

Strategic Madness: Disguise as Motif and Method

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines selected instances of disguise as a literary motif and as a literary strategy in English writing of the early modern period. The aim is to illuminate the nexus between shifting social, political, and religious faultlines on the one hand and varying forms of dissimulation on the other, and to document that from the Tudor period onwards, English literature tends to manifest at least as much self-effacing as self-fashioning.

It is further argued that this literary self-effacing and self-fashioning were two sides of the same coin, and that seen in their historical context, they appear as opposite poles of a paradoxical dialectic that was at the same time symptomatic and diagnostic. Examples cited range from English adaptations of Petrarchan poetic conventions to various forms of deceit, disguise, camouflage, and concealment in Tudor and Jacobean drama.

KEYWORDS: ambition, disguise, dissimulation, madness, malingering, self-fashioning

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Madness is but meaning carried to the extreme.

—Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*¹

Imagine a person born in England in, say, 1515. This person would grow up as a subject of Henry VIII, and as a Catholic, acknowledging the spiritual authority of the Pope in Rome. With the Act of Supremacy in 1534, establishing the King as head of the Church of England, his loyal subject would need to abandon allegiance to Rome, while continuing to subscribe to essentially the same articles of faith. The latter would change gradually as the Reformation began to take hold in England, and the King's subject would have then had to bow to the precepts of Protestant theology until 1553, when Mary Tudor's accession brought a complete reversal, and the faithful Protestant would have been obliged to once again become a faithful Catholic—only to turn back into a faithful Protestant just over five years later. If our hypothetical person had lived to the ripe old age of forty-five, and hence a little beyond the common life expectancy in Tudor England, this would mean having been required to profess a fundamentally changed secular fealty or religious belief on average once in every decade—and of course, to do so with a convincing show of sincerity.

Small wonder, then, that public utterances were often guarded or coded, and that dissimulating or evasive communication strategies were rife. Especially at court, social interactions tended to be an elaborate language game, with parties keen to make the right moves, and to steer clear of any risk of making a wrong one. Taken in its entirety, the literature of the period can be read as constituting a part as well as a critique of this game, which has three basic variants that I would label as, respectively, manipulation, encryption, and obfuscation (“Obfuscation”). The last two of these terms are used in current information technology to name techniques of data protection—an issue that was arguably no less important in the Renaissance than it is today. The pervasive Renaissance concern with information security explains why, as the curator of a recent exhibition asserts, “Renaissance principles of cryptography are still its guiding principles” in present times (“Decoding”).

In the following, I will focus on manipulation, under which heading I would subsume attempts to gain favour or to avoid disfavour, by saying what the other party wants to hear. Among the most obvious instances are the hyperbolic responses of King Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan to their

¹ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (1931), U of California P, 2014.

father's call for declarations of love. Lear's readiness to accept their poetic effusions without calling their sincerity into question makes him an example of the philosopher Apemantus' prosaic dictum in William Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*: "He that loves to be flattered is worthy o' the flatterer" (*Tim.* 1.1.228).² The audience are far less likely to be taken in than Lear himself, and more likely to side with Cordelia, when she shows, and is punished for, the audacity to speak truth to power. To an observer, the content of Cordelia's utterance must seem beyond reproach, since she acknowledges her obligation to her progenitor, but refutes the claim that a daughter's love and loyalty for her father may or should exclude all others:

You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me; I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? (*Lr.* 1.1.98-99)

It is, however, not the content of the three daughters' statements that determines the outcome of the paternal interrogation: though what Paul Watzlawick et al. call "the report and the command aspects" of the communication coexist, the latter clearly dominates (53). Goneril and Regan's answers are prime examples of what Watzlawick et al. identify as characteristic of a complementary relationship, in which one side has "the superior, primary, or 'one-up' position, and the other the corresponding inferior, secondary, or 'one-down' position" (69). When Cordelia challenges this relationship by not telling her father what he obviously wishes to hear, this is a case of symmetrical interaction, marked by "the minimization of difference, while complementary interaction is based on the maximization of difference" (69). The escalation ensues not because Cordelia denies her father's right to be loved or respected, but rather, his right to put her on the spot in a contest of rhetorical skill that exemplifies what Watzlawick et al. name "the 'be spontaneous' paradox"; i.e., the forcing of utterances that cannot, because of the way they were elicited, be taken as evidence of heartfelt conviction: "Anybody confronted with this injunction is

² The source of all quotations from Shakespeare's plays in this essay is *The Complete Works of Shakespeare. The Alexander Text* (2006).

in an untenable position, for to comply, he would have to be spontaneous within a frame of compliance, of nonspontaneity” (207, 199-200).

