

# Connotations

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# *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*

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Volume 31 (2022)

- An Introduction to Metagenre  
with a Postscript on the Journey from Comedy to Tragedy in E. M.  
Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*  
BURKHARD NIEDERHOFF 1
- Parodies of Six-Word Stories:  
A Comic Literary Metagenre  
DAVID FISHELOV 33
- Meta-Epic Reflection in Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer,  
or: The Meta-Epic Novel  
LENA LINNE 56
- The Woman Taken in Adultery:  
A Literary Perspective on Christ's Writing in John 8:1-12  
ALAN RUDRUM AND JULIA SCHATZ 85
- Romance and Metagenre:  
A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff  
FRANCESCA PIERINI 100
- Forster's Self-Ironizing in "The Road from Colonus":  
A Response to Laura M. White  
SHENYOU MEI 112

Blaming Helen in Twenty-First Century Myth Writing: A Response to Lena Linne SHELBY JUDGE	126
“That we shall die we know”: Historical Fetters and Creative Liberation in William Shakespeare’s <i>Julius Caesar</i> ANGELIKA ZIRKER AND SUSANNE RIECKER	133
Tragedy and <i>Trauerspiel</i> : John Webster’s <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> ANNY CRUNELLE-VANRIGH	160

# An Introduction to Metagenre with a Postscript on the Journey from Comedy to Tragedy in E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

BURKHARD NIEDERHOFF

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This article is the first entry in a debate on a contribution on “An Introduction to Metagenre with a Postscript on the Journey from Comedy to Tragedy in E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/an-introduction-to-metagenre/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

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## Abstract

The article defines *metagenre* as a quality or dimension of a literary text: the way the text reflects on the genre it belongs to (which includes a consideration of adjacent or opposed genres). We may distinguish between explicit metagenre, which is relatively infrequent, and implicit metagenre. The latter can be further divided into three types: *mise en abyme* or genre within genre; transtextual references to prototypical examples of the genre (quotation, allusion, parody, etc.); and conspicuous deviations from or violations of genre conventions. The textual strategies associated with metafiction and other meta-terms are seen as self-undermining and self-repudiating by some theorists. This view, however, does not apply to metagenre, at least not to its most interesting cases, which can best be described as probing and dynamic self-definitions that rely both on affirmations and rejections.

A text of this kind is E. M. Forster's first novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (which contains both explicit and implicit metagenre). The analysis of this novel is based on Forster's statement that “the object of the book is the improvement of Philip,” its protagonist. This improvement follows Forster's imperative to “connect,” which has a psychological and a social dimension. Connecting the fragments of one's personality means connecting with other people and transcending cultural or political barriers in the process. Philip's improvement is accompanied by a shift from comedy to tragedy, which echoes the history of the genre (while the novel defined itself in comic terms in the long eighteenth century, it increasingly turned to tragic models in the nineteenth). An interesting problem arises in the final chapters, in which Philip is pushed back into the role of an aesthetic observer, which, as part of his improvement, he has previously

abandoned in favour of responsibility and involvement. This problem can be solved, however, if one takes the shift from comedy to tragedy into consideration. In the final chapters, Philip changes from a comic into a tragic observer, which means that he is more sympathetic and involved than he used to be.

## 1. Introduction

At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus, the newly-wed Duke of Athens, has to choose an entertainment “[t]o wear away this long age of three hours / Between our after-supper and bed-time” (5.1.33-34). He decides in favour of “Pyramus and Thisbe,” a tragedy performed by a group of Athenian tradesmen. One of the rival options is described—and rejected—as follows:

‘The thrice three Muses mourning for the death  
Of learning, late deceas’d in beggary’?  
That is some satire, keen and critical,  
Not sorting with a nuptial ceremony. (5.1.52-55)

In this passage, a character makes a sensible choice how to be entertained—or rather not to be entertained—at his wedding. At the same time, however, the author is making a point about the play itself. The learned writers of Shakespeare’s time think of comedy as an anatomy of vice and folly, a dramatic genre that “make[s] men see and shame at their own faults,” as Sir John Harington argues in “An Apology for Ariosto” (313). In other words, these writers see comedy as a close relative of satire. But Shakespeare’s comedies are not satiric. Instead of exposing vice and folly, they celebrate love and wit. This is why Shakespeare puts a rejection of satire in Theseus’ mouth, thus defining and defending his own brand of comedy.

Theseus’ speech might be described as an instance of *metagenre*, a self-reflexive statement through which a literary text comments on the genre it belongs to. The present article is meant to give an introduction to this concept and to a series of articles which originated in the *Connotations* conference on metagenre in the summer of 2021.<sup>1</sup> The outline is as follows. This introduction (1) will be followed by a definition (2), a typology (3), a claim about the agenda or import of metagenre (4), and, finally, a reading of E. M. Forster’s first novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (5). Forster’s novel has

been chosen for its intrinsic merits but also because it illustrates the claim that will be made in part 4: metagenre is not as self-undermining and deconstructive as the forms and structures associated with metafiction and comparable meta-terms are often made out to be.

