

SHAKESPEARE'S FOLLY

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DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I hereby certify that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Sam Gilchrist Hall

ABSTRACT

And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

(*KJV*, Ecclesiastes, 1. 17)

This thesis argues that folly is central to Shakespeare's philosophical vision. As I establish in the introductory chapter, Shakespeare's fascination with folly runs throughout his career and is apparent in his comedies, histories and tragedies. Because of its paradoxical nature, the wisdom of folly exists in a state of irresolvable contradiction. But since this contradiction generates a productive tension that takes us to the core of Shakespeare's philosophical vision, thinking about wise folly is far from a fool's errand, a 'vexation of spirit'. Wise folly, it transpires, is a crucial function of the negative potential of Shakespeare's drama: its capacity to give the lie to an intolerable reality, without dogmatically asserting the veracity of its own claims.

In the second chapter, I contend that Shakespeare's foolosophy finds its antecedents in three seminal early modern texts: Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, Thomas More's *Utopia* and Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*. As well as situating Shakespearean folly in a European humanist milieu saturated with Erasmian ideas, this chapter shows how Shakespeare's philosophy of folly implicitly prefigures concepts more explicitly formulated in mid-late twentieth century by T. W. Adorno and Michel Foucault, whose theoretical concerns provide a lens through which to view more clearly Shakespeare's prescient critique of bourgeois reason. Chapter 3 traces the afterlife of Alcibiades' emblem of the wisdom of folly, the Silenus head, from the *Symposium* through to Erasmus, Montaigne and *The Merchant of Venice*. For Shakespeare, this image epitomises the impossibility of establishing hard and fast truths and is used to suggest that philosophical wonder can be experienced, paradoxically, only through reflection on aesthetic semblance.

Chapter 4 analyses Shakespeare's critique of historiography in the Second Tetralogy, where the paradoxical wisdom of folly is employed to expose the misapprehensions and falsehoods that warp the accounts of history transmitted by his chronicle and dramatic sources. Chapter 5 examines Shakespeare's techniques of ironic estrangement in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter's Tale*.

Employing the kind of Socratic irony described by Friedrich Schlegel as ‘playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden’,¹ these plays use the discourse of folly to dramatize a sceptical attitude to knowledge even more radical than Nicholas of Cusa’s *docta ignorantia*. The final chapter of this thesis is devoted to *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. In these tragedies, I argue, Shakespeare fashions an anti-aesthetics of disfigurement and derangement, an aesthetics that refuses to gloss over human suffering.

This thesis breaks new ground by arguing that the paradoxical wisdom of folly in Shakespeare is not the sole preserve of professional wise fools such as Touchstone. Wise folly is central to his philosophical—or rather anti-philosophical—vision; and the paradoxical wisdom of folly is apparent on a thematic, conceptual and formal level in virtually every play he wrote. To understand the wisdom of folly is to understand how Shakespeare’s plays comprehend their world. It is to understand how Shakespeare philosophises.

¹ *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 13.

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A NOTE ON REFERENCES

All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and others, first edition (New York: Norton, 1997) and are cited, as per the MHRA handbook, in the body of the text and in following manner: (*Cymbeline*, V. 5. 238–41). References to *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are to the Arden Third Series.

When the available translation is adequate, quotations from Adorno are cited in the following manner: (*MM*, p. 192)—with the italicised abbreviation referring to the English version. If the available translation is inadequate, then I retranslate or modify the existing translation, citing the German text first with the English version in square brackets thus: (*MM*, p. 218; [*MM*, 192]). Occasionally, for the sake of clarity, I quote the German next to existing translations, in which case I provide the translation first, followed by the German: (*MM*, p. 192; *MM*, p. 218).

The German edition of Adorno's works used is his *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and others, 20 vols (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003). Unless otherwise stated, quotations from German books and articles are my own translations. German poetry is quoted in the original and a translation is given in a footnote.

Abbreviations

Primary Sources

CWE *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. and ed. by various, 89 Vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972–). The title of the work discussed, volume number and page number are given in the text. Since this edition provides references to the major Latin editions on every page, it would be otiose to include references to the Latin, unless, of course, I am citing the original.

CWM *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, trans. and ed. by various, 15 vols (London: Yale University Press, 1976–1997). The title of the work discussed, volume number and page number are given in the text.

E *Essays vwritten in French by Michael Lord of Montaigne, Knight of the Order of S. Michael, gentleman of the French Kings chamber: done into English, according to the last French edition, by Iohn Florio reader of the Italian tongue vnto the Soueraigne Maiestie of Anna, Queene of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, &c. And one of the gentlemen of hir royall priuie chamber*, trans. by John Florio (London: Melch. Bradwood, 1613). This text is preferred, unless I am referring to the 'C-Text' of the *Essays* or if Florio's translation is unclear. The book, chapter and page numbers are given in the text.

F *The Essays of Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (London: Everyman, 2003). The book, chapter and page numbers are given in the text.

Geneva The Byble that is to say all the holy Scripture: in whych are co[n]tayned the Olde and New Testamente, truly [and] purely tra[n]slated into English, [and] nowe lately with greate industry [and] dilige[n]ce recognised, trans. by William Tyndale and others (London: S. Mierdman, 1549). Book, chapter, and verse are cited. This edition is used in discussions of Shakespeare's biblical references.

GP Gargantua and Pantagruel, trans. by Sir Thomas Urquhart and Pierre Le Motteux (London: Everyman, 1994). The book, chapter and page numbers are given in the text.

KJV The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Book, chapter and verse are cited.

NDSS The Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, ed. by Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols (London: Routledge, 1957–75). The volume number and page number are given in the text.

PF The Praise of Folie, trans. by Sir Thomas Chaloner, ed. by Clarence H. Miller, Early English Text Society, 257 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). The page number is provided in the text.

U Utopia: With Erasmus' The Sileni of Alcibiades, ed. and trans. by David Wootton (Cambridge: Hackett, 1999). The book and page numbers are given in the text.

Vulgate Biblia Sacra Vulgata: Holy Bible in Latin, ed. by Rodger Gryson and others, 4th rev. edn (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). Book, chapter and verse are cited.

Secondary Sources

Adorno

AT Aesthetic Theory, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004; repr. 2012).

DA Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1969; repr. 2010).

DE Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

LHF History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–5 ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans by Rodney Livingstone (Maldon: Polity, 2008).

- LND Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).
- M Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
- MM Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005).
- ND Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Continuum, 1973; repr. 2007).
- NL Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson, 2 Vols (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- TEF* 'The Essay as Form', trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, 32 (1984), 151–171.

Foucault

- A Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France*, ed. by Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. by Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003).
- GSO The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–3*, ed. by François Edward and Alessandro Fontana, trans. by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).
- HM The History of Madness*, trans., eds., by Jean Khalifa and Jonathan Murphy (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2006).
- SD "Society Must be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–6*, ed. by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. by David Macey (London: Verso, 2003).

CHAPTER 1

SHAKESPEARE'S FOLLY

*Nur Narr, Nur Dichter!
Nur Bunters redend.
aus Narrenlarven blunt herausredend.
herumsteigend auf lügnerischen Wortbrücken.
auf Lügen-Regenbogen
zwischen falschen Himmeln
herumschweifend, herumschleichend—
nur Narr! nur Dichter!*

—Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Dionysos-Dithyramben'²

The fool is akin to the poet insofar as he 'nothing affirms and therefore never lieth'.³ Liberated from telling the truth in a straightforward manner, fools and poets alike revel in the possibilities that the counterfactual realm of play affords them to expose the absurdities and contradictions of the serious world. The notion that donning a jester's cap enables one to critique prevalent ways of understanding and arguing, without dogmatically asserting the veracity of one's own claims, is implicitly formulated in *Cymbeline*. Baffled by Jupiter's riddling prophecy, Posthumous refers to it as:

[...] still a dream, or else such stuff as madmen
Tongue, and brain not; either both, or nothing,
Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such
As sense cannot untie.

(V. 5. 238–41)

'Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such | As sense cannot untie': this thesis takes as its basis the paradox that finds compressed expression in these remarkable lines. Sense and nonsense are locked in a mutually defining relationship: 'senseless' utterance cannot be explained, categorised and incorporated into reason's domain,

² *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Kritische Studienausgabe, 6 vols (Munich and Berlin: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag/de Gruyter, 1988), VI, p. 378: 'Only fool! Only poet! | Only colourful speech. | speaking through fool's masks. | climbing around on bridges of lying words, | on rainbows of lies | between false heavens | wandering about, prowling about— | *only* fool, *only* poet'! The emphases and irregular punctuation are original.

³ Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry: or the Defence of Poesy*, ed. by R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 103.

but such speech could not come into being without reason's classification of it as something peculiar, something beyond its remit, 'a speaking such as sense cannot untie'.

Perceiving the limitations of sense, however, is an act of reason. As Walter Kaiser writes in his seminal interpretation of the paradoxical wisdom of folly in Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare and Cervantes, 'The ability of reason to question itself and yet emerge with wisdom is key for these great Renaissance writers'.⁴ In Shakespeare's drama, folly does not offer blithe relief from the tyranny of good sense. Rather, many of his most profound philosophical ideas stem from the discourse of folly's lighthearted critique of dominant modes of reason. The witty wordplay, jubilant ironies and vertiginous paradoxes intrinsic to this discourse offer alternatives to the instrumental ways of understanding that dominate serious philosophy.

The philosophical potential of the paradoxical wisdom of folly in Shakespeare's plays has been examined in individual essays and articles,⁵ but extended studies of folly have—despite the fool's manifestly critical function within the plays—all but ignored his philosophical implications. For example, although it provides a detailed taxonomy of Shakespeare's gulls, melancholics, lunatics, lovers, verbose clowns and fully paid-up wise fools,⁶ Robert Bell's recent study, *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*, is content to assert that folly can constitute a sort of wisdom, without elucidating *why* this is the case. Bell states: 'The postmodern decentring project has reconstructed our sense of folly as wisdom',⁷ but

⁴ *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais and Shakespeare* (London: Gollancz, 1964), p. 10.

⁵ Jonathan Bate reads folly in *King Lear* in the light of Montaigne's 'Apologie of Raymond Sebond' and the *Praise*. Bate argues that all three texts share a comparable anti-stoical standpoint; see 'Shakespeare's Foolosophy', in *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R. A. Foakes*, ed. by Grace Ioppolo (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2000), pp. 17–33. Donald Wehrs draws intriguing parallels between the suspicions about 'cool reason' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. 1. 6) apparent in Erasmus's theology, Shakespearean comedy, 'contemporary cognitive science, Levinasian ethics and Kristevan psychoanalysis, which conceives of subject formation in terms of a mutually modifying dialogue between the body and discourse, nature and culture'; see 'Touching Words: Embodying Ethics in Erasmus, Shakespearean Comedy, and Contemporary Theory', *Modern Philology*, 104 (2006), 1–33 (p. 2).

⁶ See *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011). For a more succinct taxonomy of fools in Shakespeare, see Dimiter Daphinoff, 'Shakespeares Narren' in *Der Narr: Beiträge zu einem Interdisziplinären Gespräch* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1991), pp. 57–71.

⁷ *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*, p. 6.

he establishes neither how that ‘project’ has achieved this, nor what exactly the ‘project’ is.

This thesis redefines the paradoxical wisdom of folly in Shakespeare’s drama. Folly, I argue, is of key structural, aesthetic and philosophical importance to the plays; and for this reason, fools cannot be analysed in isolation from the plays that they inhabit, as is the case in the studies of Enid Welsford, William Willeford,⁸ Kaiser, Bell, Dimiter Daphinoff and Robert Goldsmith, who wrote the only study devoted solely to Shakespeare’s professional jesters.⁹ Not least because many works consider the socio-historical formation of the fool, the most significant of which are Karl Friedrich Flögel’s and Welsford’s,¹⁰ I do not examine the social function of early modern fools and clowns. Nor do I propose to build on the work of C. L. Barber,¹¹ Robert Weimann,¹² Françoise Laroque,¹³ Sandra Billington,¹⁴ Phoebe Jenson¹⁵ and Michael Bristol,¹⁶ who analyse the role of fools and jesters in early modern drama in connection with the stage’s transmission of popular customs.

⁸ See *The Fool and His Sceptre: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969).

⁹ See *Wise Fools in Shakespeare* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1955; repr. 1977).

¹⁰ Flögel’s expansive study, which M. M. Bakhtin repeatedly cites, examines the role that the grotesque comic had in the formation of various societies from Ancient Greece to Imperial China; see *Geschichte des Grotesk-Komischen: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. by Max Bauer, 2 vols (Munich: Georg Müller, 1914 [1788]). In terms of the sheer breadth of her research, Welsford’s work remains unsurpassed; she provides a typology that traces the development of the fool in culture and literature from Greece, via Persia, through Shakespeare, Erasmus, Lodge and Jonson to Charlie Chaplin and the Marx brothers. Her study places fools firmly in a history of ludic customs and it emphasizes the fool’s ability to mediate between ‘the world of fact and the world of imagination’. See *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935; repr. 1968), p. 29.

¹¹ See *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959; repr. 1990).

¹² See *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, trans. by Robert Schwartz (Baltimore, ML: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

¹³ See *Shakespeare’s Festive World*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ See *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ See *Religion and Revelry in Shakespeare’s Festive World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; repr. 2010).

¹⁶ Bristol uses Bakhtin’s theories to emphasize the social and political resonances of Shakespeare’s unique engagement with fools, folly and the ludic; see ‘In Search of the Bear: Spatiotemporal Form and the Heterogeneity of Economies in *The Winter’s Tale*’, *SQ*, 42 (1991), 145–67; ‘Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*’, in *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and his Age*, ed. by Linda Woodbridge and Edward Berry (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), pp. 207–24. Manfred Pfister provides an alternative reading of Bakhtin, which pays particular attention to the subversive function of the fool in literature; see ‘Comic Subversion: A Bakhtinian View of the Comic in Shakespeare’, *Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft Jahrbuch*, (1987), 27–43.

Whereas many of these studies argue that, in Barber's words, 'a Saturnalian reversal of social roles need not threaten the social structure, but can serve instead to consolidate it',¹⁷ Sandra Billington and Robert Hornback argue convincingly against the subversion/containment theory of festive customs in Elizabethan drama; Billington sets out to disprove it,¹⁸ while Hornback problematises it. After the Reformation, he contends, clowning was used by the state for specific ideological purposes. Building on the subversive potential of boy bishops and mock sermons, Elizabeth's government employed festive traditions in less-than-subtle anti-Catholic satire and anti-Puritan polemics.¹⁹ Hornback's emphasis on Shakespeare's transformation, rather than passive transmission, of existing theatrical practices is commendable,²⁰ since many historical studies and theatre histories downplay Shakespeare's theatrical, symbolic and metaphorical adaptations of existing ideas, preferring to focus on the way his works transmit established modes of foolery.

On the face of it, it may seem that the emphasis this thesis places on the critical function of wise folly in Shakespeare's drama is an extended endorsement of the notion that there is indeed 'slander' or subversive potential in the raillery of an 'allowed fool' (*Twelfth Night*, I. 5. 80), despite Olivia's suggestion to the contrary.

¹⁷ Barber, p. 245. Laroque argues that festive customs increased social cohesion; see *Shakespeare's Festive World*, pp. 1–16. Following Welsford's contention that 'there is nothing essentially subversive, immoral, blasphemous or rebellious about clownage' (*The Fool*, p. 8), Willeford (*The Fool and his Sceptre*, p. 135), Goldsmith (*Wise Fools in Shakespeare*, p. 99) and Bente Videbæk (*The Stage Clown in Shakespeare's Theatre*, Contributions to Drama and Theatre Studies, 69 (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1996), p. 15) argue that foolery ultimately consolidates the dominant order.

¹⁸ Billington, p. 1.

¹⁹ Much of the humour generated by Shakespeare's hapless sleuth, Dogberry, Hornback shows, depends upon the original audiences' familiarity with the 'notable clown type' of the 1590s: 'the stupid or ignorant puritan, a religious zealot typed by his rusticity, misspeaking and inane logic'. Hornback contends that Dogberry is used as a 'super subtle satiric rebuttal of the Ramist method'—a method that reduced complex philosophical problems to numbered lists and confused understanding with memorization (*The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare*, Studies in Renaissance Literature, 26 (Cambridge: Brewer, 2009), p. 102, p. 138).

²⁰ In *Othello*, Hornback demonstrates, Shakespeare uses emblems of natural folly, and the assumptions that underlie the blackface theatrical tradition, to produce the unsettling mixture of comic and tragic elements that is characteristic of this play. Elsewhere, Hornback shows how this association of blackness with irrationality contributed to the pseudo-scientific theories of race of the nineteenth century. Strikingly, the discourse of eugenics, which held sway in the 'sensible' world for nearly a century, has some of its roots in medieval and early modern fictions. See 'Emblems of Folly in the First *Othello*: Renaissance Blackface, Moor's Coat, and Muckender', *Comparative Drama*, 35 (2002), 69–99; 'Blackfaced Fools, Black-Headed Birds, Fool Synonyms, and Shakespearean Allusions to Renaissance Blackface Folly', *NQ*, 55 (2008), 215–219; 'Black Shakespearians vs. Minstrel Burlesques: 'Proper' English, Racist Blackface Dialect, and the Contest for Representing Blackness, 1821–1844', *ShakS*, 38 (2010), 125–160 and 'Extravagant and Wheeling Strangers': Early Blackface Dancing Fools, Racial Representation, and the Limits of Identification', *Exemplaria*, 20 (2008), 197–223.

However, this thesis seeks to overcome the staid dichotomy between those who consider folly and comedy to offer a meaningful subversion of the *status quo* and those who argue for the containment theory. Rather than seeking the subversion of the powers that be, the paradoxical wisdom of folly offers a determinate negation of it. Although folly does not function according to the rules of intentional reason, it does take the prevalence of this mode of reasoning into account. Not only is one conditioned by custom into believing certain things to be the case, but the way that one thinks, argues and writes is also shaped by the powers that be; far from simply subverting the dominant order of things, folly offers an alternative way of philosophising: a way of understanding that lies outside the values, ideas and interests of the order it ostensibly subverts.

Wise folly is central to the elusive philosophical vision of Shakespeare's plays, a vision that is inseparable from the forms in which it is expressed; this philosophy, by which I mean Shakespeare's sustained critical, reflexive and aesthetic thought, is recurrently expressed through the discourse of folly. After clarifying the scope and aims of this thesis, this chapter offers a descriptive conspectus of Shakespeare's wise fools, clowns and witty servants, which establishes the ubiquity of these fascinating characters. I then justify the theoretical position of this thesis, its anti-methodological methodology. Through his use of folly, Shakespeare shares an intellectual affinity with a strand of western philosophy, which includes Socrates, St Paul, Montaigne, Nietzsche, Foucault and Adorno. To throw into relief the epistemic implications of Shakespearean foolery, I employ these thinkers, all of whom are deeply sceptical both about the efficacy of man's theories and about their own sceptical take on the power and utility of theoretical knowledge. Like Shakespeare, these philosophers retain a playful awareness of their own folly and of the potential fallibility of their ideas.

In order to justify my approach in the extended analysis of the intellectual context of Shakespeare's folly in Chapters 2 and 3, the third and final section of this chapter offers a critical model of this thesis' historical method. While the question of the exact nature of Erasmus' and Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare is far from inconsequential, this thesis is concerned not so much with ascertaining the direct influence of these humanists on Shakespeare's drama, as with illustrating their shared tendency to think about and through the paradoxical mode of wise folly. Throughout this thesis, the discourse of folly is read in the context of and as

informed by contemporary humanism—especially Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* (1515) and Montaigne’s *Essays* (1580). This has not been hitherto attempted in a full-length study of Shakespearean foolery. Furthermore, it is in the figure of Montaigne—a self-professed ‘unpremeditated and accidental philosopher’ (*F*, Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 487)—that the theoretical standpoint of the thesis and the historical context of Shakespeare’s plays coincide. In order to draw into sharper focus the significance of Shakespeare’s philosophy of folly, I recurrently employ Montaigne’s philosophical speculation, which proceeds both without a methodology and without a set of aims.

Through close readings of *Praise of Folly*, Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and a selection of Montaigne’s *Essays*, Chapter 2 establishes both the significance of wise folly within the intellectual milieu from which Shakespeare sprang and the shared philosophical preoccupations of Erasmus, More, Montaigne and Shakespeare. These include a suspicion of the dogma that arises from sincerely held convictions; an awareness of the power of custom to blind people to their better natures; and a critique of man’s tendency to create nature in his own image. This chapter concludes by illustrating the parallels between Adorno’s critique of ‘identity-thinking’ (*ND*, p. 149 *et passim*) and Montaigne’s sceptical estimation of the capacity of man’s theories to get to the bottom of things, which reaches its zenith in his Pyrrhonist essay, ‘An Apologie of *Raymond Sebond*’.

It is important to stress, however, that the intention of this thesis is neither to *apply* theory to early modern texts, nor to imply that twentieth century critical theory ‘got it all’ from Renaissance humanism. Rather, I establish that certain speculative correspondences between these historically and culturally disparate thinkers enable an analysis of the central concepts and problems inherent in Shakespeare’s *foolosophy*, an analysis that does not attempt to petrify it under the medusan gaze of analytical classification. Whereas Chapter 2 is concerned with the shared philosophical preoccupations of Shakespeare and his humanist contemporaries, the thesis as a whole is more interested in the *modes* of speculation shared by Shakespeare, the Renaissance humanists and the twentieth-century critical theorists, whose ideas help me to elucidate what the philosophical import of

Shakespearean foolery is today. Andy Mousley,²¹ Hugh Grady²² and Gerhard Schweppenhäuser²³ have, in different ways, submitted the intriguing correspondences between Renaissance humanism and twentieth-century critical theory to close scrutiny.

Chapter 3 moves away from considering the themes shared by these writers. It illustrates the different ways in which Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare engage with the concept of the ‘Sileni of Alcibiades’, a concept that hails from Plato’s *Symposium* and is used to describe the paradoxical wisdom of folly: the contrast between the philosopher-fool Socrates’ ridiculous appearance and his beautiful mind. Because it encapsulates the disjunction between appearance and essence, between the Father and the Son, for Erasmus, the philosophical implications of this image are enormous. Montaigne, in contrast, develops a self-effacing, demotic or Silenic register, a low register with a kernel of philosophical insight. This chapter concludes with a re-reading of the casket plot of *The Merchant of Venice*. When Shakespeare dramatises the consequences of choosing the outwardly unpromising lead casket with the beautiful picture of Portia inside it, he evokes the idea of the Silenus figurine—an outwardly grotesque case that contained a beautiful gold statuette. Rather than using reason in a quixotic attempt to get to the essence of things and establish certainties, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare

²¹ Mousley seeks to create a ‘new literary humanism’ that is derived partly from the ideas of Renaissance humanism rather than from the more conservative agenda of liberal humanism, and partly from the ideas of first and Second Generation Frankfurt School thinkers. Mousley argues that philosophical wisdom is encrypted in the speech of characters on the margins of society: ‘Literary humanist wisdom often comes from below rather than above, in the shape of women or wise fools or designated individuals, such as Shylock [...], who speak back to the dominant culture about its inhumanity, its dehumanizing instrumentalism or its deficient versions of humanism’ (*Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 141); see also, ‘The New Literary Humanism: Towards a Critical Vocabulary’, *TPr*, 24 (2010), 819–39.

²² Grady attempts to reconstruct an ‘alternative Montaignean theory of early modern subjectivity’ that uses ‘Adorno, Horkheimer [and] Lacan [...] rather than the Machiavellian French post-structuralism that has set the agenda for cultural materialism’ (*Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard III to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 24); this argument develops those initially made in *Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 9. For a thoroughgoing consideration of Shakespeare’s influence on German thought after Hegel, see Christian Smith: ‘Shakespeare’s Influence on Marx, Freud and the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2013).

²³ Schweppenhäuser argues that a prototypical form of what might be called critical theory is identifiable, for the first time in western literature, in Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*: see ‘Narrenschele und Pathos der Vernunft. Zum Narrenmotiv bei Sebastian Brandt und Erasmus von Rotterdam’, *Neophilologus*, 71 (1987), 559–574 (p. 570).

implies that it is through reflection on aesthetic semblance that philosophical wonder may be experienced.

With the theoretical position and historical context in place and brought into dialogue with each other, I then analyse Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy, a group of plays that are overtly concerned with the relationship of theoretical knowledge to history. In these plays, Shakespeare casts himself as a Cretan Liar. He is a historian who, through the discourse of folly, boldly declares: "All historians are liars!" The philosophical power of Shakespeare's dramatisation of the past is to be found in the ways in which it gives the lie to the dominant accounts of history. Paradoxically, he uses an intrinsically mendacious form, aesthetic semblance, to reflect upon the fictions that constitute historical fact.

Moving from the folly of lying to that of self-delusion, Chapter 5 argues that in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter's Tale* the characters, who declare themselves to be wise on the grounds that they are free of the sway of love, are actually indulging in a form of self-love, which is every bit as foolish as the tribulations of lovers embroiled in the comic action. All three plays imply that one should, paradoxically, hope for an utterly unexpected future. But these plays also make clear the extreme unlikelihood of such a future occurring, a future in which Viola's injunction—"Prove true, imagination, O prove true" (*Twelfth Night*, III. 4. 340–341)—is fulfilled. These three plays, furthermore, lay bare the tyranny of a melancholic mindset, for which there is nothing new under the sun.

Shakespeare's melancholics perceive contingent events as mere examples of predetermined facts and general categories. As Orlando puts it when he attacks Jaques, the melancholic has 'studied' his 'questions' from 'a painted cloth' (*As You Like It*, III. 2. 251–252). For this reason, Shakespeare's melancholics are often unable or unwilling to hope for unexpected, radically new experiences, preferring to stay captive to the past. This has near-tragic consequences in *The Winter's Tale*. Leontes is all too ready to perceive his wife as another faithless woman—another Cressida. It is crucial that he—like Jaques and Malvolio—remains, if not an obdurate fool, at least comparatively unenlightened by the comic action. At the close of the play, he still espouses an idealising aesthetic, of which Montaigne and Erasmus' *Stultitia* are devoutly critical, an aesthetic that makes the inhuman demand of formal perfection on human beings: 'Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing | So agèd as this seems' (V. 3. 27–28).

The final chapter argues that *Hamlet* and *King Lear* offer Shakespeare's most extensive thinking-through of the paradoxical wisdom of folly. By employing Socratic irony and critiquing predetermined values and ideas, these tragedies fashion a self-critical aesthetics. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* craft an aesthetics of deformity and derangement in order to illustrate the complicity of 'neat and cleanly' (*1 Henry IV*, II. 5. 415) artworks in muting the privations of the world from which they sprang. Far from imposing order upon chaos as one might imagine aesthetic form to do, these plays turn order into chaos. In other words, they dramatise the dangers inherent in the dominant, instrumental ways of thinking; to measure and categorise an object, person or discourse, these plays imply, is in no way the same as understanding it. As Adorno writes, '[the] irrationality in the principle of reason is unmasked by the avowedly rational irrationality of art' (*AT*, p. 54). These tragedies use the purposeful purposelessness of aesthetic semblance to critique the orthodox category of the beautiful and to expose the dangers inherent in purposeful ways of thinking and communicating. Whereas, for Hal, 'in everything, the purpose must weigh with the folly' (*2 Henry IV*, 153–4)—that is, 'folly' is only justifiable if it has a 'purpose'—Shakespeare's philosophy of folly is at pains to show that the folly must also weigh with the purpose, for the discourse of folly puts the serious world's ways of understanding on trial and frequently finds them wanting.

A Conspectus of Shakespearean Fools and Folly

'Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere' (*Twelfth Night*, III. 1. 33–4). As Feste's characteristically shrewd adaptation of Cicero's famous aphorism suggests, folly is ubiquitous. Indeed, Shakespeare's drama includes a host of covert fools, most of whom have yet to receive extensive analysis.²⁴ These include Hal and his fellow drinkers, who engage in scurrilously digressive badinage while playing 'the fools with the time' (*2 Henry IV*, II. 2. 120); the aristocrats and their servants in *Love's Labour's Lost*, whose love of role-playing, logic-chopping and the double entendres of their repartee clearly recall the language of the fool; and Hamlet, who appropriates the grotesque bodily imagery

²⁴ Bente Videbæk mentions Shakespeare's covert fools, but only analyses Hamlet and Phillip Falconbridge; see *The Stage Clown in Shakespeare's Theatre*, esp. pp.1–16.

and nonsensical speech of the jester in order to craft his ‘antic disposition’ (I. 5. 170).

If one extends the notion of the Shakespearean fool to include the traditional negative connotations of the word,²⁵ as someone duped, suffering under misapprehension, or an unbeliever—as in Psalm 53, ‘The fool hath said in his heart, | *There is no God*’ (*KJV*, 1–2 [emphasis original])—then it becomes clear that in Shakespeare’s drama, ‘*Stultorum infinitus est numerus*’ (*Vulgate*, Ecclesiastes, 1. 15): the number of fools is infinite. From the early knockabout farce, *The Comedy of Errors*, the very title of which attests to the dramatic and humorous potential of mistaken identity, to *King Lear*, which wrings pathos from both the king’s initial mistake—to divide his kingdom—and his subsequent insanity, which mutates into ‘matter and impertinency mixed, | Reason in madness’ (*Lear*, IV. 6. 170–171), Shakespeare unflinchingly dramatizes errors. His tragedies commonly hinge on misapprehension. Be it Macbeth’s failure to interpret the witches’ equivocations correctly or Othello’s ‘jealous confirmations strong’ due to ‘Trifles’—inconsequential follies—‘as light as air’ (*Othello*, III. 3. 326, 325), the protagonists of a Shakespearean tragedy suffer acutely as a result of their own folly. ‘Men’, writes Montaigne, ‘are tormented by the opinions they have of things, and not by things themselves’ (*E*, Book 1, Chapter 40, p. 127).

Comedy relies on misunderstanding followed by a timely clarification and recognition, whereas in tragedy this recognition happens too late. This human propensity to err does not escape explicit comment: Mariana in *Measure for Measure* defends Angelo’s lustful machinations on the grounds that ‘They say best men are moulded out of faults’ (V. 1. 431); and Falstaff, in a typically incongruous allusion to Genesis, contends that man is but ‘foolish-compounded clay’ (*2 Henry IV*, I. 2. 6). The exposition of the role of misapprehension in Shakespeare’s drama, however, is not the primary concern of this thesis, which focuses instead on the concept of wise folly.

²⁵ See *OED*, definition no. 1; M. A. Screech points out that ‘In the Old Testament, “fool” often implies sinner; folly and “foolishness”, sinfulness’. He adds, ‘the principal Hebrew words translated as “fool” in the Authorised Version are *halal* (boaster), *evil* (fool), *nabal* (an empty or vile person), *sakal* (a thick-head)’ (*Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 81).

What G. K. Chesterton brilliantly describes as Shakespeare's 'thoughtless wisdom'²⁶ is a philosophy of folly that manifests itself most explicitly in the wise fools: Touchstone in *As You Like It*; the enigmatic Feste in *Twelfth Night*; Lavatch in *All's Well That Ends Well*; and the Fool in *King Lear*. These jesters claim the privilege of the licensed fool to speak profound, subversive or intolerable truths in the guise of gratuitous nonsense. Lear's Fool's allegory, for example, sets an ominous tone for the approaching cataclysm:

The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
That it had it head bit off by it young.
So out went the candle, and we were left darkling.

(*Lear*, I. 4. 190–3)

While retaining a beguiling surreal obscurity, the Fool moves from a reductive allegory, which compares the tribulations of the royal family to those of sparrows, to insinuating that Goneril is illegitimate, and finally leaps to an evocation of darkness.

Wise fools combine 'mangled forms' (*As You Like It*, II. 7. 41–2) of utterance with a riddling linguistic exuberance. They use 'tricksy word[s]' to consistently 'defy the matter' (*The Merchant of Venice*, III. 5. 59–60), putting the serious world on hold by rehearsing a dizzying array of counterfactual possibilities. Because they inhabit little fictions with which they lay bare the absurdities of the workaday world, fools are proudly perched, as Nietzsche puts it in his 'Dionysos-Dithyramben', '*auf Lügen-Regenbogen*': 'on rainbows of lies'. To limit the analysis of wise folly in Shakespeare, however, to jesters and clowns as previous studies have done is to fail to perceive the vital structural and thematic significance of folly, with which this study primarily is concerned. To be sure, folly is not a facet of the plays. Rather, it is what constitutes their ironic detachment from the values of the early modern age and, more importantly, what accounts for their continued capacity to estrange their audiences and readers from the *doxa* that mediate their respective presents.

Despite Bell's contention that until the advent of Shakespeare's professional jesters, clowning in the plays 'is comparatively circumscribed, relatively

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', in *On Lying in Bed and Other Essays*, ed. by Alberto Manguel (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2000), pp. 193–204 (p. 200).

unthreatening and unenlightening’,²⁷ a glance at some of Shakespeare’s early comedies shows that his professional jesters have a genealogy that stretches back to the earliest plays—clowns of one sort or another can be identified in almost all the plays.²⁸ In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, possibly Shakespeare’s first play, Lance, his early experiment with the intriguing figure of the stage clown, is given the play’s most memorable moment, a set-piece tirade against his incontinent and coldly stoical dog (II. 3. 1–29). Lance’s loyalty to ‘the sourest-natured dog that lives’ (5) burlesques the acts of devotion, often to equally unresponsive recipients, committed by the eponymous gentlemen. Although this clown overflows with a travesty of Christian compassion—‘I have sat in the stocks for puddings he [Crab] hath stolen’ (IV. 4. 26), the hapless manservant complains, and this certainly does makes him appear foolish—he is wise enough to know the true nature of his master, the self-serving would-be rapist, Proteus: ‘I am but a fool, look you, and yet I have the wit to think my master is a kind of knave’ (III. 1. 263). As Shakespeare’s fools never tire of reminding their audiences, onstage and off, the ‘wise man knows himself to be a fool’ (*As You Like It*, V. 1. 29–30); and for Indira Ghose, the key question posed by fools is “Who is the real fool”?²⁹ This sort of reflexivity distinguishes Lance from non-Shakespearean clowns, such as Wagner in Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus*, who like Lance burlesques his master’s actions, but unlike Lance lacks the Shakespearean clown’s combination of dry irony, humility and insight.

This topsy-turvy logic is also found in the poignant conclusion of the knock-about farce *The Comedy of Errors*. In order to multiply the possibilities for misunderstanding, Shakespeare added to his source, Plautus’ *Menaechmi*, a pair of identical twin servants, the Dromios. These twins may have been beaten black and blue through the course of the play, but it is they who offer at the close a utopian glimpse of a world organised according to empathy rather than the strictures of

²⁷ *Shakespeare’s Great Stage of Fools*, p. 12.

²⁸ There are a greater number of ‘*Clowne*’ roles in the Folio and the Quarto editions of Shakespeare’s plays than any other type of character. The precise significance of them, however, varies significantly from play to play. Despite their different roles in their respective plays, both Feste and the prolix Gravedigger in *Hamlet* are given the speech prefix, ‘Clowne’. In the Folio, 20 separate characters are given this speech prefix, whereas 7 are in the Quarto; see Helge Kokeritz, ed., *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955) and Michael B. Allen and Kenneth Muir, eds., *Shakespeare’s Plays in Quarto: A Facsimile Edition from the Henry E. Huntington Library* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981).

²⁹ ‘Jesting with Death: Hamlet in the Graveyard’, *TPr*, 24 (2010), 1003–1018 (p. 1008).

primogeniture. As they enter the abbey, the site of comic *anagnorisis*, Dromio of Ephesus refuses to calculate who should take precedence and step through the door first. He states: ‘We came into the world like brother and brother, | And now let’s go hand in hand, not one before another’ (V. 1. 425–6). The Dromios transcend their situation, achieving a level of philosophical suggestion beyond their ken.

However, the desire called utopia in Shakespeare’s drama not only dovetails with the historical situation in which it was conceived, but it is also undermined by structural and dramatic ironies, which ultimately thwart the construction of any castles in the sky. Consider Jack Cade’s nonsensical manifesto to the rebelling artisans in *2 Henry VI*:

CADE There shall be seven half-penny loaves, sold for a penny. I
 will make it a felony to drink small beer. All the realm shall be held
 in common [...] there shall be no money. All shall eat and drink on
 my score, and I will apparel them in one livery that they shall agree
 like brothers.

(IV. 2. 60–61, 64–66)

Cade’s Land of Cokaygne is clearly stuck in Southwark. The grip of commodity capitalism is evident from the fact that the notion of cheaper bread can be posited only within the framework of finance, despite Cade’s decrees to abolish money. The subversive political potential of his manifesto is curbed both because he remains a pawn in York’s game and because the characterization of this medieval rebel, with his ‘anti-intellectualism and promotion of irrationality’, evokes the early modern satirical type of the clownishly ignorant Puritan.³⁰

Cade’s egalitarian aims, which are mingled with clownish physical desires for cheap beer and food, are also present, albeit in a different form, in the old fool Gonzalo’s utopian vision in *The Tempest*:

GONZALO I’th’commonwealth I would by contraries
 Execute all things. For no kind of traffic
 Would I admit, no name of magistrate;
 Letters should not be known [...]
 No occupation, all men idle, all;
 And women too [...].

(II. 1. 147–150, 154–55)

³⁰ Hornback, *The English Clown Tradition*, p. 112.

This enchanted vision of how things could be in a ‘brave new world’ (V. 1. 186) if they were set topsy-turvy and executed by ‘contraries’ is as at odds with how things are on the island as Cade’s vision is disengaged from the realities of medieval (or early modern) London. Prospero demonizes Caliban as a ‘thing of darkness’ (V. 1. 279) and administers regular physical abuse to his slave; Gonzalo is laughed to scorn by his companions, who see the island as a potential site of domination, something to be owned and used. Indeed, the deformed Caliban has theatrical credit: Trinculo observes that in England ‘this monster [would] make a man’ (II. 2. 28–9). But the similarities between Cade’s rabble-rousing and Gonzalo’s ideal ‘commonwealth’ are manifest. They both argue for common ownership, no commerce, no law, no writing and no wage-labour.

In his transformation of the sources of these two statements—one is drawn from the age-old popular dream of the Isles of Plenty and one from Montaigne’s ‘Of the Cannibals’—Shakespeare offers not only a kind of ‘utopian realism’,³¹ a sort of speculation that is orientated towards the future, while nonetheless tempered by present realities, but he also provides a realistic appraisal of the utopian impulse. Shakespeare neither affirms the radical reforms, endorsed both by popular culture and Montaigne’s sceptical humanism, nor does he wholly censure them. What these ironies do suggest, however, is that Shakespeare baulks at concrete blueprints of utopia. This is because they are bound to reflect the world as it is—in the manner of Cade’s longings for a cornucopia—and because they remain as hopelessly out of sync with the current situation as Gonzalo’s fantasy.

Although, like the Dromios, the Porter in *Macbeth* is a servant, is implicated in folly, mediates between characters and only appears in one scene, he is nonetheless a ‘great clown’.³² His speech offers a hermeneutic key with which to unlock significant events, themes and images in the rest of the play; his very identity as a ‘devil porter’ (II. 3. 16) clearly resonates with the infernal imagery that runs through the play. After welcoming to ‘th’everlasting bonfire’ (19–20) a host of over-reachers, including an ‘equivocator [...] who committed treason enough, for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven’ (7–10) and a ‘farmer who hanged

³¹ See Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare’s Universality: Here’s Fine Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) [forthcoming].

³² Bell, p. 236.

himself on th'expectation of plenty' (4–5), the Porter quibbles about the aphrodisiac effects that the excessive consumption of alcohol can have:

PORTER [...] drink, sir, is a great provoker of three things.
MACDUFF What three things does drink especially provoke?
PORTER Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep, and urine. Lechery, sir, it provokes and unprovokes: it provokes the desire but it takes away the performance. Therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and it disheartens him, makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him.

(II. 3. 25–33)

Equivocation, bending the truth through deliberately ambiguous statements, is also of manifest importance to the tragedy as a whole. What Macbeth calls the witches' 'double sense' (V. 8. 20), the crafty ambiguities that lace their nonsense rhymes, is what undoes him. Although their comment that he should 'laugh to scorn | The power of man, for none of woman born | Shall harm Macbeth' (79–81) appears unambiguous, it transpires, of course, that Macduff, who sends the usurper to meet his maker, was delivered by Caesarean section, 'from his mother's womb | Untimely ripp'd' (15–16). Moreover, the disjunction between 'desire' and 'performance', on which the Porter's lewd gag is based, is the very disjunction pondered by Macbeth in the opening scenes of the play. Does he dare to enact his desires and commit regicide? He reflects on the painful gap between 'desire' and 'performance' through something of a self-equivocation:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success [...].

(I. 7. 1–4)

As Frank Kermode writes, Macbeth's language here enacts the 'dizzying gap between thought and deed',³³ or that between desire and performance; the repetition of the past tense, 'done', implies that he has already made up his mind.

It could be argued that this is a case of the hungover clown's patter undermining the seriousness of the main action by travestyng its concerns—

³³ *Shakespeare's Language* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 206.

perhaps the play is, after all, merely letting off steam through the safety valve of comedy. But this is not the case, because the play's main concerns are themselves recurrently expressed, implicitly and explicitly, though the phallic imagery and metaphors that also find expression in the Porter's extemporisation. Consider Macbeth's reflection:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other.

(I. 7. 25–28)

When Lady Macbeth goads her husband to murder Duncan—'When you durst do it, then you were a man; | And, to be more than what you were, you would | Be so much more the man' (I. 7. 49–51)—she connects virility with Macbeth's notable capacity for atrocious violence. Elsewhere in the play, she needles him by suggestively eliding social 'ambition' (I. 5. 19) with his physical strength and virility. In fact, it is Lady Macbeth who sets up the disjunction between 'desire' and 'performance' that the Porter will later play on. 'Art thou afeard | To be the same in thine own act and valour | As thou art in desire?' (I. 7. 39–41), she asks her husband. When, moments before the 'Porter of Hell Gate' scene, she accuses Macbeth of being flaccid, 'infirm of purpose' (II. 7. 51) for feeling remorse at killing Duncan, the dramatic relevance of the Porter's digressive improvisation is immediately apparent.

Since the term did not come into being until 1825, it is hardly surprising that this play fails to conform to the theory of comic relief.³⁴ Far from offering relief from its central concerns and obsessive imagery, the Porter's demotic patter reiterates them in such a way as to imply that the concerns of the serious world are themselves risible. Shakespeare uses the Porter's brand of black comedy to provide a commentary on the dangerous desires and fatal misconceptions that govern the behaviour of the play's protagonists. The serious point of this humour is that it exposes the absurdity of such desires and conceptions; to borrow a phrase from the Porter's speech, comic interludes in Shakespeare give 'the lie' to the serious world.

Wise fools, in contrast, commonly offer a critique of their world that has resonances far beyond it; consider Touchstone's digressive aria in response to

³⁴ *OED*, quoted in Hornback, *The English Clown Tradition*, pp. 12–13.

Corin's simple question: 'And how like you this shepherd's life, Master Touchstone?' (*As You Like It*, III. 2. 11–12), which confounds reason even as it offers a 'philosophy' of sorts:

TOUCHSTONE Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd's life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in court, it is tedious. As a spare life, look you, it fits my humour well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach. Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?
(12–20)

This exuberant nonsense perhaps recalls the mock-philosophical dialogues between Strepsiades and a travesty of Socrates in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, a comedy in which a farcical philosopher attempts to educate a rustic in the subtleties of natural philosophy, poetry and law. While Touchstone may fail to answer Corin clearly, he wastes time brilliantly, liberating the audience on stage and off from the 'briers' by which, as Rosalind accurately remarks, life in the 'working-day world' (*As You Like It*, I. 3. 9–10) is beset.

Touchstone's inspired gibberish parodies the relativism that is inherent in attempts at precise definition. It is a deft sideswipe at dogmatic philosophers of all times. Sebastian Brandt, Erasmus and Sidney, in his seriocomic masterpiece of literary theory, *An Apology for Poetry*,³⁵ all ridicule philosophy's tendency towards conceptually arid formalism, and I shall return to Shakespeare's critique of such formalism in my reading of *Hamlet*. Because Touchstone's opinion, what he is 'truly' stating, is obfuscated by his attempt to achieve clarity through definition, and because this 'parody appears to make distinctions where none really exist and exaggerates their number',³⁶ this spate of quibbling makes a mockery of definition. Its humour lies in the incongruity between the response's spurious pseudo-scholastic form and the simplicity of the question posed.

This wise fool's ironic relativism, moreover, hints at his role within the play. A touchstone, as Kiernan Ryan explains, is 'a substance used to test the quality of gold and silver alloys rubbed upon it, and the fool in *As You Like It* serves

³⁵ See *The Shyppe of Fooles*, trans. by Alexander Barclay (London: Wynky[n] de Worde, 1509), pp. 4–5 (*et passim*); *PF*, p. 10; *An Apology for Poetry*, pp. 89–90.

³⁶ Peter Mack, *Reading and Rhetoric in Montaigne and Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 86.

figuratively as a touchstone for the credibility and values of the diverse viewpoints the play presents us with'.³⁷ Touchstone's tireless shifting of perspectives epitomises the polyphonic interplay of antithetical intentions and opinions voiced by the protagonists and antagonists in Shakespeare's drama. The myth that Touchstone's critical quibbling humorously disenchant is the myth of the significance and necessity of philosophical method: the punchline of his mockery of man's drive for absolute conceptual clarity through rigorous definition is: 'Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?'

In fact, the discourse of folly recurrently employs the foolish citation of authoritative authors or discourses to make a mockery of them; Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* furnishes the reader with an illuminating example of this. At a stroke, Rabelais scatologically debases Scholastic seriousness and, with it, the profundity of Scholastic philosophy as a discourse. Concluding his cod-academic discussion about the youthful Gargantua's precise experimentation with the best thing to wipe one's arse on, which, it transpires, is 'the neck of a goose' (*GP*, Book 1, Chapter, XIII, p. 57), the narrator bolsters the Prince's scientific findings by commenting: 'such is the opinion of *Master John of Scotland*, aliàs *Scotus*' (*GP*, Book 1, Chapter, XIII, p. 57).

Theoretical Introduction

This thesis is not the only study to hinge on the idea implicit in Posthumous' epanalepsis: 'Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such | As sense cannot untie'. After all, it is the very 'stuff' that 'madmen | Tongue and brain not'—or at least, the 'experience' (*HM*, p. xxx) thereof—that Foucault attempts to reconstruct in his 1961 study, *History of Madness (Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique)*, which is premised on the notion that 'there can be no reason without madness' (*HM*, p. xxv), no reasonable utterance without 'senseless speaking'. While Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare are all at pains to point out that there is nothing more foolish than considering oneself wise, Foucault's study argues that the assertion of one's sanity always reveals a trace of insanity. With reference to Pascal, he concerns himself with 'that "other trick" that madness plays—that "other trick" through which men, in a gesture of sovereign reason [...] lock up their neighbour [and] communicate and

³⁷ *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), p. 213.

recognize each other in the merciless language of non-madness' (*HM.*, p. xxvii). Like any act of categorisation, identifying someone as insane is, in a sense, irrational. Not only does it place an absolute faith in the powers of 'sense' to gain mastery over that which, by definition, it cannot understand, but it also fails to recognise that, as Montaigne reflects in the opening pages of his *Essays*, 'man is a wonderful, vaine, divers, and wavering subject: it is very hard to ground any directly-constant and uniforme judgement upon him' (*E*, Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 2). Absolute standards are at odds with the intermittency of being.

At its core, Shakespeare's interest in the paradoxical wisdom of folly, which is evident from the earliest plays to the last, is based on the idea that putting one's faith in the certainties, categories and fictions of unitary identity, which it is in authority's best interest to maintain, is an act of *folie*—a word with a semantic range that encompasses both madness and folly. The political and philosophical clout of Shakespeare's 'witless wisdom'³⁸ lies in its capacity to estrange the everyday world by exposing the serious as ridiculous, the sincere as insincere, and laughter as a very important matter indeed:

The philosophy of Clowns is the philosophy that in every epoch shows up as doubtful: what has been regarded as most certain; it reveals the contradictions inherent in what seems to have been proved by visual experience; it holds up to ridicule what seems obvious common sense, and discovers truth in the absurd.³⁹

Shakespeare's representation of folly does not simply turn the rational world topsy-turvy, as is commonly assumed. Rather, by breaking causal patterns and interrogating the formation of meaning, it furnishes the reader with perspectives that tear holes in the fabric of the wisdom of the world.

In order to fathom the philosophical vision of a writer, who reflects with his tongue in his cheek: 'Alas, 'tis true I have gone here and there, | And made myself a motley to the view' ('Sonnet 110', 1–2), this thesis brings Renaissance folly into dialogue with a subterranean tradition of western thought that has, hitherto, neither been the subject of philosophical analysis, nor brought into dialogue with Shakespeare's philosophy. This way of thinking runs from the philosopher-fool,

³⁸ Ryan, *Shakespeare's Comedies*, p. 94.

³⁹ Leszek Kołakowski, quoted in Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 165.

Socrates, through to Montaigne and on to Nietzsche, but it ultimately finds its most sustained expression in the anti-theoretical philosophies of Foucault and Adorno. Far from fashioning watertight theoretical systems, these thinkers share a playful and paradoxical awareness that ‘the truth of ideas is bound up with the possibility of their being wrong, the possibility of their failure’ (*M*, p. 144). This diverse group of thinkers shares a striking capacity for a sort of negative capability; the condition of being in uncertainty, they suggest, is philosophically valid, whereas insisting on the universality of one’s systems, categories and identities is intellectually indefensible.

In *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, the fragmented, aphoristic form of which embodies its suspicion of totalising philosophies, Adorno suggests that it is the dialectician’s role to enable the expression of the disquieting ideas latent in the fool’s loquacious utterance, an utterance that picks up on the nonsensical elements in the serious world’s assumptions, cherished discourses, concepts and institutions:

The dialectic cannot stop short before the concepts of health and sickness, nor indeed before their siblings, reason and unreason. Once it has recognised the universal ruling order and its proportions as sick [...] then it can see as healing cells only what appears, by the measures of that order, as itself sick, eccentric, paranoid—indeed, ‘mad’ [*verrückt*]; it is true today, as in the Middle Ages, that only fools tell their masters the truth. The dialectician’s duty is thus to help this fool’s truth to attain its own reason, without which it will freely succumb to the abyss of sickness implacably dictated by the healthy common sense of the rest.

(*MM*, pp. 81–82; [*MM*, p. 73])

Folly refuses to operate according to norms. Rather, as Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*: ‘Folly is truth in the form by which people are struck when, in the midst of untruth, they will not abandon truth’ (*ND*, p. 396 [*ND*, p. 404]). In other words, the paradoxical wisdom of folly expresses a negative truth, exposing the untruths that constitute the wholesome certainties upon which the workaday world depends.

The significance of Adorno’s claim should not be underestimated. The fool’s truth recalls the critical, rather than systematising, impulse of ‘modern philosophy’, a ‘practice which’, for Foucault, ‘finds its function of truth in the criticism of illusion, deception, trickery and flattery’ (*GSO*, pp. 353–354). The dialectics to which Adorno alludes are, of course, the negative dialectics with which his name is associated. In contrast to traditional dialectics, negative dialectics does not attempt

to subsume two discrete identities into a larger one. Instead, it discovers the inner contradictions of supposedly stable identities and immutable categories. Negative dialectics provides a way of understanding the peculiar philosophical movement of the paradoxical wisdom of folly, a way of understanding how the wisdom of folly lies primarily in its capacity to expose the contradictions inherent in the concepts, ideas and values of the prevailing order.

Characterising the fool as a critical theorist *avant la lettre*, however, is not unproblematic. As Jan Kott reflects:

The position of a jester is ambiguous and abounds in internal contradictions arising out of the discrepancy between his profession and his philosophy. The profession of a jester, like that of an intellectual, consists in providing entertainment. His philosophy demands of him that he tell the truth and abolish myths.⁴⁰

Standing outside of the pseudo-truths of everyday life, which continue to blinker the wise and the foolish alike, fools and poets neither peddle enduring, metaphysical truths, nor expound their ideas in humourless treatises. Rather, as Foucault writes, the ‘words of the poet’ are akin to those of the ‘madman’ because they ‘unceasingly renew the power of their strangeness and the strength of their contestation’; they inhabit an area ‘on the outer edge of our culture and at the point nearest its essential divisions’.⁴¹ The poet and the fool reside on the extreme edge of reason’s domain. They are outsiders looking in: ‘The lunatic, the lover, and the poet | Are of imagination all compact’ (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V. 1. 7–8).

Since it refuses to make claims to authority, Shakespeare’s foolery offers a passive resistance to the powers that be. As Tim Prentki writes, ‘In Foucauldian terms, [fools] are not seeking an authority for their position and therefore are not concerned with the discourses of power through which human life is conducted’.⁴² Put simply, folly undoes the logic of mastery that is implicit in any claim to certainty. A ‘fool’s truth’ is, after all, spoken by a fool and, concomitantly, retains a playful awareness that it might be wrong. Richard Wilson is correct, therefore, to

⁴⁰ Kott, p. 119.

⁴¹ *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. by anon. (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2002; repr. 2012), p. 55.

⁴² *The Fool in European Theatre: Stages of Folly* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), p. 1.

detect a ‘radical passivity’ at work in ‘Shakespearean fooling’.⁴³ Indeed, as the readings of the plays in the second half of this thesis illustrate, the purposeful purposelessness of the fool’s utterance stages within the plays something of the critical capacity of representation: ‘full oft we see | Cold wisdom waiting on *superfluous* folly’ (*All’s Well that Ends Well*, I. 1. 99–100 [my emphasis]). What is philosophically important about the critical capacity of representation is its refusal to assert its authority. It does not declare that it is right or true. As Chapter 2 shows, literature’s disinclination to tell anything other than a fool’s truth is of considerable importance to More’s *Utopia* and Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*. While these works manifestly attack the dubious truths of the serious world, two fools, Raphael Hythloday and Stultitia, voice More’s and Erasmus’ sustained critical and reflexive thought.

Erasmian Roots? A Critical Model

For Claudia Corti, Shakespeare’s interest in folly is of a specifically Erasmian provenance:

It is widely known that the figure of the Fool dominates Shakespeare’s theatre, in a measure unknown in other Elizabethan or Jacobean dramatists, and that the nature of folly lies at the heart of Shakespeare’s message. Yet, the source of Shakespearean folly is to be found not in the plangent laments or angry denunciations of foolishness made ready by a notable series of sixteenth and seventeenth-century serious writers and pamphleteers, but the lambent ironies [...] with which Erasmus’ *Moria* and Chalonier’s *Folie* describe their own true nature.⁴⁴

The Dutchman has a much greater role in Shakespeare’s drama than merely a bit part in *Sir Thomas More*. Although the influence of Erasmus’ *Praise, Adages* and *Colloquies* on Shakespeare’s plays warrants further study, in this thesis I concern myself with fathoming the intellectual kinship of the Renaissance’s greatest playwright with its greatest humanists, Erasmus and Montaigne. The ways of understanding the world and expressing their sceptical wisdom that these thinkers share is considered at length in Chapters 2 and 3.

⁴³ *Free Will: Art and Power on Shakespeare’s Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 11.

⁴⁴ ‘Erasmus’ Folly and Shakespeare’s Fools’, in *Silenos: Erasmus in Elizabethan Literature*, ed. by Claudia Corti, *Studi di Letterature Moderne e Comparate*, 1 (Pisa: Pancini, 1998), pp. 13–31 (p. 25).