In Shakespeare’s plays, scenes such as these reflect one of the central concerns of a society in which, as Lacey Baldwin Smith claims, much social intercourse was governed by paranoia: “the three pieces of counsel that were reiterated *ad nauseam* by experienced fathers, worried educators, and observant social philosophers were first, trust no one; second, watch out for the enemy; and third, beware of appearances” (42-43). While this documents the pervasiveness of suspicion in all walks of life, the royal court was undoubtedly its hotbed, and the monarch was ever on the lookout for treacherous intent behind shows of loyalty and devotion. As Natalie Zarrelli puts it:

Long before NSA surveillance, Queen Elizabeth had her own “Watchers,” a network of agents who intercepted letters, cracked codes, and captured possible dissenters to protect the crown in secret. The queen’s network of spies formed the original surveillance state in the UK, and she started it for a good reason.

In such circumstances, disguise could prove ancillary or even essential to the survival of those whose loyalty was in doubt, or of those who genuinely harboured treacherous intent. For the latter, feigned madness could prove a useful, if extreme, means of disguising the true nature of their thoughts, through a type of behaviour known as malingering: “a term that describes intentionally producing false symptoms, or grossly exaggerating existing ones, with an external incentive in mind” (Montague). Among the possible incentives for such dissimulation, Jules Montague lists “obtaining financial compensation, housing, or drugs, or avoiding work, military duty, or criminal prosecution.”

If malingering was likely to flourish in Tudor England, and hence to feature as a salient motif in the literature of the period, it was certainly no original invention of Tudor society, and Tudor writers could take inspiration from a long line of precedents such as the post-Homeric story of Odysseus’ unsuccessful attempt to avoid joining the Greek campaign against Troy by yoking a motley team of animals to his plough and sowing salt into the furrows. His sanity is exposed, however, when the recruiting emissary Palamedes lays Odysseus’ infant son Telemachus in front of the plough, and the father swerves to avoid him (Apollodorus). Another time-honoured example is the biblical

story of David, who wants to be seen as mad at the court of the Philistine King of Gath, of whom he has become afraid after seeking shelter there; thus, David is reported to have “scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard” (1 Sam. 21.12-13). In the Islamic tradition, there is the story of the scientist and architect Ibn Al-Haytham who had promised the ruler of Egypt to regulate the flooding of the Nile, but found that he could neither do so, nor please the Caliph in the administrative post he was subsequently given. He is said to have then feigned madness to escape punishment (“1001 Inventions”).

Shakespeare’s Hamlet, whose pretence of insanity is an attempt to conceal his thoughts and intentions, is thus one in a long line of more or less successful malingerers. His utterances provide examples of obfuscation, as when he tells Horatio and Marcellus: “There’s ne’er a villain dwelling in all Denmark / But he’s an arrant knave,” or when, having claimed to recognise Polonius as a fishmonger, answers Polonius’ denial with: “Then I would you were so honest a man” (*Ham.* 1.5.123-24, 2.2.175). There is no encryption going on here, neither in the truism nor in the insult: both messages say what they mean, though they ask to be taken as stemming from an unsound mind that can hence lay claim to impunity. This does not escape Polonius, who suspects a deliberate strategy or method in Hamlet’s madness, although Hamlet’s strategy appears to avoid a snag that the nineteenth-century psychiatrist John Charles Bucknill found to have thwarted the efforts of many malingerers who wished to be seen as lunatics:

The feigning madman in all ages has been apt to fall into the error of believing that conduct utterly outrageous and absurd is the peculiar characteristic of insanity. The absurd conduct of the real madman does not indicate a total subversion of the intelligence; it is not utterly at variance with the reasoning processes; but it is consistent either with certain delusive ideas, or with a certain perverted state of the emotions. (434)