## 2. Definition

The term *metagenre* has been used much less than *metafiction* or *metadrama*. But like these, it has been employed in a variety of senses. In articles by North American teachers of composition, it refers to an awareness of the rules and conventions governing a particular text type such as a newsletter, a student essay or a medical report; it is primarily a didactic and somewhat prescriptive concept.<sup>2</sup> In literary studies, it tends to be employed as a broad term embracing more specific terms such as *metabiography*, *metasonnet*, *metacomedy*, etc. These terms often indicate self-reflexiveness—but by no means invariably. In Alexander Pettit's "Comedy and Metacomedy: Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and Its Antecedents," for instance, *metacomedy* means something like experimental comedy or problem play.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this usage, which I consider too vague, I would like to insist on the aspect of self-reflexiveness, by analogy with the way linguists use the term *metalanguage*. This is defined by the *OED* as "a language or set of terms used for the description or analysis of another language"; it entered the English language, according to the same source, in 1936. Linguists distinguish between the metalanguage (typically of a technical or scholarly sort, such as grammar) and its object language (the non-technical, ordinary language that is analysed by means of the metalanguage). In literary studies, this distinction exists as well. A reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will employ the metalanguage of theory and criticism (*blank verse*, *rhyming couplets*, *Petrarchism*, etc.) to analyse the object language of the play. However, this is not, or not precisely, what we are concerned with. We need to go one step further than the linguists because we are interested in the theory and criticism that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and other literary works provide *about themselves*. When the speaker of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" says, "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life



*to thee*" (147; emphasis added), he is not using a technical metalanguage to write about an ordinary or literary object language. The sonnet, especially the line in italics, refers not to other texts but to itself. Self-reflexiveness has been brought to the point where metalanguage and object language are the same. This is how terms with the prefix *meta* are used in literary studies and how the term *metagenre* will be used in the present article.

For the sake of terminological clarification, I would like to draw a further distinction, using the example of *metafiction*, probably the most popular of the numerous meta-terms. Many critics use it to refer to a work of fiction that refers to itself in one way or another (meaning no. 1). However, it can also be defined more narrowly as a work that refers to its own fictionality (meaning no. 2). Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* contains numerous examples of the first meaning, for instance, the famous passage in which the first-person narrator discovers that he lives much faster than he can write, and that he will never be able to catch up with himself:

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelvemonth; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume—and no farther than to my first day's life—'tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it—on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back—was every day of my life to be as busy a day as this—And why not?—and the transactions and opinions of it to take up as much description—And for what reason should they be cut short? as at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write—It must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write—and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.

Will this be good for your worships eyes? (4: 207; ch. 14)

This passage is metafictional only in the first and broader sense. Evidently, it refers to itself, being one of the digressions that amplify the narrative and slow down the narrator Tristram in his pursuit of the character Tristram. However, the passage is not metafictional in the second, narrower sense. Tristram elaborates on the difficulties of writing his own life, but he does not point out that he owes his existence to the fertile imagination of Sterne, and that he inhabits a work of fiction. For an admission of this sort, we have to go elsewhere, for instance to John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's*

*Woman*. At the end of chapter 12, the narrator asks a question about the enigmatic woman referred to in the title of the novel:

Who is Sarah?  
Out of what shadows does she come? (94)

The answer is given at the beginning of chapter 13:

I do not know. This story I am telling is imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. (95)

The speaker of these sentences is no longer the narrator but the author. He is admitting or rather foregrounding the fictionality of his story (and will remain in this mode for almost the entire chapter, presenting a paradoxical argument about his own loss of control and the freedom that his characters gain as they emancipate themselves from their author).

In the two meanings of *metafiction* that I have distinguished, the emphasis falls on a different part of the term: *metafiction* (no. 1) and *metafiction* (no. 2). In the second, fiction (in the sense of “fictionality”) is the *object* of self-reflexiveness. In the first, fiction (in the sense of “literary narrative”) is the *subject* of self-reflexiveness, while the object remains undefined; any aspect of the text (style, credibility, the reader, etc.) can become the object or focus of its self-examination.<sup>4</sup>

A similar distinction can be made in the case of metagenre. Genre, or rather a particular genre, can be treated as the subject of self-reflexiveness (meaning no. 1). A metagenre, then, is a particular genre (a metacomedy, a metasonnet, etc.) that is self-reflexive in one way or another. Alternatively, genre can be treated as the object of self-reflexiveness (meaning no. 2). The term loses its indefinite article and refers no longer, strictly speaking, to a genre, i.e. to a group or corpus of texts. Instead, it turns into a quality or dimension of a text (in the same way in which some theorists avoid treating literature as a corpus of texts and prefer to talk about *literariness*, a quality that a text, even a telephone directory, may have to a greater or lesser extent). Consider the following dialogue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the tradesmen are debating how to present moonlight on the stage:

*Bottom.* Why, then may you leave a casement of the great chamber window, where we play, open; and the moon may shine in at the casement.

*Quince.* Ay; or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern, and say he comes to disfigure or to present the person of Moonshine. (3.1.52-57)

The dialogue provides an instance of metagenre or metacomedie according to meaning no. 1 as it satisfies the criterion of self-reflexiveness. It refers to a problem that Shakespeare and the Lord Chamberlain's Men were faced with in performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* no less than Bottom and Quince are in staging "Pyramus and Thisbe" at Theseus' palace. However, the dialogue is not an instance of meaning no. 2. While it discusses a general problem of theatrical representation, it does not contribute to defining the genre of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as Theseus' rejection of satire does, which furnishes a good example of meaning no. 2.

