Shakespeare, Tragedy, Post-truth: *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Abstract

The recent controversy concerning 'fake news', truth and falsehood provides the stimulus for the following argument that seeks to investigate different kinds of language in a series of Shakespeare plays: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is clear that at the turn of the 16th-17th century the issue of the representational powers of language was topical, and the following arguments seek to show how that issue develops primarily in three plays, but it could also be extended to cover more. In *Hamlet* different kinds of language compete with one another, from the purveyance of 'false truth' that is the idiom of Claudius, the 'player king', right through to the Gravedigger whose grasp of the contingent powers of oral language is superior, even to Hamlet himself. Hamlet's problem is, in part, that he cannot find an adequate language in which to make sense of his predicament, while Claudius persists right up to the end in a form of deceitful language that is ultimately exposed. In *Macbeth* the 'devilish' language of the agents of evil take over Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to the point where they accept as truthful 'the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth.' In *Antony and Cleopatra* two radically opposed forms of language are engaged in conflict with each other: the factual, rational language of Rome, and the seductive 'poetic' language of Egypt, with Antony caught between the two. These radically opposed approaches to the business of representation produces a series of tragic consequences that cannot be easily resolved. It is this conflict that has re-emerged in the comparatively secular world of modern secular politics, with its contestatory approach to 'truth' and to 'fake news'.

Key words: Shakespeare, tragedy, post-truth, Hamlet, Macbeth, language, conflict.

1. The Era of Post-truth

According to *The Guardian* for 16 November last, the international

word of the year 2016 was "post-truth". The president of the *Oxford Dictionaries*, Casper Grathwohl attributed "the rise in use of post-truth" to "the Brexit vote and Donald Trump securing the Republican presidential nomination," and forecasted that "post-truth" is likely to become "one of the defining words of our time." He went on:

> It's not surprising that our choice of reflects a year dominated by highly charged political and social discourse. Fuelled by the rise of social media as a new source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, post-truth as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time.[1]

The following day, Jonathan Freedland insisted that the "the simpler word" for "post-truth" is "lies", stating that "Trump and those like him not only lie: they imply that the truth doesn't matter, showing a blithe indifference to whether what they say is grounded in reality or evidence."[2] Another word gathering momentum as we drift into 2017, and a month in which we are led to believe that "Brexit means Brexit", is "populism"; from one (perhaps naïve) perspective, assumed to be a democratic urge by a disgruntled political underclass simply to be heard. The term is coupled with "post-truth" recently defined by the *Oxford Dictionaries* as:

> relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

In contrast, "Truth", according to the same august authority, involves fidelity to a recognisable state of affairs in the world, "conformity with fact; agreement with reality; accuracy, correctness" and being true to one's word. We know that 'facts' change as we accumulate knowledge, and things are not always what they seem, but in our post-modern world where performativity is a viable concept used to define an identity politics, the term has been

hi-jacked by politicians whose performative statements, they know, can never be transformed into action however much they repeat them. Like "post-truth" that is an anodyne synonym for "lies", so "populism"- that shares a common semantic field in its appeal to, and its manipulation of, "emotion", is an anodyne synonym for crypto-fascism.

It is a commonplace that language both shapes and reflects the world that we live in, and it registers changes in our perceptions of that world and our place within it. The crisis in western culture (notwithstanding local and geographical differences) emanates from dramatic changes in the technologies of communication that result in a dislocation of what classical Marxism used to define as the forces and the relations of production. In the case to which I have just referred, the reality is obscured by a systematic flattery of electorates by those vested interests that have most to gain by manipulating them. In short the ethical questions of *sincerity* and *truthfulness* are involved. In his book on *Truth and Truthfulness*: *An Essay in Genealogy* (2002), the philosopher Bernard Williams defined 'sincerity' as "a disposition to make sure that one's assertion expresses what one actually believes."[3] And he amplified it with the suggestion that "sincerity is trustworthiness in speech."[4] He continued, "We want people to have a disposition of Sincerity which is centred on sustaining and developing relations with others that involve different kinds and degrees of trust." And he concluded with this important observation:

> Reflecting on that disposition, they will think about the kinds of trust that are implicit in different relations, and how abusing them may resemble other, perhaps more dramatic forms of manipulation and domination, inasmuch as it imposes the agent's will in place of reality – the reality which all parties equally have to live within.[5]

Williams is concerned with the pragmatic exploration of human linguistic behaviour in fictional and everyday narratives. The

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his book *The Sacrament of Language* (2010) augments this account by placing specific emphasis on assertory and promissory language, although he identifies a radical ambivalence that resides at the root of language itself:

> Every naming is, in fact, double: it is a blessing or a curse. A blessing, if the word is full, if there is a correspondence between the signifier and the signified, between words and things; a curse if the word is empty, if there remains, between the semiotic and the semantic a gap. Oath and perjury, bene-diction and male-diction correspond to this double possibility inscribed in the *logos*, in the experience by means of which the living being has been constituted as speaking being.[6]

We might do well to recall that theatrical representation, indeed, *all* fiction, plays fast and loose with the 'fullness' and 'emptiness' of language, from Plato to Sir Philip Sidney and beyond.