In the terminology of Watzlawick et al., the exchanges between the malingering Hamlet and others exemplify the dominance of relationship over content, i.e., of metacommunication over information: “on the relationship level people do not communicate about facts outside their relationship, but offer each other

definitions of that relationship and, by implication, of themselves” (83-84). The malingerer’s problem is the necessary incongruity between the messages “[t]his is how I want you to see me” and “[t]his is how I see myself,” for madness that declares itself as such is likely to be regarded as proven sanity. This is what has become known as a “catch-22,” summed up by army psychiatrist Doc Daneeka in Joseph Heller’s eponymous novel: “Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn’t really crazy” (46). If received, a metacommunicational message “I want you to see me as mad” is necessarily self-defeating, in creating a pragmatic paradox similar to the “be spontaneous” injunction. In order to be found credibly crazy, intentionally mad behaviour must in turn seem spontaneous, and not studied; and in this respect, perfect malingering may be said to mirror the kind of behaviour that marked the ideal courtier, to whom Baldassare Castiglione’s manual advised “practise in everything a certain nonchalance that shall conceal design” (35).

Like much else in the Renaissance, the notion of *sprezzatura* had a classical ancestor, namely, the Ciceronian ideal of *negligentia diligens*, the art of cultivating an artless, spontaneous, and natural style. During the dialogic argument in Castiglione’s book, Count Lodovico da Canossa draws an analogy between elegant speech and the way women may make judicious use of make-up, attire, and posture to appear attractive, “without showing care or wish to be beautiful” (55). The rhetorical principle is best seen in dialectical conjunction with the complementary idea of *copia* or embellishment, set out in Desiderius Erasmus’ eponymous treatise of 1512; while the Count’s reference to means of exerting feminine influence appears to fit in the abovementioned pattern of pervasive paranoia, since he deems “nonchalant simplicity most pleasing to the eyes and minds of men, who are forever fearful of being deceived by art” (58). Such a fear of being ensnared by feminine wiles is also expressed in Sonnet 37 of Edmund Spenser’s *Amoretti*:

What guyle is this, that those her golden tresses
 She doth attyre under a net of gold:
 and with sly skill so cunningly them dresses,
 that which is gold or heare may scarce be told?

If the enemy could lurk anywhere in any shape of form, everyone was equally suspect in theory. In practice, though, women were regarded with especial

mistrust, as being at best inconstant lovers, and at worst a danger to men's spiritual or physical wellbeing. Thomas Wyatt's poems in *Tottel's Miscellany* contain a warning of false friends—"none is worse, then is a friendly fo"—but also numerous complaints against women who make men suffer by refusing them outright, or by ceasing to grant them favours that were given once "after a pleasant gyse" ("Of" 42; "Lover" 40). Greater suffering could, however, be inflicted by consenting to, rather than by denying, physical intimacy. From the late fifteenth century onwards, syphilis had taken hold in England, and had soon been recognised as a sexually transmitted disease that disfigured and disabled. Any object of desire would thus take on the aspect of a potential nemesis:

From its beginning, syphilis was greatly feared by society—because of the repulsiveness of its symptoms, the pain and disfigurement that was endured, the severe after effects of the mercury treatment, but most of all, because it was spread by an inescapable facet of human behaviour, sexual intercourse.

(Frith 56)

Literary reflections of the disease are numerous, both obvious and latent, from curses such as Sebastian's "[a] pox o' your throat" in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1.1.38), to hints such as "[f]or beauty, with her band, / These crooked cares hath wrought" in Thomas Vaux's "The Aged Lover Renounceth Love." In the latter, the speaker's professed change in lifestyle and attitude may well appear to be not exclusively age-related; and similar transformations in behaviour, such as that of Henry VIII, who "became cruel and easily roused to anger and was subject to headaches," could be and indeed were frequently seen as linked to syphilis (Devonald 22). G. Devonald's article from which I have quoted refutes such a link, mainly on account of the assumption that a disease with salient symptoms could hardly have gone unobserved and unmentioned in the case of someone under such intense scrutiny as a Tudor monarch. We may, however, consider the contention in the following passage as a caveat:

Those who could buy care also bought silence—the confidentiality of the modern doctor/patient relationship has its roots in the treatment of syphilis. Not that it always helped. The old adage "a night with Venus; a lifetime with Mercury" reveals

all manner of horrors, from me suffocating in overheated steam baths to quacks who peddled chocolate drinks laced with mercury so that infected husbands could treat their wives and families without them knowing. Even court fashion is part of the story, with pancake makeup and beauty spots as much a response to recurrent attacks of syphilis as survivors of smallpox. (Dunant)

Watching out for harm disguised as attraction, or evil disguised as good: this is evidently as pervasive a pattern in Tudor and Jacobean social relations as a motif in the literature of the periods. *Vide* the witch hunts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, encouraged by Elizabeth I's successor James VI of Scotland and I of England, who had become convinced that an international coven of witches had sought to impede the voyage of his bride Anne of Denmark to Scotland by raising a storm in the autumn of 1589 on behalf of Satan, who "sought to undermine human society from within and was recruiting secret agents to do his bidding" (Goodare). James's semi-rational and legalistic approach occasionally led him to see through false accusations, but he never doubted the existence of witchcraft and only let go of this particular obsession when a different threat became manifestly greater: "After the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 . . . James turned away from hunting witches in favour of rooting out any Catholic conspiracies" (Goodare).

When Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was first staged in 1606, the monarch's prime attention was thus presumably no longer focused on practitioners of black magic, but rather on people near him who harboured evil intent beneath a mask of loyalty. In the context of debate on how far and how exactly Shakespeare's Scottish play pandered to the new monarch's tastes and concerns, it is noteworthy that the three witches who greet Macbeth are not only brewing potions and stirring tempests in keeping with popular notions of witchcraft, but more importantly, they dispense puzzling oracular pronouncements that initially fuel Macbeth's ambition, and later on, trick him into a false sense of invulnerability. Macbeth is not bewitched in the sense of being affected by evil spells and curses, but he is clearly charmed by the prospects held out to him, in contrast to the less impressionable Banquo, who warns his companion of possibly fatal deception:

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
 The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
 Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
 In deepest consequence. (*Mac.* 1.3.123-24)

To Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the rhyme of “harm” with “charm” must still have appeared meaningful. Richard Beckman asserts that Shakespeare “retains the Elizabethan sense of ‘charm,’ a word denoting bewitching entrapment or entrapment by a witch,” while exploiting the playfulness, the “inherent doubleness” of characters such as Rosalind in *As You Like It*, to charm his audience: “The ambiguity of which self is speaking, the real or the pretend, is part of her charm” (26, 33, 32). Beckman thus sees Shakespeare’s literary production as the locus and the vehicle of a process of amelioration, leading to the modern understanding and appreciation of “charm” as a desirable or enviable personality trait. This understanding can be said to have grown out of the Renaissance ideal of the courtier’s capacity for what Stephen Greenblatt terms improvisation: “the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one’s own scenario” (227). Greenblatt, however, tends to stress the sinister side of this capacity, citing its use as a strategic tool of colonisation in a process during which the mind of the Other is simultaneously entered and invalidated “by the subversive perception of another’s truth as an ideological construct” (228). Improvisation as defined by Greenblatt is thus essentially manipulative and reactionary:

After all, the heart of a successful improvisation lies in concealment, not exposure; and besides, as we have seen, even a hostile improvisation reproduces the relations of power that it hopes to displace and absorb. (253)

If improvisation is the art of concealment, it is by the same token the concealment of art: “the impromptu character of an improvisation is itself often a calculated mask, the product of careful preparation” (227). Of all the literary genres, poetry—and especially the form-conscious poetry of the Renaissance—is, however, arguably the least likely to succeed in hiding its craftedness or craftiness. If Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil* claims that his Muse told him “look in thy heart, and write,” the *Astrophil and Stella* sonnet cycle amply documents

that the head had a far greater hand in its creation than the heart. And if later on the speaker of George Herbert's "Jordan (I)" makes a plea for plainness, he does so within the context of a finely wrought statement that belies the purport of the rhetorical question: "Is all good structure in a winding stair?"