Many critics use the various meta-terms in the first, more inclusive sense, either not being aware of or not sufficiently caring about the second, narrower sense. In one of the standard books on metafiction, Patricia Waugh, for instance, defines the term very broadly. In the subtitle she paraphrases the term as "self-conscious fiction," thus including all sorts of self-reflexiveness. Janine Hauthal, one of the few critics to have used the term *meta-genre* so far, also thinks along these lines. While she is aware of the distinction between the two meanings, she also prefers the first, more inclusive one. In the subtitle of her article, she refers to "novelistic meta-genres," a plural that indicates that she does not think of metagenre as a quality or dimension of a text. By contrast, I would like to make a case for the second, narrower meaning. While the early studies of self-reflexiveness in literature, such as Waugh's book, have treated the subject in broad terms, recent studies have attempted to introduce more precise definitions and typologies that distinguish between different kinds of self-reflexiveness. A narrower definition of the term, then, is in line with the general tendency in the scholarly work on the subject. In addition, using the term in the broad sense means that the category of genre remains curiously irrelevant. Analysing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a metacomedie only makes sense if the genre of comedy and related genres such as satire play a significant role

in the analysis. If this is not the case, one should leave genre out of the terminology and simply talk about metatextuality or self-reflexiveness.

Treating our concept as a quality rather than a genre still allows for the question whether some genres are more favourable to this quality than others. A candidate that immediately comes to mind is parody, especially genre parodies such as the mock epic. However, this raises the question whether parody should be considered a genre in its own right, or a parasitic mode that attaches itself to other genres. In the context of the present argument, the latter option seems preferable; after all, a genre parody typically does not foreground its own mechanisms but those of the genre it is imitating in a comic or ludic fashion. Therefore, I will discuss parody in the third part of this article, which distinguishes different types or modes of metagenre. A second candidate or group of candidates consists of genres with particularly strict and obvious rules, such as the sonnet, the villanelle or the detective story. Support for this claim comes from Matthias Bauer's introduction to an earlier themed section of this journal, "Self-Imposed Fetters: The Productivity of Formal and Thematic Restrictions." Bauer discusses three self-reflexive sonnets that comment on the formal constraints imposed by this demanding genre; in different ways, the poets struggle with and ultimately embrace the constraints, discovering them to be productive and liberating. However, it would be premature to delimit the discussion to genres with very strict rules. At the *Connotations* conference on metagenre, papers were given on tragedy, the epic, stand-up comedy, pastoral poetry, the verse essay, six-word stories, the short story, the novel, the memoir-novel, and dramatic burlesques. At one point, a discussion erupted around the question whether it is the rigidity of genre rules, as in the sonnet, or rather their flexibility and looseness, as in the novel, that provides the best habitat for metagenre. The latter view is supported by Hauthal, who writes that "[t]he emergence of several meta-genres at once suggests that the novel is especially responsive to metaization and its dynamics of generic change" (89).<sup>5</sup>

Before embarking on the typology, I would like to add a final point. I have made a case for a narrow definition of metagenre: the self-examination of a literary text that is focused on, and limited to, its own genre. I would like to broaden this definition in one respect. The phrase "its own

genre" should not be taken to mean that a comedy can only focus on the conventions of comedy, a sonnet only on the conventions of the sonnet, etc. In the introductory example from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we have seen that Shakespeare defines his type of comedy by distinguishing it from satire; he also uses the tragedy, or the mock-tragedy, of "Pyramus and Thisbe" for the same purpose. Moreover, a literary text can belong to or describe itself as belonging to more than one genre. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Forster defines his type of novel by relating it to two other genres, comedy and tragedy. "Genres are better understood," writes Alastair Fowler, "through a study of their mutual relations" (255), a remark that applies not only to the efforts of the critic and the theorist but also to the instances of metagenre that we find in literary works themselves.

### 3. Typology

A number of scholars have proposed typologies to chart the field of self-reflexiveness in narrative, in literature and in the arts in general. Not all of the types distinguished by these scholars are relevant to metagenre. Werner Wolf, for instance, includes what Roman Jakobson considers the poetic function of texts, i.e. the phenomena described with the formula "[s]imilarity superimposed on contiguity" (metre, rhyme, parallelism, etc.).<sup>6</sup> These phenomena can be safely excluded, to my mind, from a typology of metagenre. Admittedly, rhyme and parallelism can become metageneric (for instance if they are used in parodic ways), but they are not metageneric as such. In the following remarks, I will draw on the typologies devised so far,<sup>7</sup> but I will limit the discussion to the types that are relevant to our subject.

A first distinction should be drawn between explicit and implicit metagenre. Fully explicit examples are rare. They have to name a genre and draw a connection to the text itself. Theseus' comment in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* only satisfies the first criterion but not the second. He is explicit about the genre ("satire") and some of its salient features ("keen and critical"), but not about the connection between this genre and the play itself; this connection is left for the audience and the critic to discover or to

ignore. An example of explicit metagenre that leaves nothing to be desired comes from John Dickson Carr's *The Hollow Man*,<sup>8</sup> a murder mystery whose detective is well aware of the conventions of the murder mystery:

"I will now lecture," said Dr Fell, inexorably, "on the general mechanics and development of the situation which is known in detective fiction as the 'hermetically sealed chamber.' Harrumph. All those opposing can skip this chapter. Harrumph. To begin with, gentlemen! Having been improving my mind with sensational fiction for the last forty years, I can say—"

"But, if you're going to analyse impossible situations," interrupted Pettis, "why discuss detective fiction?"