2. A Spoonful of Poetry

Our own current debates about language and politics are, therefore, not as novel as they now seem. Issues of 'truth', 'lies', and the protocols for establishing categories of knowledge, are present in Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* (c.1583; 1595), and his comments on the strategy for encouraging an interest in poetry presents a medically responsible alternative to Julie Andrews' claim that "a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down":

> he[the poet] cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well enchanting skill of music; and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale, which holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney corner. And, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue – even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them

> in such other as have a pleasant taste, which, if one should begin to tell them the nature of *aloes* or *rhubarbarum* they should receive, would sooner take their physic at their ears than at their mouth.[7]

Sidney's commitment to a humanistic education is fundamentally at odds with the reductively prosaic modern strategy of dividing society into mutually antagonistic groupings in thrall to the "mass hypnosis"[8] of demagogues, and for whom questions of 'virtue' and 'sincerity', let alone 'truthfulness', are barely recognised as anything more than empty rhetoric. Indeed, Sidney's "spoonful of poetry" unlike Julie Andrews' "spoonful of sugar" (the sucrose content of grapes notwithstanding) directs us to a series of Shakespearean dramatic narratives that, within a particular historical context, play out in the form of tragedy the issues that, *mutatis mutandis*, now confront us. The cultural dilemma that accelerated the crisis in Elizabethan and early Jacobean England was the technology of printing and the spread of literacy, that, not unlike modern Information technology, exerted deep pressure on ways of life that, unlike our own, were not easily compartmentalised. Religion, economics, politics, domestic life, even language, all of which the modern world continues to conveniently separate as distinct fields of social and intellectual activity, were, for the late 16th century, deeply interconnected. And it was these interconnections, as well as the language in and through which they were articulated, that were under threat. If I say that the issue was "truth", this is not to reduce a complex series of problems to one overarching abstraction. It is, rather to open up a whole series of related socially and psychologically integral concepts such as "truthfulness", "integrity", "honesty", and "virtue" to critical examination; these changes in religion, economics, and "information technology" are registered in the language and action of Shakespearean tragedy.

I want to concentrate on three of Shakespeare's tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* that, demonstrate very different

facets of this complex problem, although, I will refer in passing to *Troilus and Cressida* and *Macbeth* where these motifs are amplified. Some of them have recently been brought together in John Kerrigan's encyclopaedic account, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* (2016) in which he argues that:

> During Shakespeare's lifetime the cluster of words around *bind*, *bound*, and *bond* was used of so many kinds of connection-bonds of kin, allegiance to a monarch, material threads and cords, being bound by goodwill or service, not to mention the power of the clergy (for some) to bind and loose from sin – that usage was coloured with implications that allow binding as act and description to draw fields of meaning together.[9]

Kerrigan's concern is not just with promissory or assertatory language (including 'swearing' at both the extremes of the juridical and the profane), but, ultimately, with the ways in which these kinds of language are represented in Shakespeare's plays and his poetry, as indices of a crisis within the culture of the period. One of the examples that Kerrigan's impressively thorough analysis does not take full advantage of occurs in *Hamlet*.

The encounter with the Gravedigger takes place immediately on Hamlet's return from England and it lays bare a context-specific respect for particular meanings that change as the situation changes. Hamlet's question: "Whose grave is this, sirrah?" initiates the following exchange:

GRAVEDIGGER Mine sir.
[*Sings*.]
O, a pit of clay for to be made –
HAMLET I think it be thine, indeed, for thou liest in't.
GRAVEDIGGER You lie out on't, sir, and therefore 'tis
Not yours. For my part I do not lie in't, yet it is mine.
HAMLET Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine.

'Tis for the dead, not for the quick. Therefore thou liest.

GRAVEDIGGER 'Tis a quick lie, sir, 'twill away again from Me to you.

HAMLET What man dost thou dig it for?

GRAVEDIGGER For no man, sir

HAMLET What woman then?

GRAVEDIGGER For none, neither.

HAMLET Who is to be buried in't?

GRAVEDIGGER One that was a woman, sir, but rest her Soul she's dead.

HAMLET [*to Horatio*] How absolute this knave is! 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 heel of the courtier he galls his kibe.

(V.i.110-133)[10]

At the root of this exchange is an opposition between 'truth' and 'lies', and the question is: to what extent the Gravedigger *possesses* the grave he has been digging *and* the extent to which Hamlet himself is laid open to the accusation of 'lying'. If this were a serious exchange – say, the confrontation between Bolingbroke and Mowbray at the beginning of *The Tragedy of Richard II* – it would provoke a bellicose response. Instead the Gravedigger's nimble wit elicits from Hamlet an imperative to speak even more precisely than the "absolute" interlocutor whose oral dexterity will allow him to exploit meanings accurately that are themselves *bound* by the specific *contexts* in which they are deployed. In this exchange Hamlet has the last word, but he does so only by invoking his superior status, while at the same time lamenting the collapse of the social hierarchy. In the context of Shakespeare's play populism is anything but a demagogic manipulation of proletarian emotion; indeed, it is a political challenge to an order in which the "courtier" is shown to be at a clear linguistic disadvantage. Hamlet's "card" is

both a "ship's compass" and a "book"[11] whereas the Gravedigger's language derives its force from the immediacy of his situation and his lived experience. This, in miniature, encapsulates the crisis of language that the play (and Hamlet in particular) wrestles with, and it is one of a number of examples in the play where different *types* of language, and the rhetorical force that they are capable of producing, are on display.