However, in order to clarify the way that the multifaceted concept of folly provides these humanists with a position from which they can philosophise without asserting their own authority, it is necessary to provide a working model of how this thesis views Shakespeare's intellectual affinities with Erasmus and Montaigne. In 'That A Man Should not Communicate his Glorie', the latter writes:

Of all the follies of the world, the most universall, and of most men received, is the care of reputation and study of glorie, to which we are so wedded that we neglect and cast-off riches, friends, repose, life and health (goods effectuall and substantiall), to follow that vaine image, and idlie-simple voice, which hath neither body nor hold-fast.

(*E*, Book 1, Chapter 41, p. 137)

For Montaigne, in Florio's rendering, concern for one's glory is the greatest of all the 'follies of the world'. What is significant about this use of the word is that he is effectively using *folly* as a synonym for *ideology*—an illusion that compels people into action; and as Chapter 2 establishes, this is what the word *stultitia* comes to signify in the satirical second section of *Praise of Folly*.

Although it is not included in Geoffrey Bullough's compendious collection of sources and analogues for *1&2 Henry IV*, Erasmus' colloquy, 'A Knight Without a Horse, or Faked Nobility', not only 'provides a paradigm for Falstaff's nature'⁴⁵ and is, perhaps, directly evoked when Hal describes him as 'uncolted' (*1 Henry IV*, II. 2. 35), but it also uses irony to question the concept of honour in a manner not dissimilar to Shakespeare. In any case, this intertextuality is a striking example of Erasmus' and Shakespeare's sceptical detachment from passive and dogmatic adherence to the values of the past.

'A Knight Without a Horse' takes the form of a playful discussion. Nestor will tell Harpalus how to simulate being a knight so long as the former will tell him why he wants to be a knight in the first place. The reason he gives is 'Simply that knights do as they please and get away with it' (*CWE*, 40, p. 887). The satire in this piece operates on two levels. First and foremost, it is a satire on what passes for nobility: 'Unless you're a good dicer, a skilful card player, an infamous whoremonger, a heavy drinker, a reckless spendthrift, a wastrel, heavily in debt, decorated with the French pox, hardly anyone will believe you are a knight' (*CWE*, 40, p. 884), advises Nestor.

⁴⁵ Kaiser, p. 210.

Falstaff's tongue-in-cheek reflections about his virtue echo this comment quite closely:

I was as virtuously given as a gentleman need to be: virtuous enough; swore little; dined not—above seven times a week; went to a bawdy-house—not above once in a quarter—of an hour; paid money that I borrowed—three or four times; lived well, and in good compass. And now I live out of all order, out of all compass.

(*1 Henry IV*, III. 3. 12–17)

While he pays lip-service to some sort of 'order', the qualifications attached to each statement ensure this 'order' is that of the *mundus inversus*. In this period, the word 'compass' was polysemous. It signified the mariner's compass and thus, metonymically, the instrumental rationality that sought to control nature;⁴⁶ the 'circuit' or 'revolution' of time, which is clearly a concern of Shakespeare's histories;⁴⁷ man's limitations; and 'a crafty artifice or design'.⁴⁸ In the latter usage, it primarily signifies something within a reasonable measure or of 'proper proportion'.⁴⁹ It expresses an aesthetic concern with 'proper proportion' and links it with the domination of the world. As I shall argue at length in Chapter 4, Falstaff's conception of proportion, which is based on his reprobate life, makes a mockery of the concepts of 'compass' and 'order'.

Erasmus' second satirical technique in this colloquy, which inverts 'the doctrines of the courtesy books' ('Introduction', *CWE*, 40, pp. 880–881 [p. 881]), is to use the structures of an unreflexive, ideologically passive genre ironically. Any wastrel can emulate this depleted form of nobility. To do so is desirable, because it enables one to live outside the very social conventions that chivalry is supposed to support. The modern knight wrongs rights, rather than righting wrongs. Harpalus is proud that he can 'change' his 'countenance as easily as a mask' (*CWE*, 40, p. 883) and realizes—like Falstaff, Prince Hal and his father—that 'Reputation is the best substitute for reality' (*CWE*, 40, p. 881). This has a decidedly comic aspect, since

⁴⁶ *OED.*, definition no. 4a.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, definition nos. 3a, b.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, definition nos. 9a, 2a, b.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, definition no. 1.

‘The exchange of identity is easy for the clown because he refuses to take seriously any discriminations of rank, status or individuality’.⁵⁰

Combining an image of agrarian labour with one of atrocity, Harpalus designs an heraldic symbol based on his cutting of geese’s throats and even composes his own Falstaffian motto: ‘Cast all the dice’ (*CWE*, 40, p. 883). Nestor reflects that ‘the fundamental principle of knighthood must always be maintained:

For a knight to relieve a common traveller of his money is both just and right.
What’s more outrageous than for a vulgar trader to be rich while a knight
hasn’t enough to spend on whores and dice?
(*CWE*, 40, p. 885)

Insofar as it consists of members of the nobility robbing the upwardly mobile, the robbery in *I Henry IV* follows the logic of this comment.

In ‘A Knight Without a Horse’, honour is pervasively associated with a calculable kind of debt. Indeed, this colloquy is the main source of Rabelais’ trickster Panurge’s famous praise of debt, in which debt is viewed as the basis of human existence and the essential principle of the universe (see *GP*, Book 3, Chapter 3, pp. 309–313). When Hal asks Falstaff, ‘Sirrah, do I owe you a thousand pound?’, Falstaff shamelessly invokes man’s debt to God, responding: ‘A thousand pound, Hal? A million! Thy love is worth a million; thou owest me thy love’ (III. 3. 125–26), a comment that echoes St. Paul’s injunction: ‘Owe nothing to any man, but to love one another; for he that loveth another, hath fulfilled the Law’ (*Geneva*, Romans, 13. 8). While Falstaff’s comment reminds one that ‘Neither men nor their lives are measured by the Ell’ (*E*, Book 1, Chapter, 19, p. 39), his evocation of Paul’s authoritative discourse undermines it.

Elsewhere in the plays, Shakespeare assaults the petrified ideal of honour by linking it to the inglorious world of exchange. Hal aims to have Hotspur’s honour transferred to him:

For every honour sitting on his helm,
Would they were multitudes, and on my head
My shames redoubled; for the time will come
That I shall make this northern youth exchange
His glorious deeds for my indignities.

⁵⁰ Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 140.

Percy is but my factor, good my lord,
To engross up glorious deeds on my behalf;
And I will call him to so strict account,
That he shall render every glory up.

(*1 Henry IV*, III. 2. 142–150)

Because of his dissembled illness, Northumberland considers his ‘honour is at pawn’ (*2 Henry IV*, II. 3. 7); Morton describes the Archbishop of York as ‘a man | Who with double surety binds his followers’ (I. 1. 189–90), since the Archbishop is ‘followed both with body and with mind’ (202). His vocation is significant only in so far as it gives him credit with those he commands. Even Henry’s crusade is not a battle to win back the ‘Holy Land’ from the infidel, but a cynical strategy with a specific aim: ‘Be it thy course to busy giddy minds | With foreign quarrels, that action hence borne out | May waste the memory of former days’ (*2 Henry IV*, IV. 3. 338, 341–3).

Something approaching a genuinely honourable intention in the play comes from a surprising source, the outwardly unpromising Feeble:

FEEBLE By my troth, I care not. A man can die but once. We owe God
a death. I’ll ne’er bear a base mind. An’t be my destiny, so; an’t be
not, so. No man’s too good to serve’s prince. And let it go which way
it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next.

(*2 Henry IV*, III. 2. 216–20)

While voicing a conventional fatalism, the quiet fortitude of this marginal plebeian character contrasts favourably with the ruling elite’s instrumental use of honour. Although he anticipates Hamlet’s philosophical resolution—‘We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all [...]’ (V. 2. 197–200)—Feeble’s comment has been ignored. This replicates a misapprehension Shakespeare seeks to disabuse his audience of: namely, the association of honour almost exclusively with the ruling classes. Feeble’s statement is at odds with the temporality of the rest of the play, which lies in the ‘hollow of history: a time predominantly of recollection and anticipation’.⁵¹ With something of Pyrrho’s pig about him, Feeble is neither haunted by illusions of past honours, nor

⁵¹ Jonathan Baldo, *Memory in Shakespeare’s Histories: Stages of Forgetting in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 74.

perplexed by worries about his future as the princes and the rebels of the Second Tetralogy are.

It is through the discourse of folly that what is elsewhere implied about the idea of honour is made explicit. The estranged and estranging perspective of the utterly unheroic and anti-heroic Falstaff conspicuously lacks Feeble's resolution:

FALSTAFF I would 'twere bed-time, Hal, and all well.

PRINCE HARRY Why, thou owest God a death.

[*Exit*]

FALSTAFF 'Tis not due yet. I would be loath to pay him before his day.

What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter; honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word 'honour'? What is that 'honour'? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o'Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible then. Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism.

(*1 Henry IV*, V. 1. 126–139)

Falstaff's mastery of language illustrates language's mastery over us. Having exposed the history of honour's significance, Falstaff's 'catechism' reveals how suffering is caused by ossified ideals, ideals that have become so debased through exchange that they are mere 'air'. Like other abstract concepts, honour lacks, as Montaigne puts it, 'a hold fast' or a concrete referent. Because it is based on the shifting sands of opinion, and contingent upon an account of events penned by the winner, there is no such thing as 'undying honour'. It is clear from their attitudes towards honour that Falstaff, Erasmus and Montaigne share 'an exceptional ability to tell truths that others deny—or ignore';⁵² and as the following chapters illustrate, the philosophical significance of *foolosophy*—its peculiar rationality—lies in its critical capacity to tell the truth about the identities, values, concepts and categories that received wisdom takes for granted. In this respect, the paradoxical wisdom of folly disenchant the '*falschen Himmeln*' or 'false heavens' that good sense fashions.

⁵² Herbert Weil, 'Montaigne and Falstaff', *Shakespeare Newsletter*, 58 (2008), 49–70 (p. 49).

CHAPTER 2

THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT OF SHAKESPEARE'S FOLLY

There is in human nature generally more of the fool than of the wise; and therefore those faculties by which the foolish part of men's minds is taken are most potent.

—Francis Bacon⁵³

The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man.

—G. K. Chesterton⁵⁴

Not least because of the generative constraints of his dramatic form, Shakespeare seldom seems to explicitly endorse one worldview over another. The ideas and assumptions that tacitly govern each play are accessible not so much through what certain characters say, but more through the cracks in meaning, the ironies, paradoxes and riddling ambiguities that occur in dialogue. It is no accident that the discourse of folly is vitally attuned to this play of ideas, since it is through this discourse that Shakespeare exposes the mutability of the way things are. In this respect, 'He uses his folly like a stalking-horse, and under the presentation of that he shoots his wit' (*As You Like It*, V. 4. 95–6). This 'wit' lies, primarily, in how he suggests that the way things *are* could be more accurately understood as the way they *seem* to be. He does so both through the dazzling techniques of explicit foolery considered in Chapter 1 and through various strategies of ironic subversion that are best perceived in the context of comparable techniques of estrangement that Erasmus, More and Montaigne employ. Owing to their intrinsically playful character, the great texts of Renaissance folly generate mesmerizing unresolved ironies and ambiguities that continue to baffle dominant constructions of reason, custom and identity.

One example that clarifies the way that governing assumptions come to the fore through cracks in meaning is furnished by an exchange between a servant and her mistress in *The Merchant of Venice*:

⁵³ 'Of Boldness', in *The Major Works*, ed. by Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 361–363 (p. 362).

⁵⁴ 'The Book of Job', in *On Lying in Bed and Other Essays*, ed. by Alberto Manguel (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2000), pp. 172–180 (p. 176).

PORTIA By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this
 great world.

NERISSA You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were in the
 same abundance as your good fortunes are; and yet, for aught I see,
 they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with
 nothing. It is no mean happiness, therefore, to be seated in the mean.
 Superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives
 longer.

(I. 2. 1–8)

Like the psychic tribulations of some modern starlet, Portia's fashionable *ennui* is a consequence of her over-privileged life. Nerissa points this out through a paradox: 'they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing'. This rephrases Portia's listless depression in physical terms, implying that she is absurdly pretentious by pointing out that there are plenty of people in the world who have the real problem of survival to contend with.

However, this is more than clownish backchat. The servant's comment—'It is no mean happiness to be seated in the mean'—invokes the concept of the 'golden mean, without which there can be nothing in human affairs that is honorable, or enjoyable, or admirable' (*CWE*, 32, p. 230), a concept that originates in Aristotle, and was appropriated by humanists like Erasmus. The wisdom of this exchange is dissonant. On the one hand, it offers a social critique, implying that melancholy is a sickness of 'surfeit'. As Robert Burton puts it: 'Nothing begets' melancholy 'sooner, increaseth it and continueth it oftener than idleness'.⁵⁵ On the other, it affirms the customary wisdom about the 'golden mean', but a marginal character cites this received wisdom for the express purpose of debunking her mistress's self-obsession.

In Shakespeare's works, the dynamic, dialectical play of complex opinions and worldviews is never forced into a coherent synthesis. Many studies of Shakespeare's engagement with the philosophies of his time, however, emphasize one tacit philosophical stance within a work at the expense of other, often contradictory, ideas apparent in the same play—a study concerned with Shakespeare's stoicism, for instance, is unlikely to give much credence to his epicurean views. Such approaches are liable to stultify the drama's innate dynamism by extracting, isolating and imposing a synthesis on its ephemeral movements,

⁵⁵ *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicholas K. Kiessling and Rhonda L. Blair, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989–1994), I, p. 243.

movements in which a philosophical standpoint becomes apparent within the play's composite interplay of ideas, opinions and ironies. To wrest one voice from a play's dialogue, petrify this opinion, and suggest that it encapsulates the philosophical standpoint of the play as a whole is akin to reducing an orchestral symphony to the horn line alone. 'We murder to dissect'.⁵⁶

Needless to say, my study is guilty of over-emphasizing its topic too. This could perhaps be excused, however, on the grounds that hitherto Shakespeare's folly has been regarded as philosophically insignificant, despite its evident centrality to the philosophical vision of other Renaissance writers. A better apology for this, however, can be offered on the grounds that folly is not simply a theme in the plays, or a worldview that occasionally comes to the fore and challenges the dominance of reason. Rather, what Shakespeare and his fellow philosophers of folly—Erasmus, More, Rabelais, Montaigne, Jonson and Cervantes—found intriguing about it was how it made certain modes of thinking and forms of writing possible. The paradoxical wisdom of folly is, after all, the possibility of the impossible.

Surprisingly, there has hitherto been no comprehensive comparative study of Erasmus' *Praise* and Shakespeare's works. This chapter opens by contending that the best way of grasping Shakespeare's philosophy of folly is to enlist the help of Erasmus' *Stultitia*; moreover, this thesis as a whole examines her role in Shakespeare's comedies, histories and tragedies as both a direct influence on his drama and as an embodiment of a mode of thought that Erasmus and Shakespeare share. When we trace the metamorphosis of this character, we find that her three avatars correspond, albeit roughly, with the three main ways in which Shakespeare's dramatization of folly offers philosophical insights, which have retained their piquancy for over four hundred years. Through a reading of Thomas More's *Utopia*, I consider a tension at the heart of the discourse of folly: between a worldly pragmatism that punctures pretensions—such as Nerissa's—and the kind of idealism that refuses to sully itself by involvement in the absurdities of the sane world, a disinterested stance advocated by medieval mystics, Pico and Erasmus' holy fools. The chapter ends with an extended analysis of how Erasmian themes and theories of writing are expressed in Montaigne's *Essays*—in particular, his

⁵⁶ William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned', in *William Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, rev. ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 377.

‘Apologie of *Raymond Sebond*’, ‘Of Custom’, ‘Of Canniballs’ and ‘Of Experience’—and can be discerned in Shakespeare. Unlike Erasmus’ considerable effect on Shakespeare’s friend and collaborator, Ben Jonson,⁵⁷ his influence on Shakespeare is far from clear.

Stultitia’s Metamorphosis

There are three avatars of Erasmus’ Stultitia. In the first section of the *Praise of Folly* (1511), she undertakes a carnivalesque levelling of the differences that divide humanity by pointing out the physical nature its members share before arguing to the end that: ‘No profit grows where is no pleasure ta’en’ (*The Taming of the Shrew*, I. 1. 38). In the second, she caustically attacks the hypocrisy and venality of the powers that be. In the third, she morphs into a Christian fool, extolling the folly of the cross. Her first avatar turns ‘diseases to commodity’ (*2 Henry IV*, I. 2. 243), suggesting that were it not for humanity’s universal folly, life would not be worth living.⁵⁸

She celebrates mankind’s shared corporeality and flaws, beginning by asking her audience to give her the licence speak freely: ‘bestowe on me your eares [...] not those eares that ye carie to sermons, but those ye geue to plaiers, to iesters, and to fools’ (*PF*, p. 8); she contends that she is ‘the distraibtrix and dealer of all felicitee’ (*PF*, p. 8). Launching into a mock genealogy, she contends that her father is Plutus, the ‘golden god of riches [...] at whose onely becke as aforetymes, so now also, bothe holy and vnholy thynges be tourned topset turuie’ (*PF*, p. 11): unsurprisingly the events of Jonson’s satire *Volpone*, which is indebted to the *Praise of Folly* and was performed by the King’s Men in 1605, revolve around mankind’s insatiable desire for gold, ‘the world’s soul’ (I. 1. 3). But the tantalizing dance of capital is not the only thing that beguiles humankind. So too do Stultitia’s ‘handmaidens’, who include ‘Selfeloue’,⁵⁹ ‘Voluptuousnes’ and ‘Dronkenes’ (*PF*, p.

⁵⁷ Jonson’s most obvious engagement with the *Praise of Folly* occurs in *Volpone*. The trickster Mosca summarises it in his song, which starts: ‘Fools, they are the only nation | Worth men’s envy or admiration’ (*Volpone*, I. 2. 66–67). See Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays*, ed. by Gordon Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; repr. 2008); subsequent quotations are given in the text. See also Peter G. Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus: Erasmus’ Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 116–122.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–84.

⁵⁹ ‘Selfloue’ is the foremost of Stultitia’s ‘handmaidens’. In his adage, ‘*Philautoi*’, Erasmus observes: ‘it [self-love] is a deeply rooted fault which makes people approve of everything belonging to

11). By her own estimation at least, she is ‘the geuer of all thynges to all men’ (*PF*, p.14)—a comment that recalls Paul’s observation that God ‘giveth to all life, and breath, and all things’ (*KJV*, Acts 17. 25). In discussing the universal illusion in which mankind is duped by Stultitia, she evokes what, for Erasmus and for Christians of all times, is the necessary condition for the existence of reality, God’s Grace. In copious style, she delineates the ways in which all actions, institutions and ideologies are beholden to her. They are all premised on the illusion that man possesses control of things, that he has the power to act independently, and that what he does is cosmically significant.

The truth, according to Stultita in the first part of her *sermon joyeux*, is quite the contrary: from birth to death, life consists of the flourishing of certain follies. Childhood is foolish, as is adolescence, and so too is manhood. The wiser a man becomes, ‘the lesse and lesse he liveth’ (*PF*, p. 15). Too much reading, she suggests, is liable to make one repress the bodily drives that make everyone tick. Old age, during which man becomes ‘vrksome to others [...] and hateful also to hym selfe’ (*PF*, p. 15), follows this decline; and no one could bear this, were it not for folly. It is only by ‘becom[ing] childisse again’ that the elderly can face ‘Obluion’ with a ‘dronken longe forgetfulnesse of thynges passed’, without fear of what is to come (*PF*, p. 17).⁶⁰ The illusion of love enables men and women to ‘take into [their] mouthe the snaffle of wedlocke’ (*PF*, p. 15)—what right-thinking woman would

themselves’ (*CWE*, 31, p. 311). The irony at work in the *Praise* is that by praising herself Stultitia is committing an act of self-love, which, in her second guise, she later bitterly attacks as a vice.

⁶⁰ Echoes and correspondences between Shakespeare and Erasmus have received some critical attention, most notably from John Evans (‘Erasmus’ Folly and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: A Study in Humanist Intertextuality’, *Moreana*, 27 (1990), 3–23) and Claudia Corti (‘Erasmus’ Folly and Shakespeare’s Fools’, *Silenos: Erasmus in Elizabethan Literature*, ed. by Claudia Corti, Studi di Letterature Moderne e Compare, 1 (Pisa: Pancini, 1998), pp. 13–36). Although the spirit of Erasmus’s *Praise* haunts the tone and key ideas of these plays, the only scene in which a direct influence can be discerned with some degree of certainty is when Falstaff attempts to divert the Lord Justice’s attention from his misdemeanours. Echoing Ecclesiastes (1. 18), Falstaff claims that Hal has a ‘perturbation of the brain’ (*2 Henry IV*, I. 2. 106), caused by ‘much grief from study’ (105). The prince has ‘a kind of sleeping in the blood’ (102). This recalls the stultified philosophers and theologians—ironic self-representations in Erasmus’ satire; they waste their youthful years on abstractions and grow old before their time: the ‘sharp ‘truailing of the braine’ is responsible for the ‘little by little sokyng vp the liuely iuice of the spirits’ (p. 19). Furthermore, the Lord Chief Justice’s characterization of Falstaff as the epitome of old age—‘Have you not a moist eye, a dry hand, a yellow cheek, a white beard, a decreasing leg, an increasing belly? Is not your wind short, your voice broken and your wit single, and every part of you blasted with antiquity?’ (165–9)—echoes Folly’s memorable anatomy of aging discussed in Chapter 4; see also Roy Battenhouse, ‘Falstaff as Parodist and Perhaps Holy Fool’, *PMLA*, 90 (1975), 32–52 (p. 35); this article also appears in *Christian Irony in Shakespeare’s Histories*, ed. by Peter Milward, 2 vols, Renaissance Monographs, 37–8 (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute Sophia University, 2009), I, pp. 107–145.

venture to undergo the ‘perillous throwes of childbearing, or trauaile of their bringing vp’ (*PF*, p. 16)? Folly uses the levelling potential of the human body when she points out that the organ that ‘engendre[s] gods and men’ is but a ‘silie membre [...] so foolishe as maie not without laughter be spoken of’ (*PF*, p. 15). While Bakhtin is quite right to consider the *Praise* to be ‘one of the greatest expressions of carnival laughter in world literature’,⁶¹ critics interested in the corporeal elements of the *Praise* have over-emphasized the importance of Stultitia’s first persona.⁶²

The insights of Stultitia’s first avatar correspond with those of Shakespeare’s discourse of folly in two ways. First, they remind the reader that, from cradle to grave, the aspirations, achievements and sorrows of the serious world are simply scenes in a ‘great plaie of follie’ (*PF*, p. 36), or as *Lear* has it—possibly quoting Chaloner’s 1549 translation of the *Moriae Encomium*—scenes on a ‘great stage of fools’ (*Lear*, IV. 6. 87). The second main type of philosophical insight that Shakespeare’s discourse of folly furnishes us with is a sense of man’s shared corporeal nature, in all its absurdity, with all its unpleasant abjections. Needless to say, the adepts of the discourse of folly, such as Pantagruel or Falstaff, are attuned to the body. Bodily processes are shared by the philosophically and non-philosophically minded and by rich and poor alike. For this reason, Terence Cave sees them as key to the ‘non-transcendent humanity’ of Erasmus’, Ronsard’s,

⁶¹ *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 14.

⁶² Donald Gwynn Watson concludes his reading of the role of the carnivalesque in the *Praise* by conflating Folly’s first and third avatars: ‘Erasmus has incorporated the spirit of Carnival into the meaning and philosophical celebration of Christ’ (‘The Praise of Folly and the Spirit of Carnival’ *Renaissance Quarterly*, 32 (1979), 333–353 (p. 353)); Claudia Corti argues that Erasmus displays a ‘fondness for the overthrow of accepted values that characterizes carnival’ (‘Introduction’, in *Silenos: Erasmus in Elizabethan Literature*, pp. 5–13). However, this line of argument is untenable for three reasons. First, these interpretations estimate the significance of *Praise* as a whole purely in the terms of folly’s first persona. Second, in several places, Erasmus appears to oppose carnivals; in his colloquy, ‘A Fish Diet’, the Butcher describes with horror the grotesque hedonism of ‘revels’ in a nearby town, which would not be out of place in *Rabelais*: ‘an old fellow [...] carried head down to prevent his choking on vomit [...] he was vomiting wretchedly on the legs and feet of the hindmost carriers. Most were laughing, but in such a way as you would say without hesitation they were crazy’ (*CWE*, 40, p. 707); likewise, in his adage, ‘For sluggards it is always a holiday’, he sees holidays as having become irreligious: ‘For a true Christian every day is a holy day; while to the bad Christians who form the great majority, holy days are not so much holy as profane’ (*CWE*, 33, p. 296). Third, as he repeatedly emphasizes in his later letters, Erasmus is against the wholesale “overthrow of traditional values”, since he desires reform, not reformation (see J. A. Fronde, *Life and Letters of Erasmus: Lectures Delivered at Oxford 1893–4* (New York: Scribner’s, 1912), pp. 359–417; Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (London: Collins, 1969), pp. 298–337; Cornelius Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Work and Influence*, trans. by J. C. Grayson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 147–61).

Rabelais' and Montaigne's works.⁶³ After all, when the latter writes in 'Of Experience' that 'on the loftiest throne in the world we are sitting only on our rump' (*F*, Book III, Chapter XIII, p. 1044), he almost appropriates the court fool's role of deflating his master's grandeur by reminding him of his physicality.

In Erasmus' case, however, his interest in the body as a stubbornly pre-philosophical addendum springs from his concern that the subtlety of contemporary theologians' arguments, along with their asceticism, negates the key role that the body plays in Christianity—a role manifest from the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection and the sacraments of communion and marriage. In Shakespeare, however, such comments serve to scupper the pretensions of speculation that regards itself as having transcended the body. The most remarkable instance of this is found in Shylock's famous plea for racial equality: 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; [...] if you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh?' (*The Merchant of Venice*, III. 1. 50–54). Everyone shares similar bodily features, physical vulnerability and the same ability to transcend this vulnerability through that involuntary physical response of laughter, which Rabelais considers to be the unique, 'proper', feature of man (*GP*, Book 1, 'Prologue', p. 23).

About one third of the way through, Stultitia's oration changes tone. It slides away from pointing out the ways in which man lives a life unknowingly dedicated to folly, to a caustic critique of the hypocrisies of the powers that be. The biting quips of Shakespeare's wise fools and the satiric railing of characters such as Thersites or Timon plainly resonate with this critique of authority. In fact, Erasmus can get away with it only because he has donned the persona of Stultitia: 'what worde comyng out of a wyseman's mouthe were a hangyng mattier, the same yet spoken by a foole shall muche delight euin hym that is touched therewith' (*PF*, p. 50).

Despite his deliberate disengagement from direct critique by using a persona, Erasmus' enemies still managed to wrest Stultitia's critique out of context and accuse him of heresy.⁶⁴ Her erudite attack on human vanity encompasses all estates of man, from judges to priests and from mercenaries to philosophers, but with the

⁶³ Cave, p. 327.

⁶⁴ See Fronde, p. 309–38; Bainton, pp. 209–241.

exception of the poor and despised. Her *bêtes noires*, however, are Doctors of Divinity and theologians. They are ‘a neste of men [...] crabbed and waspelyke’ (*PF*, p. 78):

[...] propped vp with theyr owne Arrogance and Selflikyng, as if they dwelled amonges the sterres, or loked downe from aloft, and in a manner toke compassion vppon other seely men lyke wormes crepyng by the grounde. Namely whiles thei are hedged in on all sides, with such a gard of Magistral deffinicions, conclusions, corollaries, explicite and implicite propositions [...].

(*PF*, p. 78)

This brand of theology misconceives the egalitarian simplicity of the teachings of the New Testament; the apostles, Stultitia comments, ‘had need to be enstructed by a new spirite, in case vpon these matters they were compelled to argue with this new kynde of doctors’ (*PF*, p. 80). What is more, such abstruse and self-satisfied speculation fails to grasp the fact that Christian faith is manifested through deeds, not through words.⁶⁵ The theologians, mendicants and priests whom Erasmus attacks are, in the words of Lear’s fool: ‘more in word than matter’ (*Lear*, III. 2. 81). Stultitia is attacking Scholasticism, the theoretical core of the Catholic Church in the early sixteenth century, which employed Aristotelian dialectics to resolve Scriptural ambiguities. Critics interested in the role of Erasmus’ works in the Reformation have tended to emphasize this section of the *Praise of Folly*, since it attacks the superstition and corruption of the church just as much as the fruitless subtleties of scholasticism.⁶⁶

More important for our purposes, however, is how Stultitia debunks self-satisfied modes of speculation, which, peering down from abstract heights on the vast majority of humankind, view laymen as though they were ‘wormes crepyng by

⁶⁵ This belief is by no means unique to Erasmus. The Brethren of the Common Life, by whom Erasmus was brought up, practiced the *Devotio Moderna*, which combined monastic devotion with practical works, such as treating the sick and educating the young (see Bainton, pp. 8–25). Attacking theological jargon in a different context, towards the end of his life Erasmus writes to John Carondelet in 1523: ‘You will not be damned if you do not know whether the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son has a single or a double principle, but you will not escape perdition unless you see to it in the mean time that you have the fruits of the Spirit, which are charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, forbearance, gentleness, faith, moderation, self-control, and chastity’ (*CWE*, 9, p. 252).

⁶⁶ Marc Lienhard provides a cogent examination of all the critical work on Erasmus’ ambivalent relationship with the radical sects, especially the Anabaptists, in Germany during the reformation. He argues that Erasmus’ ‘Philosophy of Christ’ is the part of his thought that has the greatest affinity with radical ideas, but Erasmus’ conception of Christian simplicity is far more tolerant; see ‘Die Radikalen des 16 Jahrhunderts und Erasmus’ in M. Mout, H. Smolinsky and J. Trapman, eds., *Erasmianism: Idea and Reality* (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences: Amsterdam, 1997), pp. 91–105.

the grounde'. Indeed, such anti-intellectualism is apparent in the canon of folly before Erasmus' genius for irony transformed it. After the author himself, the first fools aboard Sebastian Brandt's *Narrenschiff* are the learned, 'doutures' and 'clerkes', who are exhorted to:

Consyder our olde faders: note wel theyr diligence:
Ensue ye theyr steppes: obtayne ye such fame,
As they dyd lyuyng: and that by true Prudence.
Within theyr hartys they planted theyr scyence
And nat in plesaunt bokes.⁶⁷

In both books, 'Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and petrified; it liberates from fear and intimidation':⁶⁸ the power of the church, which underwrote intellectual endeavour until the Reformation, is rendered risible by evoking the disjunction between lived faith apparent in the teachings of the Patriarchs and Apostles and the book-learning of modern doctors of divinity. In this connection, something of the anti-systematic impulse that Catherine Bates detects in Nietzsche can be discerned in Stultitia's seriocomic invective and Brandt's didactic satire:

Any presumption of mastery or control over nature on the part of human beings was utterly vain—an absurd grandiosity based on nothing more substantial than the intellect's own flattering and entirely self-generated estimate of itself. The human mind didn't deliver truth so much as illusions that were structured to look like truths. It surveyed the surface of things and gave the name reality to what was no more than its own particular way of seeing.⁶⁹

The crucial difference between the two works, however, is the claims to authority that they make: 'What Brandt, with the whole authority of the author of the *Narrenschiff*, proclaims as a vain outrage to be fought against, Erasmus lets Stultitia say'.⁷⁰

That pretentious ratiocination and jargon-addled specialism obscure what they purport to explain is an anti-philosophical insight common in Shakespeare's dramatization of folly—both of the wise and credulous sorts. When he speciously

⁶⁷ *The Shyppe of Fooles*, trans. by Alexander Barclay (London: Wynky[n] de worde, 1509), p. 11.

⁶⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 123.

⁶⁹ *Play in a Godless World: The Theory and Practice of Play in Shakespeare, Nietzsche and Freud* (London: Open Gate Press, 1999), p. 47.

⁷⁰ Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, 'Narrenschele und Pathos der Vernunft. Zum Narrenmotiv bei Sebastian Brandt und Erasmus von Rotterdam', *Neophilologus*, 71 (1987), 559–574 (p. 570).

cites a pseudo-religious, fictional authority's pedantic insight, which is anything but insightful, and appropriates it as a syllogistic justification of his sacrilegious impersonation, Feste makes a mockery of such sophistry:

FESTE [...] as the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King Gorboduc, 'that that is, is.' So I being Master Parson, am Master Parson; for what is 'that' but 'that' [...]?
(*Twelfth Night*, IV. 2. 11–14)

This inspired perversion of philosophical doctrine is not that far removed from the discourse of the self-serving theologians, whom Stultitia inveighs against for bending scripture to justify war, or to have heretics burnt at the stake (see *PF*, p. 89–90). As Gerhard Schweppenhäuser contends, beneath Erasmus' satire, there 'implicitly appears humanistic pathos [about] the suffering and violence stupidity causes',⁷¹ a pathos that is clearly discernable in Shakespeare's plays.

Early in his career, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Shakespeare experiments, both formally and thematically, with the idea that philosophy is utterly removed from the drives and desires of everyday existence. The arrival of the Princess and her ladies causes the self-denying intentions of students at the King's 'little academe' (I. 1. 13) to fall at the first hurdle. The antithesis of the nonsense spoken by the old hermit of Prague and the schoolmen derided by Stultitia's second persona is a philosophy of the sort espoused by her first persona, a philosophy that is sensitive to man's embodied nature, a kind of thinking that Montaigne memorably describes as 'intellectually sensible and sensibly-intellectuell' (*E*, Book 3, Chapter 13, p. 625).

Stultitia's self-reflexive critique of Grammarians like Erasmus, philosophers, theologians and scholars is founded on the idea that 'in all humaine thynges there is so great darkness and diuersnesse as nothing maie be clearly knowne out nor discovered' (*PF*, p. 63). Anybody who claims to know the true nature of things with any degree of certainty is at best deluded and at worst a hypocrite—like the venal lawyers, pardoners and kings whom she vehemently attacks. The three avatars of Stultitia are not separate entities. After all, her critical attack on the vanity of the sciences paves the way for the third part of her oration, where she morphs into a Christian fool, extolling the paradoxical wisdom of holy folly. The argument of the *Praise* is bound up with its movement, which Roland Bainton summarizes with

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 569.

admirable clarity:

The irrational is shown to be the rational. Yes, but the irrational is shown to be the rational only because the rational is shown to be irrational and all those disciplines so neatly reduced by men to order are but striving after the wind.⁷²

The final section is based on the idea that folly is the only attribute that the finite and the infinite, human and divine, share:

Now all these texts that I have alleaged, doe thei not plainly testifie, that mortall men beyng fooles, are godly also? And that Christ hym selfe mindying the relefe and redempcion of mankyndes folie, although he was the ineffable wisdome of the father, became yet a manner foole?

(*PF*, p. 118)

God's primary folly is the incarnation, in which He 'clothed Himself in vile man's flesh | So that he might be weak enough to suffer woe'.⁷³ By the standards of worldly logic, this action, through which the immortal became mortal, is foolish or even mad. It is in this connection that Paul comments: 'the foolishness of God is wiser than man; and the weakness of God is stronger than man' (I Corinthians, 1. 25).

As Nicholas Cusanus, whom Erasmus and Montaigne both read, explains in *De docta ignorantia* (1440), what reason can positively know can consist only of 'measurement' and this is 'limited to the reality it has in a finite mind'.⁷⁴ Reason cannot fathom the 'infinite' or 'maximum', since 'in every inquiry men judge of the uncertain by comparing it with an object presupposed certain, and their judgement is always approximate; every inquiry is, therefore, comparative and uses the method of analogy'.⁷⁵ The relative nature of all human sciences comes to the fore in Cusanus' contribution to the canon of folly, *De idiota* (1450), which contains perhaps the earliest example of a fool giving the lie to the values of the marketplace. Citing holy writ, the Idiot deflates man's pretensions to knowledge:

IDIOT Because I told thee that wisdome cries out in the
streets, and her cry is, that she dwells in the most high places,

⁷² Bainton, p. 123.

⁷³ 'Holy Sonnet XI', in *John Donne's Poetry*, ed. by Arthur L. Clements, 2nd edn. (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 114.

⁷⁴ *Of Learned Ignorance*, trans. by Germain Heron (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), p. 2, p. 7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8

this now will I endeavour to shew thee. And first tell me what
 doest thou see here done in the Marketplace?
 ORATOR I see in one place moneyes telling, in another wares a
 weighing, and over against us, oyle a measuring. [...]

IDIOT These are the workes of that reason, by which men
 excell beasts; for bruit beasts can neither number, weigh, nor
 measure.⁷⁶

When the archetypal fool for love, Antony, reflects that ‘there’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned’ (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. 1. 15), he too suggests that what really matters cannot be calculated or measured.

Likewise, in ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle’, Shakespeare’s neo-platonic evocation of romantic ecstasy, ‘Reason’ is ‘in itself confounded’ (41) by the fact that:

Property was thus appalled
 That the self was not the same.
 Single nature’s double name
 Neither two nor one was called.

(37–40)

At a stroke, an individual’s identity, the most basic predicate of calibrating reason not to mention a good deal of philosophy, is destroyed. Reason’s capacity to measure is voided: ‘Number there in love was slain’ (28), and thus ‘Love hath reason, reason none’ (47).

For Erasmus, the true Christian imitates in their worship and their acts God’s self-bankrupting love as best they can:⁷⁷

[...] no maner fooles are in apparence more ideotelike, than suche as are totally
 rauished, and enflamed with the ardent zeale of Christian charitee. So laueshly
 thei deale their goodes abroad, forgette all iniuries doen vnto them, suffer
 them selues to be decieued, put no difference between friends and foes,
 abhorre all pleasures and delites of the bodie [...]. Briefely, [they] seme to be

⁷⁶ *The idiot in four books. The first and second of wisdom. The third of the minde. The fourth of statick experiments, or experiments of the ballance. By the famous and learned C. Cusanus*, trans. by John Everard (London: William Leak, 1650), p. 5; *idiota*, incidentally, is how the Vulgate translates Paul’s self-deprecating description of himself as *moros* or fool. In early modern English ‘idiot’ signified both a ‘a simple or ordinary person’ and a natural fool or ‘A person so profoundly disabled in mental function or intellect as to be incapable of ordinary acts of reasoning or rational conduct’ (*OED*, definition nos. 1a and 2a).

⁷⁷ For a detailed analysis of this paradox, see M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Duckworth, 1999), pp. 1–28; *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Duckworth, 1980), esp. pp. 36–42 and pp. 63–91; Walter M. Gordon, *Humanist Play and Belief: The Seriocomic Art of Desiderius Erasmus* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 6; Augustijn, pp. 20–50.

so astounded and past all common senses, which men live by, as if their souls dwelled not in those bodies they beare about with them, but rather in some other mansion place [...] to the common iudgement of men [they] appeere to be [in] a verie madnesse, or rauing of the wittes [...] the apostles were iudged by the wicked Ethnikes to be drunkards [...] and Paul likewise was holden for madde, of Festus.

(*PF*, p. 121)

By pointing out that the apostles also appeared ridiculous, Stultitia praises the foolish appearance and selfless behaviour of ‘fools for Christ’s sake’ (I Corinthians, 4. 10). Shakespeare and his collaborators have Thomas More confess that he is ‘a very unthrift’ because he has ‘purchased [...] strange commodities’ of ‘Crutches [...] and bare cloaks, | For halting soldiers and poor needy scholars’, making himself ‘the poorest chancellor | That ever was in England’ (*Sir Thomas More*, V. 3. 64, 52, 57–58, 47–48).⁷⁸ Conversely, the motivations of worldly fools, dedicated merely to getting by in the sublunary world, are rendered incomprehensible, even irrational.

Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, on which the influence of Erasmus is well chronicled,⁷⁹ expounds the same paradox with such brilliance as to warrant extensive quotation. Pantagruel, the foolosopher Prince, persuades Panurge to take the advice of a fool, Triboulet, by making the following argument:

[H]e who narrowly takes heed to what concerns the dexterous Management of his private Affairs, domestick Businesses and those Adoes which are confined within the streight-lac’d compass of one Family: who is attentive, vigilant, and active in the oeconomik Rule of his own house [...] and who knows warily how to prevent the Inconveinces of Poverty, is a called a worldly Wise Man, though perhaps in the second Judgment of the Intelligences which are above, he is esteemed a *Fool*. So on the contrary, is he most like [...] to be not only *sage*, but to *presage* Events to come by Divine Inspiration, who laying aside those cares which are conduciabie to his body or his fortunes, and as it were rids all his senses of Terrene Affections [...]. All which neglects of Sublunary Things are vulgarly imputed *Folly*.

(*GP*, Book 3, Chapter 37, p. 446)

Without wealth, the capacity to dissimulate, or scholastic arguments, these fools *live* their faith, embodying the radical egalitarian kernel of the New Testament,

⁷⁸ *Sir Thomas More in Shakespeare and Others: Collaborative Plays*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and others (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 349–421 (p. 414–415).

⁷⁹ Rabelais wrote to Erasmus, referring to him as his spiritual ‘father and mother’; for a recent overview of the critical work on this and the question of influence, see Paul J. Smith, ‘Jean Thenaud and François Rabelais: Some Hypotheses on the Early Reception of Erasmus in French Vernacular Literature’, in Karl A. E. Enkel, ed., *The Reception of Erasmus in the Early Modern Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 211–237).

particularly apparent in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ and Paul’s writings. As Schweppenhäuser shows, the *Praise* uses irony to critique the emergent conceptions of bourgeois reason, whereas Brandt’s *Narrenschiff* (1494) exonerates forward planning from charges of folly, and—in absolute contrast to Erasmus—associates thriftiness with godliness.⁸⁰

Those interested in Erasmus’ ‘theology of ecstasy’ have tended to emphasize the role of this final section of the *Praise* at the expense of the others,⁸¹ but this description of holy fools lies in juxtaposition to Stultitia’s attack on the learned, which, in turn, is connected to the bodily follies of the first section: ‘Only through insight into the ambivalence between self-praise and self-denunciation can the paradoxical form of folly, and with it the organizing principle of the work, be unlocked’.⁸² Rabelais employs his grotesque characters in a seriocomic exploration of the self-abnegating generosity of ‘fools for Christ’s sake’ and of God himself. When the prodigal trickster Panurge is made ‘Laird of Sulmygourdin in Dyposidie’ by Pantagruel, he ‘wastes’ his substantial income:

Now his Worship, the new *Laird*, husbanded this his Estate so providently well and prudently, that in less than fourteen days he wasted and dilapidated all the certain and uncertain Revenue of his Lairdship for three whole years: Yet he did not properly dilapidate it [...] in founding monastrays, building of churches [...] but spent it in a thousand little Banquets and jolly collations, keeping an open house for all Comers and Goers [...] borrowing money before-hand, buying dear, selling cheap, and eating corn (as it were) whilst it was but grass.

(*GP*, Book 3, Chapter 2, p. 305)

Because he borrows with high interest and sells for cash, what Rabelais fallaciously terms the ‘Mysteries of *Practical Arithmetick*’ are evidently lost on this imprudent trickster. He lives for the moment, entertaining ‘good fellows’ and ‘pretty wenches’ (*GP*, Book 3, Chapter 2, p. 305) regardless of the cost. Enacting something of the boundless generosity at the core of the New Testament for himself, the Prince is ‘in no way offended at the matter, angry, nor sorry’ by his friend’s ‘Lavishness’ (*GP*, Book 3, Chapter 2, p. 305).

Erasmus emphasizes that although holy fools appear foolish in the eyes of the

⁸⁰ ‘Narrenschelte und Pathos der Vernunft’, p. 567.

⁸¹ Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly*, p. 3; Gordon, pp. 223–253.

⁸² Schweppenhäuser, p. 568.

world, they are, like the lovers in ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle’, experiencing a tantalizing

[F]oretaste of future blessedness, by which we are totally absorbed into God and shall live in future more in him than in ourselves. [...] what Plato calls madness, being rapt out of himself; he exists in the object of his love [...] he is brought in to a new kind of teaching, very different from all the current convictions of the wise and foolish alike.

(*CWE*, 3, p. 127)

This passage, from his ‘Letter to Maarten van Dorp’ (May 1515), succinctly reiterates his argument from the final pages of the *Praise* (see *PF*, pp. 126–9). Referring to Plato’s conception of poetic rapture, a state in which poets ‘are seized by a divine spirit, which inspires them to rise above human limitations’,⁸³ Erasmus suggests that fools offer a radical third way of knowing that goes beyond sublunary categories. He conceives of Greek philosophy as something that foreshadows Christian theology; texts from a pagan prehistory prefigure the teaching of the Gospel. While it would demand a full-length study in its own right, the anachronistic significance of Greek thought in Christianity had a considerable impact on the early modern mindset. A hundred years after the Dutchman’s death, John Donne, for instance, argues along strikingly similar lines: ‘it is evident, that in *Trismegistus*, and in *Zoroaster*, and in Plato and some other Authors of that Ayre, there seem to be clearer, and more literall expressings of the Trinity, than are in all the prophets of the old Testament’.⁸⁴

Shakespeare, however, goes a step further than Erasmus in his use of the ironies it is possible to generate from the supra-rational wisdom of God’s folly. In the *Praise*, a fool, who makes only spurious claims to authority, extols the paradoxical wisdom of folly, whereas in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Bottom brilliantly bungles St Paul’s description of the ineffable joys of Salvation—‘But as it is written, The things which eye hath not seen, neither ear hath heard, neither came into man’s heart, are, which God hath prepared for them that love him’ (*Geneva*, I Corinthians 2. 9)—when he expresses his ostensibly inexpressible dream:

⁸³ M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy* (London: Duckworth, 1983; repr. 2000), p. 60.

⁸⁴ *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by George R. Porter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953–62), VII, p. 57.

BOTTOM [...] I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about t'expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. *The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was.* I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom, and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.
(IV. 1. 196–211[my emphasis])

For several reasons, Bottom's nonsense is astonishing. Awakening from his dream, in which he has fulfilled that age-old human fantasy of inhabiting an alternative body, but nonetheless remained steadfastly himself, Bottom travesties Paul's memorable evocation of how man cannot grasp the joys of heaven—accidentally performing the limitations of human knowledge even as he describes them. As in Erasmus, a manifest fool, albeit not one who openly admits to being such, points out the absurdities of attempting to know the unknowable.⁸⁵

In this respect, Bottom's inspired gibberish implies something similar to what Theseus, with characteristic self-assurance, formulates towards the end of the play: there are states of being, including dreaming, the lover's infatuation and poetic inspiration, that 'apprehend | More than cool reason ever comprehends' (V. 1. 5–6). Because of Bottom's malapropisms, however, even the doctrine of learned ignorance is submitted to the play's jubilant irony; this is not to say, however, that irony negates the concepts it evokes. Rather, in Shakespeare's drama, irony liberates concepts, rendering absurd any claims to authority that may exist in connection with them; Shakespeare's seriously funny irony transmutes the building blocks of dogma into playthings.

Bottom's fears of idiotically endeavouring to explain away the unexplainable—'man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream'—are

⁸⁵ The influence of the *Praise* on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in general and Bottom's in particular is discussed by Thelma N. Greenfield in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream and Praise of Folly', *Comparative Literature*, 20 (1968), 236–244, and Catharine Birkenshaw in "Past the wit of man": A *Midsummer Night's Dream's* Debt to *Praise of Folly*', *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, 5 (1992), 43–58. For Emily Stockard, however, these studies underestimate the crucial role of holy folly in the play; she contends that 'Titania's foolish love for Bottom mirrors God's foolish love for mankind': see 'Christian Folly and the Subversion of Hierarchy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *R&L*, 29 (1997), 1–20 (p. 2).

undermined by the simple structural irony that Bottom has, quite literally, just been an ‘ass’. Nonetheless, this sentiment foreshadows Shakespeare’s closing act of authorial disavowal:

PUCK If we shadows have offended,
 Think but this, and all is mended:
 That you have but slumbered here,
 While these visions did appear;
 And this weak and idle theme,
 No more yielding but a dream,
 Gentles do not reprehend.

(‘Epilogue’, 1–6)

Man is an ass, Shakespeare implies, if he takes umbrage at *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, since drama seldom unequivocally affirms any one position. In fact, the way that the play idles away the time helps to constitute its philosophical vantage point, its otherness to the ideals of the waking world. Although Bottom considers it impossible to ‘expound’ the significance of his dream, he nonetheless sees its literary potential. However, the song he envisages, which is the ballad of ‘Bottom’s Dream’ to being sung after the death of Thisbe, flagrantly violates theatrical decorum. While the performance of it remains an unrealized possibility in *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*, the mere mention of this ballad makes a mockery both of the high seriousness of Ovid’s original, and that of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare’s tragedy of the same year based on the same tale.

The Dialectics of Utopian Enlightenment

More’s *Utopia*, one of the canonical texts of Renaissance folly and a possible influence on *The Tempest*,⁸⁶ Shakespeare’s own deeply ambivalent comment on utopia, confronts the order of things considered rational today, almost as much as it tested the mores of Tudor England. At first glance, however, the satire of Book One has lost its topical resonance, its power to alarm and offend. When Hythloday reflects that ‘Normally sheep are placid and eat very little, but now I hear that they

⁸⁶ Recognizing Shakespeare’s debt to contemporary utopias, Thomas Bulger goes so far as to contend that ‘*The Tempest* directly and fully examines Utopian ideas current at the time of the play’s composition’ and that it does so both thematically and formally (‘The Utopic Structure of the *Tempest*’, *Utopian Studies*, 5 (1994), 38–47 (p. 38).

have become so voracious and fierce that they have started eating men' (*U*, Book I, p. 66), the significance of this topical attack on the enclosures dictated by the burgeoning wool trade could easily be overlooked.

For two reasons, however, this is not the case. First, by employing the memorable image of ravenously carnivorous sheep, Hythloday uses the kind of seriocomic sugar-coating that Erasmus defends in his famous letter to Dorp. The object of the *Praise of Folly* is 'to teach and delight',⁸⁷ since 'truth by itself is a trifle astringent, and thus when made palatable finds an easier entrance into the minds of men' (*CWE*, 3, p. 113). Second, this image epitomises the self-destructive impulse at the heart of early modern (and present-day) capitalism. 'England', Hythloday comments, 'used to seem exceptionally prosperous; now the unchecked greed of a few is destroying that prosperity' (*U*, Book I, p. 67). This self-destruction is caught up with the kind of rationality that is premised on self-preservation at all costs. As Horkheimer and Adorno note, 'the not merely theoretical [*ideelle*] but practical tendency towards self-annihilation has been inherent in rationality from the start' (*DA*, p. 7; [*DE*, p. xix]).

As Alain Badiou's and Slavoj Žižek's recent studies show,⁸⁸ such rationality finds its antithesis in the communism and pacifism of Jesus' and St. Paul's teachings, which, as we have seen, are also central to Erasmus' understanding of Christian folly. The image of voracious 'sheep' is clearly ironic, since sheep are commonly used as a metaphor for the Christian faithful. It encapsulates what R. W. Chambers long ago considered to be the formula at work in *Utopia* as a whole: 'With nothing save Reason to guide them, the Utopians do this; and yet we Christian Englishmen, we Christian Europeans, do this'.⁸⁹ That reason has the paradoxical ability to create the 'instruments' (*CWE*, 36, p. 402) of its own annihilation is, in fact, pointed out by Erasmus in his long pacifist essay, 'Dulce Bellum Inexpertis' (*CWE*, 36, p. 399–440), which is one of *Utopia*'s sources.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Sidney, p. 86.

⁸⁸ See *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003 [1997]), and *The Fragile Absolute—or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000).

⁸⁹ 'The Meaning of *Utopia*', in Sir Thomas More, *Utopia: A Revised Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. and trans. by Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. 137–147 (p. 139).

⁹⁰ John C. Olin, 'Erasmus' *Adagia* and More's *Utopia*', *Moreana*, 100 (1989), 127–36. Wootton discerns the influence of Erasmus' adage 'Among friends all is in common' at work in Hythloday's

Insofar as it presages much of what has still to be openly acknowledged, More's text looks back on the present day from its position somewhere in the future. This becomes clear when *Utopia* is considered in relation to the thesis of Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 'Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology [*schon der Mythos ist Aufklärung, und: Aufklärung schlägt in Mythologie zurück*]' (DE, p. xviii; DA, p. 6)—a comment that puts paid to the simplistic, linear account of history derided by Žižek as 'evolutionist historicism'.⁹¹ This is not to say, however, that St Thomas More was a harbinger of modernity. Rather, within his model of social progress lies a diagnosis of the tendencies latent in Enlightened societies, which cause them to revert to barbarism. In other words, man's instrumental reason and confidence in his intellectual convictions not only enables his enlightenment, but also causes repression and fear to a hitherto unimaginable extent.

The first aspect of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* thesis is also apparent in *Utopia*. Despite being written by a Christian martyr, before the emergence of the vocabulary of scientific enquiry,⁹² it nonetheless examines the workings of the market using 'schemes and models'.⁹³ The second aspect of Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis is discernible if we trace the history of the literary genre that More's neologism, *utopia*, came to signify. *Utopia*, like Bacon's *New Atlantis*, displays a remarkable faith in the capacities of technology and social organisation to ensure human happiness. Yet, in the latter-day dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell, it is precisely technology and social organisation—the two things that have enabled man to dominate nature—that thwart the possibility of his happiness. What had promised to liberate, now oppresses.

At the start of their book, Horkheimer and Adorno quote Francis Bacon's 'In Praise of Knowledge', which contends that the chief aim of knowledge is for man to be able to "control [nature] by action" (DE, p. 1; DA, p. 10). This early philosophical formulation of enlightened man's instrumental relationship with both inner and outer nature is prefigured in *Utopia*. Not only do the Utopians battery-

communism. See his 'Introduction' to *Utopia: With Erasmus' The Sileni of Alcibiades*, ed. and trans. by David Wootton (Cambridge: Hackett, 1999), pp. 1–48 (p.19).

⁹¹ *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 89.

⁹² Wootton, 'Introduction', p.19.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

farm their chickens, but they also ensure the maximum possible agricultural yield through a precise categorisation and division of land; Utopian town planning, with its large boulevards and identical houses, displays a striking anticipation of the Haussmannization of Paris and, therefore, knowledge of the attendant relationship between spatial design and social control. The Utopians' notoriously pragmatic attitude towards war—it should be avoided at all costs and preferably won by stealth (see *U*, Book I, pp. 135–44)—chimes with the way in which Odysseus, for Adorno and Horkheimer the proto-bourgeois individual (*DE*, pp. 24–62; *DA*, pp. 41–88), eschewing the brute strength and endurance of the chivalric hero, uses stealth, organisation and craftiness to achieve his aims.