"Because," said the doctor, frankly, "we're in a detective story, and we don't fool the reader by pretending we're not." (152)

In this passage, the genre is identified (detective fiction), a conventional plot element is pointed out (the locked-room murder initiated by E. A. Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"), and it is made abundantly clear that Dr Fell's lecture, which takes up an entire chapter, has a bearing on the novel in which it is given. One of the listeners remarks that the lecture has "some application to this case" (154)—i.e. the case that Dr Fell will solve at the end of the novel—and the lecture is frequently interrupted by discussions as to whether the various solutions of locked-room murder mysteries in detective novels provide a key to the murders in *The Hollow Man*.

In implicit metagenre, the genre status of a text is only suggested, not pointed out in the obvious and direct manner of Dr Fell's lecture. Implicit metagenre can be further divided into three types. The first is what André Gide calls *mise en abyme*. By analogy with such terms as *the play within the play* or *the novel within the novel*, one might also refer to this as *genre within genre*. A good example of this has been mentioned more than once: the performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe" at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This performance is well described as "tragical mirth" (5.1.57), collapsing as it does into farce and laughter in the performance given by Bottom and his fellow tradesmen. As such, it contributes to the argument about genre that Shakespeare provides. It suggests the uncanny proximity of comedy and tragedy, at least in their initial plot situations (which are very similar in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and "Pyramus and Thisbe"),

and it contributes to the ultimate transformation of tragic potential into a comic outcome.<sup>9</sup>

The second type of implicit metagenre is transtextual, which means that a text invokes a genre by referring to a prototypical example of this genre.<sup>10</sup> In Jane Austen's *Emma*, for instance, the eponymous character quotes a well-known verse from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

"[...] There does seem to be a something in the air of Hartfield which gives love exactly the right direction, and sends it into the very channel where it ought to flow.

The course of true love never did run smooth—

A Hartfield edition of Shakespeare would have a long note on that passage." (73)

In this speech, Emma displays her characteristic blend of cleverness and foolishness, implying that matches at Hartfield are made in a harmonious manner under her benign and astute direction. Austen, however, indicates that the course of true love in *Emma* will be as chaotic and circuitous as in Shakespeare's play, and she also acknowledges the debt that her novels owe to the rich tradition of English stage comedy. Prototypical examples of a genre may also be invoked through allusions, as in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*: "Not Cordelia nor Imogen more deserve our tears," (47) the narrator comments on Lilia Herriton, the Englishwoman who marries and dies in a small town in Tuscany. He also compares her husband Gino to Hamlet (102), and has Philip and Harriet Herriton, her brother- and sister-in-law, visit the "tomb of Juliet" in Verona (75).

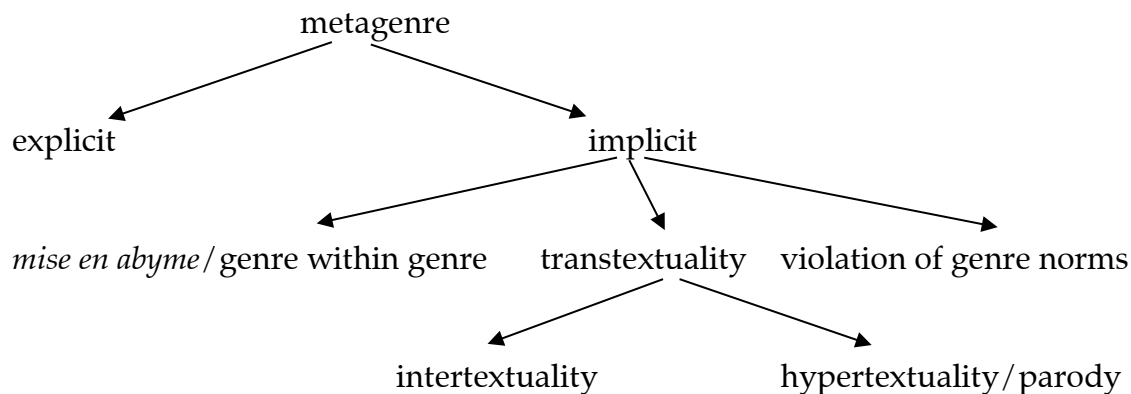
Instead of such small-scale references, "intertextual" in the terminology of Gérard Genette, writers may also resort to "hypertextuality," i.e. to the large-scale borrowings of parody, travesty, etc. in which an entire text or a great part of it is modelled on a previous text.<sup>11</sup> Parody is especially relevant for two reasons. First of all, it may be based on a genre rather than a single text, as is shown by *MacFlecknoe*, *The Rape of the Lock* and other mock epics of the neoclassical period. Even single-text parodies often target a famous or prototypical example of a genre and are thus relevant to our subject. In *Shamela*, for instance, Henry Fielding satirises not only the pseudo-morality of a particular novel, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*; he also ridicules the technique of "writing to the moment," which has a more general

bearing on the conventions of the epistolary novel. Secondly, parody is singularly apt to foreground genre conventions. One of its characteristic techniques consists in maintaining the form while lowering or trivialising the content. Thus form and content are pulled apart, with the result that the formal conventions of the text are laid bare and exposed. They become the subject of the reader's attention and, possibly, of metageneric reflections.<sup>12</sup>