3. Hamlet

Hamlet begins in uncertainty. A Ghostly father appears from the past, a Catholic past, Purgatory, weaponized (as we might say), and also armed with an assertory language that describes both his 'history' and his present predicament, to a son who has just returned from the Protestant Wittenberg. The Ghost gives his eponymous son a repeated conditional command :

HAMLET	Speak, I am bound to hear.
GHOST	So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear. (I.v.6-7)
	and :
	If thou didst ever thy dear father love –
HAMLET	O God!
GHOST –	Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder! (I.v.22-25)

The murder is "strange and unnatural" (l.28) a violation of the bonds of kinship, and later, filial attachment,[12] reinforced in his further appeal: "If thou hast nature in thee bear it not" (81).[13] The Ghost 'binds' Hamlet at the same time as it hedges the commitment it elicits from him in conditional terms. Hamlet is not required to swear a binding oath, although the Ghost's compressed negative "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (I.v.82-3), has the effect of provoking him to seek to alter what has already become the *status quo* in Denmark. At the heart of the problem is the erosion of 'memory', the air-brushing out of history of the distinctive performative ethos of Old Hamlet, where there existed "a correspondence between the signifier and the signified"

(Agamben) but who, like the psychologically repressed, returns, to *advise*, rather than unconditionally bind or instruct, the revenger: "But howsomever thou pursues this act / Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught;" (I.v.84-6). The Ghost's exhortation to revenge is understood by Hamlet in assertory terms as the exhortation to 'remember': "Now to my word. / It is adieu, adieu, remember me.' / I have sworn't." (I.v.109-11).

From the outset, speed is of the essence for Hamlet, and the variation between the Folio reading of the line: "Hast, hast me to know it / That I with wings as swift," and Q2's "Haste me to know't that I with wings as swift" (I.v.29), suggests that in addition to the possibility that the division in the Folio line may have been a compositorial attempt to remain within the measure of the composing stick, the repetition (Hast, Hast) also adds increasing urgency to Hamlet's task. But even though Hamlet judges that this is "an honest Ghost" (I.v.37) its origin in Purgatory and the injunction to "remember", in a kingdom where the "vow" of marriage is no longer sacred, will give Hamlet pause for thought. Also the secret nature of Claudius's crime serves to extend the trajectory of revenge as an action to which the revenger has recourse *only* when the legitimate avenues of justice have been exhausted. Put another way, it is only when, in the criminal's *language*, "words, things and actions" (Agamben) are finally exposed to public view, that revenge can have meaning in the play. To this extent, Hamlet's revenge is, ultimately, not a violation of a moral or an ethical code ("bene-diction), but an attempt to re-establish morality and ethics in a world in which "male-diction" now holds sway. This is not to say that there are not occasions when Hamlet's desires, or his actions do not stray into the amoral world shaped by Claudius, but it goes some way to explaining the hesitations, and the self-conscious examination of motives, feelings, and actions that act to frustrate the completion of Hamlet's task. Indeed, at one point in the play, even the Ghost becomes impatient.

From the very outset the ethos of Old Hamlet is set up against that

of Claudius. Horatio's speculations about the origins of the Ghost in Act 1 scene 1 are important insofar as they introduce us to a king and his chivalric adversary, Old Norway, whose words, actions and legal agreements reinforce each other. Were it not for the fact that this Ghost comes from Purgatory, we might conclude that Old Hamlet is present to himself; in short, he *is* his word. This image of the dead king is in contrast to that of Claudius, and it is one of many that the play sets up. The new king's first appearance, and his deployment of an uncomfortably persuasive rhetoric, raises some questions. The series of conditional statements ('Though', 'Yet') and the conclusive 'Therefore', coupled with the demagogic enlistment of the support of his Court, seek to establish a logic that is designed to explain Claudius's behaviour. The image that he uses of "an auspicious and a dropping eye" (I.ii.11) is visually implausible, but it is emotionally and rhetorically powerful. Both the Arden 2 and Arden 3 editors regard the speech as an example of 'spin' but it is surely more than that. Is Claudius simply 'bluffing' or is he telling 'lies'? As the North American philosopher Harry Frankfurt once noted in a famous essay, "Lying and bluffing are both modes of misrepresentation or deception." He goes on:

> the concept most central to the distinctive nature of a lie is that of falsity: the liar is essentially someone who deliberately promulgates a falsehood. Bluffing too is typically devoted to conveying something false. Unlike plain lying, however, it is more especially a matter not of falsity but of fakery. This is what accounts for its nearness to bullshit. For the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phoney*. In order to appreciate this distinction, one must recognise that a fake or a phoney need not be in any respect (apart from authenticity itself) inferior to the real thing.[14]

In Claudius's case 'lying' and 'bluffing' go together, but he occasionally (and privately) recognises "the truth" since, as the play develops, he admits that his entire position is 'false'. What

distinguishes him as a 'liar' and a 'phoney' is his private anxiety that drives his particular commitment to represent reality in the way that he does. He is careless with 'fact' as in his claim that "death of fathers" is a feature of "nature" "who still hath cried / From the first corpse till he that died today / 'This must be so'. (I.ii.104-6). He sends ambassadors (Cornelius and Voltemand) to deal with the Norwegians, but limits their scope of action; later he will use Polonius (with fatal consequences) and he will consent to the use of Ophelia, then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and finally Laertes as intermediaries. In all these cases death is the result, but only in the case of Laertes does his guilt finally come into the public domain. The conduct of his emissaries is circumscribed by writing, and he frequently separates his own inner feeling from his outward behaviour. In addition he engineers 'forgetfulness' even as Hamlet strives to 'remember'. Where in the case of Old Hamlet writing supplements living language and is validated in action, Claudius is a product of literacy, who can separate 'word', 'thought' and 'action from each other, and who can distinguish between the 'inner' man and the public image.