More's new genre partly has its roots in Edenic myths like the land of Cockayne (see *CWM*, 4, p. clxvii). But his Utopia is no Big Rock Candy Mountain. In place of cornucopian abundance, sexual licence and freedom of movement and expression—apparent, for instance, in Rabelais' Thélème with its daring injunction, 'Do what thou wilt' (*GP*, Book 1, Chapter 57, p. 157)—there is austerity, surveillance and strict control of travel, expression and sexual relations. In Utopia, 'liberation' from fear, the fundamental aim of 'Enlightenment understood in the widest sense as advance of thought' (*DE*, p. 1; *DA*, p. 9),⁹⁴ proves to be chimerical. As ostensible Enlightenment 'reverts' to superstition, the people remain passive and in fear. Although the Utopians need not fear a spectacular execution like the Tudor thieves of the First Book, they must, as Stephen Greenblatt shows, fear shame and slavery. Indeed, More shames his readers by forcing them to compare the chaotic misery of their society with the order and formal freedom of the pagan utopians.⁹⁵

The expectation that the Utopians 'make good use of their free time' (*U*, Book II, p. 98), the micro-organisation of their every waking hour and an insistence on sociability presage Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the illusory nature of freedom in modern society:

⁹⁴ Lucretius writes that 'I proceed to unloose the mind from the close knots of superstition [...] because the subject matter is so dark and the lies I write so clear, as I touch all with the Muses grace'; the enlightenment urge to free man from naive 'superstition' or mythology is at the core of this Epicurean thinker's philosophical project—as is an awareness of being able to get to the heart of things through imaginative rather formal discourse. (*De rerum natura*, trans. by W. H. D. Rouse, rev. by Martin Ferguson Smith, LOEB Classical Library, 181 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924; rev. edn. 1975), I. 931–35.

⁹⁵ See *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; repr. 2005), pp. 57–72.

Formal freedom is guaranteed for everyone. No one has to answer officially for what he or she thinks. However, all find themselves enclosed from early on within a system of churches, clubs, professional associations, and other relationships, which amount to the most sensitive instrument of social control.

(*DE*, p. 120; *DA*, p. 158)

It is not just in Book Two, More's concrete model for social improvement, that we can discern anticipations of the *Dialectic*: in the first section, Hythloday illustrates how, after the Landowners' enclosures, the persecution of those left homeless as vagabonds is, as he later puts it, 'a conspiracy of the rich against the poor' (*U*, Book II, p. 157). Morton suggests that the English could test out the practices of the Polyerites ('People of Much Nonsense' [*U*, Book I, p. 71]) on the 'vagabonds' upon which 'so far none of our measures have been successful' (*U*, Book I, p. 73), by turning them into slaves, distinguished by 'badges' (*U*, p. 72). Thus More thematizes the misinterpretation of Hythloday's comments: the whole point of his attack on the judicial system is that such people are victims of wider social forces. They become vagabonds, who are, like Poor Tom, 'whipped from tithing to tithing, and stock-punished, and imprisoned' (*King Lear*, III. 4. 124–5) as a direct result of the aristocracy's profiteering (*U*, Book I, 64–73). This irony throws into relief a pattern of thought that is comparable to the sort Horkheimer and Adorno observe at work in anti-Semitism, in which people are attacked on the grounds of the very powerlessness or weakness (political or physical) that social conditions foist upon them (see *DE*, p. 137–9; *DA*, 177–8).

'Like Marx's early *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*', Greenblatt argues, 'More's work propounds communism less as a coherent economic program than as a weapon against certain tendencies in human nature'.⁹⁶ Indeed, it might not be altogether absurd to extend this insight and suggest that, to a certain degree, what *Praise of Folly* and *Utopia* are grasping for is a form of expression in which they can express something comparable to critical theory. What Schweppenhäuser writes about the *Praise* could equally well apply to *Utopia*. He contends:

[T]he *Praise of Folly* is an introduction to reason's unsystematic self-reflection on its problematic realization. The criticism of reason, which is the motive of this work, refers already to the advanced forms of self-critical

⁹⁶ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 37.

reason of the present.⁹⁷

By using strategies of ironic disassociation, these humanists can attack the injustices of their world and model alternatives: in More, Utopian communism; in Erasmus, a life led according to the principles of holy folly. But this detachment means that what they offer does not have to be systematic and enclosed. Rather, these texts set various ideologies, beliefs and values into motion and conflict. In doing so, they critique the objective causes of suffering.

Moreover, like ‘critical theory’, *Utopia* and *Praise of Folly* are both ‘incompatible with the idealist belief that any theory is independent of men and even has a growth of its own’,⁹⁸ not least because Hythloday’s ostensibly idealistic thought actually advocates adherence to the teaching of the Gospel, the expression of which is found in deeds rather than words. Both texts critique early modern society, debunking certain customs that shape the behaviour of individuals, who profess to be Christians, but act, frequently in bad faith, in a manner antithetical to that expounded in the Gospel.

Playing the Fool in Utopia

More’s *Utopia* employs narrative techniques comparable to those of Stultitia’s oration. Despite or perhaps because of the connotations their names hold, both speakers furnish the reader with a critique of the world as it is and offer suggestions, both implicit and explicit, about what the world could one day become. Like the *Praise* and many of Erasmus’ *Colloquies*, *Utopia* is without a clear-cut conclusion. The final significance of this slippery, ambiguous text remains radically indeterminate; ‘Explaining why *Utopia* is the sort of text it is’, its recent editor, David Wootton writes, ‘is not the same as fixing its meaning, for the whole point of *Utopia* is that whenever we feel we have a grip on it, it slips from our grasp’.⁹⁹ To fathom the significance of the ironies and distortions at work in the discourse of folly in Shakespeare, Montaigne and Erasmus, this study will adopt a comparable method. Rather than fixing their meaning, it seeks merely to understand why and how the texts are the way they are.

⁹⁷ ‘Narrenschelte und Pathos der Vernunft’, p. 573.

⁹⁸ Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. by M. J. O’Connell and others (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 240.

⁹⁹ Wootton, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

This is not least because both texts appear so critical of the dominant order of things. Erasmus sees pretensions to certainty as mere vanity, while More's Hythloday recurrently emphasizes the fact that 'whenever you have private property, and money is the measure of all things, you will find society can scarcely ever be just or prosperous' (*U*, Book I, p. 86), a comment that 'At a stroke dismisses the elaborate ideology of status and custom that provided the time-honored justification for the uneven distributions of wealth in society'.¹⁰⁰ To have absolute faith in the veracity of Hythloday's narration, however, would be as misguided as implicitly trusting Utopian values. As David Wootton observes, *Utopia* is a Silenic text—an idea that is central to Renaissance folly and finds fuller exposition in the next chapter. The text as a whole is characterized by a sense of duplicity. Like the Silenus head, it 'holds out the possibility that our ways of thinking about the world are fundamentally unstable; that the "right" viewpoint may be parasitic on the "wrong"'.¹⁰¹ This is most visibly evoked when the Anemolian ambassadors come to *Utopia*:

They had gold rings on their fingers, and sparkling strings of gems and pearls hung from their caps. In short, they were dressed in exactly the way the Utopians dress slaves to punish them, and children to amuse them. [...] So [the Utopians] bowed low to the lowliest servants [...] as if they were great lords, while they mistook the ambassadors themselves, since they were wearing gold chains, for slaves, and showed them no respect at all.

(*U*, Book II, p. 112)

Discussing the topsy-turvy, Silenic nature of 'all humane thynges' (*PF*, p. 37), Stultitia reflects that when one opens the Silenus head what was once was infamous becomes glorious: '*quod infame, gloriosum*'.¹⁰² The Utopians' misapprehension opens up the Silenus head. The beggarly 'slaves' are venerated, while the distinguished ambassadors are thought to be mere 'slaves'. Evidently, a 'transvaluation of values' has taken place; more significantly, however, this transvaluation offers a satirical *devaluation* of the standards of this world, begging the question: 'What's aught, but as 'tis valued?' (*Troilus and Cressida*, II. 2, 52). As

¹⁰⁰ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 37.

¹⁰¹ Wootton, 'Introduction', p. 27.

¹⁰² *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi*, ed. by various, 9 vols (Amsterdam: E. J. Brill/London: Elsevier, 1964–2005), III, p. 376. Chaloner omits this comment in his translation; see Miller, *PF*, p. 151.

Cusanus shows, far from being natural and intrinsic, value is relative, arbitrary, extrinsic and validated by custom alone.

This line of argument is supported by the exchange between a Friar and a Fool at Morton's table. Even Hythloday, the 'Nonsense-speaker' himself, is unsure as to whether to relate this 'ridiculous' (*U*, Book I, p. 74) anecdote. The fool quips that Friars are the same as vagabonds and have thus been dealt with by the Cardinal's idea that they should be 'arrested and forced to work' (*U*, Book 1, p. 75). Despite his profession, the monk fails to take the joke in good humour and becomes excessively angry: 'He called his opponent a rascal, a slanderer, a tittle-tattle, and a "Son of perdition". He quoted terrible threats at him out of the Bible' (*U*, Book 1, p. 75). Refusing to calm down, he evokes Papal authority: 'we have a bull that decrees that anyone who mocks us is immediately excommunicated' (*U*, Book 1, p. 76).

Wootton is quite right to point out that:

The friar and the fool are a silenus statue, offering two contrasting readings of the Bible. The one claims to be a follower of Christ, but is in fact irascible, ill-educated and quick to appeal to papal authority. The other presents himself as a mere jester, but quoting scripture 'was just the sort of thing he was good at'.¹⁰³

But the ironies of this exchange, with its erudite fool and an ignorant friar,¹⁰⁴ reach beyond their local context. The friar's actions, which are tested against the wisdom of fool, confirm the wisdom latent in the fool's joke. For all their faults, the Utopians delight in fools and hold in 'contempt' (*U*, Book II, p. 131) those, like the friar, who mock or attack them.¹⁰⁵

This is not dissimilar to the way *Utopia* as a whole works. *Utopia*, on one level, is a joke, but it deals with the serious topic of secular power. By forcing readers to shuttle between the manifest inequalities of Tudor England, attacked in Book I, and the life of the Utopians unreliably narrated in Book II, and by forcing them to attend to the ironies and ambiguities that are generated by this process, the

¹⁰³ Wootton, 'Introduction', p. 30.

¹⁰⁴ The Friar's ignorance and willingness to misuse scripture to justify his cause are exposed by his mistake when he quotes 'The zeal of Thy house has eaten me up' to justify his anger; as the marginal gloss explains: '*Evidently the Friar, because of His Ignorance of Latin, Misuses "Zelus" (Zeal) as if It Were Neuter like "Hoc Scelus" (This Crime)* (*CWM*, 4, p. 85) [eds. italics and capitalization].

¹⁰⁵ More uses the word 'Moriones' (*CWM*, 4, p. 192) for fools or simpletons; this unusual word would have recalled Erasmus' pun on the author's name in the title of his *Praise (Moriae Encomium)*.

relative merits and failings of both models of power are diagnosed. In a discussion of the utopian genre, Fátima Vieira points out that ‘Utopia is, in fact, a game, and implies the celebration of a kind of pact between the utopist and the reader: the utopist addresses the reader to tell him about a society that does not exist, and the reader acts as if he believes the author’.¹⁰⁶

Playing and Mocking

Is that the king? I think you are fooling me. He seems to be a man in an embroidered garment.

—Thomas More¹⁰⁷

The enduring charisma of the fool, a creature who resides outside the domain of reason, lies in his ability to expose the fault lines of reason; Erasmus’ *Folly* shows how man is blinded to his better nature by *philautia*, while Hythloday argues persuasively that once money is abolished, then ‘Conflict and crimes are eliminated from society, just as a cancer is cut from the body’ (*U*, Book II, p. 158). ‘The mother of all mischief’, he continues, is the deadly sin of pride, ‘*superbia*’ (*CWM*, 4, p. 242), because of which man is happy with his ‘good fortune’ only when it ‘is compared with the miseries of others’ (*U*, Book II, p. 158, p. 159).

But the fool is estranged from the explicit values of the society in which he finds himself; this perennial outsider habitually displays a lack of commitment to any one ideology. The court fool is politically powerless, despite the ways in which his mockery exposes the hypocrisy of those with political clout. And his ephemeral nature is further emphasized by Erasmus’ and More’s disorientating strategies of rhetorical disassociation. The former dons the mask of *Stultitia* ‘to embrace the whole world of things under the name of foolishness and to show that the whole sum of human felicity depends on Folly’ (*CWE*, 3, p. 126); the latter uses the complex play between the real More and the narrative’s *Morus*, who relates what a man called ‘nonsense-speaker’ had to say, to critique a model of reason based on self-preservation by comparing it to a place that does not exist.

Shakespeare’s mercurial fool Feste best embodies this disengagement from

¹⁰⁶ ‘The Concept of *Utopia*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 3–28 (p. 8).

¹⁰⁷ *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, ed. and trans. by Leicester Bradner and Charles Arthur Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 205.

the rules that govern the serious world:

Enter MARIA and [FESTE, the] clown

MARIA Nay, either tell me where thou hast been or I will not open my lips so wide as a bristle may enter in way of thy excuse. My lady will hang thee for thy absence.

FESTE Let her hang me. He that is well hanged in this world needs to fear no colours.

(Twelfth Night, I. 5. 1–5)

Feste refuses to remain passively obedient to the whims of his mistress' will. Although Maria upbraids him for his absence, Feste immediately renders her concerns absurd through his scurrilous punning; his quibble debases the power that the powers that be possess to punish disobedience.

Like Feste, Hythloday values his autonomy. Despite Morus's and Peter Gilles' arguments that he should put his humanist education and practical experience of the (new) world to good use by becoming an advisor to a prince, he stubbornly refuses to be committed to any particular king or country. In the Latin, this is evoked by wordplay; Gilles qualifies his suggestion to Hythloday that he should serve a king thus: 'I meant not that you should be in servitude [*seruias*] but in service [*inseruias*] to kings', but Hythloday rejoins that 'there is only one syllable less than the other' (*CWM*, 4, p. 54, 55). Tellingly, Ralph Robinson's 1556 translation omits this potentially subversive wordplay. Hythloday's 'do[ing] as he please[s]' (*U*, Book II, p. 61) recalls—perhaps deliberately—both Erasmus' assiduous avoidance of commitment to one particular cause or state and his desire for intellectual autonomy, a desire that is encapsulated in his remarkable motto: '*Concedo nulli*, [I yield to none]' (*CWE*, 12, p. 548), coined at around the time of the second edition of *Utopia* (1517–18). The most eminent humanist of his age, Erasmus, preferred not to join factions.

Hythloday follows Plato both in arguing that 'Unless government shared the moral values and the rational approach of the philosopher it would not, because it could not, apply his advice' and in believing that such commitment 'would do the philosopher harm. It would divert him to no purpose from intellectual pursuits, and it would be bound to compromise his moral integrity'.¹⁰⁸ What Morus calls Hythloday's 'eccentric wisdom' (*U*, Book I, p. 83) would be out of place at court,

¹⁰⁸ Brendon Bradshaw, 'More on *Utopia*', *The Historical Journal*, 24 (1981), 1–27 (p. 26).

since kings—apart from those in Rabelais—are primarily interested in expanding their realms. However, Hythloday's idealism comes across as egotistical, perhaps even a sublimated form of self-love; he uses an analogy of a philosopher who 'sees people out in the streets, being soaked by a thunder storm', but cannot 'persuade them to get out of the rain and take shelter' (*U*, Book I, p. 85), to express his critical relation to the universal unreason in which he finds himself. This one sane spectator, he continues, on a scene of universal madness: 'will achieve nothing if they go out and join them [the madmen]' (*U*, Book I, p. 85). In this, he adopts an attitude that corresponds to Lucretius' and Stultitia's Menippean perspective on 'the innumerable tumults, and businesses of mortall men' (*PF*, p. 70). Not without a degree of self-satisfaction, Lucretius reflects that

Nothing is more delightful than to possess lofty sanctuaries serene, well fortified by the teachings of the wise, whence you may look down on the others and behold them all astray and seeking the path of life: —the strife of wits, the fight for precedence, all labouring night and day with surpassing toil to mount upon the pinnacle of riches and lay hold on power. O pitiable minds of men, O blind intelligences.¹⁰⁹

The Utopians' idea that human happiness consists mainly of avoiding pain, which Greenblatt argues is lifted from Lucretius,¹¹⁰ is evidently not the only thing that More borrows from *De rerum natura*. Taking such conspicuous pleasure in one's intellectual superiority, however, sounds suspiciously like the conduct of proud people, who measure their success by the misery of others.

In contrast to Hythloday's elitist idealism, Morus suggests that kings may in fact be guided by philosophy:

[B]ut not by this ivory-tower theorizing, which makes no allowances for time and place. There's another philosophy, better suited to politics, which recognizes the play that's being staged, adapts itself to playing a part in it, revises what it has to say as the drama unfolds, and speaks appropriately for the time and place. [...] Play your part in it as best you can.

(*U*, Book I, pp. 83–4)

This debate is significant, because it is a dialectic that runs throughout the discourse of folly in Shakespeare and Erasmus. It seems one must choose between being a

¹⁰⁹ *De rerum natura*, II. 6–14.

¹¹⁰ *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (London: Bodley Head, 2011), p. 228.

player in the drama like Morus, or an outsider mocking the very conceits that the drama is based on, but whose mockery falls on deaf ears. For Stultitia, a philosopher in isolated superiority risks becoming one of ‘The vnkyndest kynde of men liuyng, [a] fooleosopher’ (*PF*, p. 10). She is talking about people like Jaques, who are so busy censuring the folly of others that they forget to recognise their own. They reject the common humanity they share by virtue of their corporeal nature, which is central to the philosophy of folly. They also deny themselves a hand in any achievable social change, unlike hard-nosed pragmatists like Morus, who believe that ‘if you cannot transform things for the better, you can at least make sure that they are no worse than necessary’ (*U*, Book 2, p. 84). The discourse of folly in Erasmus and Shakespeare debunks ‘ivory-tower theorizing’ as useless.

It would be credible to view Hythloday as akin to the philosophers satirized by Folly and Sidney, were it not for his response to Morus:

Christ forbade dissimulation, and he commanded those truths that he had whispered into the ears of his disciples should be preached openly on street corners. Most of what he taught is much more at odds with the common customs of humankind than the policies I recommended in my speech.
(*U*, Book 1, p. 85)

There is no escaping the fact that the type of pragmatism, with its protean personae, that the worldly-wise Morus advocates is as much at odds with the kernel of Christ’s teaching as the ‘customs’ of Christian society are. Unable to change their ‘behaviour to conform with Christ’s commands’, preachers have ‘adapted his commands to their behaviour as if his standards were flexible’ (*U*, Book 1, p. 85). In this *volte-face*, Hythloday’s desire for social reform modelled on the Utopians becomes a concrete set of practical measures, which, although more idealistic than Morus’ Machiavellian role-playing, still fail to live up to Christ’s ideal example.

Essaying Folly

Only the fools are certain and assured.
—‘Of the Education of Children’¹¹¹

In his ‘Apologie of *Raymond Sebond*’, Montaigne has a revelation. He becomes aware that he is ‘A new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher’ (*F*,

¹¹¹ This comment is found only in the C-Text (*F*, Book 1, Chapter XXVI, p. 135).

Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 487). Anne Hartle shows that, far from being incoherent, ‘accidental’ philosophy, ‘in contrast with deliberate philosophy’, is ‘non-authoritative and purely human’.¹¹² It is ‘human’ because it mocks thinkers soaring up to dizzying heights of abstraction—often by reminding them that they are flesh and blood; and it is ‘non-authoritative’ because it makes no claim to general validity. ‘Others fashion man’, writes Montaigne, ‘I repeat him; and represent a particular one’ (*E*, Book 3, Chapter 2, p. 451). ‘Montaigne’, writes Hartle, ‘invented the essay because he needed a new form to express not a “teaching” or a “system of thought”, but a way of being’.¹¹³ The peculiarities of an individual’s existence are, after all, incommensurate with the totalising impulse of systemisation.

Montaigne is every bit as scathing in his attacks on the serious philosophy of his day as More, Erasmus and St Paul are:

It is a thing worthy consideration, to see what state things are brought unto in this our age; and how Philosophie, even to the wisest, and men of best understanding, is but an idle, vaine and fantastical name, of small use and lesse worth, both in opinion and effect.

(*E*, Book 1, Chapter 25, p. 76)

In contrast to much philosophy, the *Essays* do not offer a general theory, which is to be imposed on the contingent particulars of experience. Instead, they offer a response to the contingent particulars of experience, taking as their basis and incorporating into their method what Adorno calls the ‘non-identical’—by which he means that which is left by the wayside whenever one unequivocally identifies someone or something.

Perhaps for this reason, the *Essays* defy summarisation. Since no brief consideration could do them justice, I will limit myself here to illustrating the ways in which some of the *Essays* provide a conduit through which Erasmian ideas passed into Shakespeare’s drama. As far as Shakespeare’s favourite philosopher is concerned, the question is not *was* Erasmus an influence, but *how* was Erasmus an influence?¹¹⁴ Aside from their striking formal affinity with Erasmus’ *Adages*,¹¹⁵ the

¹¹² Michel de Montaigne: *Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 3.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹¹⁴ Screech considers the transmission of various Erasmian preoccupations, including a respect for the body, in the course of his *Montaigne and Melancholy*; in *The Cornucopian Text*, Cave deals with Montaigne’s use of Erasmus’ theories of writing and their self-reflexive nature; see also Edmund J.

preoccupation of the *Essays* with the particular features of their object adheres to Erasmus' dictum, which he employs in defence of the adage as a philosophical form: 'in the domain of literature, it is sometimes the smallest things which have the greatest intellectual value' (*CWE*, 31, p. 14).

As Ruth Calder argues, in offering a 'moral self-portrait' of an individual, Montaigne follows Erasmus by rejecting 'a universalizing mimesis [...] in favour of the particular, the personal, the idiosyncratic'.¹¹⁶ Yet despite this—or perhaps because of this—Montaigne's 'ill-formed' or grotesque representation of his thoughts and movements is strikingly philosophical, not least because it recurrently and playfully questions the limits of knowledge. The second half of this thesis speculates more specifically about the influence of the *Essays* on particular plays. For the rest of this chapter, I am concerned merely with teasing out the intellectual affinities between the anti-methodological methods of philosophising of Erasmus, Montaigne, Shakespeare and Adorno. Shakespeare's foolosophy is non-authoritative—and, as such, anti-authoritative too—and suspicious of any universalizing account of things.

'*Tyrant custom*'

Erasmus' sustained polemic against the abuses of the clergy is premised on pointing out that the holy orders, especially the mendicant ones, view their dogma as divine, but fail to follow the explicit teachings of the Gospel. In his adage, 'Dulce Bellum Inexpertis', Erasmus suggests that 'nothing is too villainous or too cruel to win approval, if custom recommends it' (*CWE*, 35, p. 408). He then furnishes the reader with copious exempla, the most notable of which is the contention that in some civilisations 'it was thought pious to feast on the flesh of one's intimate friends' (*CWE*, 35, p. 408). What passes for piety is not innate. It is a consequence of custom.

Campion, *Montaigne, Rabelais and Marot as Readers of Erasmus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1995).

¹¹⁵ 'Villey has shown [...] that the form of the *Essays* stems from the collections of exempla and quotations, and aphorisms' (Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Task (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953; repr. 2003), p. 295).

¹¹⁶ Ruth Calder, *From Grotesque to Silenus: Register and Satirical Self-Depiction in the 'Essais' of Montaigne* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 1993), p. 70.

‘Of the Caniballes’ furnishes us with one of Montaigne’s most illuminating discussions of hypostatization, which focuses on the same taboo as Erasmus. Taboos are taboo, of course, precisely because they cannot be incorporated into existing models of knowledge, and in this respect, they are non-identical. Both thinkers ask how is it possible that something that seems manifestly abhorrent, such as cannibalism, can be perfectly acceptable in some cultures. Montaigne’s conclusion is justly famous:

I finde (as farre as I have beene informed) that there is nothing in that nation [America] that is either barbarous or savage, unless men call that barbarisme which is not common to them. As indeed, we have no other ayme of truth and reason, than the example and Idea of the opinions and customes of the countrie we live in.

(*E*, Book 1, Chapter 30, p. 101)

He comes to the dispassionate conclusion that what is thought to be right and wrong is simply a consequence of custom—and thus of where and in what time one happens to be born. ‘[T]ruth’ and ‘reason’ are manufactured rather than innate. What is considered to be barbarous is merely what is radically different from one’s own opinions. For Erasmus, this is a consequence of *philautia*, that universal folly of the human race: ‘What race is so savage, or tongue so uncouth, as not to consider all others beneath it? What bodily form is so brutish as not to appear most beautiful to itself?’ (*CWE*, 31, p. 158). Erasmus and Montaigne expose what is taken to be innate moral superiority as blinkered stupidity, while More’s Hythloday goes even further, contending that the happiness of the Utopians can primarily be attributed to their ‘willingness to learn from others’ (*U*, Book I, p. 89). The chief resource of More’s brave new world is not the gold out of which the Utopians make their ‘chamber pots’ (*U*, Book 2, p. 110); rather, it is the possibility of alternative ways of interacting with each other and understanding the world.

In his essay, Montaigne, like Erasmus, comes to the conclusion that it is not culturally sanctioned cannibalism that is irrational. Rather, it is the violent assertion of the innate superiority of one’s customs: ‘Whatsoever is beyond the compasse of custome, wee deeme likewise to bee beyond the compasse of reason, God knowes how, for the most part, unreasonably’ (*E*, Book 1, Chapter 30, p. 51). The manner in which ‘a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it the superficial appearance

of being right'¹¹⁷ and causes humans to become enthralled by ideas of their own making is given explicit consideration in 'Of Custom'. Montaigne sees custom, despite being mutable and relative to one's society, as a force of gargantuan strength. It is 'That monster Custom, who all sense doth eat' (*Hamlet*, III. 4. 159).

What is important here is not so much the question of direct influence, but how Montaigne and Shakespeare have responded to a common intellectual heritage, steeped in Erasmian ideas, and come to a similar conclusion. They both see custom as mediating almost every aspect of social relations and experience: 'there is nothing in mine opinion, that either she [custom] doth not, or cannot: and with reason doth Pindarus, as I have heard say, call her the Queen and Empresse of all-the world' (*E*, Book 1, Chapter 22, p. 50), writes Montaigne. A paradox apparent throughout his critique of cultural conventions is discernable here. While he is critical of treating transient cultural conventions as if they were natural, he not only bolsters his arguments against custom by continually invoking the authorities of the past, but he also recurrently inveighs against novelty and innovation in its various guises.

More's Hythloday, however, attacks conservatives who evoke custom as if it were 'an unanswerable argument' (*U*, Book I, p. 62) on the grounds that: "Our present policies seemed good enough to our ancestors, and we can only wish we were as wise as they" (*U*, Book 1, p. 62), but who 'don't feel a moment's hesitation in abandoning those of their policies that worked really well' (*U*, Book 1, p. 62). This implies that custom is changeable. Indeed, what is really important about Montaigne's conception of custom is that he sees it as something ubiquitous, so that even the so-called laws of nature are a consequence of custom:

The laws of conscience, which we say to proceed from nature, rise and proceed of custome [...] the chieftest effect of her power is to seize upon us, and so to entangle us, that it shall hardly lie in us to free ourselves from her hold-fast, and come into our wits againe.

(*E*, Book 1, Chapter 22, p. 50)

Custom is deception because it inculcates a false sense of authenticity. What are merely opinions 'seeme to be the generall and naturall' (*E*, Book 1, Chapter 22, p. 51); even the 'laws of conscience' are a result of the ossification of mutable words

¹¹⁷ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004), p. 3.

into immutable ‘nature’. Don Quixote is mad because of his rigid adherence to chivalry, to custom, albeit the custom of a bygone age.¹¹⁸ ‘there is’, comments the (less than) ingenious Hidalgo, ‘no disputing, or drawing of conclusions against the customes of the time’ (*DQ*, Book IV, Chapter XII, p. 255).

Shakespeare dramatizes the perils of custom with characteristic ambivalence, but in various ways associates it with irrationality. In *King Lear*, Edmund rails:

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?

(I. 2. 1–6)

This is a reasonable request. But it comes from a character whose unnatural, illegitimate birth is mirrored by his unnatural, parricidal behaviour. Unlike Montaigne, Edmund construes ‘nature’ in a proto-Darwinian sense as something diametrically opposed to, rather than formed by, social custom. Yet this construction of nature is undermined by the reversion to ‘nature’ that Edmund professes. Precisely because it is custom that prevents illegitimate or younger children from inheriting, he rejects the ensnaring ‘curiosity of nations’, their fastidious adherence to custom.

Othello claims that ‘The tyrant custom, most grave senators, | Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war | My thrice-driven bed of down’ (I. 3. 227–9). This metaphorical fusing of custom with tyranny may have been derived from Erasmus’ *Colloquies*, in one of which ‘Custom’ is described as ‘more powerful than any tyrant’ (*CWE*, 40, p. 835)—Shakespeare’s school almost certainly used the *Colloquies* (as well as *De Copia* and the *Adages*) to teach intermediate-level Latin.¹¹⁹ But Othello’s sinister personification of custom as a tyrant develops the

¹¹⁸ See Kaiser, pp. 277–96.

¹¹⁹ See T. M. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare’s Small Latine & Less Greke*, 2 Vols (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), I, pp. 187–264. Angela Locatelli argues for the pervasive influence of Erasmus on the way rhetoric was taught in grammar schools and disseminated through teaching manuals (‘The Land of “Plenty”: Erasmus’ *De Copia* and English Renaissance Rhetoric, in Corti ed. *Silenos: Erasmus in Elizabethan Literature*, pp. 41–57 (p. 53)). Roger Stritmatter and Lynne Kositsky argue for a considerably greater influence of Erasmus’ colloquy ‘*Naufragium*’ on *The Tempest* than had previously been discerned. They establish not only that the play quotes this colloquy verbatim, but also that the ostensibly historical sources, from which Shakespeare was believed to have borrowed, use Erasmus’ fictional narrative (see ‘Pale as Death: The Fictionalizing Influence of Erasmus’s

metaphor to suggest more strongly several things that the play as a whole shows. It implies that custom is a 'tyrant' because it is all-controlling and dangerously irrational, given to pursuing whims as if they were absolutes. Like a tyrant, it is undemocratic, since it is supported and perpetuated by the ruling elite. The uncustomary love between Desdemona and Othello is destroyed partly because it is considered unnatural. Brabantio repeatedly invokes the concept of nature to show that his daughter's love is 'Against all the rules of nature' (I. 3. 102; see also 63, 97). Nature is exposed as nothing other than the cultural construct it was and still is. The positive facts about the natures of things and people, which make up the knowledge of the worldly-wise, are shown to be deceptive. Thus the discourse of folly, which consistently interrogates custom, gains philosophical credibility, since its cardinal virtue lies in its capacity to penetrate the façade of custom.

Identity Critique

For Montaigne, inner and outer nature are far from static or certain; in his *Essays*, he aims to capture one particular man's continually fluctuating experience of the world. In the opening pages, he dispels the idea that it is possible to determine 'the rules of nature', which Brabantio invokes for instrumental ends: 'Surely, man is a wonderful, vaine, divers, and wavering subject: it is very hard to ground any directly-constant and uniforme judgement upon him' (*E*, Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 2). And later, in 'An Apologie of *Raymond Sebond*', Montaigne argues along similar lines to Cusanus. In this essay, he uncharacteristically refers to the key ideas and texts of biblical folly, which were discussed earlier in this chapter; he even informs the reader that he writes with Ecclesiasticus' terse rhetorical question to mankind, which is rendered by the Authorized Version as 'Why is earth and ashes proud?' (*KJV*, 10. 9), engraved in the beam above his head. He defends Sebond's thesis that the natural world is a general revelation, while the Bible offers specific revelations, on the grounds that knowledge does not make a man good: 'The simple and the ignorant (saith St. *Paul*) raise themselves up to heaven, and take possession of it; whereas we, with all the knowledge we have plunge ourselves downe to the pit of

Naufragium on the Renaissance Travel Narrative', in Daniel Wright ed., *Discovering Shakespeare: A Festschrift in Honour of Isobel Holden* (Portland, OR: The Shakespeare Authorship Research Centre, 2009), pp. 143–152).

hell' (*E*, Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 278).

This corresponds to the praise of the simple-minded that Folly's third avatar offers; the only clear rule is that there are no clear rules. As Cusanus also argued, man should attempt to fashion a negative awareness of the limits of his knowledge:

In few, *there is no constant existence, neither of our being, nor of the objects*. And we and our judgement and all mortall things else do uncessantly rowle, turn and passe away. Thus can nothing be certainly established, nor of the one nor of the other; both the judgeing and the judged being in continuall alteration and motion. We have no communication with being; for every humane nature is ever in the middle betweene being borne and dying.

(*E*, Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 340)

As Cave argues, however, this idiosyncratic defence of natural theology is more interested in sounding the depths of Pyrrhonist thought, 'a philosophy constantly in suspense, affirming no single opinion or position other than that of perpetual enquiry' than defending Sebond.¹²⁰ Montaigne engages with the age-old Christian *topos* of the mutability of the world. But the difference is that he views nature, both in the sense of the natural world and human nature, in a Heraclitian manner. The consequence of this is that 'if everything is in a state of flux, so too is language; in which case nothing is knowable in the sense that nothing can be expressed immutably and clearly'.¹²¹

Alongside his criticism of the solidification of historically contingent actions into immutable customs, Montaigne presages Adorno's three-fold critique of identity thinking. For Albrecht Wellmer, the central preoccupation of Adorno's philosophy lies in working out how the 'non-identical' can be employed as a tool for the 'critique of identity',¹²² a critique formulated with precision in Adorno's *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*:

The concept is always less than what is subsumed under it. When a B is defined as an A, it is always *different from* and *more than* the A, the concept under which it is subsumed by way of a predicative judgment. [...] However, in a sense every concept is at the same time more than the characteristics that are subsumed under it. If [...] I speak of 'freedom', this concept is not

¹²⁰ *How to Read Montaigne* (London: Granta, 2007), p. 40.

¹²¹ Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy*, p. 76.

¹²² 'Adorno and the Difficulties of a Critical Reconstruction of the Historical Present', trans. by Frederik van Gelder, <www.amsterdam-adorno.net/T_wellmer_twa.pdf>, p. 2.

simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be regarded as free on the basis of a formal freedom within a given constitution [...] the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realising what this additional element amounts to.

(*LND*, p. 7 [Adorno's italics])

Every identity, by which Adorno means positive fact or objective thing, upon which cognition depends, is shadowed by that which it is not, its 'non-identity', in a threefold way.

First, the simple fact that two things are never quite the same is overlooked by the identifying gesture or 'predicative judgment', which seeks to classify the particular as an example of a given category, rather than enquire into the specifics of the object. Second, the concept of a thing is extraneous to the thing itself—to put it reductively, the periodic table is not the chemical elements themselves. Third, in grand, abstract concepts, such as freedom, salvation, or love, the concept far exceeds any possible positive objective experience of it. Freedom evidently does not simply mean comparative legislative freedom for most people in the West, any more than the overall concept of love signifies a specific romantic assignation between two (or more) people. For these reasons, it is possible to maintain that concepts are always 'less than' and 'more than' what is 'subsumed under them'. The argument attests to the innately paradoxical procedure of identifying something, of saying what something is by referring it to what it is not.

While Adorno's 'critique of identity' may sound pretty abstract, it is necessary to bear in mind that he considered the horrors of the twentieth century and the catastrophes of history to be a direct result of 'identity thinking', a type of thought that denies difference and the provisional nature of categories. It is, however, necessary to think and speak using identity, although this does not mean that identity is 'natural'. Simon Jarvis argues that, for Adorno, 'the thought of reconciled non-identity'¹²³—in other words, a mode of speculation that remains aware that the foundations of identity are built on the quicksand of non-identity—resists the totalitarian tendencies of what Adorno calls 'idealist-identitarian' (*ND*, p. 47) thought. Because 'Dialectical thinking wants to say what something is, whilst identity thinking says what something falls under, of what it is an example or

¹²³Adorno: *A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Polity, 1998), p. 230.

representative—what it is therefore is not itself’ (*ND*, p. 149), the reconciliation of non-identity with the subject is only possible through dialectics.

Strikingly, in the ‘Apologie’, Montaigne likewise suggests that the very nature of cognition hinders itself:

[T]he privilege whereof our soule vaunts, to bring to her condition whatsoever it conceiveth, and to despoile what of mortall and corporall qualities belongs unto it, to marshall those things which she deemed worthie her acquaintance, to disrobe and deprive their corruptible conditions, and to make them leave as superfluous and base garments, thicknesses, length, depth, weight, colour, smell, roughnesse, smoothnesse, hardnesse, softnesse, and all sensible accidents else, to fit and appropriate them to her immortall and spirituall condition [...].

(*E*, Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 268)

It is in the nature of subjectivity, Montaigne suggests, to assimilate, to ‘bring to her condition’, whatever it apprehends. The mind renders the object an exemplum of a preconceived category, which belies the mutability that so perplexes Montaigne. The object’s specific features are displaced by presupposed attributes, which, unlike ‘mortall and corporall qualities’, are not historically contingent. Bodies rot, while ‘qualities’ do not. To enable objects to be conceptualized—not to mention exchanged with other objects, likewise ‘disrob[ed]’ of their real features—they must be measured in some way. Montaigne thus scorns realism, which views these external, quantifiable features of ‘thicknesses, length, depth, weight, colour, smell, roughnesse, smoothnesse, hardnesse, softnesse’ as metaphysical forms, seeing them instead as fictions imposed on the object that hinder an immanent understanding of the thing itself.

Montaigne elsewhere anticipates the third part of Adorno’s identity critique—the argument that the possibilities inherent in grand, abstract concepts reach beyond any possible specific experience of them: ‘We easily pronounce puissance, truth, and justice; they be words importing some great matter, but that thing we neither see nor conceive’ (*E*, Book 3, Chapter 8, p. 279). In order to suggest that the full import of humanly-fashioned concepts is inconceivable, Montaigne echoes the passage from Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, which emphasizes the inexpressible joys of salvation thus: ‘the Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him’ (*KJV*, 2. 9), the passage Shakespeare’s Bottom so

brilliantly bungles.

In the same essay, Montaigne paraphrases an argument made by the Grammarian Priscian:

Our contestation is verball. I demaund what Nature, voluptuousnesse, circle, and substitution is? The question is of words, and with words it is answered. A stone is a body: but he that should insist and urge: And what is a body? – A substance. And what is a substance? and so goe-on, should at last bring the respondent to his Calepine or wits end. One word is changed for another word, and often more unknowne. I know better what *Homo* is then I know what *Animal* is, either mortall or reasonable.

(*E*, Book 3, Chapter 8, p. 602)

Juliet, when she comments ‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose | By any other word would smell as sweet’ (*Romeo and Juliet*, II. 1. 85-6), is not the only early modern character to be aware of the diremption of *res* and *verbum*. Concepts such as ‘nature’, Montaigne suggests, are linguistic constructs.

In the ‘Apologie’ he extols Erasmian simplicity by suggesting that reason’s discourses hinder rather than help man’s understanding of the object, or own nature:

It is credible that there are natural laws, as may be seen in other creatures; but in us they are lost; that fine human reason butts in everywhere, domineering and commanding, muddling and confusing the face of things in accordance with its vanity.

(*F*, Book 2, Chapter VII, p. 532)

It is through the open-ended essay, which does not seek to appropriate the object of its discourse, that speculation can be unshackled from identity-thinking. The essay makes no claims to ‘totality’ (*TEF*, p. 165), or coherence; it establishes no ‘system’ (*TEF*, p. 160). ‘These universall judgements’, which characterize “deliberate philosophy”, reflects Montaigne, ‘say nothing at all’ (*E*, Book 3, Chapter VIII), while the essay offers the ‘provisional ordering of an encounter’, in which ‘the self and the object define each other, but only in a temporary way’.¹²⁴

For this reason, in his discussion of the ‘Essay as Form’, Adorno quotes György Lukács’ *Soul and Form*; the integrity of the essay as a form of speculation inheres in its anti-systematic nature:

‘The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to

¹²⁴ Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 4.

believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best of his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness—the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life’.

(*TEF*, p. 158)

No universal judgement is possible in this form, for it is bound to its ever-changing object; it is moulded by its topic of discourse and the process of reflection. For Erich Auerbach, this realisation enables Montaigne to get to the heart of the human condition: ‘Of all his contemporaries he had the clearest conception of the problem of man’s self-orientation; that is, making one’s self at home in existence, without fixed points of support’.¹²⁵ Montaigne reflects on the comparative poverty of the essay form with a scatological metaphor. He takes no pride in his disordered discourse. It is abject, shit: ‘the excrements of an ould spirit, sometimes hard, sometimes laxative; but ever indigested’ (*E*, Book 3, Chapter 9, p. 531).

The essay offers its readers no ‘hierarchy of concepts’ (*TEF*, p. 166); as Auerbach contends, Montaigne sees that the problem with ‘systems of moral philosophy’ lies in ‘the tendency of their methodology to disguise the reality of life’.¹²⁶ Adorno openly attacks the ‘tendency’ for method to obscure the multifarious nature of existence and the dynamic nature of thought. Not only does he inveigh against philosophy’s ‘metamorphosis [*Verwandlung*] into method’ (*MM*, p. 13; [*MM*, p. 15]), but he also views the essay as the primary historical form that attacked dry formalism: ‘Doubt about the unconditional priority of method was raised, in the actual process of thought, almost exclusively by the essay’ (*TEF*, p. 157). Montaigne’s fellow essayist, William Cornwallis, cuts to the chase when he comments that Montaigne ‘speaks nobly, honestly, and wisely, with little method, but much judgment’.¹²⁷

In a paradoxical vein, Adorno reflects that ‘The law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object, which it is orthodoxy’s secret purpose to keep invisible’ (*TEF*, p. 171); by making no universal claims and by fashioning an anti-systematic and anti-philosophical philosophical system, Montaigne’s essays estrange the very

¹²⁵ *Mimesis*, p. 311.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹²⁷ *The Essays by Sir William Cornwallis the Younger*, ed. by D. C. Allen (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1946), p. 44.

building blocks of thought—in the sense of both the everyday cognition of objects and people and of orthodox philosophical thought. In the last analysis, it is a sense of negativity that Erasmus', Montaigne's and Shakespeare's discussions of the human condition share. They imply that at the heart of being human is an inability to get to the essence of things. But a partial understanding of the human condition, lies in the realization that one is flawed—in a sense, a fool.

True folly, Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare suggest, consists in attempting to establish unequivocal positive knowledge of the nature of things, one's essential self, or God. To follow the famous humanist mantra, *gnōthi seauton*, and to know one's self is to have an awareness of the limitations of concepts, language and cognition. What is remarkable about these thinkers' negativity, however, is that it is tempered by comic self-awareness. Their ambivalent laughter makes a mockery of both the serious world's philosophical systems and their own scepticism, which they behold from a healthily ironic position of the sort David Hume famously recommends in his *Treatise of Human Nature*: 'A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction'.¹²⁸ 'If I have a desire to laugh at a foole', reflects Montaigne with his tongue in his cheek and in an inadvertent paraphrase of Seneca: 'I neede not seeke one farre; I laugh at my selfe' (*E*, Book 2, Chapter 25, p. 387).

¹²⁸ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by Ernest C. Mossner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 273.

CHAPTER 3

OPENING THE SILENUS: THE FOOL'S TRUTH

All humaine thynges are lyke the Silenes or double images of Alcibiades, have two faces much vnlyke and dissemble that outwardly seemed death, yet looking within ye shoulde fynde it lyfe and on the other side what seemed lyfe, to be death: what fayre to be foule what riche, beggarly: what cunnyng, rude: what strong, feeble [...] Breifly, the Silenus ones beyng vndone and disclosed, ye shall fynde all things [are] tourned into a new semblance.

—*PF*, p. 37.

In *The Symposium*, Alcibiades suggests that Socrates is akin to a 'Silenus statue'.¹²⁹ This is because there is an absolute disjunction between the philosopher's foolish appearance in the world—his notorious ugliness, his incessant infatuations with beautiful young men, and his poverty—and the 'moderation', 'strength' and 'beauty'¹³⁰ of his innermost thoughts, which 'despised all things for which other mortals run their races' (*CWE*, 34, p. 263). These statues, observes Erasmus in his famous adage, 'Sileni Alcibiades' (1515), were commonly carved in the shape of Bacchus's tutor, Silenus: 'the court buffoon of the gods of poetry' (*CWE*, 34, p. 264). They were 'small figure[s] of carved wood, so made that they could be divided and opened. [...] When they were closed they looked like a caricature of a hideous flute-player, when opened they suddenly displayed a deity' (*CWE*, 34, p. 262).

It is easy to see how this reversible image came to encapsulate the paradoxical wisdom of folly and folly of wisdom, which, from Erasmus to Cervantes, is a striking feature of many of the most significant philosophical and literary texts of the Renaissance. Erasmus's word for the reversal of values that the Silenus statue makes possible, writes Jonathan Bate, is "*praeposterum*," a rhetorical figure of reversal. The English translation of this adage aptly uses the

¹²⁹ Plato, *The Symposium*, ed. by M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, trans. by M. C. Howatson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 216c–217a.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 216c–217a.

word “topsy turvy”.¹³¹ Walter Kaiser explains the seemingly infinite self-generative ironies of the *Praise* by evoking the idea of the Silenus,¹³² while Michael Screech examines its surprising centrality to Erasmus’ ‘theology of ecstasy’.¹³³ As I showed in the previous chapter, David Wootton argues that More’s *Utopia* must be interpreted as a Silenus;¹³⁴ and Terence Cave analyses the significant role this duplicitous little statue plays in shaping the philosophical content and literary form of Rabelais and Montaigne’s works.¹³⁵ Claudia Corti goes so far as to describe Erasmus’ ‘enormous’ influence on early modern English literature with a deliberately Silenic image: ‘embedded within Shakespeare, Nashe, Ascham, Wilson and Puttenham [...] lay Erasmus, with that ironic smile of his, as immortalized by Holbein’.¹³⁶

Not least because Alcibiades behaves foolishly, the image of the Silenus head has been equivocal from its inception. Since he wanders into the *Symposium* late and drunk, we can infer that while he may find Socrates’ ‘moderation’ laudable, he does not feel compelled to imitate it; his encomium of Socrates’ wisdom and ‘moderation’ is decidedly double-edged. Alcibiades is both impressed and appalled that, despite his multiple attempts to entrap him, the philosopher refused to be physically ‘gratified’ by him.¹³⁷ Socrates refused to ‘strike a bargain’ with him, in which knowledge is traded for sex;¹³⁸ as he points out, not only does Alcibiades misconceive the nature of love, but also this transaction does not make sense even by commercial standards, since Socrates would be trading the ‘gold’ of his knowledge ‘in exchange for [the] bronze’ of the latter’s body.¹³⁹ At the end of the

¹³¹ ‘Shakespeare’s Foolosophy’, in *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R. A. Foakes*, ed. by Grace Ioppolo (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2000), pp. 17–33 (p. 21).

¹³² See *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais and Shakespeare* (London: Gollancz, 1964), esp. pp. 60–62.

¹³³ See *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 3; *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 91.

¹³⁴ See ‘Introduction’ in *Utopia: With Erasmus’ Sileni of Alcibiades*, ed. and trans. by David Wootton (Cambridge: Hackett, 1999), pp. 1–30.

¹³⁵ See *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979; repr. 2002), pp. x–40.

¹³⁶ ‘Introduction’, in *Silenos: Erasmus in Elizabethan Literature*, Studi di Letterature Moderne e Comparate, 1 (Pisa: Pancini, 1998), pp. 5–13 (p. 5, p. 6).

¹³⁷ *The Symposium*, 218d–219e.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 218e.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 219a.

Symposium, Socrates contends that Alcibiades' 'Silenus-play' itself has a deceptive double nature. It furnishes the spurned lover with a way of venting his inner frustrations in the guise of praise.¹⁴⁰

But this disjunction between inner and outer is not simply a fixture of Platonic thought that was rediscovered by such editors as Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus. It is present in the vast corpus of medieval penitential and confessional literature. As David Aers argues, 'the whole medieval penitential tradition involves a fundamental and perfectly explicit distinction between inner and outer', which harks back 'at least as far as Augustine's *Confessions*'.¹⁴¹ Medieval mystical writing is closely related to the devotional literature that flourished in Latin and the vernacular throughout the Middle Ages. While it is by nature idiosyncratic and thus generically heterogeneous, medieval mystical writing is premised on the idea that there is a distinction between the revelation of the divine essence, experienced internally, and the experience of external realities. Additionally, it is concerned with the epistemic problems arising from attempting to communicate and evaluate the idiosyncratic experience of religious ecstasy.

Space permits neither a consideration of the ways in which the affective piety of the mystical tradition fed into the *devotio moderna* in which Erasmus was brought up, nor of how this tradition continued to exert an influence on writing about interiority and duplicity in the early modern period. All that can be done here is to highlight some of the insights and techniques of negation that the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* employs. The visionary *cum* narrator insists that would-be mystics must renounce positive human categories, images and words to achieve a state of 'unknowyng' because 'þou maist neiþer see [H]im cleerly by liȝt of understanding'.¹⁴² Even in this state, free of the mediating influence of ideology and language, the visionary does not see God; rather, he intuits His absence—he must 'bide in þis derknes [...] evermore criing after [H]im'.¹⁴³ The narrator

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 222d.

¹⁴¹ 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics writing "The History of the Subject"', in *Culture and History 1300–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. by David Aers (London: Harvester, 1992), pp. 176–202 (p. 185).

¹⁴² *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises*, ed. by Phyllis Hodgson (Exeter: Catholic Records Press, 1982), p. 9.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

recurrently attacks what he calls ‘ymaginatiif witte’,¹⁴⁴ by which he means the judging subject; far from making sense of the world by categorizing and manipulating its objective elements, this mediating ‘witte’ falsifies experience by indulging in the processes of categorisation and measurement. It fills man with human knowledge that prevents him from achieving a state of *kenosis*, in which God’s love can be experienced, albeit negatively.

Erasmus was the first thinker to connect the Christian *via negativa*, so powerfully evoked in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, with the self-revelation of Socrates—considered by the Oracle at Delphos to know something precisely because he admitted that he ‘knows nothing’.¹⁴⁵ If we trace the key arguments of Erasmus’ ‘Sileni Alcibiades’, which was translated into every major European vernacular, including English in 1543,¹⁴⁶ then many of his chief linguistic, social and theological preoccupations can be discerned. Initially, he argues that there is a difference between the inner core and outer appearance of true philosophers and apostles: ‘they wear what is most contemptible [...] concealing their treasure with a kind of worthless outward shell and not showing it to uninitiated eyes’ (*CWE*, 34, p. 264); such prophetic souls have drunk from ‘the true fountain head [of] heavenly wisdom, against which all human wisdom is mere folly’ (*CWE*, 34, p. 263). Their revelation confounds earthly cleverness and discourse. In other words, it is not that we are too naïve to get to the truth, but rather that we are too sophisticated.

Next he contends that Scripture has a doubly Silenic nature. First, the reader must not ‘pause at the surface’ because all the allegories, ambiguities and textual instabilities make it seem ‘ridiculous’ (*CWE*, 34, p. 267). Instead, they must attempt to ‘pierce the heart of the allegory’ and ‘open up the Silenus’, so that they can ‘venerate the divine wisdom’ (*CWE*, 34, p. 267). Second, as Erasmus puts very clearly in the mouth of an educated layman in his *Colloquies*: ‘What the Old Law taught under a veil, the New Law placed before the eyes’ (*CWE*, 40, p. 167). For Erasmus, then, the importance of the Old Testament and pagan texts like *The Symposium* lies in what is hidden beneath the surface. When read correctly, such writings display a partial and imperfect prefiguration of Christ and his apostles’

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁵ *The Symposium*, p. 216c.

¹⁴⁶ For an English translation, see *Here folowith a scorneful image or monstros shape of a maruelous stra[n]ge fygure called, Sileni alcibiadis*, trans. by anon (London: John Gough, 1543).

explicit teachings (see *CWE*, 3, p. 127 et passim).

Erasmus then rephrases the argument that he makes most explicitly in his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (1503), contending that in human nature there is perpetual strife between embodied existence and the being-for-the-Spirit that characterizes Paul's 'fools for Christ's sake' (I Corinthians, 4. 10):

In this world there are, as it were, two worlds, which fight against each other in every way, one gross and corporeal, the other heavenly and already practicing with all its might to become what it one day will be.

(*CWE*, 34, p. 276)

The *coup de théâtre* of his essay, however, is when he posits a deliberately provocative question: 'what of Christ? Was not he too a marvelous Silenus? His appearance was not only human, but also a poor, even wretched human?' (*CWE*, 34, p. 264). In the figure of Christ there is an absolute disjunction between appearance and essence. God's embodiment provides a 'cheap', mortal 'setting' for that which is immortal and perfect, a 'glorious pearl' (*CWE*, 34, p. 264). It is ultimately for this reason that the Christian 'picks out what is least visible to the eye and pass[es] over all the rest or using them with a measure of contempt [...] he draws his principles of judgment entirely from what is within' (*CWE*, 34, p. 268).

Erasmus plays on the idea that if the mean is splendid, the foolish is wise and the insubstantial substantial, then the inverse must also be true; he regrets that earthly experience, reality, is akin to a reversed Silenus head. The essence is absurd and ugly, but the external appearance is grand. The holy essence of things has been etiolated: the ceremonies and sacraments of the Church Militant are akin to 'seeing the Silenus from the outside' (*CWE*, 34, p. 167). This incredulity at visual signifiers of faith and his critique of the hypostatization of ceremonies in the Church corresponds with Reformist arguments, such as Luther's and Von Hutten's, against ostentatious displays of faith, which they saw as idolatrous attempts to represent the divine,¹⁴⁷ and with the deep unease that the medieval mystics felt about the iconography of their world.

At the conclusion, Erasmus' gloss itself opens up, betraying its double nature

¹⁴⁷ For a concise introduction to these concerns drawn from the primary sources, see Ulrich Von Hutten, 'Ein Klangschrift Herren Ulrichs von Hutten' and Martin Luther, 'Von der Freyheit eyñiß Christen menschen', in *Die deutsche Literatur in Text und Darstellung*, ed. by Otto F. Best and Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, 17 vols (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), III, pp. 67–73; pp. 73–80.

and suggesting that exegesis is always an indeterminate procedure: that which promises to get to the essence of things may just have been captivated by appearances all along. What Erasmus has been writing is seriocomic, since the adage has grown from a drunken praise of a man's wisdom for knowing nothing to a discussion of the way that the mankind is universally taken in by appearances. 'Of course', writes Erasmus, 'it was Alcibiades in his cups, and his Sileni, that drew me to this very sober disputation' (*CWE*, 34, p. 281). Erasmus even paints himself as a Silenic grotesque: with a characteristic act of self-effacement, he casts himself as a rash man, almost a fool, asking: 'whither has the flood of my language carried me away, so that I, who profess myself a mere compiler of proverbs, begin to be a preacher?' (*CWE*, 34, p. 281).

Michel Foucault argues that in Sebastain Franck's and Erasmus' works the Silenus epitomizes the fact that:

The abyss of folly into which men are plunged is such that the appearance that men find there is in fact its complete opposite. But there was more: the contradiction between truth and appearances was present in appearance itself, for if the appearance was coherent with itself, at least it would be an allusion to the truth, or some form of hollow echo.