Texts may draw the reader's attention to genre conventions not only by means of parody; they may also foreground these conventions by violating or deviating from them. This, I would like to suggest, is the third type of implicit metagenre. The ending of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, for instance, raises the question whether the play is a comedy, an anti-comedy or a new development of the genre, an adaptation to the cultural conditions of the early twentieth century. In a traditional comedy, young lovers have to overcome the opposition of their parents or guardians in order to get married, and their final union is celebrated as a victory of love and passion over financial prudence. *Pygmalion* reverses this pattern in that Mr Doolittle gets married against the will of his daughter, and his marriage amounts to a victory of financial prudence over love and passion. Further examples can be found in the sonnets of E. E. Cummings, who frequently and recognisably uses this genre, but almost never without drastic changes or deviations. In her article "The Modernist Sonnet and Pre-Postmodern Consciousness: The Question of Meta-Genre in E. E. Cummings' *W [ViVa]* (1931)," Gillian Huang-Tiller argues "that Cummings takes the sonnet to the level of meta-genre" (157), that his "long-standing engagement with the sonnet form is not a mere modernist experiment or desire to innovate with the traditional form and its themes, but is rather a self-reflexive structuring that bares the bones of the genre itself, conveying a larger theme of the relation of form to cultural reality" (156). The reflections on the genre are thus embedded in more general reflections about man-made forms and structures.



The types distinguished thus far may be presented as follows:



Needless to say, the neat division of branches in this diagram is a simplification. The reality that we encounter in reading actual texts is more mixed; examples that clearly fit one, and only one, of the categories distinguished here are the exception rather than the rule. I have already indicated that explicitness is a matter of degree, Theseus' comment on satire being less explicit than Dr Fell's lecture on detective novels. Moreover, the types may easily combine with each other. The performance at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* exemplifies genre within genre (implicit type no. 1), but it is also an instance of hypertextuality: a parody of the episode of Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (implicit type no. 2). One might also argue that the parodic foregrounding of a genre convention (implicit type no. 2) does not substantially differ from the violation of a genre convention (implicit type no. 3). While the distinction seems clear enough in some cases—E. E. Cummings' deviations from the Petrarchan or Shakespearean rhyming patterns are not parodic—it would be more difficult to uphold in others.

I would like to conclude this section with a final methodological question. How far can we go in pursuing implicit metagenre? Consider the opening paragraph of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*:

They were all at Charing Cross to see Lilia off—Philip, Harriet, Irma, Mrs Herriton herself. Even Mrs Theobald, squired by Mr Kingcroft, had braved the journey from Yorkshire to bid her only daughter goodbye. Miss Abbott was likewise attended by numerous relatives, and the sight of so many people talking at once and

saying such different things caused Lilia to break into ungovernable peals of laughter.

"Quite an ovation," she cried, sprawling out of her first-class carriage. "They'll take us for royalty. Oh, Mr Kingcroft, get us foot-warmers." (1)

No-one in their right minds would or should think of metagenre when they read this passage for the first time. But a little later we learn that Lilia's mother responds to her daughter's farewell with tears. Further on, we read about the "inevitable tragedy" (31) of Lilia's marriage and about Philip's preference for treating life as a comedy—a preference that is presented as highly problematic. Retrospectively, the first paragraph assumes an added meaning and can be interpreted as an instance of implicit metagenre: a comic response that is excessive and inappropriate. Similarly to Philip, Lilia is a tragic character who foolishly behaves as if she were inhabiting a comedy. Such a reading seems to me justified because of the many explicit references to genre which sharpen our vision in discerning the implicit references. But what about the "royalty" in the second paragraph? Can this be considered an allusion to tragedy, considering the old norm that tragedy is about the downfall of princes whereas comedy presents bourgeois folly? Probably not, but there are no hard and fast rules about how far to go and where to stop in pursuit of implicit instances. Metagenre is not just a feature of the text but also a way of interpreting it. And, as such, it requires both imagination and discrimination.

#### 4. The Import of Metagenre

The self-reflexiveness associated with the various meta-terms is often seen as critical, subversive or deconstructive, especially by those who consider it a salient feature of postmodern or twentieth-century literature. Waugh argues along these lines in her study of metafiction:

In modernist fiction the struggle for personal autonomy can be continued only through *opposition* to existing social institutions and conventions. This struggle necessarily involves individual alienation and often ends with mental dissolution. The power structures of *contemporary* society are, however, more diverse and more

effectively concealed or mystified, creating greater problems for the post-modernist novelist in identifying and then representing the object of "opposition".

Metafictional writers have found a solution to this by turning inwards to their own medium of expression, in order to examine the relationship between fictional form and social reality. They have come to focus on the notion that "everyday" language endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently "innocent" representations. The literary-fictional equivalent of this "everyday" language of "common sense" is the language of the traditional novel: the conventions of realism. Metafiction sets up an opposition, not to ostensibly "objective" facts in the "real" world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality.

The metafictional novel thus situates its resistance *within* the form of the novel itself. (10-11)

According to Waugh, the conventions of language and literature are by definition suspect, and metafictional writers are like detectives or investigative journalists in the corrupt world of textuality. Their task is to unmask the text, to disclose sinister meanings behind innocuous facades. Self-reflexiveness equals self-criticism or even self-repudiation.