The conflict between 'inner' and 'outer' surfaces on two notable occasions. The first is prompted by the feckless Polonius's justification of deception as he prepares his daughter for a meeting with Hamlet: "'Tis too much proved that with devotion's visage / And pious action we do sugar o'er / The devil himself." (III.i.46-8) The King's aside offers us a glimpse of his divided psyche:

> How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
> The harlot's cheek beautied with plastering art
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
> Than is my deed to my most painted word.
> O heavy burden!
>
> (III.i.49-53)

The division between 'deed' and representation is precisely a consequence of literacy, and the issue is pressed home again after another scheme involving Polonius produces a much more involved

soliloquy. What was 'natural' in the public world of Denmark is now, in the privacy of Claudius's 'closet' a "rank" offence that "hath the eldest curse upon't." (III.iii.37) The issue here is exactly *how* Claudius can communicate directly with God (through prayer) when in the human world the desire to continue to possess material acquisitions blocks the channels of communication:

> May one be pardoned and retain th'offence?
> In the corrupted currents of this world
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law; but 'tis not so above:
> There is no shuffling, there the action lies
> In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled
> Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
> To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
>
> (III.iii.56-64)

There is no way out of this dilemma, but Claudius plans nonetheless to go through the motions of prayer, even though he wants to hang on to his commitment to venality ('justice' in the human world can be 'bought'). When he enters Hamlet *sees* the gesture but does not hear what Claudius says, and he proceeds to offer a stereotypical gloss on the act 'revenge'. Left alone, the divided subject that is Claudius confirms that for the 'stock' revenger completion of the act would have been opportune:

> My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
> Words without thoughts never to heaven go.
>
> (III.iii.97-8)

The gap between 'thought', 'deed' and 'word' could not be clearer, and this represents the prevailing ethos in Denmark that Hamlet has to confront before he can make sense of the task that he has been given. It is only when Claudius is *publicly* exposed at the end of the play, where his guilt is openly revealed, that Hamlet can complete his task, but not before, tragically, he ingests the deadly poison prepared

by the King, and that will always lurk under the surface of 'untruth'.

The issue of the play's two different 'languages' – requiring Hamlet to be proficient in both in order to survive – is raised in the following scene when he confronts his mother. In a piece of brilliant plotting, the accidental (and retrospectively 'providential') killing of Polonius sets up the confrontation between Hamlet and Laertes, the one a revenger acting under certain constraints, and the other, a 'stock' revenger who throws over all constraint. At this stage, however, the issue becomes the status of language itself, and the matter of Gertrude's participation in

> Such an act
> That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
> Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
> From the fair forehead of an innocent love
> And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows
> As false as dicers' oaths – O, such a deed
> As from the body of contraction plucks
> The very soul, and sweet religion makes
> A rhapsody of words.
>
> (III.iv.38-46)

The diminution of "marriage vows" to "dicers' oaths" is one that exposes the negativity that according to Agamben resides at the constitutive heart of language itself, and it is exposed only when there occurs a crisis in representation. We remember that Old Hamlet was poisoned through the ear, and Hamlet represents the murderer as "a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother." (III.iv.62-3) We saw earlier how in an essentially oral culture, the Gravedigger's 'ear' is finely attuned to the changes of meaning that accompany each shift of context. And this is something to which Hamlet as playwright is attuned as he writes for performance, *not* as a substitute for action, but in order to bring into the public domain a crime that remains hidden from view until the end of the play. The danger inherent in what we might call Claudian language is that it fragments subjectivity, and produces a drunken chaos. Indeed, in Hamlet's interview with his

mother, it is *she* who is accused of "madness", of an "apoplexed" sense: "for madness would not err / Nor sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thrilled / But it reserved some quantity of choice / To serve in such a difference." (71-74) And he goes on:

> What devil was't
> That thus hath cozened you at hoodman-blind?
> Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
> Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
> Or but a sickly part of one true sense
> Could not so mope.
>
> (III.iv.74-79)

Hamlet's misogyny is clear here, and it is interesting that the play deflects "madness" onto the female characters: first Gertrude and then Ophelia. Indeed, after the appearance of the Ghost to Hamlet, he rejects outright Gertrude's claim that he is "mad":

> Mother, for the love of grace
> Lay not that flattering unction to your soul
> That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
> It will but skin and film the ulcerous place
> Whiles rank corruption mining all within
> Infects unseen.
>
> (III.iv.142-47)

Of course, the very virtues and values, not to mention 'vows' that Hamlet seeks to uphold in this scene, Laertes will dismiss in a rebellious gesture whose entry and significance the Messenger makes clear:

> The rabble call him lord
> And, as the world were now but to begin,
> Antiquity forgot, custom not known,
> The ratifiers and props of every word,
> They cry. 'Choose we: Laertes shall be king!'-
>
> (IV.v.102-6)

Claudius's engineered forgetfulness, enacted here by Laertes, returns us to Plato's *Phaedrus* and to the myth of writing offered

there as an *aide memoire*, but rejected as an instrument of forgetfulness. In the play political chaos is a kind of forgetfulness, and what should be a substantive justification for monarchical order becomes a series of empty platitudes as the threatened king exposes the narrative of "divine right" as an ideology rather than as a true description of his God-given authority. It is at moments such as this that the play wrestles with 'truth' and with the consequences of what we have come to recognise as 'post-truth'- that dislocation of past and present, and the forgetfulness that encourages a fragmentation of subjectivity in a chaos of discontinuity. The play ends with Hamlet 'scourging' and 'ministering' to Denmark at a cost to his own life and with a provisional reinstatement of the faculty of 'memory' in Fortinbras's claim: "I have some rights of memory in this kingdom / Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me." (V.ii.373-4). But of course, the 'memory' that is the play, and Horatio's promise to re-articulate its details leaves the audience with a tragic irresolution of the conflict between "bene-diction" and "male-diction". Performance will not *resolve* the matter. Indeed, it will resurrect it in an endlessly repetitive Purgatory on earth.