(*HM*, p. 30)

To put it another way, appearances are not wholly convincing in themselves, which is why we have a niggling sense that they are appearances rather than reality proper. For this reason, they cannot recall the essence of things. If they did, then their suggestion of their own incoherence would be part of this essence. For the historian of madness and deviancy, reality is abysmal and man is immured in a phantasmagoria, from which he cannot quite awake. Something not dissimilar to this is implicit in August Wilhelm Schlegel's comment that the Shakespearean fool offers an 'antidote to the emptiness and boredom of everyday life, a welcome interruption to traditional formalities'.¹⁴⁸ If the quotidian world really were wholly fulfilling, there would be no call for the paradoxical wisdom of folly.

That appearances are not even 'coherent' with themselves proves essential to understanding Erasmus' use of the Silenus for explicit critique of civil authority, the trappings of which, Erasmus suggests, are nothing other than an artful piece of

¹⁴⁸ *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by Edgar Lohner, 7 vols (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1967–75), VI, p. 139.

dissimulation, a costume (not quite) concealing man's bestial inner nature:

Those of whom you would say, were you to inspect their outward bodily form, that they are human beings and distinguished beings too; open the Silenus, and inside you will find maybe a pig or a lion, a bear or a donkey.
(*CWE*, 34, p. 268)

Such men are the opposite of the Silenic Christian Erasmus described: what was once 'riche' is shown to be 'beggarly'. Erasmus' capacity for critical thought is an attribute that the real-life Dutchman shares with his fictional doppelganger. In *Sir Thomas More*, More plays a practical joke on Erasmus, getting his manservant to pretend to be him to ascertain 'if great Erasmus can distinguish | Merit and outward ceremony' (III. 2. 39–40).¹⁴⁹ As it transpires, he can.

This *topos* of the inverted Silenus, with its disjunction between inner poverty and external grandeur, recurs throughout Erasmus' 'Sileni Alcibiades' and *The Praise of Folly* and can be discerned in Lear's 'reason in madness' (IV. 6. 171):

LEAR Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?
GLOUCESTER Aye, sir.
LEAR And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst
 behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office.
 Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
 Why dost thou last that whore? Strip thine own back;
 Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind
 For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.
 Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;
 Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
 And the strong arm of justice hurtles breaks;
 Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.
(IV. 6. 150–161)

In this breathtaking indictment of society's hypocrisies, Lear draws similar conclusions about the bestial essence that the signifiers of civil authority commonly hide. Perhaps the influence of the *Praise*, the *Colloquies* and the *Adages* goes a little deeper than the tantalising echoes I discussed in the previous chapter. The powers that be can hide their moral poverty with costumes ('Robes and furred gowns hide all'), but even the minor misdemeanours of the poor can be discerned through their rags. As Shakespeare emphasises with his demotic analogy, however, those in

¹⁴⁹ *Sir Thomas More in Shakespeare and Others: Collaborative Plays*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and others (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 349–421 (pp. 381–385).

authority are placed there by mere chance—in a certain context even ‘a dog’s obeyed in office’. It is there that the demented king formulates explicitly what the action of the play implies; kings are but men and ‘man, proud man’, as Isabella reminds Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, is ‘Dressed in a little brief authority’ (II. 2. 118).

Silenic Style

In ‘Of Physiognomy’, Montaigne explicitly mentions Socrates’ Silenic nature, suggesting that people these days would not appreciate him, since ‘they perceive no charms that are not sharpened, puffed out and inflated by artifice’ (*F*, Book III, Chapter 12, p. 965). His primary interest in Alcibiades’ image, however, is in how it relates to the register in which the philosopher chose to speak:

Socrates makes his soul move with a natural and common motion. [...] His mouth is full of nothing but carters, joiners, cobblers and masons. His are inductions and similes drawn from the commonest and best-known actions of man. Under so mean a form we should never have picked out the nobility and splendor of his ideas.

(*F*, Book III, Chapter 12, p. 965)

Beneath the surface of Socrates’ homely metaphors and the commonplaces, there is profound philosophical wisdom. Erich Auerbach argues that by the Renaissance the Silenus head had become a metonym for the humanist ideal of absolute clarity of expression. Montaigne and Rabelais saw it as representing ‘Socratic style [which] meant [...] something free and untrammled, something close to ordinary life, indeed, for Rabelais, something close to buffoonery’.¹⁵⁰

This ideal is derived from Erasmus. He writes admiringly of Socrates that ‘his language was simple and homely and smacking of common folk; for his talk was all of carters and cobblers’ (*CWE*, 34, p. 263), which Montaigne echoes. As Ruth Calder argues, because his language mixed rough and ready expression with philosophical content, ‘Socrates was seen as the archetype of the *Spondaioloios*’¹⁵¹ or mixed mode, characteristic of Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare. This

¹⁵⁰ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Task (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953; repr. 2003), p. 279.

¹⁵¹ *From Grottesque to Silenus*, p. 256.

register enables the ‘common characteristic of *dissimulatio*’,¹⁵² found in Montaigne’s twin rhetorical personae of Socrates and Horace, which consists of ‘an understated, self-deprecating form of self-expression, and a profound, smiling irony in their judgments’.¹⁵³ Irony penetrates appearances. It brings ‘human wisdom back down to earth’ (*F*, Book III, Chapter 12, p. 966). Such a style furnishes Montaigne with the perfect form with which to posit what is perhaps the central tenet of his philosophy: namely that the ‘essence’ of human beings is ‘radically imperfect’.¹⁵⁴

Montaigne pits the demotic speech of his Socratic persona against windy self-aggrandizement and vanity. His copious discourse is not wholly senseless, because it is through it he expresses his wry sense of irony, which enables him to become ‘a living Silenus’;¹⁵⁵ like Socrates, Montaigne is ‘always one and the same’ (*F*, Book III, Chapter 12, p. 966), content with man’s absurdity and the radical contingency of things. For this reason, in ‘Of Experience’, ‘he contemplates his old, troublesome body with its disgusting excretions, and gazes upon it with the detachment of a wise and serene mind’. This is not to say, however, that he is some kind of ascetic mystic, who renounces the outer world and his body. Rather, this process enables Montaigne to re-experience a sense of philosophical wonder, especially at the most inconsequential and material things. Existence, he realizes, is not a riddle to be solved by reason: ‘the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself’ (*F*, Book III, Chapter 11, p. 958).

As I argued in the previous chapter, Montaigne makes the inadequacy of reason an object of philosophical inquiry. Thus the idea of the Silenus affects both the style of his self-deprecating self-presentation and his conception of philosophy as something that is intrinsically playful. But this playful character has been obscured and made ‘inaccessible for children’ (*E*, Book 1, Chapter, 25, p. 76) by modern ‘Sophists’ who, through their ‘quibbling’ and abstruse formalism, have given philosophy a grotesque outer appearance; they have set ‘Lady Philosophy [...] fourth with a wrinkled, gastlie, and frowning visage’ (*E*, Book 1, Chapter, 25, p.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁵⁴ Anne Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 160.

¹⁵⁵ Calder, p. 3.

76). However, the shining deity beneath this formidable—yet risible—exterior need be neither fastidiously sincere, nor something that has been transformed into an intangible method. Philosophy actually has a decidedly bacchanalian aspect:

There is nothing more beauteous, nothing more delightfull, nothing more gainesome; and as I may say, nothing more fondly wanton: for she [Philosophy] presenteth nothing to our eyes, and preacheth nothing to our eares, but sport and pastime.

(*E*, Book 1, Chapter, 25, pp. 76–77)

Montaigne amplifies the playful nature of philosophy; his conception of philosophy corresponds to what Adorno—acknowledging Socrates, Montaigne and Nietzsche as his forerunners—was later to formulate so clearly as to warrant quotation at length:

We can perhaps express this scepticism, this element of fallibility that philosophy must remain conscious of, and also of this spiritual element, by saying that, in contrast to all the methods that have been taught in the philosophical tradition, there is an essential element of play in philosophy. This is the element that the growing trend to make philosophy scientific would like to expel, whether in accordance with the laws of the natural sciences, or [...] those of the philological disciplines. From this angle, I think one of Nietzsche's greatest achievements was the emphasis he placed on the element of play in his philosophy. In this respect, if we set aside the Greeks, and especially Socrates, he really does stand out from the entire philosophical tradition, with the exception of the so-called moralists and their predecessor Montaigne [...] I would ask you not to think of this playful element of philosophy as something merely psychological, but, as I just said, as something essential to the discipline itself. This is because philosophy goes beyond whatever secure knowledge that it possesses, and because it knows this, and because it is fallible, it also possesses this playful element without which it could not be philosophy in the first place. It does not just flirt with playfulness in its motives or its methods; rather playfulness is deeply embedded within it and candidly so. I would go so far to say that without playfulness there is no truth. And I would say further that the element of chance inherent in play makes an essential contribution to the truth—as the thing that under the general spell of identity thinking reminds us of the unthinkable. In this connection, let me remind you of a saying that I have myself applied to art in a spirit of playfulness, when I said that art is the most serious thing in the world, but then again, not that serious.

(*LND*, p. 90)

There is a palpable connection between playfulness and a dissatisfaction with the given nature of things, which arises from a realization that things could be other than how they appear. Playfulness animates philosophical speculation by virtue of

the fact that it ‘goes beyond whatever secure knowledge it possesses’, but it retains an awareness of its own fallibility and provisionality.

The Casket Test

Erasmus suggests that one of the original functions of Sileni was to provide a ‘humorous surprise [that] made the carver’s skill all the more admirable’ (*CWE*, 34, p. 262): the ‘ugly outer folded back to reveal a golden statue of a god’ (*CWE*, 34, p. 262). Shakespeare delights in exploiting his audience’s wider capacity for delusion—they are consistently taken in by appearances—by drawing attention to his own virtuoso skill at generating artifice. In the opening scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio displays a melancholic awareness that the world of appearances is not even, as Foucault, in his discussion of the Silenus, puts it, ‘coherent in itself’: ‘I hold the world but as the world, Graziano—| A stage where every man must play a part, | And mine a sad one’ (I. 1. 77–79). Like Erasmus’ duplicitous Folly, who, moments after her discussion of the Silenic nature of things, reflects that ‘All this life of mortall men, what is it els, but a certaine kynde of stage plaie? wheras men come forthe one in one araie, an other in another, eche playing his parte’ (*PF*, p. 38), Antonio invokes the *theatrum mundi* topos.

This theatrical self-awareness is not the only way in which *The Merchant of Venice* is strangely duplicitous. The play has two generic aspects: it is tragicomic. The play’s dual *loci* are like Erasmus’ Silenus turned inside out: underneath the peaceful appearance of Belmont lies the rancour and ruthless exploitation of the Venetian marketplace, while embedded in the demotic discourse of the clown’s speech lies a grasp of the play’s central concerns. When, for instance, Gobbo voices regrets about Jessica’s conversion to Christianity—‘This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs. If we grow all to be pork-eaters we shall not shortly have rasher on the coals for money’ (III. 5. 19–21)—he furnishes the audience with a *reductio ad absurdum* of the logic of the marketplace. His doctrinal ignorance implicitly illustrates how commodity, competition and exchangeability blind people to their better selves. The conversion of Jews had an even more important significance than an increase in the price of bacon: it presaged the Second Coming of Christ.

The most obvious way in which the deceptiveness of Erasmus' Silenus is evoked, however, is through a game within the play: the seriocomic casket test. Portia's suitors must choose one of three caskets in order to marry her and acquire her fortune. Inside the winning casket lies a 'picture' of Portia (II. 7. 11). Each casket is inscribed with a riddle, which Morocco, the first to play the game, reads:

This first of gold, who this inscription bears:
'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire'.
The second silver, which this promise carries:
'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves'
This third dull lead, with warning all as blunt:
'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath'.

(II. 7. 4–9)

The correct interpretation of appearances, it seems, can enable us to fathom the essence of things. The audience is not informed which casket contains the image of Portia. They too are set an interpretative puzzle, which is only solved by a process of elimination, once two incorrect choices have been dramatized. Shakespeare assumes that his audience tends, in Paul's words, to 'look on things after the outward appearance' (II Corinthians 10. 7). Morocco, who asks Portia not to be deceived by appearance or 'complexion, | The shadowed livery of the burnished sun' (II. 1. 1–2), is a naive realist, since he thinks essence corresponds to appearance. No one, he comments, could bear to encase the beautiful picture in 'gross' (50) lead. Besides, he loves himself well enough to know that 'A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross' (20). But when he opens the golden casket, he is disabused of his illusions. He is greeted with a skull—in the age of *vanitas* iconography, shorthand for the poverty of all human wealth and ambition, a reminder that 'all is vanity' (*KJV*, Ecclesiastes, 1. 1). In its riddling couplets, the scroll, placed in the 'empty eye' of the skull, extols the wisdom of correctly interpreted commonplaces (or adages of the ancients): "All that glistens is not gold; | Often have you heard that told" (65–66).

When it is Aragon's turn to play the casket game, he discloses its rules to the audience. He must not tell anyone which casket he chooses and he must leave if he chooses incorrectly. Most seriously, 'if [he] fail[s] | Of the right casket', he may never 'woo a maid in way of marriage' (II. 9. 11–14). The significance this final and binding vow would have in a society based on rigid structures of primogeniture

need hardly be pointed out. He is a little more successful in his interpretation. He will not choose gold, ‘what many men desire’:

ARAGON [...] the fool multitude, that choose by show,
 Not learning more than the fond eye doth teach,
 Which pries not to th’interior, but, like the martlet,
 Builds in the weather on the outward wall
 Even in the force and road of casualty.
(25–39)

Like Montaigne in ‘Of Physiognomy’, Aragon does not assume that there is a correspondence between appearance and essence; later in the speech he employs the example of people who ‘cozen fortune’ and corruptly acquire ‘dignity’ (35–45) to prove this point. He chooses the silver casket. As its inscription predicts, he ‘get[s] as much as he deserves’ (48). He is presented with ‘a portrait of a blinking idiot’ (53). Here the Silenus has been reversed. Its appearance is precious silver, while its essence is a grotesque portrait of a fool. There is another verse with this portrait, which suggests that those who think themselves wise—that is, not ‘fool[s] of the multitude’—are actually foolish. Such is the self-satisfied knowledge of what Portia calls ‘deliberate fools’ (79); the riddle informs Aragon that such false knowledge characterizes old men—those who have grown grey, ‘Silvered o’er’ (68). Despite being among Folly’s greatest devotees, they consider themselves wise (*PF*, p. 17). The riddle allows him to marry (‘Take what wife you will to bed’), but informs him that ‘I [i.e. the blinking idiot] will ever be your head’ (69–70).

Bassanio is a good Machiavellian. This prodigal son of Venice advises Graziano that one must manipulate appearances to give the right impression: sometimes one must ‘Use all the observance of civility’; at other times, ‘put on | Your boldest suit of mirth’ (II. 2. 172–95). Perhaps because of this, when he comes to play the game, he is not taken in by appearances:

BASSANIO [aside] So may the outward shows be least themselves.
 The world is still deceived with ornament.
 In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
 But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
 Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
 What damnèd error but some sober brow
 Will bless it and approve it with a text,
 Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?
(III. 2. 73–80)

Aragon's arguments against duplicity in public life are reiterated. The legal system is corrupt and so are the clergy, who, as Erasmus' Folly also intuitively, justify their vices with deceptive readings and self-serving interpretations of scripture (see *PF*, p. 88–91). But Bassanio's critique of these duplicities is itself expressed through a piece of linguistic ingenuity. The word 'ornament', signifying deceptive rhetorical embellishment, is itself expressed through the rhetorical ornament of epiphora.

Bassanio then rejects the 'gaudy' gold casket as 'hard food for Midas' (101) and the silver because it is a 'pale and common drudge' (106). He *foolishly* chooses the outwardly unpromising lead and is appropriately rewarded. Inside he finds the picture, and with it the right to marry Portia:

What find I here?
Fair Portia's counterfeit. What demi-god
Hath come so near creation? Move these eyes?
Or whether, riding on the balls of mine,
Seem they in motion? Here the severed lips
Parted with sugar breath. So sweet a bar
Should sunder such sweet friends. Here in her hairs
The painter plays the spider, and hath woven
A golden mesh t' untrap the hearts of men
Faster than gnats in cobwebs. But her eyes—
How could he see to do them? Having made one,
Methinks it should have power to steal both his
And leave itself unfurnished. Yet look how far
The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow
In underprizing it, so far this shadow
Doth limp behind the substance.

(III. 2. 114–129)

On the surface, it seems as though Erasmus' comment that 'All humaine thynges are lyke the Silenes or double images of Alcibiades' holds true in a straightforward way. The casket text has shown us that what 'outwardly seemed death [...] looking within ye shoulde fynde it lyfe and on the other side what seemed lyfe to be death: what fayre to be foule'. Beneath 'what men most desire', the gold casket, lies a skull; inside the leaden casket—compared by Morocco to a shroud—lies the lifelike picture of Portia.

However, when we look deeper this is not the case. When Bassanio opens his Silenus he gets a painting, a 'counterfeit' (115). This is not altogether surprising, so long as we recall that 'Breifly, the Silenus ones beyng vndone and disclosed, ye

shall fynde all things [are] tourned into a new semblance [*breviter, omnia repente versa reperies, si Silenum aperueris*].¹⁵⁶ In fact, Bassanio's eloquent praise of Portia's beauty furnishes the audience with an *ekphrasis*—a vivid description of the beauties of a painting, an image of a person. Portia's radiant natural beauty, which finds its realisation in art alone, is expressed primarily through two negations. First, the life-like quality of her eyes cannot be positively described in the way her hair—'A golden mesh t'untrap the hearts of men'—can. Second, Bassanio's description of this painting is as unequal—'The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow | In underprizing it'—as this inexpressibly beautiful painting is to capture Portia's radiance: 'so far this shadow | Doth limp behind the substance'. But this 'substance', which this painting—or rather this lover's *ekphrasis* of this painting by a 'demi-god'—cannot fully represent, is no 'substance' at all, for she is an actor in a play.

Self-Serving Mercy

For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.

(I Corinthians, 1. 22–24)

Because it underlies what Paul calls the 'great love wherewith He loved us' (Ephesians, 2. 4), the peculiar 'quality of mercy' (IV. 1. 179) is of paramount importance for understanding the concept of holy folly. Owing to His excessive mercies—most significantly, the incarnation and the general resurrection—God appears foolish by the standards of the world. For Erasmus, as for St. Paul, God's mercy is a truth that confounds earthly knowledge and logic, while in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare examines how seeming knowledge, infected with the pernicious logic of measurement and of *quid pro quo*, can blind people to their better intentions.

The most obvious evocation of mercy in Shakespeare is furnished by Portia's frequently anthologized courtroom speech. 'Mercy', she argues

[...] becomes

¹⁵⁶ *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi*, ed. by various, 9 vols (Amsterdam: E. J. Brill/London: Elsevier, 1964–2005), IV, p. 428 a–b.

The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway.
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute of God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

(IV. 1. 184–193)

The disguised Portia's duplicitous testimony demonstrates how the relative truths of the marketplace can corrode even the suprarational truth of God's foolish mercy. Her speech is an inside-out Silenus: its passionate, erudite appearance hides the fact that the Christians of the play are as bereft of mercy as the individual this speech effectively condemns.

Mercy, Portia argues, is a key quality of the earthly Christian weakness that is actually transcendent strength: 'earthly power doth then show likest God's | When mercy seasons justice'. She suggests that the real power of kings lies in the mercy 'enthroned in [their] hearts'. This inner disposition is greater than their 'force of temporal power' and its outward signifiers, a sentiment that recalls a similar claim made in Erasmus' late sermon, *De Immensa Dei Misericordia* (1524): 'A king's power and majesty are often admired even by those who hate or envy him [...] clemency and generosity are loved even by those who have no need of them' (*CWE*, 70, p. 231). Unlike 'majesty', mercy is a universally admirable quality. Portia recalls four other Erasmian ideas. First, Erasmus holds that visual signifiers of faith or power—such as 'sceptres'—are at best a necessary evil and at worst a mere deceptive stage property, which conceals a depleted or deformed essence. Her appeal to Shylock's conscience, in addition to her suggestion that regal power lies in the heart, displays a typically Erasmian emphasis on an internalized form of faith—an idea de-sublimated by Gobbo's mock catechism, in which the clown's seemingly intense self-scrutiny actually enables him to follow the urges of his stomach (see II. 2. 1–25).

Second, Portia suggests that the ethical way to live is through the imitation of Christ. Man should be merciful because it is an 'attribute of God himself'. The Gospel should be lived, not merely paid lip-service to. Third, she suggests that man should actively seek his 'salvation' (195) through his deeds of mercy, which

‘mitigate[s] the justice’ of Shylock’s ‘plea’ (198). Shylock will not be saved unless he seeks out his salvation through deeds. Erasmus contends that divine mercy is what enables us to exist and that ‘good’ and ‘justice’ spring from an understanding of mercy (*CWE*, 70, pp. 132–5). Fourth, Portia echoes Erasmus’ emphasis on the reciprocity of mercy: ‘any gift to another human being for the love of Jesus is made in a worthy cause’ (*CWE*, 66, p. 137). She describes mercy as something that ‘blesseth him that gives, and him that takes’ (182). The use of anadiplosis reiterates the reciprocity it denotes. And in a covertly self-interested, but nonetheless effective, argument she reflects that mercy should temper justice, because men are judged by their deeds of mercy in life. She asks Shylock: ‘how canst thou expect mercy giving none?’ Shylock, however, remains steadfast in his insistence on the immutability of letter of the law: ‘an oath, an oath! I have an oath in heaven | Shall I lay perjury on my soul? | No, not for Venice’ (222–25). His conscience drives him in the opposite direction from Portia’s.

Similarly, when Portia implores him for the sake of ‘charity’ (256), which Erasmus considers to be an offshoot of mercy (*CWE*, 70, p. 136), to use ‘some surgeon [...] | To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death’ (252–3). Shylock answers prosaically: ‘I cannot find it. ‘Tis not in the bond’ (257). This legalistic logic is responsible for his downfall and, ethically speaking, for Portia’s too. The paradox of this scene is that the action of the play hinges on an absolute Judaic adherence to the letter of the law, which is confounded by Christian folly. But it characterizes Portia’s dexterous quibbling just as much as it does Shylock’s insistent demands that he is allowed to demand that his ‘bond’ is paid in full. Not ‘a jot of blood’ is to be spilt, if his ‘bond’ is to be kept to the letter; ‘just a pound of flesh’ (321) no ‘less nor more’ (320) is stipulated in the bond; and he is not to receive the compensation that Portia promised earlier because ‘He hath refused it in open court. | He shall have merely justice and his bond’ (333–34).

This paradox speaks volumes about the play as a whole. Kiernan Ryan and Zdravko Planinc both argue that the reason why these Venetians hate Shylock is not because of their difference from him, but because of their similarity to him.¹⁵⁷ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that this hatred of

¹⁵⁷ *Shakespeare’s Comedies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p. 121; ‘Reading *The Merchant of Venice* through Adorno’, *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*, 8 (2007), 20–41.

one's reflection, so cogently examined in *The Merchant of Venice*, is the key to understanding Nazi hatred of the Jews: 'in the image of the Jew, which the racial nationalists hold up before the world, they express their own being. Their craving is for ownership, appropriation, unlimited power [...] at any price' (DA, p. 177; [DE, p. 137]). In his famous threat, Shylock acknowledges that the rage of the Christians is that of Caliban's in the mirror: 'The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction' (III. 1. 60–61).

Planinc is correct to point out the hypocrisy of the Christian traders: 'Neither Antonio nor Bassanio produce wealth; they merely redistribute it [...]. And yet that is the ostensible basis of their hatred of money-lending Jews'.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, the state of Venice itself does not produce anything. It, too, merely redistributes wealth. This is hinted at when the Duke hesitates to release Antonio from his bond: 'the trade and profit of the city | Consisteth of all nations' (III. 3. 30–31). Erasmus' adage, 'To extract tribute from the dead', in which he laments how 'money breeding money' (CWE, 32, p. 184) has become ubiquitous, voices comparable views to those tacit in *The Merchant of Venice*. Erasmus writes: 'I would accept a usurer sooner than this sordid class of merchants, who use tricks and falsehoods, fraud and misrepresentation, in pursuit of profit from any source' (CWE, 32, p. 185).

Antonio's business must be seen for what it is: reckless venture capitalism. And Portia's testimony must also be seen for what it is: perjury—the 'plea' is both 'tainted and corrupt'. As Planinc shows, she engages in entrapment; she appears in court in a disguise, 'gives a false name and legal credentials';¹⁵⁹ is ignorant of the difference between 'contract law and civil law';¹⁶⁰ and is the wife of one of the interested parties.¹⁶¹ It is safe to assume that her instrumental evocations of 'mercy' and 'charity' fall on deaf ears. Despite the fact that his losses have been common knowledge for some time, the Venetian Christians have conspicuously failed to give or lend Antonio 'the money he needed in time, though he had often done so for them in similar circumstances'.¹⁶²

This play shows the audience how even the radically egalitarian concept of

¹⁵⁸ Planinc, p. 23.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

God's mercy, which applies to all people of all times and of all creeds, can be used in earthly testimony as a means to an end. In Shakespeare's Venice, even the concepts that ostensibly transcend the ruthless exploitation of the marketplace are not safe from it. The ironies of this play suggest that mercy cannot be realized in a world in which even the minds of the ostensibly faithful are ensnared by a 'mad passion for property [that] has gone so far that there is nothing in the wide world, sacred or profane, from which something like usury cannot be extracted' (*CWE*, 32, p. 185).

Epilogue

What Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne and Shakespeare all find so fascinating about the Silenus is its self-generative, self-reflexive possibilities. In Montaigne, Silenic style enables self-reflection, through which he becomes aware of his own limitations. Through Socratic 'ignorance' he reaches a negative truth: 'Ignorance that knows itself, that judges itself and condemns itself, is not complete ignorance' (*F*, Book 2, Chapter 12, p. 451). Truth is not a consequence of human knowledge. Rather, a truth of sorts is found negatively, through the unlearning of received wisdom. The Silenic texts of Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare all delight in lifting the veil of appearances to point out the untruth of the way things are, of what passes for reality.

Of course, the paradox at the core of the Greek Sileni is that they did not contain a holy essence, but rather a gold statuette, a representation of a deity; similarly, the lead casket in *The Merchant of Venice* contains a *semblance* of an actor. It should not be forgotten that it is Erasmus' Folly in her encomium to folly who invokes the idea of the Silenus as a metaphor for the truth of '[a]ll humaine thynges' and that she points out that when you open the Silenus 'ye shall fynde all things [are] tourned into a new *semblance*'. '[S]emblance' carries multiple connotations of dissimulation, especially in early modern English:¹⁶³ this duplicitous icon undermines its revelation that the reality is mere shadow play. But by doing so, it also embodies the need to have a sceptical attitude towards determinate values, even of the determinate value of universal indeterminacy.

¹⁶³ 'Semblance' primarily signifies the outward appearance of a thing or a person, but holds multiple connotations of dissimulation, especially in early modern English (compare *OED*, definitions nos. 1a, 2a and b, 3a and b, 4a and c, 5, 6, 7, 8).

Isabella suggests something comparable in *Measure for Measure*. She informs Angelo that man is ‘Most ignorant of what he’s most assured | His glassy essence’ (II. 2. 22–3). Shakespeare shies away from positing negative truths about man’s essential ‘ignorance’. The ambiguity in ‘glassy’ allows for an essence that is at once brittle yet solid, translucent yet reflective.¹⁶⁴ If the human essence is translucent, then there is a nihilistic inference to be drawn: appearances are an envelope around a void and, as such, all we have. Thus man becomes a perpetual actor—an appropriate enough creed for a dramatist. If the essence is reflective, the distinction between appearance and essence is collapsed. We are faced with the proposition that the essence of things actually reflects back the monstrous, quotidian world of appearances. This also suggests that it is through speculative reflection on semblance that it is possible to get to the essence of things. The fragile truth of the Silenus head may lie less in the uncovering of an essence, which is an image, and more in the process by which this uncovering of a false idol is reached. However quixotic this process may be, its profound strength—its peculiar truth—lies in its obdurate refusal to resign itself to the given, to certain knowledge and to explicit values. In this connection, Adorno writes that ‘Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth. Its semblance disenchant the disenchanted world’ (*AT*, p. 75). As I will endeavour to establish in the following chapter, the philosophical potential of Shakespeare’s drama inheres in its capacity to expose the expedient fictions by which the serious world functions, while refusing to forget that it is itself a form of semblance.

¹⁶⁴ Compare *OED*, definitions no. 1a, b, e.

CHAPTER 4:

HONEST DEFORMITIES AND MENDACIOUS HISTORIES

If one at a solemne stage plaie, would take vpon hym to plucke of the plaiers garments whiles theyr were saying theyr partes, and so disciphre vnto lokers on, the true and natiue faces of eche of the plaiers, shoulde he not (trow ye) marre all the mattier? And well deserue for a madman to be pelted out of place with stones? Ye shoulde see yet straightwaies a new transmutacion in thynges: that who before plaied the woman, should than appeare to be a man: who seemed youth, should shew his hore heares: who counrefaited the kynge, should tourne to a rascall, and who plaied god almightie became a cobbler as he was before. Yet take awaie this error, and as soone take awaie all together, in as muche as the feigning and counterfaiying is it that so delighteth the beholders. So likewise, all this life of mortall men, what is it els, but a certaine kynde of stage plaie? Whereas men come foor the disguised one in one arraie, an other in another.

—*PF*, pp. 37–8.

At the heart of Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy lies a productive tension between the aesthetic critique of material conditions and the materialist critique of aesthetic semblance. Any account of these plays, however, should not establish a crude dichotomy between representation and reality, which are always implicated in one another. Rather, following Adorno, I contend that mimesis can lay bare the untruths that constitute reality, while the brute facts of reality, especially those of digestion, excretion and decomposition, subvert the idealizing tendencies inherent in aesthetic semblance.

On the one hand, these plays expose the provisional and retroactively formed nature of history. The most striking example of this is the way in which kingship is exposed as something manufactured, instrumentally acquired, maintained by the fictions of ceremony and legitimated by custom alone. Hugh Grady's claim that 2 *Henry IV* 'displays the scandalous truth that political power grows, not from any deputation of authority from God to king and his subjects, but from the social acceptance of artfully produced illusions of legitimacy',¹⁶⁵ holds true, I suggest, for these plays in general.

¹⁶⁵ *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard III to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 175.

In Shakespeare, history *happens*. As the insistent use of the *theatrum mundi* trope suggests, what passes for reality is constituted by the successful performance of certain roles: ‘all this life of mortall men, what is it els, but a certaine kynde of stage plaie?’ In this way, Shakespeare uses aesthetic semblance to point to the aesthetic dimension of empirical reality; kingship appears as legitimate and laudable only as a result of a combination of performance and the ‘forgetting’ intrinsic to ‘all reification’ (*DE*, p. 191; *DA*, p. 244). As Jonathan Baldo shows, forgetting, which is often an ideological act in itself, plays almost as large a role in these histories as remembering: ‘nearly any play based on chronicle histories, necessarily highly selective and truncated in its treatment, may easily assume the qualities of a cover-up as much as a rescue of memorable, heroic acts’.¹⁶⁶

On the other hand, these plays admit their complicity in maintaining a reality that is characterized by appalling suffering. Any representation makes certain claims to authority; in doing so, it reproduces, to a certain extent, the values and ideals of the world in which it is historically situated. As Michael D. Bristol argues: ‘Authority is [...] the state or quality of being an author; that is, an originator, creator, one who conceives and brings to completion even the humblest social initiative or artistic project’.¹⁶⁷ Artworks, then, are not privileged objects free from the sway of the prevailing ideology. They are shaped by it and have a hand in shaping it. Through their awareness of their complicity in real suffering, however, these plays expose both the monstrous distortions that ideology produces and the self-destructive consequences of a power politics premised on self-preservation.

In an illuminating analysis of selected comedies, tragedies and problem plays, Grady describes Shakespeare’s techniques of authorial self-effacement, which work to subvert the aesthetic ideals of formal purity and perfect proportion. Shakespeare, Grady argues, fashions an ‘impure aesthetics’.¹⁶⁸ In other words, an aesthetics that remains acutely aware that, in Walter Benjamin’s terse formulation, ‘There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of

¹⁶⁶ *Memory in Shakespeare’s Histories: Stages of Forgetting in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 16.

¹⁶⁷ *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 22.

¹⁶⁸ *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 5 ff.

barbarism'.¹⁶⁹ Since these histories do not claim to be expressing a determinate truth, they are not hoodwinked by the idea that it is possible to get to the essence of things. They do not try to recount history as it actually happened. Rather, they 'brush history against the grain'¹⁷⁰ in order to reach a negative truth, giving the lie to what passes for history.

Philip Sidney writes eloquently about the means by which poetry sidesteps positive truth-claims:

What child is there that, coming to a play, and seeing *Thebes* written in great letters upon an old door, doth believe that it is *Thebes*? If a man can arrive, at that child's age, to know that the poet's persons and doings are but pictures of what should be, and not stories of what has been, they will never give the lie to things not affirmatively but allegorically and figuratively written. And therefore, as in History looking for truth, they shall go away full fraught with falsehood, so in Poesy looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention.¹⁷¹

Even a child is aware that drama does not promise positive facts. The representation of reality in fiction is ideal and 'allegorical'—far from simply replicating the way things are, representation organises reality and offers 'pictures of what should be'. Indeed, as the following chapters establish, Shakespeare's drama is deeply suspicious of the idealising tendencies inherent in mimesis. Sidney's spirited defence of aesthetic veracity is nonetheless germane to the aims of this thesis, since it critiques affirmative knowledge: whereas 'poetry never lieth for it never affirmeth',¹⁷² those who go to the facts, dates and grand personages of 'History looking for truth' will inevitably 'go away full fraught with falsehood'.

After all, Shakespeare's telling of history focuses on how the received accounts of history diverge from the truth. For this reason, I pay careful attention to the various levels of mendacity throughout the plays. For Kiernan Ryan, understanding Shakespeare's historical practice is of crucial importance to those who wish to write politically engaged criticism today:

¹⁶⁹ 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 255–67 (p. 258).

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹⁷¹ *An Apology for Poetry: or the Defense of Poetry*, ed. by R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 103.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

As dramatizations of the fate of the Crown and nation two centuries before the time of Shakespeare and his audience, the *Henry IV* plays pose explicitly the key questions facing radical criticism today. What is the relationship between the reality of history and its creative representation, between the world of the past and the work's account of it?¹⁷³

In fact, in his history plays, Shakespeare comes close to creating the type of history that implicitly prefigures Foucault's description of his own practice as a kind of 'historicizing negativism' (*GSO*, p. 5 f.n), which

[I]nvolves replacing a theory of knowledge, power, or the subject with the analysis of historically determinate practices. A nominalist negativism, since it involves replacing universals like madness, crime, and sexuality with the analysis of experiences, which constitute singular historical forms. A negativism with a nihilistic tendency, if by this we understand a form of reflection which, instead of indexing practices to systems of values which allow them to be assessed, inserts these systems of values in the interplay of arbitrary but intelligible practices.

(*GSO*, p. 5 f.n.)

Shakespeare's histories in particular provide the perfect means by which to show the effect of universal forms on individual experience. These plays repeatedly show how a particular character's actions are governed, even generated, by the universal concept or category of which they are supposed to be an instance. By staging a segment of history, a sample group of 'arbitrary but intelligible' practices, these plays submit universal concepts—most notably, that of history itself—to intense critical scrutiny. Shakespeare leaves his audience to draw general conclusions from particular instances, rather than imposing a general theory—such as the providential theory of history—on particular events.

Through the discourse of folly, I argue, these plays criticise history even as they dramatise it; after establishing folly's structural significance to the workings of these plays, this chapter examines how this discourse infiltrates the serious action of *Richard II*. It then shows how the gardeners' candid speech is not only interwoven with images and ideas from the main plot, but also tacitly concerned with the ethical ramifications of giving aesthetic form to contingent historical reality. In the analysis of *1&2 Henry IV* that follows this, I argue that the concern of mendacity in these plays furnishes Shakespeare with a way of reflecting on the process of writing

¹⁷³ *Shakespeare*, 3rd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 38.

history. This argument is developed in the reading of *Henry V* with which this chapter concludes. By contrasting two antithetical accounts of history—the official account of history that attempts to fashion myths and the fool’s truth that debunks such myths—this play dramatises the dangers that a fictionalised past can hold for the future of a nation.

While this tension can be detected in the First Tetralogy, which is concerned with the chaos that followed Henry V’s reign, I suggest that it is most apparent in the Second Tetralogy—Shakespeare’s mature engagement with the dubious truths of history. Moreover, it is through the tension between truth and lies in these plays that Shakespeare implicitly engages with the dialectic of reality and representation, with which this chapter opened. Fredric Jameson formulates this dialectic with admirable clarity:

Genuine art, which cannot abolish *Schein* altogether without destroying itself and turning to silence, must nonetheless live its illusory appearance and its unreal luxury status as play in a vivid guilt that permeates its very forms, and is sometimes oddly called reflexivity or self-consciousness.¹⁷⁴

Shakespeare’s histories are genuine art in Jameson’s sense. Paradoxically, however, they are obsessed with lying; not only is Shakespeare seriously playful, but he is also honestly dishonest. In these histories, Shakespeare lies like the Cretan who declares: “All Cretans are liars”.

Stultitia loquitur

Criticism of the Henriad has long been divided into two broad camps. One presupposes that the plays offer an essentially conservative philosophy of history; the other argues that these plays debunk such a philosophy. The latter camp at least emphasizes the text’s transmission of festive traditions or, following Mikhail Bakhtin, examines the radical potential of plebeian characters and fools.¹⁷⁵ Unsurprisingly, studies of folly in the Second Tetralogy have been attracted to its most magnetic and enigmatic character, Falstaff. They have tended to examine

¹⁷⁴ *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 166.

¹⁷⁵ For critical examinations of these two ways of viewing Falstaff in particular and *1&2Henry IV* in general, see Ryan, pp. 61–64; and Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne*, pp. 139–218.

him in comparison to Shakespeare's other wise fools,¹⁷⁶ place him in a genealogy of European trickster figures, such as Rabelais' mercurial Panurge,¹⁷⁷ or analyze him in the light of Bakhtin's theory of carnival.¹⁷⁸ But the significance of folly in the Henriad is by no means circumscribed by Falstaff's ample girth.

These approaches fail to perceive that the paradoxical wisdom of folly and folly in the sense of misapprehension are integral components of the plays. In these histories, wise folly lays bare credulous folly, or misapprehension. Wise folly, in these plays, shows up the folly of those who swallow the fictions that constitute reality hook, line and sinker. Folly is central to the philosophy of history that these plays promulgate and it infiltrates their language, form and structure; it is not, therefore, confined to individual avatars, such as Falstaff. Aside from unintentionally replicating the ideology of individualism that these plays subject to criticism,¹⁷⁹ to treat this character in isolation is to neglect both his role within the

¹⁷⁶ Robert Bell, *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 20–35; Andrew McCulloch, "Events Borrowed from History": the Real Life Drama of *Henry IV*", *The English Review*, 16 (2006), 2–5. David Wiles contends that 'Falstaff is the clown of *Henry IV*' and that his part was written for Kemp in *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 116–35 [p. 116].

¹⁷⁷ See Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), pp. 195–267. Enid Welsford distances Falstaff from tricksters like Eulenspiegel, because he is a 'typical buffoon, understood and interpreted by Shakespeare': he is not like opportunist tricksters, since 'Like Quixote [...], Falstaff tilts against reality and loses'; see *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935; rept. 1968), p. 52. Cathleen T. McLaughlin argues for strong similarities between Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and *1&2 Henry IV* and the possible influence of the former on the latter. She argues that the Silenic Socrates (as transmitted through Lucian) accounts for Erasmus', Rabelais' and Shakespeare's shared fascination with folly (*Shakespeare, Rabelais, and the Comical Historical*, *Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures*, 80 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), esp. pp. 137–48). Examining the various ways in which Shakespeare combines traditions and types of fool in his construction of Falstaff is another popular critical move, which goes back as far as Karl Friedrich Flögel at the close of the eighteenth century, who dubs Falstaff 'the king of clowns' and provides a detailed taxonomy of Falstaff's lineage (*Geschichte des Grotesk-Komischen: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. by Max Bauer, 2 vols (Munich: Georg Müller, 1913 [1788]), I, pp. 154–60 [p. 155]).

¹⁷⁸ See Grady, 'Falstaff: Subjectivity Between the Carnival and the Aesthetic', *MLR*, 96 (2001), 609–623; this was reprinted in a revised form in *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne*, pp. 143–162). David Rutter argues that 'festivity is, both structurally and politically, the tie that binds the four plays of Shakespeare's Second Henriad together' in *Shakespeare's Festive History: Feasting, Festivity, Fasting and Lent in the Second Henriad* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 169; Focusing on the idea of carnival, Tim Prentki examines Falstaff's relationship with the 'dominant ideology in the world of the play' (*The Fool in European Theatre: Stages of Folly* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 50–68). Applying Bakhtin, Graham Holderness considers Falstaff a 'collective rather than individual being' (*Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1992), p. 139). Joachim Frenk views him as essentially a carnival figure, but points out the important 'dialectic' between the way in which Falstaff is shown and how he is narrated; see 'Falstaff erzählen und zeigen', *Wissenschaftliches Seminar 3* (2005), 16–23 (p. 16 ff).

¹⁷⁹ David Ellis provides a cogent attack on this tendency, which is apparent from Johnson to L. C. Knights; indeed, even Grady adopts a character-centred approach in 'Between the Carnival and the

text and the other, less immediately apparent, but much more important, manifestations of folly in the plays. Through the protean mode of folly, these texts display the dialectic that lies at the heart of Shakespeare's seriocomic philosophy of history: the dialectic between art's freedom from social coercion and its complicity in it.

In the Second Tetralogy, Shakespeare uses the grotesque register—the primary register through which the paradoxical wisdom of folly is expressed—to expose the grotesque nature of authority in the serious world. In 'Of Friendship' Montaigne views his *Essays* as parenthetical, 'fantasticall pictures', arranged around the centrepiece of La Boétie's revolutionary *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude, or the Anti-Dictator*. They are similar to the grotesques with which his painter fills 'void places' in his works, but, Montaigne suggests, in a typical act of Socratic self-effacement, his compositions lack the technical ability apparent in the painter's grotesquerie:

And what are these my compositions in truth, other than antike works and monstrous bodies, patched and hudled up together of divers members without any certaine or well ordered figure, having neither order, dependencie, or proportion, but casual and framed by chance?

(*E*, Book 1, Chapter 27, p. 90)

Although it does not go so far as to interrogate the idealizing tendencies of aesthetic proportion, Montaigne's characterization of his *Essays* as grotesque implies that a static, complete and ideally proportioned being is radically at odds with life's irregularity and multiplicity. In this respect, the *Essays* testify to the truth of Bakhtin's belief that the grotesque 'seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being'.¹⁸⁰ The grotesque register points out the lies and idealisations behind the neat, finished products of an Apollonian aesthetic. In short, Shakespeare's use of the grotesque opens up the Silenus: he implies that the concept of the beautiful has a grotesque, even monstrous, aspect.

Through the discourse of folly and the grotesque register representation can gain a certain proximity to the ugliness with which it is complicit because of its

Aesthetic'. However, despite his protestations to the contrary, Ellis also considers Falstaff in isolation; see 'Falstaff and the Problems of Comedy', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 34 (2005), 95–108.

¹⁸⁰ Bakhtin, p. 52.

association with all that is complete and proportioned. The grotesque register and the discourse of folly, however, do not simply serve as modes for straightforward desublimation or inversion in the plays. To suggest that they merely provide comic relief, in which grand narratives are brought down to earth, is to misunderstand them, not least because ‘The elements [of an artwork] are not arranged in juxtaposition, but rather grind away at each other or draw each other in; the one seeks or repulses the other. That alone constitutes the nexus [*Zusammenhang*] of the most demanding works’ (*AT*, p. 242). Folly is an essential facet of these texts’ incohesive ‘cohesion’, which is an alternative way of translating the German word *Zusammenhang*. Far from offering comic relief, folly enables these histories to question the values of the concepts, ideologies and institutions they purport to represent; folly ‘grinds away’ at privileged concepts at the same time as authority ‘grinds away’ at it by attempting to silence, renounce or occlude it.

For Adorno, the work that epitomises this tension between reality—what is—and representation—what could be—is the last great text of Renaissance folly, *Don Quixote*:

The object of bourgeois art is the relation of itself as artefact to empirical society; *Don Quixote* stands at the beginning of this development. Art, however, is social not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as ‘socially useful’, it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it.

(*AT*, p. 296)

Quixote’s folly, his purposive purposelessness, is comparable to that of bourgeois art in general. It is through his socially useless quest that the values both of his society and of the romances with which he is infatuated are tested. The novel’s representation of art’s relation to the reality in which it was conceived is also made apparent by the text’s insistence on its materiality, its existence as a thing, an object in circulation, a motif equally apparent in Rabelais, Montaigne and Shakespeare.

Degeneracy

So too should the historian write, consorting with Truth and not with flattery, looking to the future hope, not to the gratification of the flattered.

—Lucian¹⁸¹

In Shakespeare's histories, the concept of degeneracy is frequently employed as a byword for a disregard for the values of the established order. In this respect, it has an affinity with the word folly, signifying a dangerous, even sinful, misapprehension, as in the Richard's 'follies' (IV. 1. 275).¹⁸² According to Bolingbroke, Richard was 'unhappied and *disfigured* clean' by Bushy and Green. They 'Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him' and 'Broke the possession of the royal bed' (III. 1. 10, 12–13 [my emphasis]). Making the platonic association between physical beauty and virtue, the usurper suggests that Richard is physically marked by his immoral behaviour; ironically, however, it is Bolingbroke himself who is responsible for Richard being 'Doubly divorced', breaking 'A twofold marriage: 'twixt my crown and me, | And then betwixt me and my married wife' (V. 1. 71, 72–3). As the word's etymological root implies—it stems from the Latin *genus*, which signifies 'birth, decent, origin; offspring; kind; race; family; nation; gender'—to be *degenerate* is to be¹⁸³ 'One who has lost, or has become deficient in, the qualities considered proper to the race or kind; a degenerate specimen; a person of debased physical or mental constitution'.¹⁸⁴ In Richard's case, his degeneracy is bound up with property in general and primogeniture in particular. He is a 'Most degenerate king' (II. 1. 263), for over taxing the commons and robbing his cousin Hereford of his 'patrimony' (238).¹⁸⁵

Because it threatens the legitimacy of the royal *genus* and because the king's behaviour is supposed to be exemplary, the aberrant sexual behaviour of Holinshed's Richard attracts the chronicler's scorn. He comments, in an observation

¹⁸¹ 'How to Write History', in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, trans. by H. W. and F. G. Fowler, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), II, pp. 110–137 (p. 136).

¹⁸² See *OED*, definitions nos. 1a, c, 2a, b.

¹⁸³ *OED*., definition no. 1.

¹⁸⁴ *OED*., definition, no. 1.

¹⁸⁵ In the play's main dramatic source, the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*, Lancaster (John of Gaunt) employs this word to describe Richard: 'A heavy charge good Woodstoke hast thou had | To be protector to soe wyld a prince, | Soe far degenerate from his noble father' (*NDSS*, 3, p. 461 [I.1.34–7]).

not found in his main source,¹⁸⁶ that Richard committed the ‘filthie sinne of leacherie and fornication, with abhominable adulterie, speciallie in the king’ (*NDSS*, 3, p. 408). To be degenerate is to violate the past by failing to fulfil the deep-rooted expectations of how you should behave in the present or how you will behave in the future. It is to shatter the petrified historical constructs of form and precedence, as Hal does in his mockery of chivalric conceits, which Hotspur reports to the King:

he would unto the stews,
And from the common’st creature pluck a glove,
And wear it as a favour, and with that
He would unhorse the lustiest challenger.

(V. 3. 20–3)

Paving the way for *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, in which it is of central thematic importance, the concept of degeneracy is subjected to close critical scrutiny at the close of *Richard II*. Moments after Hotspur and Henry IV have discussed Hal’s delinquent behaviour, the theme is replayed in Aumerle’s thwarted attempt to depose Henry (his uncle)—a degenerate king according to the rules of primogeniture. Aumerle’s father, York, in what his wife regards a degenerate action, betrays his son to the king and is praised as a paradigm of constancy:

O loyal father of a treacherous son!
Thou sheer, immaculate, and silver fountain,
From whence this stream through muddy passages
Hath held his current and defiled himself.

(V.3.57–61)

What is really significant about the idea of degeneracy in *Richard II*, however, is the way in which ideas of legitimacy become a disguise for wholly instrumental relations. It is hard to say who is more degenerate: Hal or Henry, York or Aumerle. The play dramatizes the fall of a degenerate king’s realm into the hands of one whose claim is degenerate because it breaks with primogeniture. In terms of legitimacy, the play’s action lies somewhere between Scylla and Charybdis.

¹⁸⁶ Roy Rosenstein, ‘Richard the Redless: Representations of Richard II from Boccaccio and Polydore to Holinshed and Shakespeare’, in Michael Pincombe ed. *International Conference on Travels and Translations in the Sixteenth Century: Selected Papers from the Second International Conference of the Tudor Symposium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 137–148 (p. 143). As Phyllis Rackin shows at length, the 1587 version of Holinshed’s chronicles, which Shakespeare used, is a text characterised by its plurality both in terms of the multitude of sources it drew on and in the number of augmentations and glosses that other writers added to it; see *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 22–26.

Moreover, despite Richard's hysterical protestations to the contrary, 'the breath of worldly men' can 'depose | The deputy elected by the Lord' (III. 2. 52–3). As Katharine Eisaman Maus puts it: 'If being a king and having a kingdom were completely inseparable—if the realm, were, so to speak, permanently soldered to the monarch—usurpation would be an impossibility'.¹⁸⁷

The discord with which the play opens, in which the 'ceremonious form of the appeal of treason'¹⁸⁸ is used to cloak Hereford's knowledge of Richard's complicity in Woodstock's murder, is followed by the scene in which John of Gaunt is upbraided by his brother's widow. She accuses him of being degenerate because he, one of 'Edward's seven sons', one of 'seven vials of his sacred blood' (I. 2. 11–12), fails to take revenge upon his brother's murderer:

Thou dost consent
In some large measure to thy father's death
In that thou seest thy wretched brother die,
Who was the model of thy father's life.
Call it not patience, Gaunt, it is despair.
In suffering thus thy brother to be slaughtered
Thou show'st the naked pathway to thy life,
Teaching stern murder how to butcher thee.
That which in mean men we entitle patience
Is pale cold cowardice in noble breasts.

(25–34)

She attempts to motivate Gaunt's action in the present by recalling memories of an idealised past. The ironies of this marginal character's speech expose the self-serving core of the concept of legitimacy. She appeals to Gaunt's sense of pride and then his desire for self-preservation, rather than his desire to defend his *genus*. 'Old John of Gaunt', may indeed be 'time-honoured' (I. 1. 1)—as in Richard's formal epithet with which this play opens—but the common critical assumption that he embodies the values of the good old days of chivalry is undermined by the Duchess's speech.

In *Thomas of Woodstock*, the tyrant Richard is impressed that Trissillian—a 'Janus lyke' fawning lawyer and parasite—has thought up the idea of 'Blanke charters, to fill up our treasury, | Opening the cheasts of hoarding cormorants | That

¹⁸⁷ *Being and Having in Shakespeare: Oxford Wells Shakespeare Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 26.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

laugh to see ther kingly sovraigne lacke' (*NDSS*, 3, p. 470 [III.1.1135–8]). Shakespeare reverses the significance of the bestial image of the gluttonous cormorant to describe the voracious greed of Richard's inner circle.¹⁸⁹ In a desperate plea for the king to, in Northumberland's words, 'make high majesty look like itself' (II. 1. 297), Gaunt piles one commonplace about the perils of prodigality onto another, suggesting that the ruthless pursuit of self-interest is self-destructive:

He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes.
With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder.
Light vanity, insatiate cormorant,
Consuming means, soon preys upon itself.

(II. 1. 36–39)

Invoking the licence granted to fools and dying men, Gaunt inveighs against the madness into which society has degenerated. He concludes his famous praise of England, 'This royal throne of kings, this sceptxred isle' (II. 1. 40), thus:

Is now leased out—I die pronouncing it—
Like a tenement or pelting farm
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of wat'ry Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds.
That England that was wont to conquer others
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.

(59–66)

Although Richard's 'blank charters' turn out to be not so much writing that conquers as writing that deposes, his legal discourse, which seeks to order reality, illustrates the darker side of reason's desire to categorise the world. The 'shame' of which Gaunt speaks is connected to the king's degeneracy in two interrelated ways.

¹⁸⁹ Grady writes: 'The references here and elsewhere in the play to farming, weeds, and caterpillars, however, suggest a connection to another form of reification investigated by Shakespeare in other plays: the social context for this language, as a number of recent works have understood, is the enclosure movement which was proceeding apace as Shakespeare wrote in the 1590s, a slow economic process in which once customarily half lands which had existed largely outside the money economy were alienated by their legal possessors and turned over from farming to sheep-raising for the woolen trade—all in the interest of the money to be made from such transactions' (*Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne*, p. 74). Ralph Robinson's 1551 English translation of More's *Utopia* renders the Latin 'helluo', which signifies 'glutton' (*CWM*, 4, p. 64–8), as 'cormorant' (*Three Early Modern Utopias: Utopia, The New Atlantis and The Isle of Pines*, ed. by Susan Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; repr. 2008), p. 22). This word is used in Hythloday's attack on the Tudor enclosures to describe the voracious sheep eating away the livelihoods of the poor, all in the name of the production of a profitable luxury good, wool.

First, because he exults in the works of man, Richard is idolatrous. As David Hawkes explains:

The pursuit of fleshly pleasures or worldly goods indicates a misconstrual of the *telos* of the human being. To be carnal is to forget that the body is a means to a spiritual end. Such a fleshy consciousness will systematically reduce the spiritual to the material, the subjective to the objective. It is, in other words, a *fetishistic* consciousness.¹⁹⁰

As Gaunt makes clear, the ‘bonds’ that enact this quantification are material. Written script is ultimately perishable, liable to become ‘rotten’. To put one’s faith in such bonds, in humanly produced contracts, rather than divine revelation, is a misapprehension or folly that endangers the soul. Such a fetishistic consciousness is dangerously foolish, since it misapprehends the world, seeing it as possessing cornucopian plenitude, whereas, in and of itself, without the hope of salvation and resurrection, the world is barren, and human activity bereft of significance.

Second, Richard’s conduct is at odds with how a Christian prince should behave. As Erasmus argues at length in his *Institutio Principis Christiani* (1518), the earthly pomp and decadence in which tyrants revel can be measured only by the privations of their subjects (see *CWE*, 27, p. 225). In the terms of Shakespeare’s Alexander Iden, ruminating in his country garden, Richard ‘wax[es] great’ as a result of ‘others’ waning’ (*2 Henry VI*, IV. 9. 18–19). By being captivated by the signifiers of kingship, he actually negates its mysterious, spiritual power. Erasmus explains this in theatrical terms: ‘If all that makes a king is a chain, a sceptre, robes of royal purple, and a train of attendants, what after all is to prevent actors in a drama who come on stage decked with all the pomp of state from being regarded as real kings?’ (*CWE*, 27, p. 215). This *praeposterum* reverses the Silenic transformation of a king into an actor that has been examined in the previous chapter, suggesting that temporal authority is fashioned through performance, rather than derived from innate authority.