Herbert's challenge "[s]hepherds are honest people: let them sing" is posed partly in defiance of Puritans who would deny spiritual shepherds such as himself the right to versify, though it is at the same time a critique of the pastoral genre where simple rural personae serve as masks that conceal the education, the sophistication, the world-weariness, or the cynicism of their creators who have put the words in the shepherds and shepherdesses' mouths. Christopher Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd" is a good example of an innocent posture assumed by a writer who was, by all accounts, the very opposite of innocence, and who may even have been recruited as a secret agent for Privy Council member Francis Walsingham's network of spies (Hutchinson 111). Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply" is that fictional character's retort to the equally fictional Shepherd, as well as one writer's rebuke of the other's disguise, albeit delivered as a continuation of the role-play, in a corresponding act of poetic ventriloquism. The anti-pastoral stance, with its reminder of "a world where shepherds have actually been known to lie to their nymphs" thus becomes part of the pastoral word-game ("Notes").

Raleigh was, as Greenblatt suggests in a footnote, arguably "the supreme example in England of a gentleman not born but fashioned" (286); a tightrope walker extraordinaire who knew how to please and how to dissemble. His life may be taken as an example of how careers were made in actuality—somewhat differently from what Giovanni Pico della Mirandola had in mind when, in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, he spelled out a divine decree to Man: "you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer" (7). Opportunities for this kind of self-invention multiplied in Renaissance Europe, though the means of rising in the world were likely to taint the lofty ideal for which Pico intended the human being to strive: "if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God" (8). Reason and intellect, Pico suggested, can help humans free themselves from the carnal and material bonds of their existence, and enable them to live up to their proper task: "trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature" (7).

Pico's own reason and intellect led him to not only condone but commend the use of white magic and Kabbalistic ritual in Christian practice—"Magia naturalis licita est et non prohibita" (*Conclusiones*)—whereas he rejected the popular belief in astrology "as demeaning to human liberty and dignity" ("Pico della Mirandola"). This alone would perhaps suffice to explain why his ideas were perceived as "deliberately esoteric and aggressively recondite" ("Giovanni Pico della Mirandola"), and why he met with various degrees of condemnation by the establishment to whose upper echelons his own family had belonged. While showing a certain keenness to live up to his social standing by making his mark as a young man of great promise, the older Pico was apparently ready to trade all aspirations, including some scholarly pursuits, for a simple monastic life: in other words, to rein in the ambition that governed the existence of so many people around him so comprehensively that they could appear as being possessed. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Antonio offers this definition to the noble lady:

Ambition, madam, is a great man's madness,
That is not kept in chains and close-pent rooms,
But in fair lightsome lodgings, and is girt
With the wild noise of prattling visitants,
Which makes it lunatic beyond all cure. (1.3.124)

In Shakespeare's plays, ambition is ambivalent. Its mad or demonic variant is seen in the "vaulting ambition" that has Macbeth in his grip (*Mac.* 1.7.27), or that of Prospero's brother "that entertain'd ambition, / Expell'd remorse and nature" (*Tmp.* 5.1.75-76). Julius Caesar's suspected ambition to be crowned is the reason for his murder; and King Richard II states that "[t]houghts tending to ambition, they do plot / Unlikely wonders" (*R2* 5.5.18-19), while the Roman general Ventidius reins in "ambition, / The soldier's virtue" so as not to trigger Antony's envy (*Ant.* 3.1.23-24). Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well* both talks about and exhibits an oxymoronic "humble ambition, proud humility" that secures her a marriage above her station (1.1.159); Jacques, the melancholy philosopher in *As You Like It*, invites "[w]ho doth ambition shun, / And loves to live i' th' sun" to join him (2.5.34-35). In *Cymbeline*, Posthumus Leonatus includes ambition in a list of feminine shortcomings:

For there's no motion
That tends to vice in man, but I affirm
It is the woman's part; be it lying, note it,
The woman's; flattering, hers; deceiving, hers;
Lust and rank thoughts, hers, hers; revenges, hers;
Ambitions, covetings, change of prides, disdain,
Nice longings, slanders, mutability. (2.5.20-26)

In Webster's *Duchess*, the maid Cariola ends act 1 with a statement that appears to compound ambition—in the shape of hubris—and madness, in a similarly misogynistic remark on her mistress's behaviour:

Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman
Reign most in her, I know not; but it shows
A fearful madness: I owe her much of pity. (1.3.203-05)

What Cariola refers to is the Duchess's defiance of social norms in marrying her steward, and of her brothers' orders in marrying anyone at all. The irony lies in the fact that in keeping her marriage secret, the Duchess becomes a player in the very same game that she attempts to counteract: a game of lies, disguise, and intrigue, of which the virtuous and innocent are the easiest, if by no means the only victims. In the world of the drama, just about everyone is complicit in a general, systemic madness that engulfs the characters whose actions seal their diverse but similar fates. The Duchess's brother Ferdinand, who is diagnosed with the werewolf disease lycanthropia, sums this up as he dies at the hands of the vengeful Bosola: "Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, / Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust" (5.5.70-71). In other words, self-fashioning is—given a specific social context—tantamount to self-annihilation. Ferdinand's dying words to that effect can be likened to certain utterances by Shakespeare's King Lear who, at the end of the play, is able "to see through the clouds of his narcissism, the delusions of grandeur" that have brought him down (Fulton). I would argue that it is their moments of clarity that engender the audience's empathy with deranged or deluded characters; though it is apparently possible to see this differently. A recent article on "Madness and Difference," contains the claim that

we, as teachers of literature, have a moral responsibility to teach madness, encourage it, and revel in the extraordinary liberation and empowerment that it engenders. . . . Further, in a world where bombs are used to “liberate” a nation and where a Patriot Act leads to spying on the innocent citizens it is supposed to protect, an interrogation of madness and its ideological significance could actually save us as a society. (Shafer 42)

While it may be justifiable to surmise that our own time is at least as much “out of joint” as that of Hamlet’s fictional Denmark or Shakespeare’s actual England (*Ham.* 1.5.189), I balk at Gregory Shafer’s contention that “Hamlet flourishes most when he is mad” (42). Faced with the ills of his time, Hamlet evidently does not manage “to set it right,” but turns a mess into an even bigger mess with intended or collateral damage to many, including the blameless Ophelia (*Ham.* 1.5.190). His madness does not even temporarily liberate him from his circumstances, but rather implicates him to an ever greater degree in what he professes to resent. As Anthony B. Dawson notes of Hamlet, “the very real symptoms of disorder that he periodically manifests” show that “the disguise is also a deeply personal truth” in the paranoid milieu that Hamlet inhabits (44).

Our own task as scholars and teachers of literature should arguably be to examine Tudor and Jacobean literature as both diagnostic and symptomatic of their societies’ ills, and to interrogate our contemporary literature and society in the self-same light. Being the current generation of what a living German philosopher has termed “modernity’s *enfants terribles*,” we should identify and expose pathologies arising from the contrast between seemingly unlimited opportunities for self-determination or self-invention on the one hand, and the obvious or latent mechanisms that impede or thwart the efforts of the vast majority of the world’s population to truly be the captains of their ships (Sloterdijk 26). We can hardly be content with rebranding madness as a tool of liberation or as a source of inspiration, as did Virginia Woolf who in 1930 wrote to a friend “[a]s an experience, madness is terrific . . . and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about” (“Virginia Woolf” 113). All fair and good—but it is by critiquing rather than by celebrating our own world’s lunacies that we may hope to gain charge of our asylum, and to turn it into a perhaps slightly saner place.

I would submit that the key to such a critique lies in an understanding of pathological patterns as the property of social entities, rather than in an understanding of pathological traits as characteristic of individual minds. To return to the theory of Watzlawick et al. that I have cited earlier: this approach is based on the assumption that the human mind is a black box to which we have no direct access, so that the only evidence we can go by is behaviour, which always occurs in a context, and is therefore communication. One consequence of this premise is that “the terms ‘sanity’ and ‘insanity’ practically lose their meanings as attributes of individuals” (Watzlawick et al. 46). However thoroughly tomorrow’s neuroscientists may penetrate the inner workings of the cognitive apparatus, this apparatus never operates in a vacuum; and with literary characters as opposed to real people, moreover, we do not even have brains to examine, but can *ipso facto* observe only what they say and do in any given situation.