4.Othello

Othello moves the problem into another register. Whereas *Hamlet* builds and innovates on the tradition of the revenge play, *Othello* is concerned with the intimacies and the problems of marriage, and follows on innovatively from Shakespeare's earlier Venetian play, *The Merchant of Venice*. There the marriage between a Christian and a Jew (Lorenzo and Jessica), is transformed into the miscegenous relationship between a Venetian and a Moor – the very relationship that Portia rejects when she dismisses the unsuccessful Morocco. The action in *Othello* doesn't involve a crime; rather it is built around different levels of jealousy and envy that leads to 'revenge' based on a perversion of what Steven Mullaney has called "affective cognition."[15] What in *Hamlet* can be interpreted as involving opposing kinds of language, and the political, social, and

psychological conflicts that their confrontation produces, in *Othello* is shared between the audience and the protagonist who is a 'black' man with a 'white' heart. More than that, if Othello is not what he seems, then neither is the villain, Iago, a disaffected Venetian soldier who holds the rank of "ancient" or "ensign", one who shows "out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign." (I.i.154-5)[16]

In the earlier play, *The Tragedy of Richard III* (1595) the hero/villain Richard, directs onstage and offstage audience sympathies, frequently *against* their better judgements. In *Othello* Iago sustains this practice right until the end of the play, and the double perspective, that he fabricates and represents, intensifies the play's tragic irony. Some 60 years ago William Empson identified a radical instability at the heart of the play's language. His essay "Honest in *Othello*" (1951) starts from the claim that "[b]oth Iago and Othello oppose honesty to mere truth-telling,"[17] and later, that the word "seems to have rather minor connections with truth-telling."[18] But Empson's claim that "the word was in the middle of a rather complicated process of change and that what emerged from it was a sort of jovial cult of independence,"[19] suggests something much more radical. Othello's dependency, that begins with Desdemona: "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! And when I love thee not / Chaos is come again." (III.iii.90-2) derives from a general commitment to deductive reasoning into which "honesty" is subsumed:

> And for I know thou'rt full of love and honesty
> And weigh'st thy words before thou giv'st them breath.
> Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more.
> For such things in a false disloyal knave
> Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just
> They're close delations, [denotements *Q*] working from the heart,
> That passion cannot rule.
>
> (III.iii.120-27)

Iago's selectively empirical approach, by contrast, begins with the poisoning of Brabantio's mind, is extended by his destruction of

Cassio, and culminates in his engineering of the downfall of Othello, while from the outset, the theatre audience is drawn into the process, with the word 'honest' acting as a crucial symptom of the play's radical loosening of the binding language of asseveration. What Mullaney has identified as the early modern theatre audience's "auditory and spectatorial literacies"[20] are tested to the limit in *Othello* where both protagonist and villain can appeal to truths that their own mimetic inconsistencies persistently undermine: Othello is not what he is, and neither is Iago. Or to put the matter more formally, signifier and signified are separated from each other. In the domestic world of Venice, driven by money and a claimed practice of welcoming 'strangers', and in its policing of its political borders, what is under attack is an entire ethos of representation. Throughout the play, integrity, sincerity, indeed, face-to-face communication, is systematically undermined, and the result is a level of fragmentation that challenges the very efficacy of all empirically derived 'truths'. From the very outset, Iago's defence against Roderigo's accusation of financial impropriety is underwritten with a fulsome oath: "'Sblood, but you'll not hear me. If ever I did dream / Of such a matter, abhor me." (I.i.4-5). If he were telling the truth, then this oath would underwrite his assertion, but if not, then he is guilty of undermining the very foundations of signification. However, so confident is Iago of the solidity of his own case, that he can be candid with Roderigo about it:

> Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.
> In following him I follow but myself:
> Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty
> But seeming so for my peculiar end,
> For when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In complement extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.
>
> (I.i.56-64)

Like his avatar, the pathologically incoherent Donald Trump, Iago

can inhabit different personae at different times. He is an empty signifier, what in grammar is called a *shifter* whose assumption of language in each "concrete act of discourse" (to use Giorgio Agamben's phraseology) prevents us from identifying clearly the *ethos* within which each utterance might determine "the extraordinary implication of the subject in his word." What Agamben seeks to locate in a more philosophical sense, is an "ethical relation" that will lead to a determination of what he calls "the sacrament of language." Iago's constant self-justifications serve, in Agamben's philosophical language, to "put himself at stake in his speech [and] he can, for this reason, bless and curse, swear and perjure."[21] It is not just language that is the problem here, in fact, the whole of reality and the human capacity to represent it are rendered unstable, and that will produce a fantasy in which the protagonist *imagines* his wife's infidelity, and proceeds to murder her in the interests of a "cause" that he cannot "name". (V.ii.1-2). As in the later play *Macbeth* in which 'equivocation' is shown to be *like* truth, but is, in fact, lies, an action that cannot be represented in language points to horror.