Gaunt jokes about the similarities between his cadaverous appearance and his name, itself an Anglicization of Ghent, in such a way as to negate its metonymic significance in favour of its literal one. His humour subtly enacts the systematic reduction of the ‘spiritual to the material, the subjective to the objective’ that

¹⁹⁰ *Idols of the Marketplace: Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in English Literature, 1580–1680* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 58.

Hawkes sees as characteristic of idolaters. The object of Gaunt's former pride becomes the object of his scorn. The very names of the nobility attest to the way their identity—or *property* in the early modern sense of a distinguishing feature—is determined by what they own.¹⁹¹ This piece of moribund humour is absent from Shakespeare's sources:

KING RICHARD Can sick men play so nicely with their names?
 JOHN OF GAUNT No, misery makes sport to mock itself.
 Since thou doest seek to kill my name in me,
 I mock my name, great King, to flatter thee.
 KING RICHARD Should dying men flatter with those that live?
 JOHN OF GAUNT No, no, men living flatter those that die.
 KING RICHARD Thou now a-dying sayst thou flatter'st me?
 JOHN OF GAUNT O no: thou diest, though I the sicker be.
 KING RICHARD I am in health; I breathe, and see thee ill.
 JOHN OF GAUNT Now He that made me knows I see thee ill:
 Ill in myself to see, and in thee seeing ill.
 Thy deathbed is no lesser than thy land,
 Wherein thou liest in reputation sick.

(II. 1. 84–96)

Gaunt's name has become as polysemous as a word in the mouth of a fool. Although Richard dismisses this critique as the words of a "lunatic lean-witted fool" (113), Gaunt turns reality on its head by playing on the dual significance of the word "ill": the ill man is morally healthy, the healthy man is terminally ill in moral terms. Gaunt ironically adopts the position of one of Richard's flatterers so as to warn him about the deceptive nature of their eloquent counsel, as opposed to his riddling wordplay, which is as erudite as Lear's fool's castigations of his master and is removed from the inarticulate language of lunacy. Because his son returns to England specifically to make good his name, Gaunt's self-deflation has a residual significance: it creates a structural irony, which tacitly makes a mockery of Henry's project to reclaim his birthright.

To destroy the documentation of someone's existence, however, is to write them out of history. This is precisely what Richard's flatterers attempt to do to Bolingbroke; his sense of vulnerability to historical erasure is palpable when, in a kangaroo court, he indicts them for *logocide*. They have

From my own windows torn my household coat,

¹⁹¹ Maus, p. 17 ff.

Razed out my imprese, leaving me no sign,
Save men's opinions and my living blood,
To show the world I am a gentlemen.

(III. 2. 24–27)

The proliferation of first-person pronouns in connection with his property certainly supports Maus' point about the interrelation of personal identity and ownership. Moreover, Bolingbroke's return makes it clear that concerns about the duplicity and mutability of words in the face of the reality they purport to signify are not simply a problem of representation: it shapes history.

Deformities

To examine the theme of deformity, it is necessary to consider the exchange between the gardeners, absent from the sources, which puts the historical narrative of the nobles and gentry on hold. Far from providing comic relief, their exchange is rife with tensions that are also apparent in the serious action. As with the Clowns in *Hamlet*, the Porter in *Macbeth* and Falstaff's language of exuberant corporeality in *1&2 Henry IV*, these plebeian characters not only reflect upon the main action, but also betray an uncanny grasp of significant patterns of imagery that runs through the serious action of the play. They 'brush history against the grain',¹⁹² deforming the received account of history by their very presence. These men, who work up to their elbows in mud but speak in elegant blank verse, display an intuitive grasp of a conflict at the heart of Shakespeare's representation of history: the contradictory nature of historical narration.

The central problem that faces the positivist conception of history is that its own form belies it. As Lucian's 'How to Write History'—one of the very first theorizations of historical practice—suggests, the object of history is, in a certain sense, an aesthetic one, since it is to 'superinduce upon events the charm of order'.¹⁹³ To write history is to give the formal organisation intrinsic in representation—something, which in an objective sense, is *not*—to the formless multiplicity of what has been. Perhaps this tension accounts for the striking contrast between form and chaos in the exchange between the Gardener and his mate and, indeed, in the play as a whole:

¹⁹² Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 258.

¹⁹³ 'How to Write History', p. 132.

GARDENER [*To First Man*] Go, bind thou up yon dangling apricots
 Which, like unruly children, make their sire
 Stoop with oppression of their prodigal weight.
 Give some substance to the bending twigs.
 [*To Second Man*] Go thou, and, like an executioner,
 Cut off the heads of too fast-growing sprays
 That look too lofty in our commonwealth.
 All must be even in our government.
 You thus employed, I will go root away
 The noisome weeds which without profit suck
 The soil's fertility from wholesome flowers.

FIRST MAN Why should we, in the compass of a pale,
 Keep law and form and due proportion,
 Showing as in a model our firm estate,
 When our sea-wallèd garden, the whole land,
 Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up,
 Her fruit trees all unpruned, her hedges ruined,
 Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs
 Swarming with caterpillars?

GARDENER Hold thy peace.
 He that hath suffered this disordered spring
 Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf.
 The weeds, which his broad spreading leaves did shelter,
 That seemed in eating him to hold him up,
 Are plucked up, root and all, by Bolingbroke.

(III. 4. 30–53)

This exchange offers a précis of the play's themes and imagery. Prodigal offspring that threaten to destroy the achievements of their fathers must be 'Cut off' to prevent lasting damage to the abundance of England, a 'sea-wallèd garden', which is infested with parasitical creatures and 'weeds'. In addition to echoing Bolingbroke's description of himself as a gardener and the king's flatterers as 'caterpillars of the commonwealth | Which I have sworn to weed and pluck away' (II. 3. 165–66), as with the image of the 'cormorants', Shakespeare inverts the significance of the 'caterpillars' in the second half of the source.¹⁹⁴ In the latter part of *Woodstock*, Trissillian's trickster-servant, Nimble, insults a group of common people, from whom he is extorting money, by calling them 'caterpillars' (*NDSS*, 3,

¹⁹⁴ As Richard Hillman shows, this word is initially employed in *Woodstock* to describe Richard's flatterers; see *Shakespeare, Marlowe and the Politics of France* (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2002), p. 178). 'According to *OED*, the word 'caterpillar' had been applied for roughly a century to social parasites; playwrights may have especially relished the term, given Stephen Gosson's 1579 polemic, *The Schoole of Abuse, Containing a plesent inuectiue against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Iesters, and such like Caterpillers of a Commonwealth*' (*Ibid.*, p. 223, n.7); my thanks to Prof. Hillman for drawing my attention to this fact.

p. 477 [III. ii. 1636]), while here the word is used by a worker to describe the venality of 'the Earl of Wiltshire, Bushy, Green' (54).

Not only because it reveals how the grotesque register lies at the heart of the play, but also because it is associated with the nature of dramatic representation in the period, this imagery of parasites is significant. The *Second and Third Blast to the Players* (1580), like many of the contemporary anti-theatrical polemics, views theatre as a degenerate activity, which tempts its audiences, who 'prodigallic consume'¹⁹⁵ this commodity, to replicate the atrocities they see on stage. Real-life desires and emotions are all too easily infiltrated by represented ones. The audience's 'insatiable desire [for the] filthie plesure' of the theatre not only allures 'schollers [...] from their studies', but, far worse, is intrinsically idolatrous: 'we despise the Lordes table, and honor Theaters; at a worde, we loue al *things*, reuerence al *things*, [that] God alone seemeth vile to vs'.¹⁹⁶ One need only think of the modern notion of the matinee idol to observe the continuing association between actors and idols, theatre and idolatry.

The polemicist continues, observing that itinerant players debase their patrons:

Since the reteining of these *Catetpillers*, the credite of Noble men hath decayed, & they are thought to be couetous by permitting their seruants, which cannot liue of theselues, and whome for neerenes they wil not maintaine, to liue at the deuotion or almes of other men, passing from countrie to countrie, from one Gentlemans house to another, offering their seruice, which is a kind of beggerie [my emphasis].¹⁹⁷

Obviously, the actor's art and the plays themselves are commodities. Thus they are objects of the implacable desire that characterizes a fetishistic consciousness, which, never satisfied, restlessly and relentlessly shifts from desiring one thing to desiring another. Shakespeare's telling of history, however, makes it apparent through theatre, a commodity, that the dangers of an objectifying or fetishistic

¹⁹⁵ Anthony Munday [?], *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theaters the one whereof was sounded by a reuerend byshop dead long since; the other by a worshipful and zealous gentleman now aliue: one showing the filthines of plaies in times past; the other the abhomination of theaters in the time present: both expresly prouing that that common-weale is nigh vnto the curse of God, wherein either plaiers be made of, or theaters maintained. Set forth by Anglo-phile Eutheo* (London: Henrie Denham, 1580), p. 25.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

consciousness, which, as we have seen, reduces kingship to stage playing, can be diagnosed. Richard is captivated by the signifiers of authority; and in this respect, he is like the idolatrous tyrant of the *Trauerspiel*, of whom Benjamin writes: ‘His unfaithfulness to man is matched by his loyalty to those things [the symbols of kingship] to the point of being absorbed into contemplative devotion to them’.¹⁹⁸

In striking contrast to the other plebeian characters in the rest of the Second Tetralogy, the Gardeners speak with ‘law and form and due proportion’—for the most part in elegant iambic pentameter. This registers the play’s obsession with form and formality in the face of material disorder, the inexorable growth of weeds even in the most carefully maintained of gardens. Analogies between the state of the nation and the state of a garden, ill-maintained or otherwise, abound in both of the play’s two main sources. In *Woodstock*, Lancaster reflects on the duties and achievements of himself and his brothers, making the comparison between statecraft and gardening:

Princly Edwards sonnes In tender care
Of wanton Richard & ther Fathers realme,
Have toyld to purge faire Englands plessant field
Of all those ranckorous weeds that choakt the grounds
& left hir plessent meads like barron hills

(*NDSS*, 3, p. 491)

Meanwhile, in *Holinshed*, horticultural degeneration acquires a providential significance. In the year of Richard’s deposition, ‘old baie trees withered, and afterwards, contrarie to all mens thinking, grew greene againe, a strange sight, and supposed to import some unknowne event’ (*NDSS*, 3, p. 396).

Shakespeare, however, puts this providential rendering of history into the mouth of the Welsh captain, so as to gesture towards the abuse of history, the way in which giving form to multiplicity, a process intrinsic to representation, can lead to manifestly erroneous conclusions:

’Tis thought the king is dead. We will not stay.
The bay trees in our country are all withered,
And meteors fright the fixèd stars of heaven.
[...]
And lean-looking prophets whisper fearful change,

¹⁹⁸ *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998; repr. 2009), p. 156.

Rich men look sad, and ruffians dance and leap;
The one in fear to lose what they enjoy,
The other to enjoy by rage and war.
These signs forerun the death or fall of kings.

(II. 4. 7–9, 11–15)

Of course, the irony is that, for all his dire imagery of the *mundus inversus*, it is the Welshman's decision to leave that is in no small part responsible for the earth-shattering event he foresees in the stars. When the Gardener, silencing the protests of the First Man, suggests that Richard's fall is a result of his tolerance of a 'disordered spring', the tension between historical allegorisation, in which Richard indulges, and personal agency, which Bolingbroke exploits to the full, comes to the fore. When he uses the 'fall of the leaf' as a metaphor for Richard's fall, the Gardener evokes images of autumnal, natural decomposition. But he also makes it clear that this fall is not part of an organic cycle: it is the consequence of an intervention. Bolingbroke has 'plucked up' these 'weeds', Richard's parasitical flatterers, 'root and all'. Shakespeare uses the Gardeners to reflect upon the history in which the other characters are embroiled. England, the Gardeners make clear, is 'full of weeds' not because the land or some higher power somehow foresees Richard's fall, but because the lethal combination of Richard's prodigal kingship and Bolingbroke's 'boist'rous' (I. 3. 127) ambition has created chaos.

The Gardener's reflection, 'All must be even in our government', makes clear the link between statecraft and representation. The former must be even-handed and calm, while the latter lends an 'even' form to multiplicity. But it also echoes the under-garrisoned York's abrupt reflection shortly before, after a series of self-interruptions, that 'All is uneven' (II. 2. 121). His discontinuous utterance lapses from mainly iambic pentameters into a fragmented line consisting of a dactyl followed by a trochee,¹⁹⁹ reflecting metrically what his panicked observation denotes. On the one hand, if one reads the Second Man's comment more literally, it poses a potentially incendiary question, which exemplifies how 'Clowning [...] creates openings both in the literary text and in the social structure that it purports to reflect':²⁰⁰ why *should* the working man obey and be productive, when those assumed to be his moral superiors consume all he produces and fail to adhere to the

¹⁹⁹ This line is presented as a fragment in the Oxford/Norton edition.

²⁰⁰ Bristol, p. 150.

laws of primogeniture? On the other hand, the Second Man's rhetorical question—'Why should we, in the compass of a pale, | Keep law and form and due proportion?'—emphasises the fact that 'due proportion' is conceivable only in a harmonious aesthetic form. Richard later reflects that life is at odds with 'law and form':

How sour sweet music is
When time is broke and no proportion kept.
So is it in the music of men's lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To check time broke in a disordered string;
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not the ear to hear my true time broke.
I wasted time and now doth time waste me,
For now hath time made me his numb'ring clock.

(V. 5.42–50)

He can sense aesthetic discord, but can neither govern his state harmoniously, nor admit his culpability in its degeneration into civil war. He is an 'allegory monger',²⁰¹ preferring to make himself a hapless victim of 'time' in the *de casibus* vein,²⁰² rather than admitting that he has been 'deposed' (III. 2. 153) because of human action.

Through voices associated with unreason, *Richard II* critiques its diverse and, indeed, contradictory historical sources, rather than simply replicating their assumptions. It comes as no surprise in a text so vitally attuned to its own method that Shakespeare provides a cue for its interpretation, a cue that employs the pervasive imagery of visual and cerebral reflection in the play. Attempting to cheer up the Queen, who is suffering from a portentous 'unborn sorrow', the favourite Bushy comments:

For Sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,
Divides one thing entire to many objects—
Like perspectives, which, rightly gazed upon,
Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry,
Distinguish form.

(II. 2. 19–21)

²⁰¹ Zenón Luis-Martínez, 'Shakespeare's Historical Drama as *Trauerspiel*: *Richard II*—and After', *ELH*, 75 (2008), 673–704 (p. 690).

²⁰² See Paul Budra, *A Mirror for Magistrates and the de Casibus Tradition* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 85–95.

Moments later, when Green announces the rebellion, Bushy's elaborate suggestion that the Queen is worrying about nothing is disproven. Although he suggests that her premonitions are the consequence of a skewed perspective on reality, it is clear that, in *Richard II*, Shakespeare himself views history 'awry'.

Through these five marginal voices, which remain silent in his sources, Shakespeare incorporates into his history irrational and alternative voices, which give the lie to the received account of history—not least because, as Lukas Lammers astutely observes: 'When Richard asks the Queen to tell his "lamentable tale" he explicitly asks for a particular version of his suffering to be passed on. Significantly, however, this tale does not simply coincide with what the play has shown'.²⁰³ The deformity of an anamorphic painting skews the viewer's perspective, forcing them to adjust the position from which they view it and, commonly, suggesting that the serious world is mere vanity. In the same way, the themes of degeneracy and deformity in this play ultimately evoke 'This problem of the infamy of sovereignty, of the discredited sovereign', which:

[I]s precisely the problem posed by [Shakespeare's] royal tragedies, without it seems the sovereign's infamy ever being theorised. [...] from Nero [...] down to the little man with trembling hands crowned with forty million deaths, who, from deep in his bunker, asks for two things, that everything above him be destroyed and that he be given chocolate cakes until he bursts, you have the outrageous functioning of the despicable sovereign.

(A, p. 13)

Richard II is a play manifestly concerned with 'ridiculous authority' (A, p. 13), an authority that is degenerate. Richard is a pathetic man, usurped by a violent hypocrite, with a son who acts the fool. Still more striking, however, is how the gardeners, who deform the received account of history, gesture towards the grotesque nature of the reasonable world. The tyrant is 'Grotesque' because 'by virtue of their status a discourse or individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having' (A, p. 11). It is the play's marginal voices, the voices that are associated with unreason—the grieving widow, the dying man and the two plebeian characters—that tell the truth about the state of affairs.

²⁰³ "Eyed awry"—*Richard II* and the Shapes of History', *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, 147 (2011), 145–154 (p. 153).

Of course, it is not in *Richard II* alone that Shakespeare uses the grotesque register to point out the tyrannical nature of those in power. Explicitly referring to festive custom of the Lord of Misrule, Angus suggests that Macbeth feels ‘his title | Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe | Upon a dwarfish thief’ (V. 2. 20–22). Likewise, Hamlet characterises Claudius as ‘a king of shreds and patches’ (III. 4. 99). This comment turns the real King of Denmark into a travesty and political reality into a pageant. It is in *1&2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*, however, that Shakespeare views the grotesque from an alternative angle: far from being a perversion of the natural well-proportioned form, the grotesque foregrounds the ugliness of the serious world.

Telling the Truth through Lies

The notablest liar is become the best Poet; he that can make the most notorious lie, and disguise falshood in such sort, that he maie passe vnperceaued, is held the best writer.²⁰⁴

—Anthony Munday [?]

‘These lies are like the father that begets them—gross as a mountain, open, palpable’ (*1 Henry IV*, 2. 5. 208–9): so says Prince Hal of Falstaff’s Rabelaisian amplification of his assailants at the robbery in *1 Henry IV*. Like everything else about him, Falstaff’s lies are excessive, ‘open’ and ‘palpable’. Poins has staged the robbery with the express intention of making Falstaff lie: ‘The virtue of this jest will be the incomprehensible lies that this same fat rogue will tell us when we meet at supper’ (I. 2. 164–166). Although the ‘fat rogue’ in question clearly fails to pull the wool over anyone’s eyes, his grandiloquent circumlocutions captivate rather than appal his on-stage audience. His deception ends, of course, with a festive production, ‘a play extempore’ (II. 5. 257), which lays bare the ‘outrageous functioning of the despicable sovereign’. Whereas *A second and third blast* condemns ‘common plaies, vsual iesting, and *riming extempore*’ as ‘publike enimies to virtue & religion’,²⁰⁵ Shakespeare uses this piece of spontaneous theatricality within *1 Henry IV* to ‘let the world slide’ (*The Taming of the Shrew*, ‘Induction’, 5). It exposes the provisionality of the serious world: in this scene, the audience is

²⁰⁴ *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theatres*, p. 104.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

furnished with a prince, disguised by beggarly behaviour, playing a king and then re-playing himself.

Hal's response to Falstaff's barefaced lying resonates with the twofold concerns of this section. First, I identify possible echoes of specific comments from the 1580 anti-theatrical polemic, *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theatres the one whereof was sounded by a reuerend byshop dead long since; the other by a worshipful and zealous gentleman now aliue: one showing the filthines of plaies in times past; the other the abomination of theaters in the time present* [...] in *1&2 Henry IV*. As its title implies, the former text, sometimes attributed to Anthony Munday, is concerned with the lessons that history can offer. The 'first blast' has been furnished by Stephen Gosson's *Schoole of Abuse*, which was published the year before this polemic in 1579;²⁰⁶ and the 'second blast' is a translation of Book 6 of the fifth-century Christian moralist Salvian of Marseille's *De gubernatione Dei*, for whom the theatre was partly responsible for the moral degeneracy and widespread corruption that ultimately led to the fall of Rome. Finally, the 'third blast' brings Salvian's observations to bear on early modern London with considerable rhetorical flair. If Shakespeare's collaborator Munday, who worked with practically every significant playwright of the Elizabethan and Jacobean era and was an actor and a prolific writer of pageants, plays and histories, did translate this passionate invective against the theatre and pen its third section, he must have done so with his tongue in his cheek. An actor and playwright, who denounces his profession as perverse, dishonest and politically subversive would be something of a Cretan liar.

What follows is not concerned with whether Shakespeare's plays contain an immediate response to this polemic, or if they simply make a mockery of the assumptions that underpin it; this, in any case, remains impossible to fully determine. Rather, my second contention is that putting *1&2 Henry IV* and *Henry V* into dialogue with *A second and third blast* sheds new light on how these plays thematise the writing of history and how they engage with their sources. Through the 'comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material'²⁰⁷ in the 'palpable' deception of a theatrical performance, it becomes clear that Shakespeare offers a

²⁰⁶ *A second and third blast*, n. 1.

²⁰⁷ Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 52.

counterblast or defence of the capacity of aesthetic semblance to re-envisage the past.²⁰⁸ He implies that it is through the brazen lies of a manifestly fictional account of history that the received account of history's untruths can be shown. It is hardly a Falstaffian exaggeration to claim, therefore, that mendacity is every bit as important to the structure and content of these plays as it is to the later history play, *Henry VIII or All is True*, which bills its preoccupation with truth-telling in its title.

Munday's complaint that contemporary history plays give facts 'a newe face, and turn them out like counterfeites to shoue themselves on the stage'²⁰⁹ is true in a way that he could not possibly have imagined. Because *1&2 Henry IV* and *Henry V* recurrently insist on their counterfeit status, questioning the ability of this 'cockpit [to] hold | The vasty fields of France' (*Henry V*, Prologue, 11), they lie openly: by which I mean that they acknowledge their fictional status. Shakespeare, it seems, has little interest in disguising 'falshood in such sort, that he maie passe vnperceaued': 'the truest poetry', reflects his wise fool Touchstone, 'is the most feigning' (*As You Like It*, 3. 3. 15–16). By playing off different accounts of history against one another in the drama, these plays create a critical space that reflects upon the 'erasure, rewriting and forgetting'²¹⁰ that is, paradoxically, intrinsic to historical writing.

On the one hand, this conflict gives voice to those who have been silenced or skated over by the grand sweep of history. For example, Michael Williams, a common soldier absent from the sources, questions Henry V's reason for going to war, imagining a macabre, hydra-headed, multi-limbed, monstrosity calling the King to 'reckoning': 'if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads chopped off in a battle shall join together at the latter day' (IV. 1. 130–132). On the other hand, such a critique of the success of the received account of history sees through both the untruths that constitute the past and the fictions that continue to govern the appalling facts of

²⁰⁸ Arguing for parodic intertextuality between anti-theatrical polemics and plays, François Laroque observes that 'It is perfectly reasonable to suppose that Shakespeare himself may have had [Philip Stubbes' *Anatomy of Abuses*] in mind when writing certain passages of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *Othello*'; see *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1988]), p. 6.

²⁰⁹ *A second and third blast*, p. 106.

²¹⁰ Baldo, p. 67; see also Tobias Döring, 'Dinner for One: Sir Toby und die kulturelle Arbeit am Vergessen', *Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft Jahrbuch*, 145 (2009), 124–140; and Umberto Eco and Marilyn Migiel, 'An *Ars Oblivionalis*? Forget It!', *PLMA*, 103 (1988), 254–261.

reality. It thereby offers a trace of a kind of thought that is not ‘captivated by the truth of a foolish world’,²¹¹ in the manner that Sidney considered historians to be.

‘*Greedie of wickednes*’

Scrutiny of the ostensible act of truth-telling, which frames the action of *I Henry IV*, supports the argument that these plays are preoccupied with mendacity. In his famous soliloquy, the Prince admits that he is playing along with Poins’ duping of Falstaff as part of a wider deception:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humour of your idleness.
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he may be more wondered at,
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.
If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work;
But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.
So, when this loose behavior I throw off
And pay the debt I never promisèd,
By how much better than my word I am,
By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes;
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I’ll so offend to make offence a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

(I. 2. 173–195)

In contrast to his sources, Shakespeare gives a reason for Hal’s degenerate behaviour. It is a piece of politic mendacity. This point is made recurrently throughout the three plays—for instance, when the English Constable informs the French court that when he consorted with Falstaff and the denizens of Eastcheap, Hal was merely ‘Covering discretion with a coat of folly’ (*Henry V*, II. 4. 38). Owing to this instrumental use of folly, the subsequent tavern scenes take on the quality of a

²¹¹ *An Apology for Poetry*, p. 94.

dissimulation within the action of the play, itself an intrinsically dishonest form that shapes the dubious truths of the play's sources.

Moreover, this trickery illustrates how the objective conditions of one's given historical situation infiltrate the recesses of one's subjectivity. In Hal's speech, Shakespeare implies that the idea of a mental space unshaped by the prevailing ideology, a space of the sort that Montaigne describes as his 'principal place of retreat and solitude [...] [an] *arriereboutique*, a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop',²¹² is, unfortunately, an illusion. When Hal levels with the audience, confessing his secret motives in soliloquy, these motives merely reflect what his historical-social situation expects of him. In this respect, he possesses what Isabella in *Measure for Measure* calls a 'glassy essence' (*Measure for Measure*, II. 2. 23), an essence that reflects back the historical coercion he has undergone. He too is duped. This act of truth telling implicitly presages what Adorno formulates when he reflects that 'we are preformed by that being-for-others to the very core of our being' (*HF*, p. 71). Although 'Prince Hal [...] thinks he can operate outside of history' and attempts 'to write history to accommodate his personal wishes',²¹³ these very wishes and hopes are a series of pragmatic choices that have been scripted for him.

Indeed, when Hal tells the truth in his soliloquy, the only truth he tells is a negative one: he is deceiving the other characters both at court and in the tavern. He alludes to Ephesians: 'Take heed therefore that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the season: for the days are evil' (*Geneva*, 5. 15–16). Although Munday uses the same scriptural passage as the epigraph for his book, the contrast between the two invocations of it could scarcely be more striking. Hal uses it to justify his use of theatre for the earthly end of falsifying 'men's hopes', while Munday uses it to support his central contention that theatregoing is a sinful waste of time, which results in self-dissipation. Theatre audiences are liable to lose both 'themselves and the time'.²¹⁴

Seemingly unwilling to accept the critical capacity of theatre, the polemicist employs sustained metaphors of consumption to describe the London populace's

²¹² *Essays*, trans. by M. A. Screech in *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays* (London: Duckworth, 1980; repr. 2000), p. 68 (Book, 1, Chapter, 39).

²¹³ Ivo Kamps, *Historiography and Ideology in Stuart Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 95.

²¹⁴ Munday, p. 96.

enthralment by the theatre as gluttony:

Those vnsauerie morsels of vnseemelie sentences passing out of the mouth of a ruffenlie plaier doth more content the hungrie humors of the rude multitude, and carieth better rellish in their mouthes, than the bread of the worde, which is the foode of the soule. They are alwaies eating, & neuer satisfied; euer seeing, and neuer contented; continualie hearing, & neuer wearied; they are greedie of wickednes, and wil let no time, nor spare for anie weather (so great is their deuotion to make their pilgrimage) to offer their penie to the Diuel.²¹⁵

Drawing a similar comparison, Falstaff ironically assumes a position of moral superiority in order to castigate Hal for his ‘most unsavoury similes’ (*1 Henry IV*. I. 2. 70). He also suggests that the implicit meaning of Hal’s descriptions of him infects his listeners with immorality. And he continues:

FALSTAFF An old lord of the council rated me the other day in the street about you [...], but I regarded him not; and yet he talked very wisely, and in the street too.

PRINCE HARRY Thou didst well, for wisdom cries out in the streets and no man regards it.

FALSTAFF O, thou hast damnable iteration, and art indeed able to corrupt a saint. Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal, God forgive thee for it. Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing; and now I am, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked.

(74–84)

The comic incongruities of this exchange warrant clarification in the context of truth telling. Not without some wisdom, Falstaff confesses to being blind to the moral sense of the Lord Chief Justice’s castigations. Hal travesties a misunderstanding—or a temporary forgetting—of the significance of Proverbs 1. 20. 20–22, which is that people remain obstinately in ‘love’ with ‘foolishness’, when they *should* in fact heed what ‘Wisdom cries without’. Subsequently, Falstaff plays the penitent sinner, hypocritically reprimanding the Prince for his parody of holy writ, before making the outrageous suggestion that Hal has corrupted him. Falstaff’s detachment from explicit values undermines even negative, Socratic wisdom—‘Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing’—by travestyng it.

Falstaff’s mock lament that ‘company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me’ (*1 Henry IV*, 3. 3. 8–9), ridicules the notion apparent in anti-theatrical

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 69–71.

polemics that proximity with actors not only made the audience imitate what they saw on stage, but also caused a radical alteration in their God-given identity.²¹⁶ For Salvian, moreover, authorities are tarnished by their tolerance of and complicity with the theatres:

An euil cause maintained is nearetheles euil; &, as pitch defiles the toucher thereof, be he neuer so cleane: so the virtuous bring their life into question either by sufferace, or maintenance of euil.²¹⁷

Shakespeare memorably redeploys the Erasmian adage that is invoked to justify his ideas about sin by association (see *CWE*, 33, p. 172); in donning the persona of Henry IV, Falstaff rehearses the castigation the Prince will receive from his father in the following scene: ‘There is a thing, Harry, which thou hast oft heard of, and it is known by many in our land by the name of pitch. This pitch, as ancient writers do report, doth defile. So doth the company thou keepest’ (2. 5. 375–378). Falstaff’s citation of the wisdom of the ancients humorously subverts the authority of ‘ancient writers’. When, in the guise of the King, he comments that ‘there is virtue in that Falstaff. Him keep with; the rest banish’ (391), he both rescripts the past, suggesting (as he frequently does) that he has not led an errant life, and envisages an alternative future, in which Hal neither ‘throw[s] off’ his ‘loose behaviour’, nor gets castigated by his father for his association with *everyone* in the tavern.

Hal’s description of Falstaff’s mendacious utterances—‘These lies are like the father that begets them—gross as a mountain, open, palpable’—aptly associates him with a gigantic geological formation. Falstaff is ‘open’ both in the sense that his lies are brazen and in the Bakhtinian sense that his body is ‘blended with the world’;²¹⁸ he amply embodies the subversive potential of corporeal openness, about which Bakhtin writes at length, and is described as ‘lard[ing] the lean earth as he walks along’ (II. 3. 17) when he runs away from the robbery. ‘A dissolute man’ writes Adorno is ‘one who dissolves in all directions, who is not subject to a

²¹⁶ For instance, William Prynne, in a typically hysterical tone, describes theatrical transvestism as ‘a despicable effeminacie, for men, for Christians, thus to adulterate, emasculate, metamorphose, and debase their noble sexe. Thus purposely, yea, affectedly, to vnman, vnchristian, vncreate themselves, if I may so speake, and to make themselves, as it were, neither men nor women, but Monsters’; (*Histrion-mastix The players scourge, or, actors tragaedie, divided into two parts [...]* (London: E.A. and W.I. for Michael Sparke, 1633), p. 35).

²¹⁷ *A second and third blast*, p. 45.

²¹⁸ *Rabelais and his World*, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 26.

sustained, harmonious rational principle' (*HF*, p. 255). This grossness is made manifest in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in which Falstaff admits that he is 'as subject to heat as butter, a man of continual dissolution and thaw' (III. 5. 98–100).

However insincere, Hal's dispraise of Falstaff in their 'play extempore' is rooted in aesthetic objections to Falstaff, who is disgusting and morally reprehensible because he is disproportioned. He is 'out of all reasonable compass' (*I Henry IV*, III. 3. 19),²¹⁹ not unified—spectacularly failing to conform to the socially expedient aesthetic/moral ideals of being 'neat and cleanly' (II. 5. 415). But when he comments about Bardolf's complexion, Falstaff assumes the standpoint of someone who associates virtue with neat proportion, parodying the idealising aesthetic that he himself confounds: 'I make as good use of it as many a man doth of a death's head, or a *memento mori*. I never see thy face but I think upon hell-fire and Dives that lived in purple—for there he is in his robes burning, burning' (*I Henry IV*, II. 3. 25–28). This comment perhaps recalls Salvian's reflection that theatre encourages a hedonistic intoxication, which ultimately causes an utter disregard for the spiritual *telos* of human being: 'we burne, we burne, yet dread we not the fire wherwith we burne'.²²⁰ Needless to say, Falstaff embodies this state of spiritual blindness. Not only does he forget part of the parable—Dives was rich, while Bardolf is not—but also, despite his duplicitous protestations to the contrary, he fails to heed the moral message of his paradoxically incarnate death's head. In fact, in *2 Henry IV*, he attempts to wilfully forget about his mortality, imploring Doll, to whom his physical limitations are manifest, to 'not speak like a death's head; do not bid me remember mine end' (II. 4. 232–233).

In the conclusion of the 'third blast', the Elizabethan polemicist, perhaps propelled by his own hyperbole, describes actors as 'Cretan liers'.²²¹ This is glanced at by Shakespeare's introduction of Rumour in *2 Henry IV* and when Falstaff exclaims, after his first meeting with Shallow: 'Lord, lord, how subject are we old men to this vice of lying!' (*2 Henry IV*, 3. 2. 275–6). The hapless Justice of the

²¹⁹ In the period, the word 'compass' was polysemous. It signified the mariner's compass and thus the instrumental rationality that sought to control and calibrate nature; the 'circuit' or 'revolution' of time, so clearly a concern of these plays; man's limitations; and 'a crafty artifice or design'. In this usage, its primary significance is something within a reasonable measure, something of 'proper proportion', (see *OED*: definitions nos. 4a; 3a, b; 9a; 2a, b).

²²⁰ *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theatres*, p. 24.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Peace's reminiscences throws into relief the combination of nostalgia and forgetfulness that acts of remembrance are prone to exhibit. Falstaff's comment recalls the Cretan liar paradox: do we trust a self-confessed liar's confession of his own (and others') mendacity? This question is all the more pressing since Falstaff's paradoxical candour about his habitual dishonesty echoes Rumour's comparable disclosure.

While confessing her untruthfulness, Rumour actually tells the truth. Realising that she is being uncharacteristically candid, she then corrects herself: 'But what mean I | To speak so true at first? My office is | To noise abroad that Harry Monmouth fell' (*2 Henry IV*, 'Induction', 27–30). This flagrantly fictional supplement replays alternative histories within *2 Henry IV*. Rosalie Colie's observation that the 'essence of paradox is its doubleness, with its concomitant detachment and postponement of commitment',²²² is borne out by the way in which any claim to historical veracity in this play is framed by Rumour's remarkable admission of her mendacity. Additionally, there is a related paradox at work: namely, that it is Rumour's Cretan lie that takes the audience *para-doxa*. It takes them outside of the very opinions, *doxa*—the 'slanders', 'false reports', 'surmises' and 'conjectures' (6, 8, 16, 16) that baffle humankind—that this personification of dishonesty honestly admits to spreading 'from the orient to the drooping west' (3). But this means that the audience must take her avowedly unreliable word as gospel. They are thereby left stranded in a state of insoluble contradiction or *aporia*.

When it comes to writing history, Lucian's desire for it to consist of the 'establishment of truth'²²³ is exposed as either naive or over-ambitious. Those who go to 'History looking for truth', blind to the fact that like poetry it is 'allegorically and figuratively written', writes Sidney, 'shall go away full fraught with falsehood'.²²⁴ Shakespeare's account of history lies in the manner of the Cretan liar. By pointing out its manifestly false nature—not least by using Rumour and the Chorus in *Henry V*—he exploits the negative potential of mimesis to give the lie to reality. These plays use this paradox to expose the dishonesties of the *orthodox*

²²² *Paradoxica Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 408.

²²³ 'How to Write History', p. 105.

²²⁴ *An Apology for Poesy*, p. 103.

account of history—the account of history that standardises and orders (as the prefix, *ortho* implies) opinions, *doxa*, and passes them off as facts.

The Use and Abuse of History

Shakespeare's histories expose the way that a fictionalised past is used to justify what is instrumentally expedient in the present. Falstaff has already made a mockery of this tendency when he plays on Shallow's false memories for his personal gain, confessing to the audience: 'If the young dace be a bait for the old pike, I see no reason in the law of nature but I may snap at him' (*2 Henry IV*, 3. 2. 295–6). But the abuse of history is most apparent in the main action of *Henry V*. Out of pure self-interest the Archbishop of Canterbury wilfully misreads Numbers 2. 28, providing an obscure genealogy to create Henry's right to France.²²⁵

The retroactive construction of the past was a key factor in Tudor nation building: 'Genealogies were constructed to derive the Tudor dynasty directly out of the line of Brutus, come to reunite for ever the divided kingdoms of England, Wales and Ireland'.²²⁶ Not only does Shakespeare question the legitimacy of hereditary privilege in *Richard II*, but, early in his career, he also travesties this sort of fashioning of the past. In *2 Henry VI*, the manifestly illegitimate Jack Cade constructs a thoroughly mendacious genealogy (see IV. 2. 33–51). Through a piece of egregious mendacity, Cade declares his legitimacy: 'My father was a Mortimer', a comment deflated by the Butcher's aside: 'He was an honest man and a good bricklayer' (33–35). Although it could be overlooked as merely a comment calculated to rile the Globe's audience, the Dauphin's petulant description of the British as 'Normans, but bastard Normans, Norman bastards' (*Henry V*, III. 5. 10) debunks the fictions of legitimacy upon which the British nobility and royalty depend—by the French account, Henry is *sans droict*.

In *Henry V*, the Fluellen's providential and self-aggrandizing historiographic analogies are comically vague. They imply that the historical analogues of the *de*

²²⁵ *Shakespeare's Festive History: Feasting, Festivity, Fasting and Lent in the Second Henriad* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 145.

²²⁶ Phillip Edwards, quoted in Baldo, p. 117. As Rackin argues, Tudor genealogies were, in essence, reactionary: 'A major impetus for the Tudor fascination with history was to defend against the forces of modernity, to deny change, and to rationalize a bewildering world in fictions of hereditary privilege' (*Stages of History*, p. 22).

casibus tradition, from which the popular *Mirror for Magistrates* developed, reflect the self-interest of victors as much as the fall of great men:

I tell you, captain, if you look in the maps of the world I warrant you shall find, in the comparisons between Macedon and Monmouth, that the situations, look you, is both alike. There is a river in Macedon, and there is also moreover a river at Monmouth [...]. If you mark Alexander's life well, Harry of Monmouth's life is come after it indifferent well. For there is figures in all things.

(IV. 7. 19–24)

The Welshman is absurd because of his dogmatic adherence to formal frameworks, regardless of how they are contradicted by empirical reality. Fluellen is duped by a providential tradition of historical writing, which suppresses the physical privations and material consequences of war.

No doubt the 'pristine wars of the Romans' (III. 3. 25–6), to which he compares present actions, actually caused as much physical suffering, with 'shrill-shrieking' daughters raped and 'naked infants spitted on pikes' (112, 115), as Henry's invasion of France could potentially. Indeed, after Agincourt, Shakespeare briefly stages the selective amnesia that characterises the writing of history in his list of the casualties: 'Edward duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, | Sir Richard Keighley, Davy Gam Esquire; | None else of name, and of all other men not five and twenty' (IV. 8. 96–100). The names of some of Henry's erstwhile 'band of brothers' (IV. 3. 60) do not warrant being recorded in history. Moreover, by foregrounding Henry V's insecurities and the war's spurious justification, Shakespeare certainly undermines Holinshed's explanation of this miraculous triumph as a particular instance of the universal principle that 'victories for the most part followeth where right leadeth, being advanced forward by justice, and set fourth by equitie' (*NDSS*, 3, p. 382).

The question of the truth of history is the central tension in these plays and *Henry V* in particular. As we have seen, negative truths about the untruth of the received account can be voiced through aesthetic semblance. But writing history necessarily lends aesthetic form to material facts and events. Shakespeare employs the Chorus to peddle the authorised account of history, which conveniently forgets inconvenient facts; only present in the Folio edition of the play, it frames the action as a whole and each act with a jingoistic and providential account of the history that the play's action dramatizes. It offers, amongst other things, the 'point of

crystallization for the complexity of this history' in this play.²²⁷ The Chorus recurrently evokes art's triumph over, and inevitable separation from, empirical reality; it does so by using Henry's favoured rhetorical tactic, *occupatio*, which he employs at Harfleur and in his wooing of Katherine. By saying that it is incapable of describing the action, the Chorus describes it:

I humbly pray them to admit th'excuse
Of time, of numbers and due course of things,
Which cannot in their huge and proper life
Be here presented.

(5. 0. 2–5)

As Rackin put it, 'Grounded in the contemporary material reality of the playhouse' Shakespeare's histories 'undermined the authority of the imagined historical action, and with it the authority of history'.²²⁸ But the disparity between the history that the Chorus imposes on events and what the play's action dramatises is no less great than that between Falstaff's tale of the robbery and what is presented:

Now all the youth of England are on fire,
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies;
Now thrive the armourers, and honour's thought
Reigns solely in the breast of every man.
They sell the pasture now to buy the horse,
Following the mirror of all Christian kings,
With winged heels, as English Mercuries.

(2. 0. 1–7)

The following scene, in which the inept, reluctant and old soldiers illustrate the grotesque reality of 'silken dalliance', incorporates an alternative to the triumphal account of events that the Chorus is attempting to give. And so does the Chorus's language.

The image of the mirror, which recalls the providential historiography of the *Mirror for Magistrates* and the function of mimesis to 'hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature' (*Hamlet*, 3. 2. 20), reworks Holinshed's opinion that Henry was one 'that bothe lived & died a pattene in princehood, a lode-starre in honour, and mirror of magnificince' (*NDSS*, 3, 408). Citing historical precedence, the Chorus implies that

²²⁷ Uwe Baumann, 'Der Nationalheld im Spannungsfeld von Panegyrik und Dekonstruktion: *Henry V*', in Baumann, ed., *William Shakespeare: Historien und Tragödien: Neue Wege der Forschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), pp. 49–55 (p. 50).

²²⁸ *Stages of History*, p. 206.

In fact, in this scene, two distinct models of history are counterpoised. On the one hand, there is Williams' embodied history. Williams makes it clear that obeying earthly powers can have serious consequences for the soul, since the syntactical proximity of 'proportion' and 'subjection' implies that ideas of aesthetic proportion, which the grotesque imagery of his prose violates, are closely related to his historical 'subjection'. On the other hand, Henry would like to tell a providential version of history: national destiny predictably reflects the desires of the aristocracy for more wealth and political power. It is characterised by techniques of abstraction and disassociation; its values are relative. Henry manages to cancel out the potentially egalitarian idea of man's shared physical vulnerability—the philosophical and social significance of which was considered in Chapter 2—by using it instrumentally in his politic humbling.

Henry enables and justifies his destruction of the nameless victims of progress by appearing to be 'but a man' (IV. 1. 99):

I think the King is but a man, as I am. The violet smells to him as it doth to me. All his senses have but human conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man.

(99–102)

Falstaff, his mentor in excess, has already warned him of the consequences of his politic dissimulations. Towards the end of the 'play extempore' in which his banishment is foreshadowed, Falstaff anticipates a crisis of meaning: 'Dost thou hear, Hal? Never call a true piece of gold a counterfeit—thou art essentially made without seeming so' (*I Henry IV*, II. 5. 449–450). What he means is that because of all his acting, Hal's true essence, which is in any case merely a product of the dominant ideology, takes on the quality of a performance; even as he declares that 'the King is but a man', Henry testifies to the fact that the King is a perpetual performer, a 'counterfeit'.

Nonetheless, Henry's encounter with Williams gives him cause for reflection:

'Let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our care-full wives,
Our children, and our sins, lay on the King.'
We must bear all. O hard condition,
Twin-born with greatness: subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing. What infinite heartease

Must kings neglect that private men enjoy?
 And what have kings that privates have not too,
 Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
 And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?
 What kind of god art thou? That suffer'st more
 Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?
 What are thy rents? What are thy comings in?
 O ceremony, show me but thy worth.
 What is thy soul of adoration?
 Art thou aught else but place, degree and form,
 Creating awe and fear in other men?
 Wherein thou art less happy being feared,
 Than they in fearing.

(IV.1.214–251)

This soliloquy betrays an understanding of what I considered earlier in connection with Henry's 'I know you all' soliloquy. As Adorno writes:

At the very moment when people believe they are most themselves and belong to themselves, they are not only the prey of ideology. We might even go so far as to say that they themselves have turned into ideology.

(*HF*, p. 78)

There is, it appears, a tacit realisation that there is possibly no remainder, no recess, no 'room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop' in Henry's subjectivity: 'men | *Are* as the time is' (*King Lear*, V. 3 31–32). Kingship is an aesthetic product, dependent upon 'place, degree and form'; it is built on the uncertain footings of 'opinion', which Henry IV confesses 'did help' him 'to the throne' (*I Henry IV*, III. 2. 41). It is legitimated by manufacturing history.

In contrast to the soliloquy in the tavern, however, Hal realises the extent to which ideology mediates every moment of his existence. When Henry delivers this speech there is a turn in the drama. Beneath 'ceremony' the king is not a mere 'man', but one whose repose is continually interrupted by the Sisyphean burden of kingship. Although Erasmus denounces the 'idol ceremony' associated with kingship as meaningless—'nobility, statues, wax masks, family trees, and all heraldic pomp which makes the common people swell with girlish pride, are only empty gestures' (*CWE*, 27, p. 213)—Henry, in contrast, implies that that is all there is to it. When he appears to break through his social role, he shows that he has been conditioned by the burgeoning mercantile ideology premised on 'reckoning'.²³⁰ This

²³⁰ *OED*, definitions, nos. 3a, b, c and d.

sort of rationality cannot conceive of the excessive, valueless, and even idolatrous nature of regal ‘ceremony’.

Just as in the ‘I know you all’ soliloquy, Henry here uses the *platea* to estrange the fictions that constitute kingship; indeed, all the characters who use this liminal space are, in one way or another, either lying or reflecting on mendacity: Falstaff recurrently lies outright and outrageously and also formulates his liar paradox from the *platea*; the Chorus in *Henry V* peddles a dubious account of events from here; while Rumour comments on the prevalence of *doxa* from this position. Hal uses this location near the audience to give speeches, which consider the extent to which objective historical conditions shape the Silenic core of human beings. Paradoxically, Falstaff uses this position of proximity to evoke the distance he and his audience are at from authentic interiority. In this respect, the invention of the human, it seems, is just that, an invention or fiction; as Heinrich Böll’s clown, Hans Schnier, puts it in *Ansichten eines Clowns*: ‘That which other people call nonfiction appears to me to be very fictive’.²³¹ In these plays, it takes the manifestly fictional discourse of folly to expose the fictional nature of history.

At the close of the play, Shakespeare also inverts the significance of Holinshed’s image of Henry as ‘a lode-starre’ in the Epilogue, which is spoken by the Chorus:

Small time, but in that small most greatly lived
This star of England

[...]

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned king
Of France and England, did this king succeed,
Whose state so many had the managing
That they lost France and made his England bleed.

(‘Epilogue’, 5–6, 9–11)

At a stroke, the closing lines of the play write off Henry’s achievements. The tension between the official account of history and an alternative one premised on the critique of such accounts is even apparent in the Chorus’s metaphor of Henry’s soldiers as ‘English Mercuries’. On the one hand, it suggests that Henry’s mission is divinely sanctioned. Like Mercury, the English soldiers are messengers from the gods, and thus agents of their wills, although this allusion is certainly strained by the

²³¹ *Ansichten eines Clowns* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991 [1963]), p. 185.

foregrounding of the trumped up grounds for going to war. On the other hand, they are thieves; not only are they invading another country with no real justification, but also certain members of the army are ‘sworn brothers in filching’ (III. 2. 41–3).

Such ambiguities stand in stark contrast to Samuel Daniel’s *First Four Bookes of the Civil War*, which seeks to create a national identity based on a shared—and therefore unequivocal—memory of this victory. Daniel castigates present ‘times’: ‘Ungrateful times that impiously neglect | That worth that never again times shall show’, before invoking the nationalistic potential of poetry: ‘O what eternall matter here is found! | Whence new immortal *Illiards* might proceed’ (NDSS, 3, p. 421 [Book IV, Stanzas, 4–5]). It is easy to see Shakespeare’s antagonistic historical practice at work in *Troilus and Cressida*, his disenchanting reworking of one of the founding stories of western civilisation, the myth to which Daniel refers. Throughout, Shakespeare questions the significance of the fall of Troy and the malcontent Thersites even debases poetry that seeks to unequivocally honour the war caused by Paris’s abduction of Helen with his reductive assertion: ‘Here is such patchery, such juggling and such knavery! All the argument is a whore and cuckold’ (II. 3. 64–65). While the next chapter of this thesis is devoted to the follies of love in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter’s Tale*, it is clear that this *Heldensage* also hinges on Paris’s lust.

Shakespeare’s histories frustrate the construction of a shared national memory by refusing to forget the self-interested motives and selective amnesia that constitutes such an account of the past. As Rackin astutely argues, in Shakespeare’s histories, the age of honour is a vanishing point:

Just as the first tetralogy looks back to Henry V as an emblem of lost glory that shows up the inadequacy of his son’s troubled reign, the second looks forward to his glorious accession [...] But [...] when he finally appears as king, all that longingly remembered and eagerly anticipated glory evaporates in ambiguity.²³²

Moreover, *1&2 Henry IV* and *Henry V* make it clear that the world in which they were composed is moulded by the very history whose veracity they expose. Munday’s complaint that early modern historians are like dishonest tailors, who use

²³² *Stages of History*, p. 30.

‘shreds’ from ‘old coate[s]’²³³ to create new ones, encapsulates not only the plurality of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, but also Shakespeare’s parodic refashioning of his source materials. From the fragments of what has been, these plays work to elucidate the inadequacies of the world in which they were written. In doing so, they offer thought that is not bound into its objective circumstances, but goes beyond them through critical reflection. ‘A good wit’, reflects Falstaff, ‘will make use of anything. I will turn diseases to commodity’ (2 *Henry IV*, I. 2. 227). What vitiates such critical reflection, however, is the principal paradox with which I have been concerned: the fact that to guard against mendacity one must employ the openly dishonest form of theatrical representation.

²³³ *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theatres*, p. 105.

CHAPTER 5

LOVE'S FOOLS

Hope refresheth, as much as misery depresseth; hard beginnings have many times prosperous events, and that may happen at last, which never was yet.

—Robert Burton²³⁴

That love makes a fool of everyone is something of a commonplace. In *The hospitall of incurable fooles*, Thomaso Garzoni argues that this particular branch of folly underwrites all human activity:

Now woulde it be requisite that we had the knowledge and practise together of as many amorous accidents, as haue fallen out both in the old, and this our present age, that we might describe with conuenient solemnitie, all the fopperies of louers, they being manifest causes of a thousand other follies, which from this stock as from their beginning, drawing their originall and essence, cause their life not onely to appeere, but really and in effect to be the strangest and maddest race, that may be imagined.²³⁵

This view is certainly shared by Shakespeare, who reflects upon this fact primarily through the discourse of folly. As the wise fool Touchstone observes, ‘We that are true lovers run into strange capers. But as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly’ (*As You Like It*, II. 4. 48–49).

The connection between love and folly has not escaped critical attention. Tim Prentki devotes a chapter to the comedies entitled ‘Fooling with Love’, contending that Shakespeare’s comedies ‘take as their theme the discrepancies between the ideal view of love and the reality of the workings of desire within the human animal’.²³⁶ Likewise, Robert Bell shows how love is persistently characterised as a necessary folly throughout Shakespeare’s comedies and romances.²³⁷ For Andy

²³⁴ *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicholas K. Kiessling and Rhonda L. Blair, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989–1994), II, p. 167. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

²³⁵ *The hospitall of incurable fooles: erected in English, as neer the first Italian modell and platforme, as the vnskilfull hand of an ignorant architect could deuise [...]*, trans. by anon (London: Edm[und] Bolland, 1600 [1586]), p. 81.

²³⁶ *The Fool in European Theatre: Stages of Folly* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 69–96 (p. 69).

²³⁷ *Shakespeare’s Great Stage of Fools* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), esp. pp. 49–77.

Mousley, ‘in Shakespeare’s comedies [...] love is foolish and proves the “only human” ridiculousness of human beings’.²³⁸ Examining the ‘influence of liturgical, Pauline and Erasmian paradoxes concerning faith and folly’, Chris Hassel argues for the centrality of holy folly, ‘the great love where with He loved us’ (*KJV*, Ephesians 2. 5), to Shakespeare’s ‘comic vision and comic form’;²³⁹ developing Hassel’s arguments, Donald Whers provides a theoretically nuanced reading of Shakespearean comedy through the prism of Erasmus’ theories of grace and Levinasian ethics.²⁴⁰

This chapter, however, contends that love and folly are connected in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter’s Tale* in a twofold way that has not hitherto been considered. On the one hand, these plays expose how love, which is ostensibly perhaps the most intensely personal of emotions, is ideologically mediated. The characters are duped by love: even those who acknowledge the severe limitations inherent in the prevailing—monogamous and heterosexual—conception of love find themselves conforming to it. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, for instance, the two lovers, who are ‘too wise to woo peacefully’ (V. 2. 61), ultimately find themselves performing the roles that, as the eavesdropping scenes make clear, have been scripted for them all along. Benedict’s very declaration of love is equivocal: ‘I do love nothing in the world so well as you’ (IV. 1. 266). Beatrice aptly responds by amplifying the unease lurking in his comment: ‘It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you, but believe me not, and yet I lie not. I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing’ (268–70). For all the ironic distance from the explicit values of the serious world implicit in her riddle, at the end of the comedy she nonetheless marries.

On the other hand, to be wholly outside of love’s sway, the plays suggest, is to take a conceited satisfaction in one’s own wisdom. This, paradoxically, is a form of self-love, a perverse form of love considered at length in this chapter. Because it

²³⁸ *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 135.

²³⁹ *Faith and Folly in Shakespeare’s Romantic Comedies* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980; repr. 2000), p. i.

²⁴⁰ See ‘Touching Words: Embodying Ethics in Erasmus, Shakespearean Comedy, and Contemporary Theory’, *MP*, 104 (2006), 1–33.

negates the libidinal drives that make everybody tick, for Erasmus' Stultitia such scoffing is disingenuous:

Consider now (I praie you) how much more Affection, than Reason, Iupiter hath put in man, to the end theyr lyfe should not althogether be heauy, and vnpleasant. [...] he shutte vp Reason within the narowe compasse of mans head, leauyng all the rest of the bodie to affections.

(*PF*, p. 23)

Fortunately, cold reason has little sway over humankind. It is the affection we feel for others that makes life bearable.

Shakespeare suggests that the *promesse de bonheur* lies in love. 'Love', it transpires, 'is wise in folly, foolish witty' (*Venus and Adonis*, 838). These plays imply, however, that to be open to what love could one day be, one must accept love in the distorted form in which it manifests itself in the everyday world, but retain a critical awareness of this distortion—as Petruccio does when he makes his own wedding into a pantomime in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Not only do the resolutions of the comedies expose the coercion that forces people into conforming to the way things are, but also, by staging the way in which these characters are forced into doing the same thing as everyone else, these weddings estrange the everyday institutions, discourses and rituals that people unthinkingly accept.

While it may be true that 'Wishers were ever fools' (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, IV. 16. 38), it is in the nature of thought, Shakespeare implies, to be discontented with what is and to foolishly wish for what is not—as an infatuated lover does. As the great philosopher of hopes and dreams, Ernst Bloch, was later to formulate it: 'Thinking means going beyond [*Überschreiten*]'.²⁴¹ Commenting along similar lines to Shakespeare's archetypal lover, Cleopatra, Montaigne associates certainty with intellectual complacency. For him, yearning for that which is not is characteristic of genuinely insightful thinking: 'if you grant follie what it desireth, it will no-whit be satisfied', whereas seeming 'wisdom [is] content with that which is present, and never displeased with it selfe' (*E*, Book 1, Chapter 3, p. 5). Owing, however, to his Erasmian techniques of ironic framing, Shakespeare goes one step further than Montaigne. *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter's Tale* disavow their own capacity to create the absolute convictions upon which conceited wisdom is based.