Waugh's assumptions doubtless apply to some texts and some writers. They fit the plays of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (or at least Brecht's own view of his plays); the so-called *Verfremdungseffekt*, the disruption of the theatrical illusion and the replacement of feelings by reflection, is in sync with political enlightenment and oppositional politics.<sup>13</sup> However, Waugh's view does not do justice to the examples of metagenre discussed thus far. Dr Fell's lecture on the locked-room murder mystery does not betray a dissatisfaction with the genre. On the contrary, he confesses that he has "been *improving* his mind with sensational fiction for the last forty years" (emphasis added); and the lecture helps him and his listeners sort out their ideas on the murders they are currently investigating.

Interesting examples of metagenre go far beyond the simple strategy of either opposing or endorsing genre conventions. As pointed out above, they may bring different genres (and different attitudes to these genres) into play. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, Shakespeare dismisses satire and parodies tragedy, while simultaneously defining and defending his own brand of comedy. A metageneric statement may also be at odds with what a text does, in the manner of the liar paradox. Like the

Cretan who says that Cretans are liars, a text may repudiate a genre while simultaneously practicing it. The sonnets analysed by Bauer express misgivings about the rigid formal constraints of the sonnet, but they all have fourteen lines and a Petrarchan rhyme scheme. The various explicit and implicit instances of metagenre in a text may also contradict each other, and they may change in the course of a text (as they do in Bauer's examples, which initially reject but ultimately embrace the sonnet conventions). The most rewarding cases of metagenre create a complex and dynamic debate, a concert of critical and affirmative voices through which a text ultimately achieves a sense of itself. This is also true for the novel analysed in the postscript of this article.

## 5. Postscript:

### The Journey from Comedy to Tragedy in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

Forster's first novel, which was published in 1905, revolves around three journeys from Sawston, a middle-class London suburb, to Monteriano, a small town in Tuscany modelled on San Gimignano. The first of these journeys is undertaken by Lilia Herriton, a young widow who has become an embarrassment to her in-laws after the death of her husband Charles. To prevent her from marrying Mr Kingcroft, whom they consider unsuitable, the Herritons send her to Italy. She is accompanied by Caroline Abbott, an acquaintance who is supposed to watch Lilia and to make sure that she does not disgrace the family. The manoeuvre backfires. In Monteriano Lilia becomes engaged to someone even less suitable than Mr Kingcroft; her fiancé, Gino Carella, is a local, much younger than her, and the son of a dentist. The news of this event triggers the second trip, which is taken by Philip Herriton, Charles's younger brother, who is sent by his mother to break off the engagement. He comes too late, however, as Lilia is already married when he arrives. The third journey is another mission of interference aptly described by the allusion in the title.<sup>14</sup> After Lilia has died in giving birth to a son, Caroline lets it be known that she wants to adopt him. For reasons of pride and reputation rather than a genuine interest in the boy, Mrs Herriton decides to adopt him herself. She sends Philip and his sister Harriet

to persuade or bribe Gino to give up the boy. This, however, is the last thing that Gino wants to do because he loves his son deeply. Eventually, Harriet abducts the boy, who dies in a traffic accident outside Monteriano. When Philip tells Gino about the death of his son, Gino almost kills him. They are eventually reconciled by Caroline, who has also come to Monteriano on a parallel trip, and Gino forgives his English relatives and also protects them from any legal consequences of their actions. The novel ends with Philip, Harriet and Caroline travelling back to England empty-handed; the only lasting and tangible result of the three journeys would appear to be a friendship between Philip and Gino.

In a letter written to his friend R. C. Trevelyan soon after the publication of the novel, Forster writes:

The object of the book is the improvement of Philip [...]. In ch. 5 he has got into a mess, through trying to live only by a sense of humour and by a sense of the beautiful. The knowledge of the mess embitters him, and this is the improvement's beginning. From that time I exhibit new pieces of him—pieces that he did not know of, or at all events had never used. He grows large enough to appreciate Miss Abbott, and in the final scene he exceeds her.<sup>15</sup>

In presenting Philip as a miscellany of separate pieces, some of them unused, Forster employs the same terms as in other writings about the English middle class. In "Notes on the English Character," for instance, he argues that, due to self-denial and inhibition, a typical English person is undeveloped and incomplete (10). What follows from this diagnosis is a cure that consists primarily in acknowledging, expressing and integrating the unused pieces of the self. As Forster writes in a letter on *Maurice*: "My defence at any Last Judgement would be 'I was trying to connect up and use all the fragments I was born with.'" <sup>16</sup> Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End* thinks along the same lines: "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die" (183-84).<sup>17</sup>

In addition to its personal and psychological meaning, Forster's imperative to connect also has a public and communal meaning. Connecting oneself involves connecting with other people, especially those from whom one is separated by social, political and cultural boundaries. In *Howards End*, for instance, the characters form relationships across the divisions of the English class system. In *A Passage to India*, they attempt to do so despite the hierarchies of colonial rule. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the improvement of Philip, the process of using and connecting the fragments he was born with, is likewise accompanied by connecting with Gino and transcending the barriers between Sawston and Monteriano. This process is, as I have indicated above, linked to a metageneric shift from comedy to tragedy.<sup>18</sup> It is this shift that I want to trace in the present reading, doing justice to its complexity and to the aestheticist inflections by which it is complicated. I am particularly interested in a puzzling, seemingly contradictory development in the final chapter that, as far as I can see, has not been adequately explained so far.