In a play in which the radically shifting ethos of 'post-truth' and nefarious 'honesty' reign, considerable care is taken to establish the processes whereby 'truth' can be verified. Brabantio's wholly manipulated summary judgement of his daughter's elopement based on a flimsy ocular 'proof', is followed two scenes later by a more calculated (and accurate) speculation by the Duke of the destination of the Turkish fleet. As the play develops 'ocular' proof is shown to be the subject of manipulation creating a gulf in cognition between the dramatic characters and the audience. In short, because of the ineffectuality of 'face-to-face' communication, we do not know who to believe. And yet, as omniscient audience we know where the 'truth' lies. If Iago can lay bare a plethora of 'myths' about human behaviour, it is left to Aemilia to identify their source in the patriarchal unconscious desire of Venice:

> What is it that they [men] do
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
> I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
> It is so too. And have we not affections?
> Desires for sport? And frailty, as men have?
> Then let them use us well: else let them know,
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.
>
> (IV.iii.95-102)

Women's 'frailty', it seems, *imitate* those of men. But Brabantio's 'dream' fleshed out by the suggestions of Iago and Roderigo, exposes a hideous fear that belies Venice's vaunted claim to be hospitable to 'strangers'. Indeed, the republic itself is not what it seems.

There is one moment in the play when the tragic protagonist is what he seems, and it is Aemilia who makes the point. It is an uncomfortable moment that recent 'populist' politics have augmented. Desdemona takes upon herself the responsibility for her own death, but Aemilia identifies an empirical truth in answer to Othello's claim: "OTHELLO: You heard her say herself it was not I. / AEMILIA: She said so; I must report the truth." (V.ii2.125-6). Othello then retracts, using Desdemona's dying words as evidence that "She's like a liar gone to burning hell: / 'Twas I that killed her." We might ponder the motive for Desdemona's final words, but Aemilia is clear that in her death she is an "angel" and Othello, "the blacker evil!" (V.ii.128-9) Desdemona is, in death, finally what she seems, and her murder makes Othello the devil he appears to be. But if this were the conclusion then the 'ill-fated' Desdemona would be the protagonist whose tragic error was not to divulge the whereabouts of her lost handkerchief, and Othello would be the villain. However, at the end of the play there are *two* Othellos: the "noble Moor" and the "blacker devil." But, for Othello, this consistency is temporary, as the narrative that immediately precedes his unusual death indicates:

> Set you down this,
> And say besides that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him - thus!
>
> (V.ii.349-54)

What is 'in fact' a suicide is represented as an act of justice carried out by an agent of Venice who "has done the state some service" (V.ii.337), against a 'dog'. There is much more at stake here than Othello "cheering himself up," as T.S.Eliot once thought. Indeed, what begins in the first person singular: "Speak of me as I am" (340) proceeds to identify a 'Turk', and then a 'Venetian', and ends by isolating the 'the Turk' as a criminal, a 'circumcised dog' that can then be executed. Is this what Jacques Derrida would call a "*feint*", i.e. the strategic activity of the animal who is, here, cornered? Or is this an indication of what the animal cannot do, "to testify to…the trickery of speech in the order of the signifier and of Truth."[22] It is difficult in this speech to sort out 'truth' from 'lies'; indeed, is this a final manifestation of the alleged trickery and 'witchcraft' (I.iii.61-5) of which Brabantio had earlier accused Othello in seducing his daughter? It is a different order of 'trickery' than, say Iago's, which is "lying insofar as it comprises, in promising the truth, the supplementary possibility of speaking the truth in order to mislead the other, to make the other believe something other than the truth", to borrow a Derridean formulation.[23] Derrida continues by identifying:

> The reflexive and abyssal concept of a *feigned feint.* It is via the power to feign the feint that one accedes to Speech, to the order of Truth, to the symbolic order, in short to the human order. And thereby to sovereignty in general, as to the order of the political.[24]

This is also what Agamben would describe as the representative utterance of man, "*the living being whose language places his life in*

question."[25] What the play's tragic ending promises is a qualified return to an expressive language that binds together "in an ethical and political connection words, things and actions."[26] And yet, with the promise of "torture", the loosening of the villain's tongue threatens to return to the beginning and to re-problematise "the connection that unites language and the world."[27]

5. Antony and Cleopatra

In the earlier play, *Troilus and Cressida* (c.1602), the questions of self-division and value, are played out to the point where the gulf between observation and 'truth', between promissory language and action is so wide that every ethical category that the play sets up is demolished. Troilus observes Cressida's infidelity far more directly and conclusively than in the scenario engineered by Iago for Othello, and the consequent emptying of language is crystallised in Troilus' despairing confusion:

> O, madness of discourse,
> That cause sets up with and against itself!
> Bifold authority, where reason can revolt
> Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
> Without revolt! This is and is not Cressid.
>
> (V.ii.149-53)[28]

But of course, the play that pushes this linguistic instability to its tragic limits is *Macbeth* where it is "th' equivocation of the fiend, / That lies like truth" (V.v.42-3). *Antony and Cleopatra* (c.1607-8), a play that follows closely on the heels of *Macbeth*, extends and considerably sophisticates some of the theatrical substance of *Troilus and Cressida* and the theatrical techniques of *Othello*. In the excellent introduction to his edition of the play, Michael Neill identifies a characteristically Shakespearean 'dialectic' that he describes as a "characteristic rhetorical posture of a play always arguing with itself, in which no single argumentative position, however passionately presented, is allowed to go unquestioned or unqualified."[29] Neill goes on to suggest that

> there are two distinct uses of paradox in the play which correspond to the rival perceptions of reason and imagination. In one, which we might loosely call 'Roman', it expresses only self-devouring contradiction; in the other, more typically 'Egyptian' use, it figures the inalienable doubleness of things, by which opposites flourish in mysterious complementarity.[30]