²⁴¹ *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 vols (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1959; repr, 1985), I, p. 3.

They suggest, ultimately, that even the negative knowledge that love, in one form or another, dupes everyone might also be mere nonsense.

As You Like It and *Twelfth Night* contain two of Shakespeare's most esteemed wise fools, Touchstone and Feste. While my readings of these plays emphasise the thematic integrity of these jesters, showing that they should not be treated in isolation from the plays' philosophical standpoints, folly in these comedies is by no means limited to specific avatars, to clowns and jesters. Rather, it possesses as vital a thematic, structural and conceptual significance as it does in the histories. My analysis of *The Winter's Tale*, with which this chapter concludes, argues for the thematic integrity of two conceptions of folly to this play: namely, folly in the sense of misapprehension and folly in the sense of the utopian desire for things to be other than how they are. The analysis of Shakespeare's dramatisation of aesthetic judgements in this play also anticipates my readings of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, which build on my arguments about the role of the grotesque in the Second Tetralogy. In these tragedies, I argue, Shakespeare fashions an anti-aesthetics with which he exposes the inhumanity of art that is finished, clean and correctly proportioned.

Making a Mockery of Allegory

The more pity that fools may not speak wisely what wise men do foolishly.

—I. 2. 72–73

For G. K. Chesterton, the title *As You Like It* is 'an expression of utter carelessness, but it is not the bitter carelessness which Mr. Bernard Shaw reads into it; it is the god-like and inexhaustible carelessness of a happy man'.²⁴² Of course, Chesterton does not mean that the comedy is careless in the sense that it is badly constructed, or slapdash in the way that Folly's citations sometimes are.²⁴³ The 'inexhaustible carelessness' Chesterton perceives designates a playful attitude, of the sort apparent in Montaigne's comment: 'Our life consisteth partly in folly and partly in wisdom. Hee that writes of it but reverently and regularly, omits the better moitie

²⁴² 'A *Midsummer's Night's Dream*', in *On Lying in Bed and Other Essays* by G. K. Chesterton, ed. by Alberto Manguel (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2000), pp. 193–203 (p. 194).

²⁴³ See Jon Haarberg, *Parody and the Praise of Folly*, *Acta Humaniora*, 42 (Cambridge, MA: Scandinavian University Press, 1998) pp. 137–175.

of it' (*E*, Book 3, Chapter 5, p. 498).

This type of wisdom can be discerned in Rosalind's opening dialogue with Celia, who enjoins her disenfranchised cousin to 'be merry' (I. 2. 15):

ROSALIND From henceforth I will, coz, and devise sports. Let
me see, what think you of falling in love?

CELIA Marry, I prithee do, to make sport withal; but
love no man in good earnest, nor no further in sport
neither than with safety of a pure blush thou mayst
in honour come off again.

ROSALIND What shall be our sport, then?

CELIA Let us sit and mock the good housewife Fortune from
her wheel, that her gifts may henceforth be bestowed equally.

ROSALIND I would we could do so, for her benefits are
mightily misplaced; and the bountiful blind woman
doth most mistake in her gifts to women.

CELIA 'Tis true; for those that she makes fair she scarce
makes honest, and those that she makes honest she
makes very ill-favouredly.

ROSALIND Nay, now thou goest from Fortune's office to
Nature's. Fortune reigns in gifts of the world, not in the
lineaments of Nature.

(20–36)

At this moment, love, the emotion around which the events of the comedy revolve, is not taken at all sincerely—not least because, as Rosalind later comments, 'Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love' (IV. 1. 91–92). Love becomes a provisional proposition, a 'sport', which seems to reflect her counterpart's attitude towards love in the play's chief source, in which she considers it 'a toye, and fancie a momentary passion, that as it was taken with a gaze, might be shaken off with a winck' (*NDSS*, 2, p. 172). This badinage reduces the grand concepts of 'love', 'Fortune' and 'Nature' to mere playthings; it suspends the values of the serious world in order to hold them at arm's length and critique them. Not only does this mockery of the 'good housewife Fortune' voice a longing for the 'benefits of fortune' to be 'bestowed equally', but it also demands a detached perspective, a perspective, in other words, that entails a refusal to resign oneself to the idea that one 'must be circumstanced' (*Othello*, III. 4. 196), or hopelessly immured in the world as it is, as the prostitute Bianca considers herself to be.

Rosalind and Celia's pseudo-scholastic quibbling about the auspices of 'Nature' and 'Fortune' gestures towards the key tension in *As You Like It*; this

tension is between sincerity and insincerity or, to put it in more literary terms, between perceiving the world in prefabricated allegorical categories, and the parody of such wisdom, which, the play as a whole is at pains to point out, writes of life all too ‘reverently and regularly’. The main problem with an allegorical understanding of the world, as John Donne suggests, is that it generalises, forcing the diversity of human behaviour, emotions and relationships into predetermined categories, regardless of whether they fit or not:

When thou knowest a wife, a sonne, a servant, a friend no better, but that that wife betrayes thy bed, and that sonne thy estate, and that servant your credit, and that friend thy secret, what canst thou say thou knowest?²⁴⁴

Such an understanding of the world forecloses any possibility of experiencing a new and unexpected relationship with a person or the world. As Shakespeare’s sceptical treatment of providential history’s allegories attests, not only is allegory frequently used to support the status quo—why wives and servants are treated the way they are—but an allegorical (or, for that matter, analogical) understanding of the world also interprets new events and ideas in the terms of the past. It remains, like Lot’s wife, paralyzed by the past.

The dangers of perceiving the world in terms of the past are apparent from the first scene of the play. When Oliver uses the stock example of folly, the parable of the prodigal son, to justify his denial of Orlando’s inheritance, his younger brother rightly questions the analogy, echoing Luke 15. 16: ‘Shall I keep your hogs and eat husks with them? What prodigal portion have I spent, that I should come to such penury?’ (I. 1. 29–32); Oliver evidently misses the point of the parable, which is used to explain God’s foolish, gratuitous love for every member of creation. But when Orlando rescues Oliver from the lion, it is just this sort of unwarranted, irrational love that he extends to his brother. In the parable, the elder son is angered by his father’s joyous welcoming of his erring son with ‘melody, and dancing’ (*Geneva*, Luke 15. 25), for he has ‘done thee service, neither brake I at anytime thy commandment’ (*Geneva*, Luke 15. 29). Oliver, however, has done his father a disservice by ignoring his behest to bequeath Orlando ‘a thousand crowns’ (I. 1. 2).

²⁴⁴ ‘Sermon Preached at the funeral of Sir William Cokayne Knight, Alderman of London, December 12. 1626’, in *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by George R. Porter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), VII, pp. 257–78 (p. 157).

In contrast to the prodigal son, Orlando is innately good: ‘he’s gentle; never schooled, and yet learned; full of noble device; of all sorts enchantingly beloved’ (141–2). And it is partly for this reason that his Canaanite brother despises him.

The audience’s first encounter with the lachrymose Jaques—the report of his passionate reaction to the injured animal—critiques allegory even as it describes one:

FIRST LORD [...] The wretched animal heaved forth such groans
That their discharge did stretch his leathern coat
Almost to bursting, and the big round tears
Coursed one another down his innocent nose
In piteous chase. And thus the hairy fool,
Much markèd of the melancholy Jaques,
Stood on th’extremest verge of the swift brook,
Augmenting it with tears.

DUKE SENIOR But what said Jaques?
Did he not moralize this spectacle?

FIRST LORD O yes, into a thousand similes.
First, for his weeping into the needless stream;
‘Poor deer,’ quoth he, ‘thou makst a testament
As worldlings do, giving thy sum of more
To that which had too much.’ Then being there alone,
Left and abandoned of his velvet friend,
’Tis right,’ quoth he, ‘thus misery doth part
The flux of company.’ Anon a careless herd,
Full of the pasture jumps along by him
And never stays to greet him. ‘Ay,’ quoth Jaques,
‘Sweep on, you fat and greasy citizens,
’Tis just the fashion. Wherefore do you look
Upon that poor and broken bankrupt there?’
Thus most invectively he pierceth through
The body of the country, city, court,
Yea, and of this our life, swearing that we
Are mere usurpers, tyrants, and what’s worse,
To fright the animals and to kill them up
In their assigned and native dwelling place.

(II. 1. 36–63)

Jaques’ sustained prosopopoeia turns the Duke’s earlier assumption that nature is insensible on its head. For Jaques it is civilized men—especially the enfranchised ‘citizens’ of cities—who are insensible: they are content to turn a cold shoulder to the suffering around them, in which they are complicit, so long as they can cram themselves with ‘greasy’ commodities.

Shakespeare does not endow Jaques with the powers of divination associated

with melancholia by Ficino and Agrippa; Jaques is the opposite of ‘a common type of Renaissance utopianist or Arcadian, who out of his own medically aberrant consciousness spins a tale of a better world’.²⁴⁵ Not least because he shares the Duke’s tendency to allegorise, his wisdom is decidedly shortsighted. Even in the radically new or unusual, he can only ever see more of the same—his thought fails to go ‘beyond’. He does not so much ‘moralize’ as *allegorise* the spectacle of the deer, reducing it to yet another example of man’s innate cruelty. He even characterizes the stag as a fellow melancholic, shunned by the world. The actual suffering of this ‘poor dappled fool’ (II. 1. 22) is muted.

This is not surprising, since this image ‘is the closest approximation we have in Shakespeare of an actual emblem’.²⁴⁶ It hails from the *Metamorphoses* and recalls the moment when Actaeon glimpses his reflection after he has been transformed into a stag:

But when he saw his face
And hornèd temples in the brook, he would have cried, ‘Alas!’
But as for then no kind of speech out of his lips could pass,
He sighed and brayed; for that was then the speech that did
remain.
And down the eyes that were not his, his bitter tears did rain.
No part remained (save his mind) of what he erst had been’.²⁴⁷

Shakespeare employs this image to evoke Jaques’ alienation from society rather than the alienation from personal identity apparent in Ovid. Moving from sympathy—weeping with and for the beast—to an aggressive attack on society (‘invectively he *pierceth through* | *The body* of the country, city, court’), Jaques is not passive in the way Actaeon is. This extended metaphor links the scoffing satirist’s actions unequivocally to those of the hunters; like the hunters, he turns the ‘native burghers of this desert city’ (II. 1. 24) to his own uses. Since the play is vitally concerned with tyranny and usurpation—as well as with the figurative tyranny of an allegorical mindset—it is not insignificant that this ‘allegorical

²⁴⁵ Winfried Schleiner, *Melancholy, Genius, and Utopia in the Renaissance*, Wolfenbütteler Abhandlung zur Renaissanceforschung, 10 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991), p. 16.

²⁴⁶ Michael Bath, ‘Weeping Stags and Melancholy Lovers: The Iconography of *As You Like It*, II. I’, *Emblematika* 1 (1986), 13–42 (p. 14).

²⁴⁷ *Metamorphoses*, ed. by Madeleine Forey, trans. by Arthur Golding (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002 [1567]) p. 100 (Book III, 235–47).

description' is wholly 'static and distanced from the action of the play'.²⁴⁸

In his first encounter with Jaques, Touchstone, who is absent from the source, makes a mockery of the seriousness associated with an allegorical habit of mind. But Jaques is delighted to find another outsider, a recently homeless wanderer, in the forest:

JAQUES A fool, a fool, I met a fool i'th' forest,
A motley fool—a miserable world!—
As I do live by food, I met a fool,
Who laid him down and basked him in the sun,
And railed on Lady Fortune in good terms,
In good set terms, and yet a motley fool.
'Good morrow, fool,' quoth I. 'No, sir,' quoth he,
'Call me not fool till heaven hath sent me fortune.'
And then he drew a dial from his poke,
And looking on it with lack-lustre eye
Says very wisely, 'It is ten o'clock.'
Thus we may see,' quoth he, 'how the world wags.
'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,
And after one hour more 'twill be eleven;
And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot;
And thereby hangs a tale.' When I did hear
The motley fool thus moral on the time
My lungs began to crow like chanticleer,
That fools should be so deep-contemplative,
And I did laugh sans intermission
An hour by his dial. O noble fool,
A worthy fool—motley's the only wear.

(II. 7. 12–34)

In a play otherwise characterized by role-playing, parody and disguise, Jaques is not changed by the course of events, remaining to the last a melancholic. Even when he laughs, crowing 'like chanticleer', his laughter does not distance him from the rigid identities of the sublunary world, since it recalls the case of the melancholic in Galen,²⁴⁹ who, in Garzoni's words, 'imitate[s] the crowing and noise the cocke made with his winges'.²⁵⁰ Because he takes the fool's Janus-faced discourse at face value, the paradoxical wisdom or 'moral' implicit in Touchstone's meditation on

²⁴⁸ Bath, p. 14.

²⁴⁹ Schleiner, p. 239; the eponymous, melancholic hero of Belleforest's *Amleth*—a possible source for *Hamlet*—employs this tactic 'when he suspects an ambush in his mother's chamber' (p. 240).

²⁵⁰ Galen, quoted in Garzoni, p. 17.

time and decay is lost on Jaques. Through his mock-serious attitude, Touchstone travesties the calibration of time into easily measurable segments; his ‘lack-lustre eye’ is dissimulated and the fact that he spends his time basking in the sun implies that he is unconcerned by the ‘moral’ of his ‘tale’.

Such an attitude towards the time of the ‘working-day-world’ is apparent elsewhere in the play. In her mock catechism of Orlando’s tardiness, Rosalind contends that such an account of time is an abstraction, wholly at odds with lived experience, in which ‘Time travels in divers paces with divers persons’ (III. 2. 282–3):

Break an hour’s promise in love! He that will divide a minute into a thousand parts and break but a part of the thousand part of a minute in the affairs of love, it may be said of him that Cupid hath clapped him o’th’shoulder, but I’ll warrant him heartwhole.

(IV. 1. 39–44)

Because ‘There’s no clock in the forest’ (III. 2. 275), a temporality not based on sequential progression is possible; Celia likes Arden and ‘willingly could waste [her] time in it’ (II. 4. 90).

Allegory is a fragile thing, not least because, as Walter Benjamin contends, ‘the parody of a form proclaims its end’.²⁵¹ This is apparent in the complex parody at work in Jaques’ on-stage report to the Duke and his followers of Touchstone’s allegory:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.
And then the whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then, a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation

²⁵¹ *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998; repr. 2009), p. 113.

Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
 In fair round belly with good capon lined,
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
 Full of wise saws and modern instances;
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange, eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

(II. 7. 135–165)

On the face of it, this account of man's inexorable decline into senility seems to echo Folly's famous description of the innate foolishness of each age of Man. Jaques's melancholy, however, skews her descriptions. For Folly, 'the first age of man' is 'most gracious and acceptable vnto all folks' (*PF*, p. 16). People delight in babies because of the 'allurement of Folie; 'all men put to theyr helpyng handes' to assist youths (*PF*, p. 16); in the serious part of his life, 'Manhode', 'the floure of his beautie decaieth, his myrth fadethe, his grace waketh colde'; and in Eld man becomes 'not only vrksome to others, but hatefull also to him selfe', but, at 'deaths dore', he reverts 'back againe vnto childhode' (*PF*, p. 17). For Folly, as a 'wasshyng awaie [of] all the troubles and carefullnesses of the mynde', this sort of 'Obluion' (*PF*, p. 17) is not the self-annihilation to which Jaques alludes. Rather, it is a gift that helps man to die well, maintaining his hope in the face of the brute facts of physical finitude. The essential difference between Folly's understanding of the seven ages of man and Jaques' is that the former conceives it in essentially comic terms, while the latter regards it with a sense of tragic inevitability.

But such a generalization is at risk of ignoring the multiple layers of parody operating in this speech, through which Shakespeare makes a mockery of objective standpoints. Indeed, Erasmus puts his speech into the mouth of an unreliable narrator, the high priestess of folly, Stultitia. Her invocation of this allegorical conception of human development, which is itself based on the notion of linear progression of time *As You Like It* is so suspicious of, is very far from serious. Sincerely peddling the wisdom of Touchstone and Stultitia, Jaques not only

foolishly takes their word for gospel, but he also misunderstands it. His conception of the universality of folly is more akin to Sebastian Brandt's remorseless didactic satire than the vertiginous ironies of the *Praise*. As with the death of the stag, he understands the *theatrum mundi topos*, which is insistently invoked by Stultitia throughout the *Praise*, in his own melancholic terms, in which it epitomizes a world drained of meaning. Ironically, the world appears in this way to him precisely because he is so certain about his own caustic wisdom, which for the most part is sententious drivel. Orlando points out that this melancholic has 'studied' his 'questions' from 'a painted cloth' (III. 2. 251–252).

Jaques not only attempts to reduce every person's existence to an allegory of progressive disintegration, but also indulges in narcissistic reflection about his melancholy, which the rapier wit of Rosalind cuts immediately down to size:

JAQUES Why 'tis good to be sad and say nothing.

ROSALIND Why then, 'tis good to be a post.

JAQUES I have neither the scholar's melancholy, which is emulation, nor the musician's, which is fantastical, nor the courtier's, which is proud, nor the soldier's, which is ambitious, nor the lawyer's, which is politic, nor the lady's, which is nice, nor the lover's, which is all these; but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness.

ROSALIND A traveller! By my faith, you have great reason to be sad. I fear you have sold your own lands to see other men's.

(IV. 1. 8–20)

Jaques' Burtonian attempt at defining his melancholy is no less absurd than the relativism that Touchstone parodies in his extemporisation on the phrase 'in respect that' (III. 2. 13 ff). Tambling observes that the 'interest in division: dividing existence up' is 'characteristic of the allegorical disposition' that 'works by soliloquy'.²⁵²

Certainly, Jaques tends to soliloquise and *divisio* is pervasive in his speech. But, as Touchstone is well aware in his discussion with the baffled rustic Corin, this melancholic desire to divide the world into watertight categories proves self-

²⁵² *Allegory and the Work of Melancholy: The Late Medieval and Shakespeare*, ed. by Alberto Martino, Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 72 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 185.

defeating. It leaves the audience, both on stage and off, in a muddle. Indeed, this interest in the pathology of this sort of madness can perhaps be seen in the elaborate divisions and subdivisions that Burton uses in his work, which far from clarifying the text become part of its copiousness, but it is perhaps most apparent in *The hospitall of incurable fooles*. This text conceives of folly neither in the paradoxically positive way of the *Praise*, nor as something that liberates one from the coercive strictures of sobriety, as is apparent in *As You Like It*. Folly, for Garzoni, is a privation that ‘sorely vexeth mortallmen, and holdeth in subiection vnder her tyrannicall empire’.²⁵³ The narrator of this peculiar text, with which Burton was familiar,²⁵⁴ shows his voyeuristic readers, who have presumably made the grade as sane observers, around a thirty-room hospital. In every chamber, he confines one type of fool; each chamber is under the auspices of a suitable pagan deity. In the case of the ‘infinitt kinds of melancholike fooles’,²⁵⁵ the deity is Saturn. The idea that the scientific drive to categorise and control the world is already apparent in mythology, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is borne out in *The hospitall of incurable fooles*’ pathology of folly, which uses pagan deities as shorthand for certain experiences or emotions.

What is really significant, however, is that the narrator’s distinctions are at best arbitrary and at worst absurd. Perhaps succumbing to Folly’s venal vice of forgetfulness, the narrator dedicates two rooms of his institution to obstinate fools, and classes ‘stupid’ and divinely inspired ‘ecstatic’²⁵⁶ fools together, although admittedly telling the two apart is no mean feat. It remains unclear whether this text offers a subtle travesty of man’s drive to categorise and create the definite identities from which allegories spring, or if it simply examines the privations of folly from a privileged, disenchanted perspective. What I think it does expose, however, is the limitations of an allegorical or categorical mindset. Such a mentality does not ask what a thing is, but merely under what category it falls. And Garzoni shows us, albeit accidentally, that this mentality is discernible not only in the medical

²⁵³ *The hospitall of incurable fooles*, p. 2.

²⁵⁴ Schleiner, p. 43.

²⁵⁵ *The hospitall of incurable fooles*, p. 17.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–38.

confinement at the dawn of the age of reason, but also in the categorical rationality of polytheism.

True, False, Other: Love's 'Strange Capers'

In contrast to its source, *As You Like It* sets the static wisdom of the serious world into motion. The play's dazzling ironies subject positive knowledge, allegorical worldviews and any sincere endorsement of a particular standpoint or system of values to ridicule. For this reason, this chapter takes a very dim view of sincerity indeed—not least because those who are captive to sincerity equate seriousness with veracity, whereas all three of the plays considered imply that the opposite is true. Paradoxically, their seriousness lies in their essential playfulness.

When Touchstone deflates the rustic William's self-satisfied assertion—'I have a pretty wit'—with his comment 'Why, thou sayst well. I do now remember a saying: "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool"' (V. 1. 27–29), any kind of self-admiration—the *philautia* Stultitia decries and, since she is praising herself, simultaneously embodies—is debunked. Crucially, however, William's opinion of himself is not disproved and replaced with another positive proposition. Rather, arguing along the same lines as Socrates, the fool suggests that any estimation of one's wisdom is an act of folly. To be sure, a paradoxical kind of wisdom lies in acknowledging one's folly, but this insight oscillates in a state of ironic indeterminacy: the baffled rustic, William, shares his name with the creator of the play.

In eschewing the law of the excluded middle, which holds that either a proposition is true or the negation of it is true, Touchstone is an avatar of a non-categorizing mindset. Early on, he speaks of a knight, who, contrary to what the mercurial Touchstone avows to be the truth, claims that certain pancakes 'were good pancakes, and swore "by his honour" the mustard was naught' (I. 2. 54–55), but is not 'foresworn', 'for he never had any [honour]' (64) to lose in the first place. From Touchstone's pancake syllogism Kiernan Ryan concludes:

Truth-claims are only as secure as the assumptions on which they rest; demolish these assumptions and the truth claims collapse with them, clearing the way for propositions that might otherwise seem preposterous.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ *Shakespeare's Comedies*, p. 214.

In fact, the very notion of a wise fool gives the lie to the law of the excluded middle. He is a creature that is neither wholly wise nor essentially foolish, a creature that, by being wise in his folly, confounds any straightforward distinction between wisdom and folly, between being correct and being wrong. This resonates with the philosophical procedure of the play as a whole, which is less concerned with questions of truth and falsehood than with examining the ways in which such certainties are formed in the first place.

Shakespeare is recurrently critical of the conceits commonly employed in the aestheticization of love. Such staid commonplaces are, of course, famously satirised in ‘Sonnet 130’: ‘My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun; | Coral is far more red than her lips’ red’ (1–2). And early on in his career, Shakespeare has Dromio of Syracuse debase the staid geographical analogies of romantic verse. Of Nell, the kitchen wench, Dromio observes:

She is spherical, like a globe. I could find out countries in her.
[...]
ANTIPHOLUS OF SYRACUSE Where is her America, the Indies?
DROMIO OF SYRACUSE O, sir, upon her nose, all o’er embellished
 With rubies, carbuncles, sapphires, declining their rich aspect to the
 hot breath of Spain, who sent whole armadas of carracks to be ballast
 at her nose.
ANTIPHOLUS OF SYRACUSE Where stood Belgia, the Netherlands?
DROMIO OF SYRACUSE Oh, sir, I did not look so low.
 (*The Comedy of Errors*, III. 2. 113–114, 131–137)

In this bout of repartee, the ‘Comparisons’ are indeed ‘odorous’ (*Much Ado About Nothing*, III. 5. 14)—as Dogberry’s memorable malapropism has it.

Such posturing is also mocked in *Twelfth Night*. When Viola professes Olivia’s singularity in thoroughly conventional terms, compelling her not to ‘leave the world no copy’, Olivia responds:

O sir, I will not be so hard-hearted. I will give out divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried and every particular utensil labelled to my will, as, *item*, two lips, indifferent red; *item*, to grey eyes with lids to them; *item*, one neck, one chin, and so forth.
(I. 5. 213, 214–218)

This travesties the conventional descriptive techniques of amorous poetry by

reducing them to a grotesque list of isolated body parts. The effect of this travesty is to show how an allegorical or clichéd understanding of the world fails to inquire into the particular features of its object of discourse.

In *As You Like It* the self-regard latent in writing sonnets to one's lover is overcome through parody. But this parody eventually turns out to be a sincere attempt at a relationship based on a kind of reciprocity impossible for self-infatuated creator-lovers from Pygmalion onwards. While he refuses to be 'cured' (III. 2. 380) of his love melancholy, Orlando is more than prepared to woo Ganymede in the guise of what he already is, a fool for love. Undercutting expectations of how a lover might appear, Ganymede catalogues the 'marks' of a true lover; a lover, he contends, must have 'A lean cheek, which you have not; a blue eye and sunken, which you have not; an unquestionable spirit, which you have not' (357, 337–340). This tension between acting out one's desires and these desires finding satisfaction is also apparent in the way that the weddings at the end are structurally pre-empted. Both Touchstone and Audrey and Ganymede and Orlando have already performed travesties of the marriage ceremony.

When Touchstone parodies Orlando's verses—"Sweetest nut hath sourest rind," | Such a nut is Rosalind' (III. 2. 98–99)—his primary objection to them is not that they are hopelessly mannered, but that they lack technical skill. They are the 'very false gallop of verses' (102). Such poetry is prone to be copious—"I'll rhyme you so eight years together, dinners and suppers, and sleeping-hours excepted. It is the right butter women's rank to market' (85–87)—but, like the proverbially garrulous chitchat of milkmaids, it is ultimately vacuous. As with Rosalind's infatuated comment—"my affection hath an unknown bottom, like the bay of Portugal', which Celia inverts: 'Or rather bottomless, that as fast as you pour your affection in, it runs out' (IV. 1. 177–181)—plenitude can easily turn into scarcity.

In her parody of what someone outside love's sway might say, Rosalind contends that love is a universal folly: 'Love is merely a madness, and I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do; and the reason they are not so punished and cured is that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love too' (III. 3. 359–363). But in contrast to Theseus' disenchanting comment that 'The lunatic, the lover, and the poet | Are of imagination all compact' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. 1. 7–8), Rosalind is not peddling the kind of wisdom that

removes her from the other ‘country copulatives’ (V. 4. 53). Rather, she parodies the attitude of a disenchanted scoffer at the folly of lovers.

However, her treatment of Orlando’s love melancholy through playful substitution, which turns out to be no substitution at all, is in turn debunked by Touchstone. When he describes the time when he was in ‘love’ (II. 4. 41) with ‘Jane Smile’ (43), he offers a grotesque replay of the self-dramatisations, substitutions and role-playing that lovers employ—be it carving poetry on trees, the wooing of Ganymede, or the token of the blood stained cloth:

[...] I remember the kissing of her batlet, and the cow’s dugs that her pretty chapped hands had milked; and I remember the wooing of a peascod instead of her from whom I took two cods, and giving her them again, said with weeping tears, ‘Wear these for my sake’. We that are true lovers run into strange capers. But as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly.

(43–49)

As in Rabelais, the production and consumption of food and human reproduction are grotesquely conflated; the tautology of ‘weeping tears’ invokes the tears of true—or conceited—lovers like Orlando or Oliver, but this is wholly undercut by the fact that gift to his beloved, a ‘peascod’, possesses overt phallic connotations.

Touchstone’s mockery of explicit values inflects the marriage scene—not least because his ‘Loving voyage | Is but for two months victualled’ (V. 4. 180–181), as Jaques puts it; Touchstone’s extemporal travesty of duelling codes defers the crucial moment of recognition at the end of the comedy by discussing the ‘degrees of the lie’ (V. 4. 80):

O sir, we quarrel in print, by the book, as you have books for good manners. I will name for you the degrees. The first, the Retort Courteous; the second, the Quip Modest; the third, the Reply Churlish; the fourth, the Reproof Valiant; the fifth, the Countercheck Quarrelsome; the sixth, the lie with Circumstance; the seventh, the Lie Direct. All these you may avoid but the Lie Direct; and you may avoid that too with an ‘if’ [...]. Your ‘if’ is the only peacemaker, much virtue in ‘if’.

(81–92)

Be it the hair-splitting of philosophical discourse, the details of love poetry or duelling etiquette, this professional fool has a remarkable command of the otiose formal signifying systems of the serious world, systems which are transmitted

through ‘books’. In this connection, Touchstone speaks ‘wisely what wise men do foolishly’.

Moreover, his praise of the conditional conjunction ‘if’ imbues the final scene with a sense of provisionality, emphasising how unlikely—even patently fictional—the events on stage are:

ROSALIND [*to the DUKE*] To you I give myself, for I am yours.
 [*to ORLANDO*] To you I give myself, for I am yours.
DUKE *If* there be truth in sight, you are my daughter.
ORLANDO *If* there by truth in sight, you are my Rosalind.
PHOEBE *If* sight and shape be true,
 Why then my love adieu!

(V. 4. 105–110; [my emphasis])

‘To you I give myself’, evokes self-surrender, although, as Ryan contends, this is not simply submission to ‘patriarchal conventions, since the premises on which these conventions rest have been kicked away in the course of the play’.²⁵⁸ The conditional clause in ‘*If* there be truth in sight’ estranges the audience. It reminds them that they are spectators of an ‘improbable fiction’, ‘played upon the stage’ (*Twelfth Night*, III. 4. 115, 114). What they see in the theatre is, by definition, not straightforwardly ‘true’, a point emphasised moments later, when the god Hymen introduces a note of uncertainty: he will join the characters in marriage, ‘*If* truth holds true contents’ (V. 4. 119).

In Arden, even the gods are uncertain. It seems as though they too are under the sway of that magical conjunction, “if”, which is anathema to the serious, sincere and dogmatic. *As You Like It* avoids being a ‘Lie Direct’—that is, avowing things to be true, when they are manifestly untrue—by using ‘if’. By not insisting on the veracity of its own claims, the play renders the world conditional by deftly submitting any sincere worldview to parody. For this reason, the most significant moment of the play occurs when Oliver wakes up in the forest as his brother wrestles with a lion: ‘in which hurtling | From miserable slumber I awakened’ (IV. 3. 130–131). In saving his brother, albeit after some hesitation, Orlando confounds the logic of self-preservation, of getting by in the world. In an inversion of what occurs in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which suggests that the forest outside

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

Athens was a mere dream, a theatrical illusion—‘If we shadows have offended, | Think but this, and all is mended: that you have but slumbered here’ (‘Epilogue’, 1–3)—Oliver awakens from a nightmarish reality into a realm of fictional possibility. This realm is characterised by the possibility of generosity and reciprocity—a model of which is offered by Adam’s gift to Orlando of ‘five hundred crowns | The thrifty hire I saved’ (II. 4. 39–40)—rather than the ‘bubble reputation’ that ostensibly motivates both the tyrant Duke’s banishment of Rosalind, who thinks Celia ‘wilt show more bright and seem more virtuous | When she is gone’ (I. 3. 75–6), and Oliver’s jealousy of Orlando.

As You Like It rehearses alternative endings to the two biblical tales that form the bedrock of common conceptions of fallen, human nature. Adam does not transgress; and Cain does not murder Abel. When Oliver wakes in the forest it signifies neither the nadir of his insanity as it does in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Yvain*, nor a period of spiritual anguish as in Dante. The wise fool’s paradoxical comment to Audrey that ‘the truest poetry is the most feigning’ (III. 3. 15–16) resonates far beyond its immediate context. In this most manifestly fictional of plays—with its fragments from Ovid, romances, parables and the *Praise of Folly*—the injustices of the world as it is can be rendered risible.

In this respect, *As You Like It* epitomises a fact that Adorno formulates with great clarity in his essay ‘Is Art Lighthearted’:

[A]rt is a critique of the brute seriousness that reality imposes on human beings. Art imagines that by naming this fateful state of affairs it is loosening its hold. That is what is lighthearted in it; as a change in the existing mode of consciousness, that is also, to be sure, its seriousness.

(*NL*, 2, p. 248)

To indulge, for a moment, in a paradox almost worthy of a wise fool: the serious point of *As You Like It* lies in its playful exposure of the insincerity at the heart of the serious world. The play’s ironies clear the way for amazement—both in the modern sense of astonishment and the early modern sense of confusion. Although the resolution of this comedy is so incredible that it is compared to the art of a ‘magician’ (V. 2. 54), the fact that the play fragments and rewrites the fictions that shape reality suggests that it is not wholly constrained by the ways of the world: it is prepared to adumbrate alternatives and embraces the hypothetical liberties of ‘if’.

The World Turned Upside-Down

Since, therefore, laughter is the principal sign of this frisky pleasure that we like so much, which counteracts old age, is common to all, and proper to man, I am most astonished that the diligent ancients, scrutinisers of causes, have omitted the investigation of its origin, working a great deal more to find the reasons behind the things which touch us less and in less far regard. Why do we not stop to consider the familiar, common miracles that we carry about, and are able to examine them closely and at leisure?

—Laurent Joubert.²⁵⁹

For August Wilhelm Schlegel, folly is central to *Twelfth Night*. In his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, he contends that this play contrasts the ‘idealistic follies’ of Orsino, Olivia and Viola, who are duped by the prevalent notion of what love is, with the ‘naked follies [*baren Narrheiten*] [...] of the risible persons of the piece, [who are] likewise acting under the pretext of love’.²⁶⁰ Far from being a theme, folly is of considerable structural significance to this play. Sir Toby, Maria and the other merry-makers not only embody the spirit of celebration alluded to by the first of the play’s titles—the feast of the Epiphany, a ‘brief, licensed period of festive release and frivolity on the last eve of the holiday season’²⁶¹—but they also suggest that the performance of the stereotypes, which the more serious-minded citizens of Illyria indulge in, is absurd. Unlike the Duke, Olivia and Malvolio, these revelers are not in thrall to an allegorical or analogical mindset.

Schlegel neither wrests the main action from the backstairs world, nor dismisses the overtly festive scenes as comic relief as Barber and Laroque do in their discussions of festivity in this play. Schlegel contends that ‘These scenes are as exquisite and significant as they are delightfully and humorously organized’.²⁶² Not least because festivity can create, for a moment, an alternative world that comes far closer to what the characters (and audience) will than the serious world, even the antics of the play’s tosspot and gull cannot be discounted as insignificant. Indeed, the labile, grotesque world of carnival is a realm that operates, like play, according

²⁵⁹ *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. by Gregory David De Rocher (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 17.

²⁶⁰ *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by Edgar Lohner, 7 vols (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1967–75), VI, p. 158.

²⁶¹ Ryan, *Shakespeare’s Comedies*, p. 244.

²⁶² Schlegel, p. 158.

to the rules of ‘if’, of “make-believe”. But it does not operate according to Barber’s proscriptive rubric: ‘through release to clarification’.²⁶³ The unlicensed festivity in the play is consistently excessive, refusing to remain within its calendrical bounds.

On his first entrance, Sir Toby is asked by Maria to ‘confine’ himself ‘within the modest limits of order’ (I. 3. 6–7). In his quibble on the word ‘confine’, he evokes his unruly body, a socially useless body undeterred by the self-discipline characteristic of the bourgeois age: ‘Confine? I’ll confine myself no finer than I am. These clothes are good enough to drink in, and so be these boots too’ (8–9). At the close of the play, when one might expect clarification, the wounded braggarts cannot be treated by the doctor, because he has chosen drunken torpor over facing up to the everyday reality of Illyria: ‘Dick Surgeon’ is ‘drunk [...] an hour ago. His eyes were set at eight i’th’ morning’ (V. 1. 190, 191–192). Likewise, the disguised Viola describes her persistent courtship of Olivia on behalf of Orsino in terms of a violation of decorum. She will encamp herself at Olivia’s gate and ‘Write loyal cantons of contemnèd love, | And sing them loud *even in the dead of night*’ (I. 5. 239–40; [my emphasis]).

Malvolio attacks the backstairs revellers precisely on the grounds that their levity is out of control:

My masters, are you mad? Or what are you? Have you no wit, manners nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady’s house, that ye squeak out coziers’ catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?

(II. 3. 78–83)

For the steward, who, according to Maria, is nothing ‘but a time-pleaser’ (131–132), this ‘uncivil rule’ (111) threatens to turn the world on its head, upsetting what he considers the immutable hierarchy of ‘place’, ‘persons’ and ‘time’. Needless to say, however, the play points out that these ostensibly watertight concepts are scarcely more stable than the festivity that unsettles them. Earlier in this scene, for instance, Sir Toby solipsistically invokes the topsy-turvy temporality of festivity, an ‘uneven element’, which does not see time as a ‘measurable quantity or a simple

²⁶³ *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959; repr. 1990), p. 5ff.

factor in observable physical phenomena'.²⁶⁴ 'To be up after midnight and to go to bed then is early; so that to go to bed after midnight is to go to bed betimes' (5–7).

Sir Toby's utterances are not always mere bluster. When he asks: 'What the plague means my niece to take the death of her brother thus? I am sure care's an enemy to life' (I. 3. 1–2), he is not only an evangelist for the 'God-like carelessness of the happy man', which includes a healthy indifference to the workaday world's edicts of time, place and person, but he also recalls the primary medical purpose of the fool: namely, to prolong and enrich his master's life by 'making his or her liege laugh'.²⁶⁵ Since 'there was no way conceptually or discursively to separate the psychological from the physiological' in Renaissance medical discourses,²⁶⁶ the laughter arising from folly and the notoriously 'ambivalent' laughter of the carnival had physical consequences. 'Mirth', Burton writes, '*purgeth the blood, confirms health, causeth a fresh, pleasing, and fine colour, prolongues life, whets the wit, makes the body young, lively, and fit for any manner of employment*'.²⁶⁷

Malvolio, however, is receptive to neither Sir Toby's 'Saturnalian creed',²⁶⁸ nor Feste's foolery. Olivia praises the potential inherent in folly to belittle the privations of a hostile reality, when she reproves her steward:

O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite. To be generous, guiltless, and of free disposition is to take those things for birdbolts that you deem cannon bullets. There is no slander in an allowed fool, though he do nothing but rail.

(I. 5. 77–81)

By this account, the paradoxical wisdom of folly, which is later alluded to in Viola's comment, 'This fellow is wise enough to play the fool; | And to do that well craves a kind of wit' (III. 1. 1–2), is a careless or indifferent wisdom. It is 'free' insofar as it is neither swayed by dominant ideas, nor given to mendacity; it is 'generous' in that the fool gives without being motivated by the desire for personal

²⁶⁴ Laroque, p. 29.

²⁶⁵ Tiller, p. 43.

²⁶⁶ Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 12.

²⁶⁷ *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, II. p. 116. This argument goes at least as far back as Quintilian (see Joubert, p. 16).

²⁶⁸ Ryan, p. 238.

preferment. In a way similar to *As You Like It*, the logic of an instrumental reason grounded in getting by in the world is questioned.

It is Malvolio's sanctimonious humourlessness in this scene—'I marvel your ladyship takes such delight in such a barren rascal' (I. 5. 71)—that occasions Feste's involvement in his humiliation. The fool downplays this by making it the consequence of an abstract entity and simultaneously evokes the restorations, recognitions and reprisals that conclude comedies: 'thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges' (V. 1. 364). But immuring Malvolio in 'hideous darkness (IV. 2. 27) is the central example of how jokes turn sour in this play. What is more, this seriocomic pseudo-treatment fails to cure Malvolio of his illness, his self-love.

Malvolio's self-estimation is apparent in his fantasy of leaving a sexually exhausted Olivia asleep on a 'daybed' (II. 5. 43), while he castigates her dissolute kinsmen. His virtue, such as it is, becomes the object of his own desire. In other words, he does not simply yearn for coitus with Olivia. Rather, he primarily desires the power his sexual possession of her will give him to enforce his moral authority on others. He may seem at a remove from Olivia's ritualistic excess, but for all his 'clear ordering of time and space',²⁶⁹ he too is excessive. He has a surfeit of 'Self-love', a kind of love that, for Thomas Wright, is an 'infected love' from which 'sprung all the evils, welnie that pester the world'.²⁷⁰

For Joost Dandler, *Twelfth Night* is a play concerned with 'questions of reality versus the imagination, though in the case of illusion the imagination is a positive force, while delusion is negative', because the latter 'depends on a serious distortion produced by the individual's own mind, whereas illusion depends on what others do to us'.²⁷¹ It is illusion that Erasmus' Stultitia praises and delusion that she attacks. Similarly, the play exposes the absurdities of deluded melancholia, excessive mourning and self-love, while exulting in the capacity of illusion to debunk these delusions and rehearse an alternative world. Sebastian hopes that his illusion is not a delusion: 'Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep | If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep' (IV. 1. 61–62).

²⁶⁹ Tobias Döring, 'Dinner for One: Sir Toby und die kulturelle Arbeit am Vergessen', *Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft Jahrbuch*, 145 (2009), 124–140 (p. 129).

²⁷⁰ *Passions of the Minde in Generall* (London: Valintine Simmes, 1601), p. 8.

²⁷¹ 'Perspectives of Madness in *Twelfth Night*', *ES*, 78 (1997), 105–110 (p. 107).

However, this play frustrates the desire to perceive a neat dichotomy between reality and imagination. The tension between two types of folly—*illusion*, in which one is, as at a magician’s act, eventually aware that one is being duped, and *delusion*, in which one is convinced by one’s own fancy—becomes most acute in the gulling scene, which ‘satirises’ the serious contemporary concern with ‘demonic possession’.²⁷²

FESTE *Bonos dies*, Sir Toby, for, as the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King Gorboduc, ‘That that is, is.’ So I, being Master Parson, am Master Parson; for what is ‘that’ but ‘that’, and ‘is’ but ‘is’?

[...]

MALVOLIO within

MALVOLIO Who calls there?

FESTE Sir Topas the curate, who comes to visit Malvolio the lunatic.

MALVOLIO Sir Topas, Sir Topas, good Sir Topas, go to my lady.

FESTE Out, hyperbolical fiend, how vexest thou this man! Talkest thou nothing but of ladies?

(IV. 2. 11–14, 17–20)

Feste’s catechising of the madman is the climax of a game staged by Maria and the others; because it is a game within a play, it is also doubly distanced from the spectators. Feste’s nonsensical citation of a spurious scholastic authority to justify his blasphemous impersonation deftly parodies the dogmatic platitudes of a naive realism, which denies the possibility that things might be other than they seem. ‘That that is, is’ is an inversion of Feste’s comment, after a discussion at cross-purposes with Sebastian, ‘Nothing that is so, is so’ (IV. 1. 6). Both of these comments use anadiplosis to gesture to the inherent instability of what ‘is’. Viola also employs this sort of repetition when she hopes for a future radically different from the one she had hitherto envisaged, a future which includes her brother: ‘Prove true, imagination, O prove true, | That I, dear brother, be now ta’en for you!’ (III. 4. 340–341).

Whereas Burton observes that ‘*Jacinth* and *Topaz*, they allay anger, grief, diminish madness, much delight and exhilarate the mind’,²⁷³ the fictional parson, Sir Topas, who shares his name with a gem thought to cure melancholy, merely

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷³ *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, II, p. 19.

entangles Malvolio further in the web of Maria's illusion, delighting on-stage and off-stage spectators alike. Feste, however, is no absolutist monarch of misrule, since his persona's name alludes to Chaucer's ironic, self-effacing authorial persona in the *Canterbury Tales*. The 'elvyssh' Sir Topas contributes an inept and clichéd doggerel romance, but is stopped in his tracks and told: 'Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord! | Thou doost noght elles but despendest tyme' (*Canterbury Tales*, VII, 703, 929–30).²⁷⁴ His simulated religious authority is, not unlike the authority of the daft 'hermit' he pedantically cites, no authority at all. But it is a dizzyingly complex piece of parodic intertextuality, which illustrates the epistemological consequences of a jester citing an authority, one that in this case turns out to be spurious. The 'wisdom' Feste cites is a fragment from a bogus authority, travestied by the professional fool, disguised as a parson, whose name refers to the most risible character in the *Canterbury Tales*. Sir Topas' presence serves to discredit the *auctoritee* of the speaker. It thereby makes a mockery of writers who confidently claim to be certain of what is the case.

Modalities of Melancholy

Olivia and Orsino find themselves in a festive space, insofar as they must neither work for their survival, nor submit to the inflexible will of parents, the tragic consequences of which Shakespeare dramatises in *Romeo and Juliet*. In fact, *Twelfth Night* omits the fathers who appear in its probable source, *The Deceived* (see NDSS, 3, pp. 286–342). Perhaps it is for this reason that, like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, these bright young things fashion their own pseudo-problems.

The carnival imagery of 'cakes and ale' (II. 3. 104) and of gluttony or 'excess' (I. 1. 2) runs disconcertingly throughout Orsino's descriptions of his love melancholy, attesting to the difficulty of separating the serious action from the lighthearted interludes of Sir Toby and Co. But far from furnishing us with perceptive insights into his subjective state such as one might expect from a creative, melancholic genius, the Duke's self-indulgent meditations about his *ennui*, although protracted, are at best superficial and at worst vacuous. Recalling his first sight of Olivia, he reflects, invoking Ovid's tale of Actaeon:

²⁷⁴ *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Methought she purged the air of pestilence;
That instant was I turned into a hart,
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
E'er since pursue me.

(I. 1. 19–22)

His avowed adoration of Olivia is ideologically mediated in a twofold way. First, he cannot express his ostensibly unique love without drawing a mythological analogy; second, as I shall show, Orsino's love initially has more to do with him fashioning a socially recognisable identity—that of the modish melancholy lover—than with either affection or physical desire.

His narcissism is especially apparent in his sententious reflections to Cesario on the nature of women's love:

There's no woman's sides
Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart
So big, to hold so much. They lack retention.

(II. 4. 91–94)

Not only is the 'hunter turned hunted' an archetypal trope of the *mundus inversus* associated with folly and festivity,²⁷⁵ but also, in this particular story, Ovid makes much of how it might feel to be trapped in a vulnerable, alien body. In the moments before the hounds tear their transformed master to pieces, Actaeon

strained often times to speak, and was about to say,
'I am Actaeon. Know your master, sirs, I pray'.
But use of words and speech did want to utter forth his mind.
Their cry did ring though all the wood, redoubled with the
wind.

(Book III, 276–280)

In that she is forced to play the role of wooer when she would herself be wooed, Viola finds herself in a comparable, albeit less lethal, situation. She is unhappy because she must play the role her assumed identity dictates.

Orsino's supposed infatuation certainly enables the clichéd posturing as an unrequited lover that he so excels at. He advises Cesario:

²⁷⁵ Jean Klene, 'The Fool, Folly, and the World Upside-Down in *Measure for Measure*', *Upstart Crow*, 3 (1980), 1–10 (p. 3).

ORSINO If ever thou shalt love,
 In the sweet pangs of it remember me;
 For such as I am, all true lovers are,
 Unstaid and skittish in all motions else
 Save in the constant image of the creature
 That is beloved.

(II. 4. 14–19)

Orsino cannot but help taking pride in how exemplary his suffering is. He plays his socially sanctioned role of unrequited lover as perfectly as the shepherd Silvius in *As You Like It*. As Schlegel observes, love in *Twelfth Night* has much more to do with ‘the imagination than with the heart’.²⁷⁶

Because it objectifies his lover, Orsino’s affection might also be said to be fetishistic—Olivia refers to the ‘heresy’ (I. 5. 201) in his poetry, implying that his love is idolatrous. Such captivation of a lover by the remembrance of a mental image of their beloved is explicitly compared to idolatry in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Helen reflects: ‘But now he’s gone, and my idolatrous fancy | Must sanctify his relics’ (I. 1. 92–3). And the same emotion is manifest in Orsino’s castigation of Olivia for her faithlessness:

 You uncivil lady,
 To whose ingrate and unauspicious alters
 My soul the faithfull’st off’rings hath breathed out
 That e’er devotion tendered.

(V. 1. 107–110)

Although Orsino’s brand of melancholy is brilliantly mocked by Olivia’s list of body parts praised in conventional love poetry, it is nonetheless significant. He fails to regard Olivia as a *person*; he misapprehends her. Like Bassanio at the end of the casket test in *The Merchant of Venice*, he venerates an ‘image’ of his lover: Orsino’s implication that he is more worthy of grace because he has made ‘off’rings’—an assumption tainted by the mercantile connotations of the word ‘tendered’ that further characterises him as a pagan idolater.

The mercurial Feste, however, emphasises the mutability of all things, especially thought, upbraiding Orsino thus:

²⁷⁶ Schlegel, p. 157.

Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal. I would have men of such constancy put to sea, that their business might be everything, and their intent everywhere, for that's it that always makes a good voyage of nothing.

(II. 4. 72–76)

Orsino's 'constancy' is at odds with a world characterised by constant flux. Saturn must protect it. So long as one unlearns the fictions of certainty, Feste argues, a receptive mind may have its preconceptions and expectations transformed at every turn.

What sends Malvolio mad, after all, is his determination to believe that the letter from Olivia is true. Sir Toby comments to Maria in at the end of the gulling scene: 'Why thou hadst put him in such a dream that when the image of it leaves him, he must be mad' (II. 5. 168–169)—he is bound to be bowled over by her fiction. But illusion is inevitable: 'Folly's reference to the extreme unlikelihood of anyone unmasking actors introduces the argument that just as everyone accepts illusion as the substance of theatre, so one should likewise accept that illusion and uncertainty are the condition of man's existence'.²⁷⁷ The wisdom of Feste's comment to Orsino is borne out by the rest of the play.

Olivia is similarly deluded. As Feste points out when he 'proves' her a 'fool' (I. 5. 50), she is held captive by the past, or rather, a static image projected onto the past from the present, one that almost prevents her from being receptive to the possibilities of an astonishing future. For 'A brother's dead love' (I. 1. 30), she will deny herself the pleasures of the flesh; this is emphasised by Orsino's peculiar syntax, since the adjective 'dead' qualifies her 'love' rather than the brother himself. Her mourning focuses on another polarity of the word 'if': it is fixated on what could have been different in the past, rather than how different things could be different in the future. Sir Andrew's propensity to regret—'O, had I but followed the arts!' (I. 3. 80)—displays a regressive tendency to regret possibilities of the past that have been thwarted, as does his poignant reflection on his own 'dead love': 'I was adored once too' (II. 4. 160). The problem with perceiving the world in pre-determined and immutable categories is that it is at odds with the nature of existence and, more significantly perhaps, that it makes one unhappy. All of the melancholics

²⁷⁷ Catherine Birkinshaw, "'Past the Wit of Man": *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* Debt to *Praise of Folly*', *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, 5 (1992), 43–58, p. 51.

considered in this chapter share this tendency to categorise new experiences in inflexible terms.

It comes as little surprise that Feste, a self-professed ‘corrupter of words’ (III. 1. 32), has already underscored the instability of the words upon which fixed identities are predicated. He points out the incoherence of fixed ways of understanding. In a bout of repartee between Cesario and Feste about the fluidity of words, Feste assumes the identity of someone nostalgic for a time in which word and matter corresponded, lamenting with his tongue in his cheek: ‘To see this age!—A sentence is but a cheverel glove to a good wit, how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward’ (10–12). Although the metaphor of the ‘cheverel glove’ was proverbial,²⁷⁸ it might not be altogether fanciful to detect an echo of Erasmus’ *Stultitia* in this comment. In her attack on the ignorance of theologians, more interested in Scholastic authority than textual interpretation, she inveighs against the perverse interpretations that these wise men project onto scripture: ‘all doctours [of divinity] take it comenly for theyr priuilege, to stretche out heauen (that is to saie) holy writte lyke a *cheuerell skynne*’; they wrest ‘the woordes of scripture fare as if they were of contary senses, whereas being set in their right places, they do varie neuer a dele’ (*PF*, p. 111). In contrast to the received wisdom that words themselves are intrinsically deceptive or that language *per se* has fallen into confusion, Feste and Folly suggest that it is man’s use of words that has debased them. Dropping his nostalgic persona, Feste contends that ‘words are very rascals since bonds disgraced them’ (18–19); appropriately enough, he refuses to give Cesario the ‘reason’ (20) he demands: ‘Troth, sir, I can yield you none without words, and words are grown so false I am loath to prove reason with them’ (21–22). With a passing reference to Folly, Feste points out the impossibility of certainty. In fact, the whole play is tuned into Feste’s scepticism: it makes no claim to uphold dogmatic certainties, since it is concerned with the capacity of art to liberate people and things from petrified identities.

In fact, Feste’s interest in the mutability of all human certainties has a structural significance. *Twelfth Night* is framed by two reflections on the way that, as Adorno observes, art’s ‘content could be its own transitoriness [*Vergänglichkeit*]

²⁷⁸ Clarence Miller cites Tilley’s collections of proverbs (see ‘Explanatory Notes’, *PF*, pp. 131–202 [p. 193]); ‘cheuerell skynne’ is Thomas Chaloner’s rendering of the Latin, ‘*Pellem*’ (*PF*, p. 193).

(*AT*, p. 4). Both the content of the play and its structure therefore give the lie to static identities. The play opens *in medias res*, half way through a performance. Orsino desires his musicians to continue playing a song and then changes his mind:

ORSINO If music be the food of love, play on,
 Give me excess of it that, surfeiting,
 The appetite may sicken and so die.
 That strain again, it had a dying fall.
 O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
 That breathes upon a bank of violets,
 Stealing and giving odour. Enough, no more,
 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

(I. 1. 1–8)

The first lines evoke the mutability of art's affective significance, thereby suspending what follows in a space of semantic indeterminacy; furthermore, Orsino's reflections echo the scornful estimation of man's achievements in Psalm 103, which the *Geneva Bible* renders thus: 'The days of man are as grass: as a flower of the field, so flourisheth he. | For the wind goeth over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more' (15–16). That the significance of a piece of music or the equivocal wisdom offered by a work of dramatic art is intimately connected to the sensibility of the audience is clear: it is as fleeting as the wind on a bank of flowers on a spring day. Whatever *Twelfth Night* says, it says equivocally and through motion, through the movement intrinsic to the temporal arts of music and drama.

The play does not conclude with marriages, but with Feste's plangent song—a fragment of which is later echoed and replayed in a demonic key in *King Lear*. In this song, the wryly detached, even 'transcendent perspective'²⁷⁹ that Feste has espoused all along comes to the fore:

A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
But that's all one, our play is done,
And we'll strive to please you every day.

(V. 1. 392–396)

Stepping out of the final festivities to address the audience, Feste steps out of the

²⁷⁹ *Shakespeare's Comedies*, p. 277.

world of aesthetic semblance, in which what you will is fulfilled no matter how unlikely it seems. He implies that the provisional wisdom of the play is but a moment in history in an eternity of physical suffering and the ‘wind and rain [...] pities neither wise man nor fools’ (*King Lear*, III. 2. 12). The song has a relativising function like that of Orsino’s meditation on music. But it also suggests that such material facts become irrelevant, ‘all one’, to those captivated by the illusion: the fleeting glimpse of a world worthy of hope that Shakespearean comedy offers.

‘What a Fool Honesty is’

To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human,
I am come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration.

—William Blake²⁸⁰

In *The Winter’s Tale*, Camillo describes the self-begetting nature of Leontes’ jealousy, which is compared to an ‘infectious soare’ (*NDSS*, 8, p. 156) in the play’s principal source:

The fabric of his folly, whose foundation
Is piled upon his faith, and will continue
The standing of his body.