Gregory Shafer’s take on *Hamlet* as an example of how madness “can be a place in which rebels operate in contesting the immoral aspects of their world” largely disregards the outcome of Hamlet’s course of action (Shafer 47), which turns out to be “a reaction that follows, and therefore perpetuates, the rules of such a context” (Watzlawick et al. 47). The rebels featuring in Tudor and Jacobean tragedy do not succeed in making the world better, whether they rebel openly like the honest Cordelia, secretly like the tender Duchess of Malfi, or under guise of insanity like Hamlet; and it is doubtful whether even the rule-disputing heroines of comedies such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Much Ado about Nothing* achieve anything more significant than personal gratification. Kari K. Eliason notes that Hermia’s “rebellion rewards her with the husband of her choice,” and Beatrice is able to “marry the man of her choice, by her own free will,” but these happy endings are achieved after rather a lot of such plotting and scheming as will presumably continue after the curtain falls (46, 52).

To modern audiences, a need for disguise and a bias against frankness are bound to appear not entirely unfamiliar. Those living under authoritarian regimes are well aware of the risks of speaking truth to power, while corporate environments tend to operate in subtler ways: “While they may have good intentions about encouraging people to openly share their feelings, line managers may inadvertently show attitudes or behaviour that discourage voice” (Baczor). But what if your boss asks you to say quite honestly what you think

of his or her management style? Or what if you conceive of the opening scene of *King Lear* as a twenty-first century interview with three internal candidates who vie for the succession of the retiring CEO in a major corporation? Goneril and Regan will fall over themselves and each other in vouching for their boundless commitment to take the enterprise to the next level; then Cordelia will say that she intends to do neither less nor more than what the terms of her contract ask her to do, and ask why her sisters do not seem to factor obligations to their husbands into their work-life balances. Now who do you think will land the post?

A final parallel to ponder is the ease with which not only public but also private actions and utterances could and can be weaponised against individuals then and now. Authorial disclaimers and literary distancing techniques were as common a currency in the Renaissance as trigger warnings and apologies are at present. “Thou shalt not offend” was the eleventh commandment of writers then, and still is in our day and age, the main difference being that the range of people who must not be offended is now infinitely broader, and their means to accuse and condemn are infinitely greater. In addition to state intelligence services with an official remit, there are so many self-appointed Watchers poised to publicise real or imagined transgressions, heresies, or insults perpetrated by writers that one must wonder whether the literature of the future will be withdrawing into the space of the inoffensive and the innocuous, and thus be hardly worth reading at all.

Giorgio Caravale cites the example of a cobbler from whom the Inquisition in 1574 took “the only three books he possessed: the *Orlando Furioso*, the *Decameron*, and a copy of the New Testament” (94). If such was the influence of the Catholic Church in its dominions, can one even imagine the globally combined influence of all kinds of creeds, polities, ethnicities, and other groups on the content of public, institutional, and private libraries? Ironically enough, though, the concerted Catholic censorship of the late sixteenth century gave way to a different policy in the early seventeenth, as Caravale reports:

The Protestant peril having been eliminated, and there no longer being any urgency to remove the abuses that had fueled Protestant polemics, the same superstitious elements that in the years after the Council of Trent attempts had been made to eliminate were not only tolerated by the church hierarchy but in some cases even

encouraged and exploited in order to achieve even greater success in the conquest of the masses. (102)

In other words, having run an extensive campaign to protect the public from unwanted content, the Church now ran, endorsed, or at the very least tolerated a campaign of disinformation that fed a gullible public with religious treatises which in the eyes of the Church itself seemed to contain hocus-pocus, mumbo-jumbo, or absurd scholastic speculation. Nowadays we would in all likelihood call this the spreading of fake news—but that would be, as they say, a different story.

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