The play switches cinematically between 'Rome' and 'Egypt' but each is politically implicated in the world of the other. But there are so many narratives that jostle with each other in Shakespeare's play, and that, in part, recall *Othello*. In the latter there is a version of the Mars-Venus-Vulcan drama that is recounted in Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamophoses* book 4, and an attenuated version of this narrative (along with others) reappears in *Antony and Cleopatra.* Jonathan Bate has observed that "[t]he love of Antony and Cleopatra is symbolic of cosmic harmony, as that of Venus and Mars was sometimes interpreted to be, but it is also undignified to the point of risibility."[31] In *Othello* "the net / That shall enmesh them all" (*Oth.* II.iii.336-7) is not that of Vulcan, but of Iago, and in the later play, it is Cleopatra.[32] In *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, the tone shifts with the geographic location of the action. From the Roman perspective the two lovers *are* 'risible', but that perspective is never allowed to predominate. Indeed, whenever Rome comes into Egypt the logical, reasonable language of Empire is undermined by a fecund poetic language that protects Egypt against the predations of an uncomprehending but vulnerable Roman imperialism. Shakespeare's own innovative adaptation of an Ovidian myth, is deployed here to show both the binding and the unbinding of language amid the ebb and flow of political contingency. Egypt has the capacity to see through and unmake 'vows' made in Rome, as the percipient Cleopatra recognises when Rome encroaches upon her domain. Antony's recall to Rome is to deal with the political situation that his dead wife Fulvia has caused, but Cleopatra sees this as a betrayal by Antony of trust:

> Why should I think you can be mine and true –
> Though you in swearing shake the throned gods –
> Who have been false to Fulvia? Riotous madness,
> To be entangled with those mouth-made vows
> Which break themselves in swearing!
>
> (I.iii.28-32)

She augments this with a description of the emotional intensity generated by Antony's justification for remaining in Egypt; *either* his assertory language retains its power: "Eternity was in our lips and eyes, / Bliss in our brows' bent; none our parts so poor /But was a race of heaven." (I.iii.36-38) *or* "the greatest soldier of the world, / Art turned the greatest liar" (I.iii.39-40). As the political situation changes, so the veridical content of language loses its force. Antony vacillates between an identity that derives its force from a Roman self-presence, and an Egypt in which that identity dissolves. This is no simple either / or; rather it is a consequence of the threat that a radically feminised 'other' poses to the Roman world of military action, and political alliance. The masculine, commanding a-sexual Fulvia: "Can Fulvia die?" is later replaced by the biddable Octavia whose 'love' will become the agency to stifle future political conflict:

> By this marriage
> All little jealousies which now seem great,
> And all great fears which now import their dangers
> Would then be nothing. Truths would be tales,
> Where now half-tales be truths. Her love to both
> Would each to other, and all loves to both
> Draw after her.
>
> (II.ii.138-44)

In masculine Rome the value of love is measured in its *effects*, and it renders retrospectively ironical Cleopatra's question to Antony at the beginning of the play, that follows Philo's categorisation of her as a "strumpet", and Antony her "fool": "If it be love indeed, tell me how much." (I.i.14). This of course is the Lear question, but Antony

passes the test: "There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned." (I.i.15) To this extent Egypt is Rome's *excess*, its 'other' and it is Enobarbus's periodical accounts of feasting and his poetically charged descriptions that sometimes point to linguistic inadequacy. His descriptions gather veridical force from his characteristic Roman militaristic candour, and they serve to reinforce a constitutive difference between Rome and Egypt.

Unlike in *Othello* where no matter how deceived the dramatic characters are, the theatre audience is permitted to distinguish between 'truth' and 'falsehood', even though both intersect with each other, in *Antony and Cleopatra* there are the contingent political *and* poetic 'truths' of Egypt, and there are the contingent political 'truths' of Rome. But even that does not quite explain the difference. At Actium Cleopatra contributes to Antony's defeat, and again at Alexandria, in a much more balanced confrontation, the same happens again, leading Antony to suspect that "she, Eros, has / Pack'd cards with Caesar, and false- played my glory / Unto an enemy's triumph." (IV.xiv.18-20) Antony's claim that "She has robb'd me of my sword" (IV.xiv.23), recalls "She made proud Caesar lay his sword to bed; / He plough'd her and she cropped." (II.ii.237-8), and also the carnivalesque narrative of cross-dressing: "Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst / I wore his sword Philippan." (II.v.22-3).

Throughout the play minor characters constantly seek verification for the stories they have heard about Cleopatra, and about the Egyptian revels. Also, characters such as the gruff Enobarbus, can wax poetic when recalling Cleopatra. Similarly, Cleopatra can unravel the Roman world, and she can undermine Antony's authority, and, beyond that, the tragic ethos of the Roman world; for example, the heroic Antony is no match for the Machiavellian Octavius, and what should be a characteristically Roman death is botched. Cleopatra on the other hand can outguess the political strategy of representing her on the Roman stage, and her death transforms even as it eroticised a stereotyped 'tragic' death.

Her language, her gestures, indeed, her political deployment of stereotyped feminine foibles, is utterly in *excess*, even at the same time as it is engaged with the 'politics' imposed upon it by Rome. 'Truth' and 'honesty' are frequently relativised; and where 'fact' appears, certainty is open to question; for example, Menas's "We look not for Mark Antony here: pray you, is he married to Cleopatra? (II.vi.109-10) is ostensibly corrected by Enobarbus, but the 'fact', and the promise that it entails, dissolves in the complexity of Antony's known involvement with Cleopatra:

ENOBARBUS	Caesar's sister is called Octavia.
MENAS	True, sir, she was the wife of Caius Marcellus.
ENOBARBUS	But she is now the wife of Marcus Antonius.
MENAS	Pray ye, sir?
ENOBARBUS	'Tis true.
MENAS	Then is Caesar and he for ever knit together.
ENOBARBUS	If I were bound to divine of this unity, I would not prophesy so.