Forster describes Philip in a lengthy passage, which comes at a curiously late point, almost halfway through the novel and somewhat like an afterthought. After focusing on Philip's loneliness as a self-conscious intellectual, it touches upon his sense of beauty and his sense of humour, also mentioned in the letter to Trevelyan.

At all events he had got a sense of beauty and a sense of humour, two most desirable gifts. The sense of beauty developed first. It caused him at the age of twenty to wear parti-coloured ties and a squashy hat, to be late for dinner on account of the sunset, and to catch art from Burne-Jones to Praxiteles. At twenty-two he went to Italy with some cousins, and there he absorbed into one aesthetic whole olive-trees, blue sky, frescoes, country inns, saints, peasants, mosaics, statues, beggars. He came back with the air of a prophet who would either remodel Sawston or reject it. All the energies and enthusiasms of a rather friendless life had passed into the championship of beauty.

In a short time it was over. Nothing had happened either in Sawston or within himself. He had shocked half a dozen people, squabbled with his sister, and bickered with his mother. He concluded that nothing could happen, not knowing that human love and love of truth sometimes conquer where love of beauty fails.

A little disenchanted, a little tired, but aesthetically intact, he resumed his placid life, relying more and more on his second gift, the gift of humour. If he could not

reform the world, he could at all events laugh at it, thus attaining at least an intellectual superiority. Laughter, he read and believed, was a sign of good moral health, and he laughed on contentedly. (54-55)

In describing Philip's sense of beauty, the passage introduces a third term that we will encounter repeatedly in looking at the shift from the comic to the tragic. Forster enriches his metageneric argument by combining it with a response to the aestheticism of the late nineteenth century. The development from the sense of beauty to the sense of humour should not be taken to mean that the two are opposed to each other. Philip does not give up the first in favour of the second; there is rather a gradual shift in emphasis. Moreover, the two share an important characteristic in that they turn Philip into a spectator, an observer who is not involved in the events around him and takes only an aesthetic pleasure in studying them.<sup>19</sup> This attitude is especially evident in his encounters with Caroline. Sometimes he observes her in generally aesthetic terms:

Without being exactly original, she did show a commendable intelligence, and though at times she was *gauche* and even *uncourtly* he felt that here was a person whom it might be well to *cultivate*. (58; emphasis added)

He assented, but her remark had only an aesthetic value. He was not prepared to take it to his heart. (123)

Sometimes in pictorial terms:

For he saw a charming picture, as charming a picture as he had seen for years—the hot red theatre; outside the theatre, towers and dark gates and medieval walls; beyond the walls, olive-trees in the starlight and white winding roads and fireflies and untroubled dust; and here in the middle of it all Miss Abbott, wishing she had not come looking like a guy. She had made the right remark. Most undoubtedly she had made the right remark. This stiff suburban woman was unbending before the shrine. (93-94)

Sometimes in theatrical terms:

After a silence, which he intended to symbolize to her *the dropping of a curtain on the scene*, he began to talk of other subjects. (20; emphasis added)

"Now that we [Philip and Caroline] have quarrelled we scarcely want to travel in procession all the way down the hill. Well, goodbye; it's all over at last; another scene in my *pageant* has shifted." (125; emphasis added)

And sometimes in terms of comedy, as in the following passage, in which Caroline is included with others and in which the word *humour* is used as in *comedy of humours*, where it refers to predictable, narrow-minded eccentrics that are ruled by a single obsession:

Philip saw no prospect of good, nor of beauty either. But the expedition promised to be highly comic. He was not averse to it any longer; he was simply indifferent to all in it except the humours. These would be wonderful. Harriet, worked by her mother; Mrs Herriton, worked by Miss Abbott; Gino, worked by a cheque—what better entertainment could he desire? There was nothing to distract him this time; his sentimentality had died, so had his anxiety for the family honour. He might be a puppet's puppet, but he knew exactly the disposition of the strings. (74-75)

As indicated above, Philip's spectator attitude means that he is not able—and not willing—to become involved in the events around him. He is fully aware of this and justifies his non-involvement with a philosophy that, in a rare moment of confidence, he shares with Caroline during a chance encounter on the train to London. When she tells him that her Italian experiences made her hate the "mediocrity and dullness and spitefulness" (61) of Sawston society, he answers:

"Society *is* invincible—to a certain degree. But your real life is your own, and nothing can touch it. There is no power on earth that can prevent your criticizing and despising mediocrity—nothing that can stop you retreating into splendour and beauty—into the thoughts and beliefs that make the real life—the real you." (62)

During a later conversation, which takes place in Santa Deodata, the church of Monteriano, he again affirms his philosophy of non-involvement:

"Miss Abbott, don't worry over me. Some people are born not to do things. I'm one of them [...]. I seem fated to pass through the world without colliding with it or moving it—and I'm sure I can't tell you whether the fate's good or evil. I don't die—I don't fall in love. And if other people die or fall in love they always do it when I'm not there. You are quite right: life to me is just a spectacle, which—thank



God, and thank Italy, and thank you—is now more beautiful and heartening than it has ever been before.” (120-21)

Philip's spectator attitude is shown to be an inadequate response to the course of events. It leaves him in “a mess” (149), as Forster writes to Trevelyan. His sense of humour is particularly problematic.<sup>20</sup> Philip “always adopted a dry satirical manner when he was *puzzled*” (59; emphasis added); it would appear that his manner is primarily a defence mechanism. Lilia complains to him, “[Y]ou said funny things about me to show how clever you were!” (27). In other words, Philip cultivates his sense of humour to achieve a feeling of superiority that is unfounded. As Thomas Hobbes points out, the self-elevation of laughter is often a matter of wishful thinking rather than a sign of genuine precedence: “And it [laughter] is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of Pusillanimity” (43).