(I. 2. 429–31)

Here Camillo neatly describes how ideas can become ossified. Leontes’ ideas about the nature of women are based on socially embedded assumptions, *doxa*, rather than his own experience. His misapprehension attests to the way in which ‘the custome and vse of common life overbeareth us’ (*E*, Book 3, Chapter 5, p. 477). Unwittingly, the King is led by the nose by ‘example’ (*E*, Book 3, Chapter 5, p. 477).

What the play has to say about the distinction between art and nature, I contend, is closely connected with the process Camillo describes.²⁸¹ I say ‘distinction’ rather than ‘opposition’ because these terms are not binary opposites—although even readings of Shakespearean comedy as theoretically acute as Wehr’s oppose these terms. Such oppositions, however, prove to be part of the problem. Contrary to Laroque’s contention that in this play festive ‘cycles of nature win over

²⁸⁰ ‘Milton’, in *Blake: Complete Writings with Variant Readings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 480–535 (p. 533) (Book 2, Section, 42); [the irregular capitalisation is Blake’s].

²⁸¹ See ‘Touching Words’, pp. 2 ff.

the forces of anti-nature and perversion',²⁸² I believe that the play confronts each of these concepts, art and nature, with itself and with its alleged opposite, interrogating and modifying their valences throughout the play. Precisely how socially embedded assumptions pervert relationships remains, in the final analysis, a moot point. There is certainly no outright victory over 'anti-nature'.

Insofar as it is the consequence of human customs and institutions, which are, as Time's soliloquy makes apparent, historically contingent, what humankind calls nature is shown to be unnatural, something manufactured. Time informs the audience that he can 'o'erthrow law, and in one self-born hour | Plant and o'erwhelm custom' (IV. 1. 5–9). This romance lays bare the distortions that a reified conception of female nature inflicts on ideas, relationships and the protagonists' possible futures:

O thou thing,
Which I'll not call a creature of thy place
Lest barbarism, making me the precedent,
Should a like language use to all degrees,
And mannerly distinguishment leave out
Betwixt the prince and beggar.

(II. 1. 85–9)

Driven by his grotesque delusions, Leontes seeks not only to vilify his wife, but also to annihilate her rhetorically. Because her alleged action threatens to destroy a lexicon of 'mannerly distinguishment', her nature is too degenerate for words. 'When jealousy once seizeth on these silly, weake, and unresisting soules', writes Montaigne, 'tis pitiful to see how cruelly it tormenteth, insultingly it tyrannizeth them'; a 'consuming feaver blemisheth and corrupteth all that otherwise is good' (*E*, Book 3, Chapter 5, p. 485).

The significance of folly in *The Winter's Tale*, however, lies neither in the foolish misapprehension around which the play's action revolves, nor in how Leontes and Autolycus are the 'two chief manifestations of folly'.²⁸³ Not least because 'no man is free' from being 'negligent, foolish and fearful' (I. 2. 253, 252), the importance of folly is to be found in the way it suggests that conceited, positive knowledge should be unlearned. Paradoxically, after all, it is when he is in the

²⁸² Laroque, p. 199.

²⁸³ Peter Happé, "All mine own folly": The Function of Folly in *The Winter's Tale*, *Theta*, 10 (2011), 217–38 (p. 218).

depths of his paranoia that Leontes considers himself to be wise, a lone, disenchanted, albeit somewhat voyeuristic, spectator of the sexual tribulations of this ‘bawdy planet’ (202):

There have been,
Or am I much deceived, cuckolds ere now,
And many a man there is, even at this present,
Now, while I speak this, holds his wife by th’arm,
That little thinks she has been sluiced in’s absence.

(191–195)

This travesties the common ‘foolishness of aspiring to inhuman clear-sightedness’, which Erasmus’ *Stultitia* also mocks.²⁸⁴ In this respect, ‘Leontes’ words are not the ravings of insanity but a careful meditation on the relation of experience to certitude’.²⁸⁵ He falls prey to a potentially lethal strain of folly that

Upon entring once into the seate of the braine, [...] whirlleth about a thousand fopperies, some of them no lesse lamentable then ridiculous: But the greatest inconuenience that springeth from her is this, that continually weakening the braine, she causeth man to rmaine so blockish, and insensate, that he thinketh himselfe wisest, when he is most foole.²⁸⁶

Leontes’ action of abandoning his baby ironically makes him less humane than the ‘creatures’ to which he refused to compare Hermione; as Antigonus observes: ‘Wolves and bears, they say, | Casting their savageness aside, have done | Like offices of pity’ (II. 3. 187–89).

Antigonus’ comment implies that a reasonable man can be cruel or unjust in a way that creatures bereft of reason cannot. The potentially catastrophic consequences of a habit of mind that effaces difference, turning individuals into mere examples of a predetermined fact, is central to *Othello*,²⁸⁷ a play in which ‘fornication’ is clearly associated with money as a ‘living element with the same powers of reproduction as human beings’.²⁸⁸ Desdemona’s corpse serves as a prop

²⁸⁴ Wehrs, p. 20.

²⁸⁵ James A. Knapp, *Image Ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), p. 175.

²⁸⁶ *The hospitall of incurable fooles*, pp. 1–2.

²⁸⁷ For a reading of *Othello*’s colour symbolism in the light of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Sam Hall, ‘Civil Monsters’: The Enlightened Dialectics of *Othello*, *The Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, 9 (2012), 15–28.

²⁸⁸ Laroque, p. 274.

in Othello's patriarchal rhetoric. In what he nauseatingly calls his 'sacrifice' (V. 2. 66), he employs the very colour symbolism that is exposed by the play as a fallacy and that thwarts the possibility inherent in their love's survival: Othello associates whiteness with purity.²⁸⁹ He does not wish to 'scar that whiter skin of hers than snow | And smooth as monumental alabaster— | Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men' (V. 2. 3–5). Whereas in the source Othello does not wish to leave obvious marks on the body for fear of 'the inviolable justice of the Venetian Lords',²⁹⁰ Shakespeare uses this idea to show the destructive potential of dehumanised perceptions of women, even as it expresses them. Essentialist discourses have transmuted Desdemona into an object, a piece of 'monumental alabaster'. This is further emphasized when Othello reflects: 'Cold, cold, my girl? | Even like thy chastity' (274–5). The metaphorical coldness conventionally associated with chastity has been made horrifically literal by the fact he is holding the hand of a dying woman. The opinions, convictions and pseudo-certainties that result from ossified ideas are, in no small part, responsible for the suffering inflicted on real, warm bodies.

In *The Winter's Tale*, however, it is through that most patently fictional of events, Hermione's resurrection, that the play rehearses the possibility of a world no longer governed by obsolete ideas. The resurrection of this berated 'thing' is astonishing. As Frank Kermode observes, it 'seems not a theatrical trick but an epiphany, such that those who experienced it might well seem silent, aghast'.²⁹¹ Leontes' simple words of wonder—'O, she's warm! | If this be magic, let it be an art | Lawful as eating' (V. 3. 109–111)—reverse both the negative connotations of his earlier imagery associated with bodily warmth—'Too hot, too hot: | To mingle

²⁸⁹ In a series of insightful studies, Robert Hornback traces the association of black skin colour with sinfulness, abjection, madness and folly. (See 'Blackfaced Fools, Black-Headed Birds, Fool Synonyms, and Shakespearean Allusions to Renaissance Blackface Folly', *NQ*, 55 (2008), 215–19; 'Black Shakespeareans vs. Minstrel Burlesques: 'Proper' English, Racist Blackface Dialect, and the Contest for Representing Blackness, 1821–1844', *ShakS*, 38 (2010), 125–60; 'Emblems of Folly in the First *Othello*: Renaissance Blackface, Moor's Coat, and Muckender', *CompD*, 35 (2001–2), 69–99; and 'Extravagant and Wheeling Strangers: Early Blackface Dancing Fools, Racial Representation, and the Limits of Identification', *Exemplaria*, 20 (2008), 197–223. Although this association comes from medieval morality plays, it came to underwrite 'pseudo-scientific theories of race' in the late nineteenth century (*The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare*, Studies in Renaissance Literature, 26 (Cambridge: Brewer, 2009), pp. 50–54 [p. 52]).

²⁹⁰ G. Cinthio, 'Gli Hecatommithi: Third Decade, Seventh Novella', trans by Bruno Ferraro, in *Othello*, ed. by Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 434–444 (p. 447).

²⁹¹ *Shakespeare's Language* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 272.

friendship far is mingling bloods' (I. 2. 110–111)—and the positive connotations of 'cold' chastity. Since it lies in art's power to strip away some assumptions about women, enabling Leontes to experience the warmth of human contact—a perfectly ordinary yet uncanny experience—the 'magic' of this piece of 'art' is to be found in how it furnishes the reader with a negative image of a reformed nature, a nature that will perhaps one day be possible. In other words, Leontes has washed off what Blake calls the 'Not Human': the stultifying commonplaces of popular wisdom. For the first time, he does not perceive his wife as an example of a preordained category. She is neither one of history's numerous wronged women, nor as yet another example of an unfaithful wife, but a particular being, a creature warm to the touch. Because it strips all forms of philosophy down to the conceptual remainder of one body experiencing another, Leontes' revelation of the real is astonishing.

Hermione's resurrection, absent from the source, *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* by Robert Greene, is not a foreseeable outcome of events. But far from being one in which, as Laroque argues, 'The festivity which was rendered impotent or destroyed in the no man's land of tragedy, miraculously re-emerges here in an atmosphere of freshness and innocence',²⁹² there are traces of darkness. There is both the pressing memory of the time lost and people killed by Leontes' folly and the lurking implication that aesthetic semblance is partly responsible for the misery caused by the inhuman demands humans place on themselves. This is most apparent in the debate about nature and art between the disguised Polixenes and Perdita. In the midst of a festive celebration of nature's plenitude, these characters discuss the capacity of aesthetic semblance to uncover a nature truer than that performed in the quotidian world—an 'art' that 'itself is nature' (IV. 4. 97). Although Perdita advises Florizel that, because their love is 'Opposed, as it must be, by th' power of the King,' she 'must change this purpose, | Or I my life' (IV. 4. 27; 39–40), it is her life—or at least her social position—that is transformed in the course of the play; his hope of marriage is not thwarted by being brought down to earth.

Polixenes contends that the grafting of less cultivated flowers onto cultivated ones is 'an art | Which does mend nature—change it rather; but | The art itself is nature' (IV. 4. 95–97). He suggests that human creations are dependent upon 'great

²⁹² Laroque, p. 199.

creating nature' (87) and that the inner workings of this sort of 'nature' can be fathomed only through something as manifestly unnatural as 'art'. Perdita, in contrast, insists on unadulterated art: her aesthetic product, the floral 'garlands' (IV. 4. 128) for the sheep-shearing festival, excludes impure flowers, 'carnations and streaked gillyvors [...] nature's bastards' (82–83). This form, an idealisation based on the exclusion of impurities, is at odds with the nature of the play in which it finds expression. *The Winter's Tale* is the quintessential 'mongrel tragi-comedy'.²⁹³ It also raises a problem about aesthetic form that remains unresolved at the end of the play: the tendency for aesthetic semblance to skate over the suffering inflicted on people by seriousness. The potentially destructive drive for purity and perfection is apparent in Othello's murder of Desdemona and Leontes' insanity: he considers the Hermione to 'Sully the purity and whiteness of' his marital 'sheets' (I. 2. 329). Leontes evokes the subversive 'openness' of the human body—in contrast to the completed, pure form possible in, for instance, sculpture—when he reflects that there is 'No barricado for a belly. Know't, | It will let in and out the enemy' (205–6). Even at the end of the play, he displays a desire for a perfectly proportioned aesthetic form: 'Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing | So agèd as this seems' (V. 3. 27–28).

Leontes remains blind to the fact that the concept of the ideal human exceeds the bounds of possibility. In the myth of Pygmalion, from which Shakespeare may have drawn Hermione's resurrection, however, Ovid emphasises how art can create the ideal in a way that nature simply cannot:

Now in the while by wonderous art an image he did grave
Of such proportion, shape and grace as nature never gave
Nor can to any woman give. In his work he took
A certain love.

(Book 10, 265–268)

Pygmalion *creates*, or rather *gives expression to*, his beloved's 'proportion, shape and grace'. *The Winter's Tale* stages a tension between the complicity of mimesis in perpetuating discourses that figuratively and literally reduce the likes of Hermione and Desdemona to objects and its capacity to envisage a world in which those

²⁹³ Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry: or the Defence of Poesy*, ed. by R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 112.

destroyed by such discourses can return to life. Hermione's resurrection is tempered not only by the fact that it is shown to be extraordinary and possible only in a play, but also by the implication that Leontes' idealising aesthetics have not been reformed. Shakespeare's masterstroke is that he *stages* Leontes' captivation by the aesthetics of purity and completeness, which collude in sustaining the ossified opinions that threaten to plunge the spectacular events of this romance into the realm of tragedy.

Losing Eden

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of the world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*.

—*KJV*, Ephesians, 6. 12

The source makes clear its intention to provide a moral edification and prove an adage to be correct: *Pandosto* is a 'pleasant Historie, that although by the meanes of sinister fortune Truth may be concealed, yet by Time in spight of fortune it is most manifestly reuealed [...] *Temporis filia veritas*' (*NDSS*, 8, p. 156). But *The Winter's Tale* debunks this providential account of history. It contrasts a regressive present with one that it is transformed by hope. After he has been persuaded to stay in Sicily a little longer, Polixenes recounts to Hermione his and Leontes' fall from grace:

POLIXENES We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i'th' sun,
And bleat the one at th'other. What we changed
Was innocence for innocence. We knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed
That any did. Had we pursued that life,
And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared
With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven
Boldly 'not guilty', the imposition cleared,
Hereditary ours.

(I. 2. 69–77)

Polixenes recalls a prepubescent state, without the 'temptations' of desire. Because such innocence can only ever be reflected upon in a fallen world, *post factum*, the state of immaculate innocence, which he considers to have had the potential to wipe the slate clean for humanity, is essentially a state of ignorance. The association of his awakening sexual desire with fallen nature is theologically dubious: Adam and

Hermione's alleged actions 'Give scandal to the blood o'th' prince, my son, | Who I do think is mine and love as mine' (I. 2. 332–333). The three possessive pronouns make it clear that his affection for Mamillius springs from self-love. The love of a parent for a child is exposed, in this instance, as an unnatural infatuation with himself. The 'chief mythic source for Leontes's derangement' is, after all, 'Ovid's tale of Narcissus'.²⁹⁶ Contrary to Erasmus' injunction that the 'glory' of a King 'cannot be more truly illuminated than by being overshadowed' (*CWE*, 27, p. 207) by his son, Leontes' hopes for the future are an inauthentic projection of the present, a projection of his power.

Kermode is not wrong to point out that 'Leontes' language is always tyrannical';²⁹⁷ after all, Erasmus advises in his *Education* that the 'tyrannical slogans "I desire this, I command this, let my will be the reason"', so characteristic of Leontes' utterance, should 'be far removed from the mind of a prince' (*CWE*, 27, p. 243). The Sicilian king's conviction that he is 'blest' in his 'true opinion' (II. 1. 38, 39) is undercut by the fact that it is an oxymoron. By definition, an 'opinion' cannot be 'true'. The absurdity of this conviction is further emphasised in his statement: 'There is no truth at all i'th' oracle' (138). Oracles cannot be dishonest. Moreover, although they can sometimes utter cryptic prophecies, which cannot be understood in the ignorance of the present moment, this particular prophecy is unambiguous.

Polixenes, Leontes' double, is scarcely less tyrannical. Both men are characterised by their nostalgia. Polixenes' tyrannical nature is apparent in the contrast between his horticultural and his social theories. Upon discovering his son's betrothal to Perdita, he views his son as degenerate, threatening to 'bar' him 'from succession, | Not hold thee of our blood, no, not our kin' (IV. 4. 418–19). He is just as concerned with his family tree as his counterpart. Presumably for fear that it will threaten the legitimacy of other noble lineages, he threatens to deface Perdita's beauty, the source of her 'witchcraft' (411): 'I'll have thy beauty scratched with briars and made | More homely than thy state' (412–13). In *Pandosto*, not only has the prince been betrothed by his father 'vpon reasonable conditions' (*NDSS*, 8, p.

²⁹⁶ David Houston Wood, "He Something Seems Unsettled": Melancholy, Jealousy, and Subjective Temporality in *The Winter's Tale*, *Renaissance Drama*, 31 (2002), 185–21 (p. 186).

²⁹⁷ *Shakespeare's Language*, p. 280.

176) to the Princess of Denmark, but he has also already married without his father's permission; in *The Winter's Tale* Florizel has not actually married Perdita at this stage and insists, contrary to his father's assumption that this 'royal fool' has copulated with the shepherdess, that his 'desires | Run not before mine honour, nor my lusts | Burn hotter than my faith' (33–34). In *Pandosto*, although Dorastus' father becomes 'somewhat chollericke' (*NDSS*, 8, p. 177), he at least attempts to dissuade his son (see *NDSS*, 8, p. 177). Polixenes' explosive response, in contrast, emphasises the irrationality of the reified opinions that even kings are governed by.

Even after Leontes has realized that the events of the first half of the play were 'All mine own folly' (V. 1. 134), he remains in thrall to a nostalgic mode of thought. Inverting the notion that 'melancholy is the nurse of frenzy' (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 'Induction 2', 128), his jealous frenzy has caused his melancholy. Under the influence of Paulina, he has 'performed | A saint-like sorrow' and 'paid down | More penitence than done trespass' (V. 1. 1–2; 3–4). The imagery of performance is employed throughout the play and is apparent in the king's sustained and public mourning. This comment continues the imagery of finance and exchange associated with personal relationships from the very first scene: 'the King of Sicilia means to pay Bohemia the visitation which he justly owes him' (I. 1. 6).²⁹⁸ For Cleomenes, the king has 'paid' his dues. By the end, Hermione has become an object of nostalgic veneration, a figure of an idealised past: 'There is none worthy | Respecting her that's gone' (34–35), says Paulina, while Leontes pities 'not the state nor the remembrance | Of his most sovereign name' (25–26), the desire for posterity, which motivated him in the first part of the play. Not unlike the courts in the *Trauersspiele* that Benjamin analyses, Leontes's court of mourning represents a life paralysed by the past. Drained of all vitality and significance, the present is obliterated along with any hope for a radically different future. The eyes of the dead

²⁹⁸ Money, the play makes clear, is ambivalent to terms of 'mannerly distinguishment': it is used by kings and beggars alike. This is apparent in the Clown's association of romance with considerable personal expenditure: 'If I were not in love with Mopsa, thou shouldst take no money of me, but being enthralled as I am, it will also be the bondage of certain ribbons and gloves' (IV. 4. 226–28). Autolycus provides a disenchanting reflection on this fact in one of his songs, which are themselves commodities: 'Come to the pedlar, | Money's a meddler, | That doth utter all men's ware-a' (307–10)—even this idea cannot escape the market. In the report of the first scene of recognition, however, the Second Gentleman suggests that 'such a deal of wonder is broken out that ballad-makers cannot be able to express it' (V. 2. 23–25), a comment which transforms wonder into a commodity to be sold in broadsheets or at playhouse doors. *The Winter's Tale* as a whole, of course, could be said to cash in on wonder.

queen appear to him as ‘Stars, stars’, while those of the living, ‘All eyes else’, are but ‘dead coals!’ (68–69)—just as when Henry VI sees Gloucester’s corpse: ‘seeing him, I see my life in death’ (2 *Henry VI*, III. 2. 151). Since Leontes’ comments arrive at a definitive judgement of the world in much the same way as when he meditates on the universality of cuckoldry, they drain particular lives and experience of any potential significance. Because it negates the role of the future in the play, Houston Wood’s argument that Leontes’ paranoid melancholia has its roots in ‘conflicting temporalities, through which he reads himself into the forms of others in a similarly contrasting manner: that is, both *nostalgically* and *immediately present*’,²⁹⁹ is one with which I cannot concur.

It is no coincidence that in the scene in which the play begins to morph from a tragedy into a comedy, while the Clown laments Antigonus’ being eaten by the bear and ‘the most piteous cry of the poor souls!’ (III. 3. 84–5) of the shipwreck, the Shepherd responds with a concern for the future: ‘Heavy matters, heavy matters. But look thee here, boy. Now bless thyself. Thou mettest with things dying, I with things newborn’ (103–5). This openness to the future entails an awareness that something radically new might at any moment invade the present, opening up the possibility of an alternative, genuinely unpredictable, future—as, for instance, when Hermione’s statue returns to life. It is the utopian impulse behind truly philosophical thought, which goes beyond existing conceptual categories rather than being constrained by them. The final section of *The Praise of Folly* argues that it is this sort of hope—not inauthentic, nostalgic projections onto the future of the sort Leontes and Polixenes indulge in—that characterises Paul’s ‘fools for Christ’s sake’ (*KJV*, I Corinthians, 4. 10):

[T]he life of good Christians is naught els than a continuall meditacion or certaine shadow as it were of that life to come, it chanceth, that they yet living have for theyr coumforte permission at sometimes to discern a taste or savour of that hieghest rewarde behight vnto them.

(*PF*, p. 127)

Here Erasmus’ seriocomic lauding of folly and his serious theories about the nature of grace, which he views as unexpected and utterly surprising (see *CWE*, 47, pp. 50–60, *et passim*), correspond: ‘Erasmus follows Paul in casting the relation of God to

²⁹⁹ Houston Wood, p. 192.

humanity in terms of unmotivated kindness',³⁰⁰ kindness which is radically different from the calculated, material generosity of the two kings.

But Leontes even construes the statue's silence as an accurate representation of his wife's nature: 'thou art she | In thy not chiding, for she was as tender | As infancy and grace' (V. 3. 25–27). The stultifying discourses to which he still adheres distort his understanding of 'grace'. Even his experience of wonder remains handcuffed to the past and mediated by quotidian wisdom. In striking contrast, however, even momentary contact with the oracle, an embodiment of the 'grandeur of inspiration', occasions an unlearning akin to Blakean 'Self-annihilation'—what the Orthodox church calls *kenosis*:

CLEOMENES But of all, the burst
 And the ear-deaf'ning voice o'th' oracle,
 Kin to Jove's thunder, so surprised my sense
 That I was nothing.

(III. 1. 8–11)

This baffling of 'sense', of the assumption that 'I' am something, offers a model of a humbled consciousness, astonished, and liberated to a certain extent, from the man-made inhuman demands that continue to make people unhappy.

As Montaigne argues, consciousness is innately orientated towards the future. Because consciousness is all but consumed by anxieties about the future, one never inhabits a unitary identity in the present:

We are never in our selves, but beyond. Feare, desire, and hope, draw us ever towards that which is to come, and remove our sense and consideration from that which is, to amuse us on that which shall be, yea when we shall be no more.

(*E*, Book 1, Chapter 3, p. 5)

On the one hand, *The Winter's Tale* dramatizes the dangers of being captive to nostalgia, a subjective inclination that relies on a consciousness that is drawn to what has been rather than what could be. On the other hand, in its *coup de théâtre*, this play suggests that it is at least possible for authentic, utterly unexpected, futures to come to fruition. But *The Winter's Tale* does so unreliably. It is—as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and the Second Tetralogy are—self-conscious about its

³⁰⁰ 'Embodying Ethics', p. 12.

fictional nature. Not unlike Feste's disguise as Sir Topas, the authority of this text is improvised, which frustrates the establishment of any unequivocal standpoint—even if such a standpoint were 'an invitation to accept the openness or, in more recent critical terms, indeterminacy of both art and life'.³⁰¹

The Winter's Tale concedes that the wonderful events of the ending are possible only in the make-believe realm of play. As Paulina comments: 'That she is living, | Were it but told you, should be hooted at | Like an old tale. But it appears she lives' (V. 3. 115–117). For Anne Barton, this comment displays a 'desperate artistic honesty which could admit, now, to creating fictions, while making us understand why and how much we should like these fictions to be real'.³⁰² After all, the very name of the play, *The Winter's Tale*, like Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, is a title that 'itselfe semeth to set foorth no wisdome' ('Introduction', *PF*, pp. 3–6 [p. 3]). As Catherine Belsey reminds us: 'Among the terms in circulation in the period for far-fetched narratives and improbable fables, one favourite was "a winter's tale"³⁰³ and young Mamillius unwittingly alludes to this popular tradition in his comment, 'A sad tale's best for winter | Of sprites and goblins' (*The Winter's Tale*, II. 1. 25–6). The play's implication that it is necessary to unlearn the wisdom of the world so as to be open to the wonders of an incredible future is qualified by the suggestion that even this negative wisdom might be not be true. The play refuses to commit to an unequivocal epistemological standpoint. This radical scepticism, which is justly sceptical of its own suspicions of any sincere, universal or certain way of knowing, finds its most sustained expression in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. These plays use the complexly ironic mode of understanding offered by the discourse of folly to give the lie to the reasonable world by foolishly refusing to insist upon the veracity of their claims.

³⁰¹ Knapp, p. 161.

³⁰² 'Leontes and the Spider' in Kiernan Ryan, ed., *Shakespeare: The Last Plays* (Basingstoke: Routledge, 1999), 22–42 (p. 41)

³⁰³ 'Shakespeare's Sad Tale for Winter: *Hamlet* and the Tradition of Fireside Ghost Stories', *SQ*, 61 (2010), 1–27 (p. 4).

CHAPTER 6

AESTHETIC FOLLIES

'Pitiful ambition in the fool'

KNAPP VORM DRITTEN HAHNENSCHREI ZERREISST EIN NARR
DAS SCHELLENKLEID DES PHILOSOPHEN.

—Heiner Müller, 'Die Hamletmaschine'³⁰⁴

Although Robert Bell is quite correct to argue that 'In Shakespearean tragedy, fooling matters seriously and fools take centre stage',³⁰⁵ *Hamlet's* engagement with the discourse of folly is unique. Indeed, not least because the discourse of folly is omnipresent in the play's language, *Hamlet* does not simply engage with folly, but is constituted by it. The play's recurrent rhetorical tics are 'foolish figure[s]' (II. 2. 198) of speech and it abounds in the circumlocutions, puns, riddles, paradoxes and oxymora characteristic of the loquacious patter of Shakespeare's wise fools.

The play's obsession with such rhetorical figures is manifest from the outset. In the first exchange between Claudius and Hamlet, the King employs an oxymoron—'But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son' (I. 2. 64)—a figure of speech, meaning 'pointedly foolish' in Greek,³⁰⁶ that baffles logic by negating both the meanings it evokes: Hamlet cannot be the 'son' and 'cousin' of the same man. The Prince responds with his famous opening pun; his 'uncle father' (II. 2. 323) is 'A little more than kin, and less than kind' (I. 2. 65). For Catherine Bates, puns embody in miniature what is special about art—its distance from the ordinary world:

³⁰⁴ Heiner Müller: *Werke 4*, ed. by Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 551–554 (p. 553) [the irregular capitalisation is Müller's]; 'Shortly before the third cock's crow a clown will tear the fool's cap off the philosopher' (*Hamlet Machine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. and trans. by Carl Webber (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984), p. 53.

³⁰⁵ *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), p. 101.

³⁰⁶ James Calderwood and Frank Kermode provide extensive analyses of the use of oxymora and puns in *Hamlet* (see *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 64–80 and *Shakespeare's Language* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 101–108).

As the smallest unit of linguistic deviation the pun was a microcosm of literariness, since it contained ambiguity, polysemy, and frequently metaphor all within a single word. A pun is literariness writ small, and its supposed difference from ‘ordinary words’ explains why it’s traditionally been branded as illegitimate and treated as a barbarian—a foreign element or exotic intruder.³⁰⁷

Because it tempts him from the high road of clear, instrumental self-expression and because, in that Claudius is an unkind schemer, it departs from what is acceptable to say in public, Hamlet’s opening pun is doubly subversive of the new King’s ‘rotten’ (I. 4. 90) state. To be sure, the seriousness of *Hamlet* lies in its lightheartedness.

Elsewhere, the Prince uses quibbles and puns, ‘indirections’, to discover his mother’s ‘directions’ (II. 1. 63), her thoroughly dishonourable intentions:

HAMLET Now, mother, what’s the matter?
QUEEN GERTRUDE Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
HAMLET Mother, you have my father much offended.
QUEEN GERTRUDE Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
HAMLET Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.
QUEEN GERTRUDE Why, how now, Hamlet!
HAMLET What’s the matter now?
QUEEN GERTRUDE Have you forgot me?
HAMLET No, by the rood, not so.
 You are the Queen, your husband’s brother’s wife,
 And, would it were not so, you are my mother.

(III. 4. 7–15)

This terse stichomythia—a rhetorical mode in the fool’s linguistic armoury from Aristophanes onwards—attests to Hamlet’s propensity for ‘punning equivocation’, which connects him with ‘those characters called fools [or] court jesters’ and ultimately allows him ‘to uncover the most hidden of motives’.³⁰⁸ The discourse of folly provides Hamlet with a position from which to question the values of the world that the powers that be would like to pass off as reasonable or natural.

³⁰⁷ *Play in a Godless World: The Theory and Practice of Play in Shakespeare, Nietzsche and Freud* (London: Open Gate Press, 1999), p. 142; Kermode points out that it is an example of hendiadys, a figure of speech in which paired words denote a single idea that can ‘take us to the heart of the play’ (*Shakespeare’s Language*, p. 101).

³⁰⁸ Jacques Lacan, ‘Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*’, *YFS*, 55 (1977), 30–51 (p. 33).

The tragic hero's very name in the *Historiae Danicae*, Amleth, 'probably means fool or weakling'.³⁰⁹ Livy's *Roman History*, a possible source for the play and one with which Shakespeare was certainly familiar, relates the story of Brutus, who resolves to 'save himself' by 'counterfeit[ing] a noddie and a verie innocent' (*NDSS*, 7, p. 80). At Delphos, Brutus presents Apollo with a Silenic offering—'a 'golden rod within a staffe of cornell wood' (*NDSS*, 7, p. 80)—to symbolise his hidden wisdom. Not only does Hamlet, like Brutus, disguise 'his long hid wits' out of 'deep policy' ('The Rape of Lucrece', 1815–1816), but he also assumes his 'antic disposition' (I. 5. 170) in order to penetrate the façade of the serious world. The Prince's feigned folly or madness offers a position outside the serious world, from which he can examine the opinions, the *doxa*, that constitute it. For Richard Wilson, Hamlet's creative response to his father's death is nothing other than Shakespeare's 'metadramatizing [of] his own evasion of absolutism's neoclassical aesthetic, with its imperious demand for decorum, transparency, and order'.³¹⁰

Folly's digressive tendencies are intrinsic to the play's dramatic structure as a whole. Between the Ghost's injunction—'remember me' (I. 5. 91)—and the fencing match at the conclusion, the play's action is hardly action at all. Hamlet postpones his revenge, evading the role he will eventually have to play. *Hamlet* is a set piece in the fool's favourite art of narrative dilation. *Hamlet*'s diversions and digressions certainly give the lie to the notion that the 'structure' of a play must run in 'a satisfactorily linear, sequential course';³¹¹ in a certain sense, this play is one long, slightly farcical digression, full of quibbling, role-playing and logic-chopping. Because it is written in the margins of the tragedy's main plot, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* cannily registers its source's obsession with digression by foregrounding the misadventures of two marginal characters.

While creative responses to the play are attuned to the pivotal significance of folly in it,³¹² critical analyses have, for the most part, either viewed folly as an

³⁰⁹ A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 393.

³¹⁰ *Free Will: Art and Power on Shakespeare's Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 207.

³¹¹ Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespeherian Rag: Essays on a Critical Process* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 94.

³¹² *Dogg's Hamlet*, Tom Stoppard's truncated *Hamlet*, boils the play down to a fifteen-minute sequence, which, according to R. A. Foakes, 'reveals it to be a farce' (*Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and*

isolated phenomenon, examining it in terms of its generic implications,³¹³ or considered it in connection with the play's main protagonist.³¹⁴ By and large, they have stuck to the ostensibly solid theoretical categories of character and genre. As the previous chapter argued, however, playful digression is of crucial significance to Shakespeare's philosophy of folly.

Kiernan Ryan contends that the play's peculiar structure and language are the keys to its philosophical vision:

[When] we find *Hamlet* scuppering its own plot and deranging its own discourse to baffle and confound generations of critics, what we are feeling is nothing less than the tidal pull of the possible, of the as-yet-unrealized, twisting the script into this unique convolution of language and form that continues to hold us spellbound.³¹⁵

Precisely because of its ostensible purposelessness, digression, even the momentary digression of the pun, puts the serious world on hold. It lays bare the dangers inherent in an inflexible, purposeful seriousness, a seriousness that has led to *Hamlet* being read as a sober philosophical essay, albeit one interrupted by the occasional scurrility.

Shakespeare's Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 42); Heiner Müller's astonishing appropriation, 'Die Hamletmaschine', enlists ideas of absurdity and aporia latent in the original in order to deconstruct conservative ideas about *Hamlet*; Howard Barker's rewrite is attuned to the riddling ambiguities of the original and centres on Gertrude's phatic 'cry' (see 'Gertrude—The Cry' in *Gertrude—The Cry and Knowledge and a Girl* (London: Calder, 2002), pp. 9–93).

³¹³ See Peter Davidson, 'The Comedy of *Hamlet*', in *Hamlet: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Martin Coyle (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1992), pp. 37–46; Ann Thompson, 'Infinite Jest: The Comedy of *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark', *SS*, 56 (2003), 93–104; Phyllis Gorfain uses zoological theories of play and Bakhtin in her reading of *Hamlet* (see 'Towards a Theory of Play and the Carnavalesque in *Hamlet*', in *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*, ed. by Ronald Knowles (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), pp. 152–76).

³¹⁴ Despite the promising comparison, Ivan Turgenev's study of *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* focuses on considering what universal 'types' each character represents and pays no direct attention to the nature of folly in these texts (see *Hamlet and Don Quixote*, trans. by Robert Nicholls (London: Hendersons, 1930), p. 8); Robert Weimann points out that Hamlet's madness 'attracts suspicion' and considers it in the light of theatrical traditions of staging madness (*Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, trans. by Robert Schwartz (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 128; and Tim Prentki augments these arguments, adding philosophical insights (see *The Fool in European Theatre: Stages of Folly* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 96–110). Bell examines the Prince's engagement with folly (see *Great Stage*, pp. 100–110); Michael Groves argues along much the same lines, albeit in a more measured tone (see 'Hamlet as a Fool', *HamS*, 4 (1982), 72–88); see also Harry Levin, 'The Antic Disposition', in *Shakespeare: Hamlet*, ed. by John Jump, Casebook Series (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 122–136 and Dimiter Daphinoff, 'Shakespeares Narren' in *Der Narr: Beiträge zu einem Interdisziplinären Gespräch* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1991), pp. 57–71 [p. 68]).

³¹⁵ *Shakespeare*, 3rd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 169.

The Graveyard Scene is calculated to confound the expectations brought to bear on it by a 'neat and cleanly' (*I Henry IV*, II. 5. 417) aesthetics. When he inveighs against clowns' tendency to extemporise, Hamlet himself adheres to such a serious-minded aesthetics:

[...] let not those that play your clowns speak more than is set down for them. For there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quality of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered.

(III. 2. 36–41)

Ironically, however, not only is Hamlet playing the fool, but his foolery is also what occludes the 'necessary question of the play', its serious point. By reading the main action out of the play's inbuilt creative interpretation of itself, the Graveyard Scene, this chapter's analysis turns such decorous interpretations of the play topsy-turvy. Paradoxically, it is the interruptions of the action that are important. Jacques Lacan contends that the key question posed by *Hamlet* is: 'what happens in the Graveyard scene'?³¹⁶ While this is something of an exaggeration, like all exaggerations, perhaps, it has a kernel of truth. This play's seriousness lies in its light-heartedness; this is not, however, the cruelly incurious light-heartedness of blithe optimists. Rather, it is a darker laughter, a laughter that acts against 'what we fear might take control of us'.³¹⁷

Anti-Philosophy

Hamlet is full of temporally and emotionally disorientating moments of doubling, which offer frequently indecorous replays of what is supposed to happen. This play does not simply 'hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature' (III. 2. 20). Rather, it holds a distorting fairground mirror up to itself. For instance, Hamlet and the Gravedigger's quibbling equivocation about who 'liest' (V. 2. 11) in the grave almost travesties the figure of the ghost and the revenge plot: this is not the first time that the prince has been spoken to from a grave, nor will it be the last. This comic exchange precludes the presence of the 'quick' (114) in Ophelia's grave.

³¹⁶ 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire', p. 33.

³¹⁷ Ghose, p. 1005.

Like *The Winter's Tale*, *Hamlet* hinges on an event that is absent from the sources and only possible in the manifest 'illusion' (I. 1. 126) offered by mimesis. Stalking the battlements of Elismore, the Ghost fractures the linear notion of time upon which the sensible world and its systems depend: 'The time is out of joint' (I. 5. 186). Its paradoxical presence as an absence, something that is neither living nor dead, disrupts the distinction between the 'quick' (V. 1. 114) and the 'dead' (119), about which Hamlet and the Gravedigger quibble. By definition, then, a Ghost is a non-identical element in any epistemological system or ontology:

GHOST Swear by his sword.
HAMLET Well said, old mole, canst work i'th' earth so fast?
 A worthy pioneer! Once more remove good friends.
HORATIO O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.
HAMLET And therefore as a stranger give it welcome:
 There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
 Than are dreamt of in your [F, *our*] philosophy.
(I. 5. 160–166)

Not least because it straddles two supposedly separate philosophical disciplines, challenging the division between natural philosophy and metaphysics, Hamlet encourages Horatio to embrace the challenge this 'strange' addendum poses to existing knowledge. This is more pronounced in the Folio's use of the personal pronoun 'our'. In this version of the play, Hamlet extols the virtues of learned ignorance, rather than merely questioning Horatio's Stoic standpoint.

Referring to his father's ghost as an 'old mole' and a 'fellow in the cellarage' (151), Hamlet does not take the 'necessary question' of his own play wholly seriously. The Ghost, who is an absolute challenge to existing systems of knowledge or 'our philosophy', is not taken without a pinch of salt. The remarkable way that Hamlet philosophises through irony—by holding up any unequivocal standpoint to playful mockery—epitomises the seriously playful, philosophically anti-philosophical movement of this tragedy. Moreover, by comically undercutting the seriousness of this uncanny figure, which 'bodes some strange eruption' (I. 1. 68) to Denmark, Hamlet refuses to incorporate this absolute challenge to reason's conceptual categories into the language of reason.

Although *Hamlet* has been commonly held to be Shakespeare's most philosophical play, it is at pains to point out that the reasonable world is far less

reasonable than one might imagine. Not only is the play full of ineluctable complexities, curtailments, and elaborate theoretical connivances, most of which go disastrously wrong, but, like *King Lear*, it also evokes the self-destructiveness of the sensible and purposeful world:

How stand I then
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep; while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!

(IV. 4. 55–65)

Paradoxically, Hamlet is compelled to revenge his father by the foolish example of men caught up in an Hobbesian war of all against all, fighting for the sake of that most fickle of things, fame.

Reason's self-destructive tendencies are further emphasised by Laertes' peculiar response to Hamlet's apology. This is itself incongruous, since the Prince claims diminished responsibility, despite the fact that his 'madness' (V. 2. 215, 217) has been a performance:

I am satisfied in nature,
Whose motive in this case should stir me most
To my revenge. But in my terms of honour
I stand aloof and will no reconciliation
Till by some elder masters of known honour
I have the voice and precedent of peace
To keep my name ungored. But all that time
I do receive your offered love like love
And will not wrong it.

(221–228)

On the one hand, Laertes must, to an extent, accept the prince's apology in order to justify the fencing match, a game, rather than have an outright duel. Hamlet's oxymoron—they will 'frankly play' (230) in their bout—is not only accidentally ironic, since Laertes fully intends to cheat, but it also evokes a key concern of the play: namely, how representation can get to the truth of things. On the other, it

seems to me that the statesman's son's equivocating answer—alongside Hamlet's reflections on the war—exposes the fact that these characters act in bad faith. Laertes knows that what he is doing is thoroughly dishonourable, since he admits that cheating 'is almost against my conscience' (279), thereby accidentally rendering the absolute category of 'conscience' relative. Likewise, Hamlet follows an example of pointless self-destructiveness, even as he perceives its futility. Strikingly, both characters feel the urge to adhere to a system of values that they know to be wrong.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare insistently points out that theories, which have the potential to be self-defining, are often self-curtailing. Laertes describes himself as 'a woodcock to mine own springe' (291) and points out that: 'The foul practice | Hath turned itself on me' (301–302), while Hamlet comments on Polonius' demise: 'an 'tis the sport to have the engineer | Hoist with his own petard' (III. 4. 204–205).³¹⁸ As in a farce, there is 'sport' or comic satisfaction to be had in seeing man's *ingenium*—his unique capacity to think and to systematise—destroyed by its own connivance. At the end of the play, Horatio promises to relate a senseless tale of

carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on my cunning, and for no cause,
And in this upshot the purposes mistook
Fallen on th'inventors' heads.

(V. 2. 365–368)

Although *Hamlet* makes no claims to be a tragedy of high seriousness, it eloquently illustrates the incoherence of the sensible world's systems and modes of speculation and judgement.

In his ostensibly inept love letter, with its 'ill phrase' (II. 2. 109) of 'beautified Ophelia' (109), Hamlet describes his body as a 'machine' (121), an idea that Heiner Müller borrows for the title of his brilliant adaptation of the play. Because it imbues a human being with a mechanical inflexibility, this phrase is

³¹⁸ In early modern English, 'engineer' could signify both 'a person who makes engines, structures and systems' and 'an author or designer of something; a plotter, a schemer' (*OED.*, definitions, nos. 1 and 5a).

incongruous—as Henri Bergson observes: ‘automatism makes us laugh’.³¹⁹ Hamlet’s comment implies that people—far from possessing the mysterious subjective depths, which critics from Coleridge to Bloom have attributed to Hamlet—are actually mere functions of the historical situation and society in which they find themselves. This idea is apparent in modern medical parlance. A functioning depressive or alcoholic still operates as a cog in the social system. They go to work and, more importantly, buy things. Hamlet, of course, focuses on its protagonist’s disinclination to function, his hesitancy to play the socially scripted role of the avenger. Instead, he wastes time, resolving to ‘be idle’ (III. 2. 87). It is no coincidence, then, that one of the fragments of a play within this play offers a powerful vignette of a man caught between ‘desire’ and ‘performance’ (*Macbeth*, II. 3. 27, 28): ‘*So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood | Like a neutral to his will and matter, | Did nothing*’ (II. 2. 418–421), a *mise en abyme* that vividly evokes Hamlet’s paradoxical situation as an avenger, who cannot bring himself to avenge.

The Prince may claim to possess ‘that within which passes show’ (I. 2. 85), but, since he takes on a dizzying number of discrete identities, this profession of integrity is disingenuous. Aside from the fool, he plays a lover, a sailor, a duellist and a playwright—as Tim Prentki puts it, Hamlet, who ‘sees himself from his first appearance as an actor’, opts for ‘the suppression of any fixed identity’,³²⁰ a course of action that is perhaps the only one to take in a thoroughly ‘rotten’ totality. Although Hamlet reflects critically on such values through play, he ultimately does what is expected of him. Because it reflects a realisation that one is not autonomous, the comedy of automatism is dark.

The ‘pregnant’ (II. 2. 206) nonsense of Müller’s remarkable rewrite is sensitive to the frustration of one who is forced to play out a role they accept only in bad faith. His Hamlet exclaims:

WIE EINEN BUCKEL SCHLEPP ICH MEIN SCHWERES
GEHIRN

³¹⁹ *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Breton and Fred Rothwell (Rockville, MA: Manor, 2008), p. 8.

³²⁰ Prentki, p. 98, p. 99.

ZWEITER CLOWN IM KOMMUNISTISCHEN FRÜHLING
SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THIS AGE OF HOPE.³²¹

The visionary melancholic's intelligence is comically physicalized as a clown's insufferable burden. For Müller, Hamlet's foray into the depths of his own psyche is clearly quixotic. By refusing to take itself seriously, exposing the self-destructive tendencies inherent in a purely instrumental, purposeful form of reason, and foregrounding the objective limitations of the knowing subject, *Hamlet* clears the way for the radically new modes of understanding furnished by the discourse of folly. Paradoxically, in this play, thought liberates itself from the received account of what is rational through a discourse that is located on the extreme edge of the reasonable world, the discourse of folly.

'Here's fine revolution'

With the possible exception of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Graveyard scene is the most frequently invoked and commonly parodied scene in the whole of Shakespeare.³²² Because it offers an interlude in which plebeian characters reflect on the dominant values of society, includes the skull of a dead jester, and quite probably employs images drawn from Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*,³²³ folly takes centre stage in this culturally ubiquitous scene. If the Ghost might be said to act as a Chorus, or a 'a retributory voice of conscience' ('Introduction', *NDSS*, 7, p. 26)—one which peddles an account of what should happen—here workers provide an alternative history, rooted in non-intentional forms of discourse, a history that puts what should happen on hold.

This scene in particular enacts the question that Ernesto Grassi and Marisella Lorch consider to be one of the key questions posed by fool-literature from Erasmus to Cervantes: namely, is not 'the formal thought of analytical philosophy nothing

³²¹ Heiner Müller: *Werke 4*, p. 542. Müller writes in capitals, does not punctuate, and starts writing in English as quoted; the full translation is: 'I'M LUGGING MY HEAVY | BRAIN | LIKE A HUNCHBACKED CLOWN | NUMBER TWO IN THE SPRING OF COMMUNISM | SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THIS AGE OF HOPE' (Webber, p. 53 [translation modified]).

³²² See Ghose, pp. 1004–6.

³²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 1003–1018.

but insanity [...] since it involves an absolute removal from objective reality’?³²⁴ *Hamlet* casts a critical gaze over everyday conceptions of rationality; in this scene, as in the play as a whole, time-wasting discourse offers a deft parody of the language of intention, which foregrounds the similarities between comical quibbling and philosophical disputation, between the serious and the comic: ‘How absolute the knave is!’ (V. 1. 129–134) exclaims Hamlet. The Gravedigger turns out to be something of a Socratic questioner:

We must speak by the card or equivocation will undo us. By the Lord, Horatio, this three years I have took note of it, the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the courtier he galls his kibe.
(129–134)

Voltaire’s categorisation of *Hamlet* as one of literary history’s ‘monstrous farces’ on the grounds that ‘[A] grave is dug on the stage; some gravediggers, holding skulls in their hands, make bad puns worthy of their sort; to their abominable scurrilities, Prince Hamlet makes nonsensical replies that are no less disgusting’ is inaccurate in one crucial respect.³²⁵ Although there are certainly plenty of puns and scurrilities in this scene, these peasants, Hamlet implies, use hair-splitting distinctions and detect evasive ambiguities of utterance just as well as any ‘courtier’.

The patter between the two workmen, a mock-philosophical dialogue, makes the paradox of reason’s desire for clear-cut analytical truths manifest; such definitions, they imply, are at odds with the messiness of reality:³²⁶

SECOND MAN [...] The crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian
 burial
GRAVEDIGGER How can that be unless she drowned herself in her
 own defence?
SECOND MAN Why ’tis found so.

³²⁴ *Folly and Insanity in Renaissance Literature* (New York: Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1986), p. 86.

³²⁵ ‘Dissertation sur la trágédie ancienne et moderne’, quoted in Ghose, p. 1003.

³²⁶ Philip Sidney argues that for all the ‘largesse’ of moral philosophers’ ‘distinctions’ and ‘divisions’ they only teach what virtue is; they do not enact it (*An Apology for Poetry: or the Defense of Poetry*, ed. by R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 88).

GRAVEDIGGER It must be *se offendendo*. It cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches — it is to act, to do, to perform. Argal, she drowned herself wittingly.

(V. 1. 4–12)

As in a revenge tragedy in which the act of revenge is delayed, the facts of the matter do not correspond with the official version of events. ‘Is this [the] Law?’ (21), asks the Second (or straight) man, evidently unconvinced by the Gravedigger’s mock-legal disputation, to which the latter knowingly replies: ‘Ay, marry is’t. Crowner’s ’quest law’ (22). The only ‘truth’ to be extrapolated from this corrupt version of the law is the fact that the rich have the privilege or ‘countenance’ (27) to do what they will. The Gravedigger inappropriately appropriates both legalistic discourse and its formal ‘quiddities’ (V. 1. 94)—the play, after all, blurs any possible distinction between acting, doing and performing. He makes divisions where there are none. His malapropisms—‘*se offendendo*’ and ‘Argal’ (for *se defendendo* [self-defence] and *ergo*, respectively—make a mockery of what George Puttenham calls the legal profession’s ‘peevisch affectation of words’,³²⁷ and so does the grotesque implication that the has coroner literally sat ‘on’ Ophelia’s corpse.

Shakespeare puts the rhetorical tendency to divide the world into conceptually palatable chunks into the mouths of ‘good man delver’ (14) and his mate; and these plebeian characters gall the ‘kibe’ of the great humanist rhetoricians as well as the courtiers. As Walter Kaiser contends, what ‘the humanist spirit hated most was divisions and distinctions’; ‘partition’, he continues, ‘was most commonly attacked or avoided in humanist oratory’.³²⁸ But rather than refusing to follow ‘common sophmisters and rhetoritians’ and ‘shew by definition what I am’ (*PF*, p. 10), as Stultitia does, Shakespeare subverts the authority of otiose divisions and distinctions by travestyng them.

Hamlet furnishes us with the most famous mockery of partition in Renaissance literature. Polonius comments that the players are:

³²⁷ *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. by Gladys Dodge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 141.

³²⁸ *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), p. 42.

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, scene indivisible or poem unlimited. Seneca cannot be too heavy nor Plautus too light for the law of writ and the liberty.

(II. 2. 333–336)

Although uttered with the punctilious earnestness that has become synonymous with this character, these divisions are every bit as absurd as Touchstone's. What Polonius is attempting to say—that the actors are very capable—is obscured by his very attempt at precise definition. The idea that they can adeptly play both classical tragedy and comedy emphasizes the fluidity of acting, which contrasts with the pointless formalism of his partition; the inclusion of the unclassifiable forms—'poem unlimited' and 'scene indivisible'—further undermines his attempts at classification.

Polonius problematizes the paradoxical wisdom of folly, which is so integral to the play. After Hamlet informs him of the content of the satirical work he is reading,³²⁹ which says that 'old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging amber and plumtree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit' (II. 2. 193–196), he riddles: 'I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down. For yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am—if, like a crab, you could go backward' (298–301), Polonius comments in an aside: 'Though this be madness yet there is method in't' (201–202); he discerns 'a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of' (207–208).

Because he takes a profound pride in his own sententious wisdom, Polonius is himself a fool in a pejorative sense, but it is he who utters this perfectly reasonable insight about the paradoxical wisdom of folly. In other words, *Hamlet's* alienation from (and *of*) sensible values undermines the wisdom that the only thing one can know is that one knows nothing. As A. D. Nuttall writes of Hamlet and Polonius's digression on the imagined shapes of a certain cloud—one of the

³²⁹ Peter G. Bietenholz has speculated that this is a reference to Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, which describes old age in comparable terms; see *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus: Erasmus' Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 260.

numerous ‘tiny fool’s plays’ in the play, which Bell entitles ‘*The Clown Prince and Foolonius*’:³³⁰

Hamlet cruelly draws Polonius into warm, positive agreement and then hits him with the emergent truth that a cloud can be made to resemble anything we like. [...] So Polonius is made a fool of, as the play *Hamlet* makes a fool of any critic who offers a single positive interpretation.³³¹

The play suggests neither that folly provides a straightforward alternative to wisdom, nor that all philosophical ideas are void from the outset. Rather, as Ryan writes:

To grasp a Shakespeare play as fully as possible at any point in time is to recognize that its gaze is bent upon a vanishing point at which no reader or spectator can hope to arrive. Like the hat that the circus clown kicks out of reach every time he steps forward to pick it up, final comprehension of the play is indefinitely postponed by each act of interpretation.³³²

Due to the way in which *Hamlet* makes a mockery of any unequivocal standpoint—even the view that folly harbours a paradoxical wisdom—it audaciously implies that the serious world is nothing other than a game. And yet, like *The Winter’s Tale*, it prefers not to endorse even this wisdom too seriously.

Like the rituals of quotidian life, games are time-limited and dependent upon repetition, which for Bates is ‘one of the defining characteristics of play’.³³³ Because they conspicuously refuse to play by the rules—murdering the rightful king; proceeding ‘To post | with such dexterity to incestuous sheets’ (I. 2. 156–157); transgressing the rules of primogeniture; and interring Polonius in a ‘hugger-mugger’ (IV. 5. 84) fashion—Gertrude and Claudius are outrageous. Hamlet contends that his stepfather’s authority is assumed by comparing him to a mocking king. Claudius is an actor in a pageant, ‘A vice of kings’ (96) and ‘A king of shreds and patches’ (99), who has stolen a prop; he is ‘A cutpurse of the empire and the rule | That from a shelf the precious diadem stole | And put it in his pocket’ (96–99).

³³⁰ Bell, p. 102.

³³¹ *Shakespeare the Thinker*, p. 201.

³³² *Shakespeare*, p. 175.

³³³ Bates, p. 171.

The Prince's mother has been duped. Her 'hasty marriage' (II. 2. 57) to someone inferior is akin to an amateur gambler being deceived by a card counter: 'What devil was't | That thus hath cozened you at hoodman blind?' (III. 4. 74–75), the Prince asks Gertrude.

This imagery of card-play continues when Claudius says to Laertes that 'with a little shuffling, you may choose | A sword unbated and in a pass of practice | Requite him for your father' (IV. 7. 134–137). As with the related concern about the sort of veracity mimesis can create, the ironies generated by Claudius's attempts to literally 'poison in jest' (III. 2. 228) are as ambivalent as they are paradoxical. Shakespeare *dramatizes* the transgression of the rules of a game, since every player or performer of a game must have knowledge of the game's limits and what is at stake. He thereby implies that it is desirable to play by the rules, while, simultaneously, estranging the everyday world by laying bare the fact that everyday life consists in the performance of certain roles. Perhaps with the Globe's motto in mind, Nietzsche writes: 'We have to improvise—all the world improvises its day. Let us proceed today as all the world does'.³³⁴

Parasites and Revolutionaries

Hamlet dramatises two models of human relations. The first sort consists of knowing one's place. In their prolix and grovelling acquiescence in the betrayal of their erstwhile friend, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern invoke the body politic, a notion that was already central to the Elizabethan World Picture and the burgeoning theories of absolutism:

GUILDENSTERN We will ourselves provide.
 Most holy and religious fear it is
 To keep those many bodies safe
 That live and feed upon your majesty.
ROSENCRANTZ The single and peculiar life is bound
 With all the strength and armour of the mind
 To keep itself from noyance; but much more
 That spirit upon whose weal depends and rests
 The lives of many. The cress of majesty

³³⁴ *The Gay Science With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 95.

Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
 What's near it with it; or it is a massy wheel
 Fixed on the summit of the highest mount
 To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
 Are mortised and adjoined, which when it falls
 Each small annexment, petty consequence,
 Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
 Did the king sigh but with a general groan.