(II.vi.111-19)

We are here in the world of 'post-truth' and 'post-fact' where language changes even as the geographical and political landscapes change. Thus Octavia's "holy, cold and still conversation" (II.vi.120-1) is counterbalanced by Cleopatra's incessant eroticised movement that is anything but 'holy' and 'still'. But part of what the Roman world perceives as the indefinability of Egypt, is also its capacity to elevate, bewitch even, and fantasise. But Roman rationality also perceives Antony's dilemma. After Enobarbus's defection, and Antony's own suicide Maecenas pinpoints what is at root a tragic struggle: "His taints and honours / Waged equal with him." (V.i.30-31).

What the play offers us is a fading Roman world where the values of military heroism are fragile and conditional, and are always capable of being dismantled. The persistent instability of language, the failures of representation, its dependency on the inadequacies of

stereotyping, is suddenly and finally supplanted by 'dream'. Cleopatra's 'dream': "I dreamt there was an emperor Antony" (V.ii.75) is a feat of Egyptian poetic imagination. Although, her idealised characterisation of Antony, while it earns the respect of her interlocutor Dolabella, does not entirely outstrip his scepticism. Even so, his denial of her 'dream' is met with a vehement riposte:

> You lie up to the hearing of the gods!
> But if there be or ever were one such,
> It's past the size of dreaming. Nature wants stuff
> To vie strange forms with fancy; yet t'imagine
> An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy,
> Condemning shadows quite.
>
> (V.ii.94-99)

Shakespeare returned to this logic a few years later in *The Winter's Tale*, and there again, in Florizel's speech to Perdita on grafting, a distinction is made between the overarching organising power of 'Nature' and the human capacity to approach it through the imagination. And yet, no matter how Cleopatra may embellish the image of Antony, both the contrived erotic nature of her suicide, and Octavius's final pronouncement on the dead lovers, pulls them back to earth. Octavius's "No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous." (V.ii.358-9) anticipates Andrew Marvell's poem 'To His Coy Mistress' where the point is made clearly: "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none I think do there embrace." Unlike Sidney's disguising the bitter morality of poetry (alloes) in a pleasing medicine, in these three plays we are left with irreconcilable division, and provisional conclusion, the marks of tragedy, but also indicators of crisis. That crisis represents itself in the irreducible instabilities of language, in a process of unbinding of what John Kerrigan has called 'binding language' but that extends far beyond particular words to incorporate the technologies of representation themselves. Indeed, what corrupts public discourse is two kinds of 'lies': "the lie that is intended to deceive is easy to understand, but the lie that is intended to be recognised as a lie is much more

dangerous, because it carries an unambiguous message about power." (*Guardian* "Public lies can only be vanquished by public truth", Monday, 30 January, p.24) So to understand the poisonous implications of the world of 'post-truth', and 'post-fact' that now confronts us, we don't need more scientists, or more disseminators of information (a.k.a. spin doctors). What we need is a greater public exposure to the literature and drama that prefigure and comment critically upon the crises that they have historically generated. In short, we need to go back to Shakespeare.

Endnotes :

[1] Alison Flood, "Trump and Brexit herald a brave new word: post-truth", The Guardian, 16.11.16

[2] Jonathan Freedland, "Don't call it post-truth. There's a simpler word lies", *The Guardian*, 17.12.16

[3] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 96.

[4] Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, p.97.

[5] Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, p.121.

[6] Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, trans., Adam Kotsko, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011), pp.69-70.

[7] Michael Payne & John Hunter eds., *Renaissance Literature: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), p. 511

[8] I borrow this phrase from Alex Ross's "The Frankfurt School Knew that Trump Was Coming", *The New Yorker*, 5.12.2016, p.3

[9] John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Binding Language*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.10-11.

[10] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds., Ann Thompson & Neil Taylor (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), pp.418-19. All references to *Hamlet* are from this text unless otherwise stated.

[11] See Thompson and Taylor, pp. 418-19 for glosses.

[12] This is glossed in Thompson and Taylor, as "all murders are bad (but mine was especially bad)", but Harold Jenkins ed. *Hamlet*, Arden 2 series (1982), p.217 fn.28 glosses it much more carefully as "the violation of

the natural tie between kin."

[13] Glossed simply as "natural feeling" in Arden 3 (p.217, fn.81), but amplified in Arden 2 to: "natural feeling. Cf.…*2 H4* IV.v..37-40 'Thy due from me/ Is tears and heavy sorrows of the blood / Which nature, love, and filial tenderness, /Shall, O dear father, pay thee." (Arden 2, p. 220, fn.81).

[14] Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit", *Raritan Quarterly Review* 6.2 (Fall, 1986), p.12.

[15] Steven Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 75.

[16] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E.A.J.Honigmann, revised by Ayanna Thompson, Arden 3 series (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2016), p. 130. All quotations from the play are from this edition unless otherwise stated.

[17] William Empson, "Honest in *Othello*", *Shakespeare: Othello*, New Casebook series, ed. John Wain (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1971), p.102

[18] William Empson, "Honest in *Othello*", p.112.

[19] William Empson, "Honest in *Othello*", pp. 98-9.

[20] Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* p. 76.

[21] Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, p.71.

[22] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, 2 vols., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), I.121.

[23] Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign.*

[24] Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p. 126.

[25] Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, p. 69.

[26] Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language.*

[27] Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, p. 42.

[28] Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. David Bevington, Arden 3 series, (Walton-on-Thames: Arden Shakespeare, 1998). All citations to the play are from this text unless otherwise stated.

[29] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed., Michael Neill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Reissued, p.101.

[30] Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, p. 102.

[31] Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 204.