(III. 3. 6–23)

The assumption that those in authority have a natural, physical relation to their subjects is reconceived to imply that such a relationship is parasitical. The flatly conventional sentiment of this verse illustrates the dishonesty of decorous language. The allegorical figure of Fortune, scurrilously debased in Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's opening repartee with Hamlet, is invoked insincerely with ostensible sincerity. Under the (unconvincing) guise of concern for their fellow subjects—they wish to 'keep those many bodies safe | That live and feed upon your majesty'—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply pursue their own advancement.

The second model of relations is based on the fact that death is a radical leveller, a fact not lost on the medieval painters and sculptors of *Totentänzen*.³³⁵ Shakespeare's Richard II invokes this tradition when he realises, aghast, that

[...] within the hollow crown
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king
 Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits,
 Scoffing at his state and grinning at his pomp.

(III. 2. 160–163)

All creations, systems, people and societies end up as just as they start out—as the Anglican funeral service curtly puts it, they progress from 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust'; 'But age with his stealing steps', intones the Gravedigger in his cheerful appropriation of a courtly lyric,³³⁶ '[...] hath shipped me into the land | *As if I had never been such*' (67, 69–70 [*my emphasis*]). His language is not only

³³⁵ For a thorough analysis of *Hamlet* and the iconographic and literary tradition of the *danse macabre* in late medieval and early modern Europe, see Sophie Oosterwijk, "Alas, poor Yorick": Death, the fool and the *danse macabre*' in Stefanie Knöll, ed., *Narren—Masken—Karneval: Meisterwerke von Dürer bis Kubin aus der Düsseldorfer Graphiksammlung: Mensch und Tod* (Regensburg: Schnell and Steiner, 2009), pp. 20–33.

³³⁶ Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 103.

without an instrumental *purpose*, but it is also *pointless* in the strongest sense of the word: it registers that all identity is transient. Since it suggests that all the systems, discourses and institutions that mould man's innermost desires and hopes are mutable, this cheerful lyric harbours nothing other than a potentially revolutionary realisation.

Since it articulates an alternative to the logic of inheritance that governs Hamlet's actions in favour of a shared or common root, the earth, the Gravedigger's boast—'There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and gravemakers; they hold up Adam's profession' (V. 1. 28–29)—is perhaps the most explicit formulation of the revolutionary conception of human relations. It alludes to John Ball's question: 'When Adam delved and Eve span | Who was then the gentleman?' It seems that man comes from dust as well as returning to it; in the face of this fact, social divisions and class distinctions are absurd. Indeed, this sort of cyclical relationship between humans and matter, between worm and man, is already evident in Livy. The oracle predicts: 'WHICH OF YOU [...] SHALL FIRST KISSE YOUR MOTHER, HE SHAL BEARE CHIEFE AND SOVERAIGNE RULE IN ROME' (*NDSS*, 7, p. 81 [irregular capitalization in the original]). Despite his foolish appearance, Brutus interprets this comment correctly and 'kiss[es] the earth, thinking with himself, that she was the common mother of all mortall men' (*NDSS*, 7, p. 81); it is he who later rules Rome.

Hamlet is astonished that, for all their decisive action, the military heroes of yesteryear have been reduced to earth: 'Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?' (192–3), to which Horatio replies: 'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so' (195). Hamlet then rephrases his realisation in seriocomic couplets:

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away
O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw.

(V. 1. 201–5)

By repeating his philosophical considerations in nonsensical rhymes, to a certain extent Hamlet makes a mockery of death. For Indira Ghose, this sort of laughter is characteristic of 'the medieval mind', for which it 'marked one's triumph over the

specious threat of evil and the illusion of death. It was a defence strategy against the human fear of dying, intended to expose its absurdity'.³³⁷ Ironically, the harbinger of modern subjectivity has a decidedly old-fashioned theory of laughter, but it is precisely this sort of humour that furnishes him with the estranged perspective required for philosophical speculation.

Discussing Hamlet's comment in the graveyard—'And now my Lady Worm's—chapless and knocked about the mazard with a sexton's spade. Here's fine revolution an we had the trick to see't' (V. 1. 83–86)—Ryan contends:

The strict historicist scholar will hasten to point out that the word 'revolution' must be construed here as a reference to the wheel of fortune or the whirligig of time, and that to impute our modern political meaning to it would be anachronistic. It would indeed, but it would also be perfectly in keeping with Shakespeare's profoundly anachronistic imagination.³³⁸

This type of future-orientated thought about the revolution of the times already has traces of the modern understanding of revolution in it. It acknowledges that all the structures, values and systems of the serious world are not set in stone, but rather that they are embodied in that most perishable of things, human flesh.

This is apparent in Hamlet's subversion of the King's straightforward questions about the location of Polonius's corpse:

KING Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?
HAMLET At supper.
KING At Supper! Where?
HAMLET Not where he eats but where 'a is eaten. A certain convocation
 of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for
 diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for
 maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service,
 two dishes but to one table. That's the end!
KING Alas, alas.
HAMLET A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king
 and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.
KING What dost thou mean by this?
HAMLET Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress
 through the guts of a beggar.

(IV. 3. 26–31)

³³⁷ Ghose, p. 1004.

³³⁸ 'Here's fine revolution': Shakespeare's Philosophy of the Future', *Essays in Criticism*, 63 (2013), 105–126 (p. 124).

Hamlet's outlandish image of politically savvy worms eating the verbose statesman is humorous precisely because of its absurdity. It perhaps inverts an analogous image in Montaigne: 'the heart and life of a mighty and triumphant emperor is but the break-fast of a *seely* little worme' (*E*, Book 2, Chapter 8, p. 258). Through the pun on 'progress' Hamlet compares the elaborate ritual of a monarch's movement around the country houses of the nobility to the digestion and excreting of a fish by a beggar, while another pun serves to conflate the archaic sense of 'diet', which meant a meeting frequently of national importance between members of the aristocracy and royalty, with the familiar sense of 'diet' meaning the type of food one eats.³³⁹ In his explanation of his riddle, he parodies syllogistic thought, a logical mode that is employed ironically by many of Shakespeare's wise fools.³⁴⁰ The structure of a syllogism is, after all, premised on an account of straightforward causality to which the play does not adhere.

Hamlet's attempts at individuating the skulls—'This might be the pate of a politician' (73–74) / 'This might be my Lord Such-a-One' (78)—are a little more than the 'pompous platitudes' based on 'the fear of the negation of identity in death' that Ghose considers them to be.³⁴¹ As the use of the indefinite article and the mock-title, 'Lord Such-a-One', implies, Hamlet's experience among the skulls involves a *reductio ad absurdum*—or, possibly, *ad nauseam* ('Dost thou think Alexander looked o'this fashion i'th' earth? [...] And smelt so? Pah!' [187–88, 190])—of the compulsion to create clear-cut identities. Even when he is faced with something literally faceless, a skull conspicuously bereft of any distinguishing features, Hamlet assigns an identity and a profession to it.

Of course, the character that Hamlet fleshes out most vividly is the former Court Jester, Yorrik. While the countless appropriations and parodies may have numbed the effect this moment, its sheer strangeness should be emphasized:

HAMLET Alas, poor Yorrik. I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of
 infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a

³³⁹ *OED*.

³⁴⁰ The syllogism is a figure of analytic reason that Stultitia finds distasteful; see *PF*, p. 48.

³⁴¹ 'Jesting with Death', p. 1011.

thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your jibes now—your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning, quite chapfallen.

(V. 1. 174–84)

This astonishing moment, in which the ever-dead Yorrik is vividly resurrected, offers an antic pastiche of the dramatist's profession of fleshing out historical or imaginary figures. Bates contends that in his tragedies, Shakespeare 'brings characters on to the stage who speculate on the denial of death that is implicit in any representation of it and on the fact that tragedy's consolatory power rests upon a falsification of life's grim realities'.³⁴² Put another way, what is so disarming about Shakespeare's tragedies and, as this thesis has shown, many of his other plays too is their mimetic impurity: they refuse to forget that they are fictions, which impart meaning and coherence to a confusing and meaningless reality.

When he 'abjures' his 'potent art' (50), Prospero observes that 'graves at my command | Have waked their sleepers' (*The Tempest*, V. 1. 49), but *Hamlet* admits its own lack of mastery over its material. The play's admission of representation's impotence, however, is expressed indeterminately, through its digressive, riddling seriocomic idiom, so that even *Hamlet's* awareness of art's inability to affect the brute facts of existence is rendered lighthearted. This moment of mimetic vulnerability, in which an actor holds a skull by an open grave, has become iconic; paradoxically, it has endured.

'This prophecy Merlin shall make'

We assume unto our selves imaginarie and fantastical goods, future and absent goods, which humane capacitie can no way warrant unto her selfe; or some other, which by the overweening of our owne opinion we falsely ascribe unto our selves; as reason, honour, and knowledge.

—Montaigne (*E*, Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 270)

In contrast to many of the plays considered so far, folly has been central to the critical afterlife of *King Lear*. Eschewing historicist and textual approaches, this might be very broadly and provisionally divided into two main types. On the one

³⁴² Bates, p. 210.

hand, absurdist readings and productions use the pervasive presence of folly to bolster their argument that the play prefigures the meaningless universe of existentialism. Although this line of argument is most dominant in cold war readings and performances of the play,³⁴³ it is by no means new. August Wilhelm Schlegel describes the play as wiping ‘away all of humanity’s outer and inner virtues, exposing its naked helplessness’.³⁴⁴ On the other hand, Bradleyan or redemptive readings are underpinned by a grander theological conception of folly.³⁴⁵ When Lear becomes aware of his own folly and Cordelia’s immense sacrifice—in the final count, it is she who gives him ‘all’ (II. 2. 248)—he is humbled. As R. V. Young writes:

Interpreters have generally sought to show either that the tragic close evinces a redemptive possibility, notwithstanding its horror, or that Tate was right, that *King Lear* in fact subverts a Christian or even Enlightenment world

³⁴³ Jan Kott’s influential existentialist reading of the play (*King Lear* or *Endgame*’, in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism, 1945–2000*, ed. by Russ McDonald (London: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 174–191), along with the cold war productions of Grigori Kozintsev (*Korol Lir* 1971) and Peter Brook (1962), established the idea that Lear is an absurdist masterpiece *avant la lettre*; for an analysis of Lear in Jean Paul Sartre’s criticism, see Hazel E. Barnes, ‘Flaubert and Sartre on Madness in *King Lear*’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 10 (1986), 211–21; and in light of the existentialist concept of an individual’s self-determining “choice” see Jagannath Chakravorty, ‘King Lear’s ‘Choice’: An Existentialist Approach’, *Poetica*, 4 (1976), 97–110. Stephen Booth emphasises the play’s refusal to ‘fulfil the generic promise inherent in a story’ and argues that it implies that ‘perception of pattern is folly’ (*King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy* (London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 14, p. 22), while R. A. Foakes argues that the increasing popularity of *Lear* in the second half of the twentieth century can be partly attributed to the bleak *Zeitgeist* of the Cold War era: see *Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare’s Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. p. 42.

³⁴⁴ *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by Edgar Lohner, 7 vols (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1967–75), VI, p. 176.

³⁴⁵ Bradley famously writes: ‘Should we not be at least as near the truth if we called this poem *The Redemption of King Lear*, and declared that the business of “the gods” with him was neither to torment him, nor to teach him a “noble anger”, but to lead him to attain through apparently hopeless failure the very end and aim of life?’ (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1919 [1904]), p. 286); John Danby follows Bradley and reads the play in terms of a contrast between the Machiavellian idea of nature, invoked by Edmund, and a benevolent natural order, (see *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948; repr. 1982)). Although Jonathan Bate’s reading of *Lear*’s anti-stoicism in the light of Montaigne goes some way to establishing the centrality of the ‘wise fool’ in Shakespeare’s mature philosophical vision, it ultimately falls back on a redemptive reading, albeit a redemption through scepticism: ‘it seems to me that in Shakespeare’s strand of “wise fooling,” a kind of divine history is smuggled back into the raw natural world of *Lear*’ (*Shakespeare’s Foolosophy*’, in *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R. A. Foakes*, ed. by Grace Ioppolo (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2000), pp. 17–33 [p. 26]); John X., Evans argues along comparable lines in ‘Erasmus’s Folly and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: A Study in Humanist Intertextuality’, *Moreana*, 27 (1990), 3–23.

view and anticipates the absurd universe of existentialism or postmodern materialism.³⁴⁶

But both of these readings ultimately fail to perceive that *Lear* is, more any other Shakespearean tragedy, a play concerned with how meaning is generated.

The central paradox at work in the play is that the very institutions, discourses and ideas that have the potential to liberate humankind from its 'naked helplessness' can reduce them to a 'poor, bare, forked animal' (III. 4. 105–106). Part of what Frank Kermode terms the play's 'authorial savagery',³⁴⁷ or what Jan Kott describes as its 'philosophical cruelty',³⁴⁸ is connected with the realisation that, as Marlowe's Mephistopheles puts it, 'this is hell, nor am I out of it'.³⁴⁹ While evil in *Lear* is 'inextricably enmeshed in collective human experience',³⁵⁰ the play does not allow the reader the luxury of forgetting that evil is a direct consequence of social values, discourses and institutions.

Edgar, after all, is not possessed by devils because of a malign, supernatural agent. Rather, because of his bastard brother's Machiavellian guile, this 'good, but dull boy'³⁵¹ is forced to play the role of a possessed man, a 'bedlam' beggar (II. 2. 185). Indeed, it is characteristic of *Lear*'s bleak irony that Edgar simulates demonic possession in order to escape human evil. His haunting lament, 'Tom's a-cold' (III. 4. 57, 81, 143, 169; IV. 1. 55),³⁵² however, is true, for it voices the physical suffering of the insane, 'whipped from tithing to tithing, and stocked, punished, and imprisoned' (III. 4. 129–30). It evokes the mad brutality of the serious, supposedly reasonable world.

³⁴⁶ 'Hope and Despair in *King Lear*: The Gospel and the Crisis of Natural Law', in Jeffrey Kahan, ed., *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, Shakespeare Criticism, 33 (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 253–277 (p. 253).

³⁴⁷ Kermode, p. 195.

³⁴⁸ Kott, p. 113.

³⁴⁹ Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus* in *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. by Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p. 356 [Scene 3, 78].

³⁵⁰ John Carey, 'Milton's Satan', in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. by Dennis Danielson, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 160–74 (p. 162).

³⁵¹ *The Demonic: Literature and Experience* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 224.

³⁵² The word 'cold' occurs more times in *Lear* than in any other play by Shakespeare; it and its variants appear 17 times in the *Conflated Text*.

As Jonathan Bate shows, the play dramatically embodies Montaigne's sceptical attack on the stoic denial of human suffering and its concomitant belief that 'reason is our highest faculty and a sign of the power of the human [...] subject'.³⁵³ The monsters in *Lear* are human. The '[v]ast universal powers working in the world of individual fates and passions' that Bradley discerns are wholly absent.³⁵⁴ Conversely, Jan Kott's argument that 'The theme of *King Lear* is the decay and the fall of the world'³⁵⁵ misses the point, for he assumes that the 'world' corresponds to what humankind wants the world to be. *Lear*, however, exposes the 'decay and fall' of the systems with which humans explain and control the world. This analysis illustrates Shakespeare's anti-philosophical attack on the structures of calculation, philosophy and law, concurring with Bate's astute reflection that 'The compound word [*Morosophos*] may, it seems to me, be attached most aptly to the Shakespeare who wrote *King Lear*. He was not a historian. He was not a philosopher. He was a FOOLOSOPHER'.³⁵⁶

Deformity, Thomas Hobbes and Laurent Joubert agree,³⁵⁷ is funny. But what the former calls the 'sudden glory'³⁵⁸ of laughter occasioned by the realisation of one's superiority to someone or something deformed cannot be said to apply to the dark humour of *Lear*. For in this play, as Adorno writes of Beckett's *Endgame*, 'humour is salvaged [...] because [it] infect[s] the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair' (*NL*, 2, p. 253). As G. Wilson Knight writes, 'there is humour that treads the brink of tears, and tragedy which needs but an infinitesimal shift of perspective to disclose the varied riches of comedy';³⁵⁹ such is the laughter when, after his blinded father staggers on stage, Edgar finds stoic consolation in the fact that 'worse I may be yet; the worst is not | So long as we can say "This is the worst"' (IV. 1. 29–30). This black humour

³⁵³ Bate, p. 25.

³⁵⁴ Bradley, p. 248.

³⁵⁵ '*King Lear* or *Endgame*', p. 105.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30 [the irregular capitalisation is Bate's].

³⁵⁷ *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. by Gregory David De Rocher (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 20.

³⁵⁸ *Treatise of Human Nature*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. by William Molesworth, 12 Vols (London: Bohn, 1839–45; repr. Routledge, 1992), IV, p. 46.

³⁵⁹ *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 160.

frustrates any assessment of the play that might consider it beautiful or sublime—not least because, if ‘*Sublime* carries in it such a noble vigour, such a resistless strength, which ravishes away the hearer’s soul against his consent’,³⁶⁰ then the language of *Lear* is the language of earth-bound weakness. In this play, grand style is at best absurd and at worst grotesque.

In his defence of ugly art, Adorno echoes a sentiment not entirely dissimilar to Edgar’s pyrrhic self-consolation, suggesting that people view images of ‘starving children [...] as documents of that beneficent heart that beats even in the face of the worst [*Ärgsten*], thereby promising that it is not the worst [*Ärgste*]’ (*AT*, p. 64; *ÄT*, p. 79). Shortly before this reflection, he argues:

Art must take up the cause of what is proscribed as ugly, though no longer in order to instigate it, mitigate it, or to reconcile it with its own existence through humour that is more offensive than anything repulsive. Rather, in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image, even if in this too the possibility persists that sympathy with the degraded will reverse the concurrence with degradation.

(*AT*, p. 64; *ÄT*, p. 79)

Lear is concerned with the paradoxical way in which man can generate evils that go far beyond his capacity to explain or express them. But far from attesting to Shakespeare’s inhumanity or his ‘savagery’, the play’s ugliness shows a proleptic sort of humanity: ugly art becomes a way of denouncing rather than forgetting an ugly reality. The problem with a redemptive conception of representation is that it implies that life can always ‘be embellished, straightened or improved by art’, which risks inculcating ‘an invidious irresponsibility if not a callously *laissez faire* attitude towards suffering’.³⁶¹ In this respect, poetry is a Silenic form. Grand style, untouched by the agonies of existence, is ugly. *Lear*’s tortured nonsense and demotic discourse are neither perfectly proportioned, nor sublime, but they are at least humane.

³⁶⁰ Longinus [?], *An Essay upon the Sublime*, trans. by T. Leigh (Oxford: Leon. Lichfield, 1698), p. 3.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Stop making sense!

Part of the reason why *Lear* is ugly is because of its refusal to pass pain off as anything other than pain; as Kott writes, the ‘grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience’.³⁶² Consider Lear’s encounter with Poor Tom, an encounter that epitomises the fact that ‘biology is an affront to rationalizing philosophy’.³⁶³

KING LEAR Why, thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow’st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha? Here’s three on’s are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings: come unbutton here.

[*Tearing at his clothes, he is restrained by Kent and the Fool*]

Enter GLOUCESTER, with a torch

FOOL Prithee, nuncle, be contented; ’tis a naughty night to swim in. Now a little fire in a wild field were like an old lecher’s heart; a small spark, all the rest on’s body cold: look, here comes a walking fire.

(III. 4. 99–107)

Although Lear’s insight that man’s mastery of the world is a consequence of his physical vulnerability is a fine example of how ‘true things’ may be conceived ‘by what their mock’ries be’ (*Henry V*, IV, 0, 53), that Edgar is only playing at being the ‘thing itself’ (not to mention, that he is playing this role within a drama) should not be forgotten.

Lear’s realisation of the ostensibly authentic nature of ‘unaccommodated man’, the universal corporal vulnerability of humankind, is a consequence of an artful deception, which Edgar, doing his histrionic skills a disservice, later compares to a poorly executed painting, a ‘daub’ (IV. 1. 55). The crucial paradox is that even in this realisation Lear remains, to a certain degree, in error: his error is to assume that ‘something must lie beneath the surface of appearance when surface was all there ever was’.³⁶⁴ For this reason and others that shall become apparent, the

³⁶² Kott, p. 104.

³⁶³ ‘Shakespeare’s Foolosophy’, p. 27; ‘*King Lear* or *Endgame*’, p. 104.

³⁶⁴ *Play in a Godless World*, p. iv.

discourse of folly in this play cannot be wholly reduced to the comment that ‘*King Lear* states the basic ontological distinction of Erasmus’ two follies: folly as true, genuine perception of the inner nature of human things, and madness as the false, distorted perception of it’.³⁶⁵

Rephrasing Folly’s contention that man is endowed with infinitely more ‘Affection, than reason’ (*PF*, p. 23) in a demonic key, the Fool counters Lear’s pseudo-realisation with the suggestion that people are sustained by carnality alone. He ‘presents an extraordinary image of the world as a dead body and of the life that survives as feebly posthumous flickerings of lust’.³⁶⁶ The notion that suffering enables insight—‘When the mind’s free, | The body’s delicate’ (III. 4. 11–12)—may be reassuring in a world characterised by plainly intolerable physical conditions, but, for two reasons, it is a misapprehension. First, it skates over the fact that all ratiocination is contingent upon bodily needs—something that even Lear realises when he reflects: ‘they are not men o’their words: they told me I was everything; ’tis a lie, I am not ague-proof’ (IV. 6. 103–105); second, it implies that man is animated by reason rather than the animal drives that the Fool believes to govern human behaviour.

Poor Tom’s nonsense appeals to the King more than the reasonable advice of the Fool, Kent and Gloucester. To Lear’s mind, he is a ‘good Athenian’ (III. 4. 176) and a ‘Noble philosopher’ (168):

KING LEAR First let me talk with this philosopher:

[*To Edgar*] What is the cause of thunder?

KENT Good my lord,

Take his offer, go into the house.

KING LEAR I’ll talk a word with this same learned Theban:

What is your study?

EDGAR How to prevent the fiend, and to kill vermin.

(150–155)

A recurrent humanist criticism of scholastic philosophy was that it pursued pointless pseudo-problems; rather than attempting to fathom the ‘common miracles’

³⁶⁵ Richard Strier, ‘Against the Rule of Reason: Praise of Passion from Petrarch to Luther to Shakespeare to Herbert’, in *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural Traditions of Emotion*, ed. by Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 23–42 (p. 23).

³⁶⁶ Fernie, p. 227.

of life, such as the cause of ‘laughter’,³⁶⁷ men of theory, as Erasmus’ Folly seriocomically puts it, vainly seek to ‘expounde *the causes of thunder*, of wyndes, of eclipses, and suche other inexplicable thynges, nothyng doubting, as if they had crepte into natures bosome, or were of counsaile with the Goddes’ (*PF*, p. 77 [my emphasis]).³⁶⁸

The irony at work in this scene, however, is that posing this hitherto theoretical question about the ‘cause of thunder’ is manifestly relevant to those stranded on the heath. The desire to make sense of the universe by causal logic and to control it by creating conceptual systems is of pressing importance to the play as a whole. At the close of Lear’s mock trial of his daughters, playing the role of the judge, he rules: ‘let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?’ (III. 6. 73–75). Paradoxically, Lear’s fantasy of scientific certainty through the vivisection of Regan to find out the ‘cause’ of her and Goneril’s cruelty characterises him as insane. Such an inquiry is every bit as hardhearted as philosophies that exalt the rational at the expense of the passions. Even in his perverse fantasy of being imprisoned with his virtuous daughter, Lear envisages an impossible separation of thought from the body, aspiring to a god-like clear-sightedness. He tells Cordelia that ‘we’ will ‘take upon’s the mystery of things | As if we were God’s spies. And we’ll wear out | In a walled prison packs and sects of great ones’ (V. 3. 16–19). His acceptance that they cannot aspire to absolute knowledge remains parasitical on the intentional forms of reason, premised on the kind of self-preservation that ultimately destroys the major characters of the play.

Cordelia’s words of forgiveness are a denial of thinking in terms of cause and consequence. ‘I know you do not love me, for your sisters | Have, as I remember, done me wrong. | You have some cause, they have not’ (IV. 7. 72–74), says the semi-conscious King, to whom she ‘lies beautifully and generously’.³⁶⁹ ‘No cause,

³⁶⁷ Joubert, p. 17.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 17.

³⁶⁹ Bate, p. 29.

no cause' (75).³⁷⁰ The implication is clear: what is remarkable in human nature is not icy reason's ability to fashion systems with which to gain imaginary mastery over things. Rather, it is the ability to go beyond this logic. What is remarkable in human nature is the ability to love inexplicably and stupidly. Indeed, Gloucester memorably deflates the mastery of intention, when he wryly observes of Poor Tom that 'He has some reason, else he could not beg' (IV. 1. 34).

In *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, from which Shakespeare drew the Gloucester plot, the virtuous Pamela inveighs against the seeming 'knowledge' of mankind, with which he 'puffeth' himself 'up' (*KJV*, I Corinthians 8. 1). She points to the paradox that 'while by pregancie of his imagination [man] strives for things supernaturall, [he] meanwhile he loose[s] his own naturall felicitie' (*NDSS*, 7, p. 412). In *Lear*, the way in which man's faith in his own systems blinds him to the way things are is evidenced by Gloucester's bizarre response to Edgar's supposed attempt at parricide. He immediately invokes the supernatural as a way of explaining what turns out to be Edmund's all too natural act of self-preservation:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by sequent effects.

(I. 2. 103–106)

Gloucester ascribes cosmic causality, a providential significance, to what is actually Edmund's manipulation of this tendency of thought: 'This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters of the sun, the moon and the stars (118–121). Like the astronomer satirized in Sidney's *Apolog for Poetry*, who falls into a 'ditch' because he is looking at the stars,³⁷¹ Gloucester's stargazing causes him to fall flat on his face. But what is really disarming about this is that Edmund's insights are eminently sensible: one of the main perpetrators of evil in the play offers an entirely rational self-justification.

It is perhaps surprising that the providential reading of *Lear* has had such

³⁷⁰ In *Leir*, Cordelia forgives him thus: 'O grieve not you, my Lord, you have no cause | Let not your passions move your mind a whit' (*NDSS*, 7, p. 367). Shakespeare amplifies the phrase 'No cause' and omits her advice to her father to retain his Stoic fortitude.

³⁷¹ *An Apology for Poetry*, p. 88.

mileage, since attempts in the play to ascribe divine purpose to this ‘great stage of fools’ (IV. 6. 179) are exposed as mere platitudes. When he reveals his identity to his brother, Edgar invokes the principle of an ordered universe:

My name is Edgar and thy father’s son.
The gods are just and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us:
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes.

(V. 3. 167–171)

But, once again, he has got it entirely wrong. For Edgar, his father’s blinding attests to the way in which human law ultimately reflects the will of the divine. Although his idea that the ‘gods are just’ is borne out by Goneril’s and Regan’s deaths moments later, this attempt to impose a theory on mere contingencies contributes to what Albany calls the ‘Great thing of us forgot’ (235): the pressing danger Lear and Cordelia are in. She is hanged partly because of bad timing and partly because of Albany and Edgar’s protracted discussion, a consequence, perhaps, of their desire to foreclose a game in which all is still left to play for. After Cordelia’s death, it is impossible to concur with his assessment that ‘The gods are just’. It exemplifies, with savage irony, what Bates means when she writes: ‘The fact that men wanted—even needed—to attribute meaning to the world didn’t in the least make it meaningful’.³⁷² As Montaigne observes: ‘Presumption is our naturall and originall infirmitie’ (*E*, Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 250)—presuming that a meaning is fixed has dire consequences in *King Lear*.

The primary way in which *homo economicus* has lent meaning to the universe is through quantification, numeration and calculation. Although it is not possible to say what something is, numeration means that it is always possible to measure it and thus bring it within the compass of theory. Folly mocks natural philosophers who: ‘take vpon [themselves] to measure the sonne, the moon, the planets and theyr compasses, as it were by *ynchmeale*, or *drawne with a line*’ (*PF*, p. 77). While quantification is necessary in the business of self-preservation, the action of the play is at pains to point out that when one attempts to quantify abstract

³⁷² *Play in a Godless World*, p. 49.

factors in human relations—love, for instance—the consequences are disastrous. Demanding an objective measure of affection, Lear asks his daughters: ‘Which of you shall we say doth love us most?’ (I. 1. 51) and is blind to the fact that ‘There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned’ (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, I. 1. 15). This objectifying tendency of thought is made manifest when he refers to his youngest daughter as his ‘best object’ (I. 1. 215), a comment that, because of its blindness, exposes a pernicious ideology which falsely aligns love with possession.

Despite the way in which the two elder sisters use the same quantification against him, whittling down the number of his attendant knights, even when he is on the heath, delivering his vain incantation to the Fool and the thunder, Lear still figures affection in pecuniary terms:

I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness.
I never gave you kingdom, called you children;
You owe me no subscription.

(III. 2. 16–19)

This comment is not only ugly because of the sentiments it expresses, but also in the way in which it expresses them: ‘Low and vulgar expressions extremely darken the beauty of *sublimity*’.³⁷³ Cordelia’s famous response to his test, ‘nothing, my Lord’, gives the lie to reckoning the love between parent and child, a ‘bond’ (I. 4. 93) that is absolute.

Like Touchstone, the Fool grasps the formal systems of the sensible world. He points out that the number zero is a cipher, requiring other numbers to signify: ‘nothing will come of nothing’ (I. 1. 90). Castigating the King’s ‘hideous rashness’ (I. 4. 152), he comments: ‘Now thou art an 0 without a figure; I am better than thou art now. I am a fool, thou art nothing’ (I. 4. 182–4). He turns quantification against itself by mathematically *proving* that Lear has made a dire error in thinking of love as something that can be quantified. What the Fool formulates explicitly is implicit in Lear’s demand that Goneril and Regan ‘part betwixt’ them his ‘coronet’ (I. 1. 140), since it is as physically impossible to split one ‘coronet’ into two and for it to remain a usable crown as it is mathematically impossible to divide an ‘0 without a figure’ and get a result of anything other than zero. The Fool reiterates this point

³⁷³ *An Essay on the Sublime*, p. 85.

moments later, suggesting that Lear is a ‘shelled peascod’ (190). On the one hand, this grotesque image colloquially evokes the King’s impotence, his physical vulnerability; and on the other, it presages the important idea that ‘Robes and furred gowns hide all’ (IV. 6. 161). There is always a frail body beneath the insignia of temporal authority.

Lear’s response to Cordelia’s ‘nothing’ is proverbial—‘nothing will come of nothing’, a fact emphasised when he reuses it in his terse dialogue with the fool (I. 4. 130). Rather than suggesting, as Erasmus does in the introduction to his *Adages*, that, owing to their ubiquity, there is some ‘native power of truth’ in ‘proverbs’ (CWE, 31, p. 17), *Lear*, along with *The Winter’s Tale*, implies that proverbial expressions can blind people to the particulars of their situation, providing a way of forcing the contingencies of experience into a predetermined formula. Instead of reflecting on what Cordelia means, he immediately resorts to the ossified wisdom of the ancients. Far from being a folksy alternative to the grand theories of the intellectuals, proverbial wisdom is further attacked when, in an attempt to justify her treatment of her father, Goneril says ‘Old fools are babes again’ (I. 3. 20).³⁷⁴

The repetition of the word ‘nothing’, however, not only gives the lie to proverbial wisdom, but also sets the play’s dominant pattern of imagery, circularity, in motion, a pattern that plays a significant role in the play’s exposure of the limitations of ratiocination. Noughts, crowns, wheels—not to mention, spectacles, eye-sockets, the ‘operation of the orbs’ (I. 1. 112) and female genitalia—are evocative of circles, a geometrical form that symbolises the whole and possess a formal coherence that is at odds with life. In the context of *Lear*, Booth contends that the ‘image of the Wheel is, above all, finite’; and it is, therefore, a ‘deliberately inappropriate’³⁷⁵ symbol in a play that conspicuously lacks the sense of an ending.

It is the Fool who first invokes Fortune’s Wheel, advising Kent to ‘Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill lest it break thy neck with following it; but the great one that goes up the hill, let him draw thee after’ (II. 2. 261–263), which is clearly echoed by Edmund’s dying comment: ‘The wheel is come full circle, I am

³⁷⁴ The very same proverb is voiced by Erasmus’s Stultitia and analysed in his *Adages* (see *PF*, p. 17; *CWE*, 31, p. 414). Furthermore, Lear’s fool uses one of Erasmus’ *Adages* in a particularly caustic put-down of his master at I. 4. 148–50; see Kermode, p. 187.

³⁷⁵ *Indefinition and Tragedy*, p. 13.

here' (V. 3. 172). Because the Fool has already invoked this commonplace idea, it becomes unfixed and acquires the vital semantic indeterminacy characteristic of the discourse of folly. His comment dialogises the providential account of history. To make sense of the senseless, Lear, Gloucester and Edgar all sincerely invoke a narrative that the Fool holds at a playful distance. Both Edmund's capitulation to the feeble determinism that he earlier ridicules and Lear's reflection on his tragic predicament—that he is 'bound | Upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears | Do scald like moulten lead' (IV. 7. 46–49)—are subject to structural irony. Lear is denied the dignity that might make such an observation profound. His moment of self-reflection cannot help but sound uncannily like a bombastic invocation of the Fool's insight.

The Fool's prophecy—like the Porter scene in *Macbeth* and the Graveyard Scene in *Hamlet*—displays an uncanny grasp of the themes, ideas, and images present in the play's serious action. It 'pulls into focus the battle between utopian possibilities and dystopian realities that rages at the heart of the tragedy'.³⁷⁶

When priests are more in word than matter,
 When brewers mar their malt with water,
 When nobles are their tailors' tutors,
 No heretics burned but wenches' suitors:
 When every case in law is right
 No Squire in debt, nor no poor Knight;
 When slanders do not live in tongues,
 Nor cut-purses come not to throngs
 When usurers tell their Gold in the field,
 And bawds and whores do churches build,
 Then shall the realm of Albion
 Come to great confusion:
 Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
 That going shall be used with feet.
 This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time.

(III. 2. 79–96)

The notion of being 'more in word than matter' recalls two central concerns of the play: first, the discrepancy between what Goneril and Regan 'profess' (I. 1. 72) and how they treat their father; second, the King's folly, his desire to 'retain the name and all th'addition to a king' (I. 1. 136), which makes him recall the proverbial

³⁷⁶ Ryan, 'Here's fine revolution', p. 108.

‘Tragedy King’, an expression which Erasmus glosses as applying to ‘a proud and pompous man, or to one who is a king in name alone but has little power’ (*CWE*, 33, p. 26). Next, the image of inversion, ‘when nobles are their tailors’ tutors’, reiterates the suggestions made by Poor Tom, Kent and Lear, which evoke the histrionic nature of the normal world, where everyday clothing is nothing other than a costume or disguise.

Moreover, when Kent insults Oswald by saying ‘a tailor made thee’ (II. 2. 53–54), what he means is that Oswald’s authority is improvised—no less than the authority of the Justice Lear rails against, or the judicial clout of the Fool and Madman in the mock-trial in the hovel. The imagery of ‘wenches’ suitors’ being ‘burnt’ by venereal disease prefigures both Lear’s misogynistic description of female genitalia—‘there is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption!’ (IV. 6. 124–125)—and Edgar’s comments about the ‘vicious place’, from whence his brother came.

In short, the Fool builds the concerns of the sensible, intentional world into his nonsense prophecy. This soliloquy, found only in the Folio, ultimately subverts its ostensible function: it fails to let the audience know what the Fool really thinks. But it does generate dialogism, for it offers an interlude that sets the play’s ostensibly solid and serious ideas and identities spinning, dissolving their significance in comic indeterminacy. It philosophises through paradox. As Prentki writes: ‘It is in the contradiction between what humanity is and what it has the capacity to imagine that the fool finds the space in which to play with the irony inherent in the human condition’.³⁷⁷ It operates in a way not altogether different from Cordelia’s, Kent’s and Edgar’s recurrent asides, which use the liberties of mimesis to comment upon the action in which they are embroiled. It thereby holds the ‘horror’ (V. 3. 262) of the action at arm’s length for a moment.

Allen R. Shickman convincingly shows that the Fool would originally have delivered this prophecy to a mirror. Not only does this make a visual gag about the ability of representation to ‘hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature’, and recall the prevalent imagery of circularity, but it also invokes the ‘iconography of Prudence, who, in addition to bearing a glass, often wears the mask of an old man behind her

³⁷⁷ *The Fool in European Theatre*, p. 113.

head to signify the wisdom of the years with its ability to look both forward and backwards'.³⁷⁸ While the irony of the Fool invoking the allegorical figure of Prudence is lost on Shickman, the way in which the prophecy looks both forwards and backwards warrants comment.

The prophecy avoids talking about the madness of the intentional world in the systematic language of reason, for it uses material from the world of reason, which is so obviously dangerously irrational, to create a prophecy of a prophecy, which remains impossible to grasp in today's terms. It is detached from the world, but fashioned out of material drawn from its historical situation. In this respect it is realistic. It would be too reassuring to suggest that it is a consequence of the supra-rational 'metaphysical inspiration'³⁷⁹ of Christian ecstasy, since the play operates by 'interpolat[ing] into a universe that's beyond man's control little worlds of his own devising, and it is this which confers on the play the power of a god'.³⁸⁰ For all its purposefulness without purpose, even representation is predicated on a drive for mastery over contingencies.

But this nonsense prophecy liberates the play from the argument that it exhibits the same drive for mastery over things as the intentional discourses to which *Lear* gives the lie. With caustic irony on the part of the playwright, murder is, after all, referred to as 'man's work' (V. 3. 40). The prophecy offers an enigmatic glimpse of a future in which life is not at the mercy of reason's dishonourable intentions, evoking a time of 'confusion' in which reason is reconciled with the senselessness of its compulsion to make sense of things. Despite being narrated by a spouter of nonsense, More's Utopia is clearly ordered; like the Fool's prophecy, its constitutive contrast is between the world as it is and the world as it could be, although this realm of 'if' is, of course, a utopia or 'no-place'. Even this sort of conceptual coherence is absent from the Fool's prophecy. From a time in the distant past, he predicts a prophecy that 'Merlin shall make' in the mythological past of an equivocal future of 'great confusion', a future, in other words, that is different, but not perfect; a few years after *Lear* was first performed, the *King James Bible*

³⁷⁸ 'The Fool's Mirror in *King Lear*', *ELR*, 21 (1991), 75–86 (p. 80).

³⁷⁹ Strier, p. 32.

³⁸⁰ Bates, p. 13.

annotates Chapter 2 of Isaiah as depicting ‘*The great confusion which commeth by sin*’. In any case, the fool predicts his future utopia or dystopia in a performance. This prophecy of a prophecy actually happens in the present; and because it is voiced on stage, in the here and now, there is always the implicit suggestion that it will be reiterated in future performances.

Ultimately, this anachronistic jumbling of timescapes unfixes the linear perceptions of clock-time, upon which theoretical man’s systems and the world of work depend. It simultaneously gives the lie to the cyclical account of time, with its emblems of Fortune’s Wheel and its recurrent festivals, which Barber, Laroque and Bakhtin are wont to sentimentalise. Not least because it is ‘dreaming on things to come’ (‘Sonnet 107’, 2) in a play that otherwise implies that objective circumstances dictate characters’ innermost desires—‘Men are as the time is’ (V. 3. 31–32)—the Fool’s prophecy is, like all great poetry, revolutionary nonsense. Far from being ‘without hope’,³⁸¹ the Fool, amidst the horrors of the heath, hopes for a radically new, absolutely unpredictable future—an enigmatic and tantalising future (or rather, future of a future), which is viewed as much through a darkened glass now as it was when it was first performed. Paradoxically, while the revolutionary and revelatory potential of his nonsense dies with him, this thwarting of the possibility that things could be different—that ‘Humanity’ may one day not ‘perforce prey on itself | Like monsters of the deep’ (IV. 2. 50–51)—is performed over and over again.

The final aspect of this play’s pervasive attack on systems and the assumptions they create is *King Lear*’s attack on the law. What Paul A. Cantor writes in his detailed consideration of the relationship between natural law and human law resonates with what I have argued about the dangers of trying to force things to make sense: ‘In Lear’s monumental self-assurance as a reigning monarch, he had always assumed that the political order is rooted in the natural, that nature supports human justice’.³⁸² For Nietzsche, as for Montaigne, the central

³⁸¹ Daphinoff, ‘Shakespeares Narren’, p. 66.

³⁸² ‘The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in *King Lear*’, in Jeffrey Kahan, ed. *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, pp. 231–252 (p. 231); strictly speaking, however, this assumption is also present in *Leir*:

Nay, if thou talke of reason, then be mute;

KING LEAR She cannot deny it.
 FOOL Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool.
 KING LEAR And here's another, whose warped looks proclaim what store
 her heart is made on. Stop her there! Arms, arms, sword, fire!
 Corruption in the place! False justicer, why hast thou let her 'scape?
 EDGAR Bless thy five wits!

(III. 6. 40–56)

Only a madman could think it possible to impose order ('deal justly') in this situation. Perhaps this is why Poor Tom's pregnant nonsense is interspersed with the performative utterances—blessing, taking oaths and dealing impartially—of the rational world. Lear's ridiculous accusation that the mock-court is corrupt is later echoed in his encounter with Gloucester, in which he realises that the 'authority' he had thought to be innate is not the consequence of natural laws, but an expedient fiction perpetuated by those in power for purely self-serving ends: 'A dog's obeyed in office' (IV. 6. 150, 152–155). The time when human and natural law correspond, 'When every case in law is right' (III. 1. 85), must remain for the present an unlikely hope in a foolish tale. What is darkly comic is that Lear views the abject beggar, one wronged by the law, as one who has corrupted the ideal of law, abusing his power out of self-interest.

In this respect, the scene is a microcosm of the play as a whole. By staging a system *in extremis*, it exposes the fact that conceptual systems do not so much make sense of how things *are*, but rather how things can be *theorised*. But the pragmatic argument that these systems are necessary fictions is evident in the text. After his daughters have whittled the number of his knights down to nothing, Lear justifies their existence on purely theoretical grounds:

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
 Are in the poorest thing superfluous;
 Allow not nature more than nature needs,
 Man's life is cheap as beast's.

(II. 2. 452–456)

He implies that fictions of certainty constitute what is special about man, what makes him different from a 'beast'. Although Cantor argues that humans 'need to establish conventions in order to fulfil their natures',³⁸⁷ the play implies that what is

³⁸⁷ 'The Cause of Thunder', p. 245.

important is to retain a critical awareness of the holes in even the most watertight systems; to retain, in other words, something of the wise fool's dazzling detachment from explicit values.

Insofar as Lear substitutes inanimate objects for people and empty words for feeling, this trial is child's play—as the Fool's ironic apology to the 'joint-stall' implies. Goneril is tried for subjecting her father to slapstick indignity. He swears—quite contrary to what has been dramatised—that 'she kicked the poor King her father'. This actually denigrates his suffering, reimagining her callous indifference as a festive inversion gone too far—such carnivalesque violence is present in the sources. Her greatest crime is that she has violated the rules of his earlier game, which allowed him to play at being a king. This is not the only place in the play where something of the comic violence of *The Comedy of Errors* resurfaces and frustrates any sort of tragic grandeur: Kent trips up Oswald and then suffers the indignity of the stocks; Goneril plucks the defenceless Gloucester's beard, adding insult to the injury of the blinding that is about to take place. This is compounded by the cruel humour derived from Gloucester's blinding. Goneril quips, 'let him smell | His way to Dover' (III. 7. 92–93); on Dover beach, Lear pseudo-foolosophically quibbles to the blind man: 'Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light, yet you see how this world goes' (IV. 6. 143–144).

Fort, da, ... fort?

The blinded Earl's pratfall is by far the most gleefully inappropriate moment of 'sudden glory'. Any sort of dignity, gleaned from this paradoxically self-determining action of self-annihilation, is denied him. His attempted suicide, a demonic inversion of the idea of a leap of faith, is a piece of ill-timed slapstick, which Kott aptly describes as a 'pantomime'.³⁸⁸ Assuming the persona of a peasant, Edgar insists to his father that he was tempted by a devil to jump. He describes it thus:

As I stood here below methought his eyes
Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,
Horns welked and waved like the enraged sea.

³⁸⁸ 'King Lear or Endgame', p. 113.

It was some fiend.

(IV. 6. 69–71)

What Gloucester's fall and resurrection make clear is that actors are an author's automatons; as Bates argues, drama, like Freud's grandson, plays the '*fort, da!*' game. Characters are killed, their fictive existence obliterated, only to be resurrected and to take their final bows and do it all again in the next performance—a fact famously acknowledged in *Julius Caesar* when Brutus asks: 'How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport?' (III. 1. 115).

The 'fiend' to which Edgar refers, a monster capable of creating and destroying, could be seen as a demonic double of the author. A far cry from the urbane haplessness of Chaucer's Sir Topas, Shakespeare's phantasmagorical alter ego is monstrously ugly, like something out of Revelations. The mirthless irony is, of course, that although Gloucester is convinced that his 'life's a miracle' (IV. 6. 55), his heart nonetheless 'Burst[s] smilingly' (V. 3. 198), when Edgar reveals his true identity to his father later in the act. Gloucester may have come to realise the error of his ways, and the absurdity of the values that he had hitherto cherished, but this makes no difference. He dies.

Moreover, it is no 'miracle' that he is revived onstage, since, like Prospero, the playwright possesses the capacity to resurrect the dead. But this magic is a consequence of the dramatist's control over his materials—an absolute control over things that man can only ever have in that most artificial of things: art. Lear's searing response to what appears to be the cosmic injustice of it all, the brute fact that 'in this world there is no poetic justice', underscores this:³⁸⁹

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
And thou no breath at all? O thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never.

(V. 3. 304–307)

Lear's dying hope, 'Look there, look there!' (309), is an illusion. For all his demands, injunctions and conjurations, he cannot bring his daughter back to life.

Adorno contends that 'great artworks, as destructive works, have also

³⁸⁹ Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935; repr. 1968), p. 265.

retained the power to destroy the authority of their success. Their radiance is dark; the beautiful permeates the negativity, which appears to have mastered it' (*AT*, p. 66). This idea is borne out in *Lear*. Its power lies in the way that its ugly elements, intimately bound to the discourse of folly, 'destroy' the 'success' of an aesthetics based on mastery and decorum, on the idea that man's ability to shape things into pleasing forms is an unequivocally positive thing. The ugly is a dynamic category that is indivisible from its opposite; and as Karl Rosencrantz argues, it occupies the 'middle between that which is beautiful and that which is comical'.³⁹⁰ The prevalence of the ugly in *King Lear* belies the affirmative footings of Bradley's rapt assessment of the play:

The final and total result is one in which pity and terror, carried perhaps to the extreme limits of art, are so blended with a sense of law and beauty that we feel at last, not depression and much less despair, but a consciousness of greatness in pain, and of solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom.³⁹¹

Not least through the love-test motif, the play lays bare the dangers inherent in a tendency of thought that attempts to classify, quantify and measure objects in order to make them palatable to conceptual schema, a tendency of thought that is also characteristic of aesthetic judgments. *Lear* is an aesthetic artefact, removed from the everyday, only insofar as it is anti-aesthetic, a work of 'utopian realism'.³⁹²

In order to examine its inner nature, I have been guilty of classifying the play as ugly. In truth, of course, such gestures of rigid identification are useful only insofar as they ultimately belie themselves and expose their concept's constitutive paradoxes. But I have emphasised *Lear*'s ugliness so as to show how the discourse of folly shapes its anti-aesthetic aesthetic. I imply what Adorno states with admirable—although uncharacteristic—clarity in his unpublished lecture series, *Ästhetik*, which were delivered in 1961: namely, that 'art is the way of

³⁹⁰ Karl Rosencrantz, *Ästhetik des Haßlichen*, ed. by Dieter Kliche (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990; repr. 2007 [1853]), p. 5.

³⁹¹ Bradley, p. 279.

³⁹² See Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare's Universality: Here's Fine Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) [forthcoming].

understanding, not an object to be understood'.³⁹³ Folly offers us an insight into *Lear*'s 'way of knowing', a mode of knowing that is essentially negative, both in its sustained, sceptical assault on the theories with which man attempts to make sense of things and in its recognition that the way that drama understands is always transitory—drama is a phenomenon, not a theory about the world. *Lear* ultimately baffles any interpretation that views it as an object that must be defined, categorised, fixed and possessed. If the play says anything explicitly, it is that the all too human tendency to grasp for certainties is, more often than not, merely clutching at straws.

³⁹³ Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv, Akademie der Künste (AdK), MS 440, 'Ästhetik' (1961), p. 35.

EPILOGUE: *SAPERE AUDE?*

Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction (*sens*); but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time.³⁹⁴

—Gilles Deleuze

A frustrating and, at times, productive tension at the heart of this thesis is how to provide a coherent account of Shakespeare's folly, without reducing this ephemeral phenomenon to the blandly coherent terms of good sense, of which it is devoutly and consistently critical. While this study has sought to establish that there is a sustained philosophy of folly in Shakespeare's works, it has not been possible to consider closely its role in every play, although it is not difficult to perceive how a reading of *Troilus and Cressida* might corroborate my analysis of Shakespeare's historiography, or how his use of the grotesque in *Romeo and Juliet* presages the aesthetics of deformity with which my final chapter is concerned.

Moreover, the significance of folly in Shakespeare's collaborative plays, which, in recent years, have become a focal point of critical attention, is neither confined to Erasmus' walk-on role in *Sir Thomas More*, nor to the fact that *Double Falsehood* is based on *Don Quixote*. Rather, the discourse of folly is intrinsically bound both to Shakespeare's disconcerting disavowal of authority and his famous capacity for negative capability; the paradoxical wisdom of folly could, therefore, provide a theoretical basis from which to analyse the problems of authorial authority that Shakespeare's considerable collaborative output brings to the fore.

As my readings of selected histories, comedies and tragedies has established, Shakespeare's philosophy of folly—like Montaigne's *Essays*—proceeds without a methodology. This 'way of understanding'³⁹⁵ lacks a predetermined formal structure. In fact, the plays make a mockery of the very footings upon which conventional, positivistic methodologies depend—not least because the discourse of folly conspicuously lacks the rigorously delineated concepts, causal logic and clearly

³⁹⁴ *The Logic of Sense*, ed. by Constantin V. Boundas, trans. by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1969]), p. 3.

³⁹⁵ AdK, MS 440, 'Ästhetik' (1961), p. 35.

defined ends that one might associate with serious thought. Shakespeare's 'true and lively knowledge'³⁹⁶ consists of a sustained attack on, and estrangement of, philosophical and everyday certainties alike. Primarily through folly's paradoxes and ironies, Shakespeare dissolves the crude dichotomies upon which received wisdom depends. Folly sets static identities, fixed categories and watertight concepts into play, exposing the contradictions inherent in conventional ideas and traditional modes of understanding.

As I argued in Chapter 3, it is in this playful estrangement that true philosophy inheres. For Shakespeare, the very notion of conventional wisdom is an oxymoron. Since it goes beyond the given and takes the audience *para-doxa*, the discourse of folly is necessarily unconventional and, concomitantly, unsure of itself. It retains a playful awareness that its peculiar wisdom might, after all, be mere nonsense. The paradoxical wisdom of folly in Shakespeare is neither limited to specific characters, nor is it simply a theme in the plays. Rather, mapping folly's erratic movement furnishes the reader with insights into *how* these plays *know*. Not only does this give us access to the ways in which Shakespeare philosophises, but it also raises the question of literature's singularity, of the ways in which literature—in contrast to the ostensibly rational discipline of philosophy—understands the world and humankind's place within it.

My analysis of folly in Shakespeare's drama suggests that there are four prevalent modes of understanding—or ways of engagement with the world—at work in literature: ways of knowing that confound the certainties conventional philosophical methods seek to establish. First, folly is keyed into the innately utopian inclination of cognition, the perennial tendency of 'imagination' to body 'forth | The forms of things unknown' (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. 1. 14–15), whereas philosophy has generally concerned itself with the interpretation of either the past or the present.³⁹⁷ Second, an awareness of folly fosters an appreciation of literature's affective power, a stubbornly pre-theoretical remainder that is nonetheless close to the core of literature's appeal. Inhabiting the realm of folly frees the critic from the

³⁹⁶ Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry: or the Defence of Poetry*, ed. by R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 90.

³⁹⁷ See Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 vols (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1959; repr, 1985), esp. I, pp. 1–17.

demand to make sense of a literary work in coldly analytical terms. One can, for instance, ask why Lear's distraught observation that Cordelia will 'come no more, | Never, never, never, never' (*King Lear*, V. 3. 306–307) expresses the desolation of immense personal loss with a primal eloquence and dramatic urgency impossible to match in philosophy. Third, literature is comfortable with the fool's knowledge that even the grandest conceptual systems are transient. Furthermore, as I argued in connection with *Twelfth Night*, literature itself frequently implies that art—especially the temporal art of drama—is best understood by fathoming its laws of motion. Finally, an appreciation of Shakespeare's folly makes possible a fuller understanding of how for him—as for Socrates, Erasmus, Montaigne and Nietzsche—irony provides a way of perceiving and engaging with the world.

Although the concepts of hope, affect, transience and irony are of manifest importance to experience, they have, generally speaking, been ill-served by serious philosophy. As I established in chapters 2 and 3, however, these concepts are key intellectual preoccupations and modes of thinking and writing both for Shakespeare and for Erasmus, More and Montaigne. Because literary knowledge offers insights that a scientific understanding of the world—one that seeks to quantify and categorise—cannot, a more comprehensive mapping of how the great texts of European humanism know is urgently required.

'No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. 1. 340): to conclude anything too conclusive about Shakespeare's folly would be an act of folly. It would gravely misconceive the vital indeterminacy of its paradoxical subject matter. Paradox is both a complex rhetorical figure and a sort of negative dialectics in miniature, since it does not seek to sublimate two discrete identities into one sense or 'direction'. Indeed, this thesis has been recurrently drawn to the way that Shakespeare philosophises through paradox. Quite apart from either the countless paradoxes associated with wise folly, which were considered in chapters 1 and 3, or the rich contemporary context of thinking through paradox, which I examined in Chapter 2, my analysis of the plays in the final three chapters of this thesis revolves around three paradoxes. Shakespeare's paradoxical historiography retells historical events, even as it criticises the representation of history; the comedies, considered in Chapter 5, imply that one should, paradoxically,

hope for a thoroughly unexpected and radically new future; while in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* Shakespeare fashions an anti-aesthetic aesthetics.

Thus, rather than concluding with results and a clear-cut direction of study, I will draw to a close with a paradox, which attests to the way that paradoxes pull in two directions and how they beget other paradoxes. If one understands the process of enlightenment to consist of ‘the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority’,³⁹⁸ then Shakespeare, paradoxically, enlightens his audience through the discourse of folly. It is through this discourse that he frees his audience from their enthrallment to conventional ideas and to established modes of reasoning. First and foremost, however, the paradoxical wisdom of folly lies in its sceptical refusal to trust itself, to assert either that its implications are straightforwardly true, or that its ways of perceiving the world are unequivocally right. Therefore, folly does not teach one to trust one’s own understanding. It does something far more important and ultimately more enlightening. The paradoxical wisdom of folly teaches us to distrust our own wisdom.

WORD COUNT: 88,981

³⁹⁸ Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’ in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. by Mary C. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.1–22 (p. 17).

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