Philip's sense of humour is also problematic because it prevents him from acknowledging the tragic dimension of the events happening around him. This dimension is evident not only in the deaths of Lilia and her son but also in Lilia's marriage to Gino, which is presented in tragic terms from the start: “It was in this house [the house that Lilia buys for Gino after their marriage] that the brief and inevitable tragedy of Lilia's married life took place” (31). Lilia soon learns that married life in Monteriano means the “brotherhood of man” and the “democracy of the *caffè*” for Gino (36), and something close to solitary confinement at home for her—a worse prison than the respectable existence that the Herritons imposed on her in Sawston. When she discovers that Gino is spending his time away from her not only with male companions at the café but in bed with another woman, she breaks down in despair, realising the hopelessness of her situation. “Lilia had achieved pathos despite herself, for there are some situations in which vulgarity counts no longer. Not Cordelia nor Imogen more deserve our tears” (47). The tragic nature of Lilia's story is indicated not only by the allusion to *King Lear* and *Cymbeline* but also by the concept of pathos, a key

element in Aristotle's theory of the genre.<sup>21</sup> Forster complicates Lilia's tragedy by acknowledging that it is at odds with her vulgarity, an incongruity that is echoed in the oxymoron "sordid tragedy" (55) later on. This incongruity suggests an interesting parallel between Lilia and Philip. In both cases, there is a considerable resistance to tragedy. While Philip refuses to *see* the tragic because of his comic prejudices, Lilia is unlikely to *experience* it because of who she is. With her vulgarity, weakness and foolishness, Lilia belongs in a comedy or satire. But the nature of the events ultimately overrides the nature of the character—"the wisest of women could hardly have suffered more" (47)—and thus Lilia achieves the status of a tragic heroine.<sup>22</sup>

The most problematic part of Philip's philosophy is his embrace of passivity. Caroline is vehemently opposed to it, pointing out that, despite his claims about non-involvement and inaction, he is acting on behalf of others: "Anyone gets hold of you and makes you do what they want. And you see through them and laugh at them—and do it" (120). Philip's claims are thoroughly disproved by the events around the baby's death. In the conversation with Caroline that takes place in Santa Deodata, he maintains that he "pass[es] through the world without colliding with it," but he quite literally collides with it when his coach runs into Caroline's on the way out of Monteriano. He also states, as quoted above, that he does not die or fall in love, and that he is not present when others do so (see 121). However, Caroline almost immediately tells him that, because of his passivity, he is "dead—dead—dead," (120) and he does fall in love with Caroline herself. He is present when Gino's son dies, holding him in his arms, and when Caroline falls in love with Gino, which happens (or reaches the point at which she can no longer resist it) when she reconciles the two men and enfolds Gino in her arms. Moreover, Philip learns in a later conversation with Caroline that he is not only present at her falling in love but also responsible for it. The scene of reconciliation would not have taken place if he had followed Caroline's advice to bundle Harriet into a coach and leave Monteriano at once (159-60).

The inadequacy of Philip's spectator attitude is also, and most paradoxically, shown at the place where it would seem to be most appropriate: the theatre. This is where, during their second visit to Monteriano, Philip and

Caroline make a spontaneous decision to go, and they succeed in persuading Harriet to join them, pointing out that the opera they are going to attend, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, is based on a novel by Sir Walter Scott (92). On a previous occasion, Philip remembers, he saw *La Zia di Carlo* at the same theatre, an Italian translation or adaptation of Thomas Brandon's farcical comedy *Charley's Aunt* (93). The two performances represent the shift from comedy to tragedy in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, and they also suggest, because of their British origin, that the journey to Italy is a journey of self-discovery for the English visitors. *Tua res agitur*: What Philip, Caroline and Harriet see on the stage of Monteriano comes from their own country. To return to Philip's spectator attitude, it proves to be out of place at the performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Instead of watching and listening from an aesthetic distance, the audience join in the performance, accompanying it "with tappings and drummings, swaying in the melody like corn in the wind," murmuring "like a hive of happy bees," greeting the performers and showering the stage with flowers (94-95).<sup>23</sup> When a bouquet with a *billet-doux* lands in Harriet's lap, Philip grabs it and shouts, "Whose is it?," making the house explode with laughter (96). He is directed to a box, where he finds himself, to his great surprise, not handing over the bouquet but being pulled up and greeted by Gino. The incident shows Philip turning from a spectator into a participant—albeit without a will of his own as yet. As a messenger of his mother and of unknown Italians writing love letters, his actions and movements are directed by others.

The pivotal moment in Philip's improvement is when, after the death of Gino's son, he decides to give up his spectator attitude and accept the responsibility that, so far, he has not acknowledged:

As yet he could scarcely survey the thing. It was too great. Round the Italian baby who had died in the mud there centred deep passions and high hopes. People had been wicked or wrong in the matter; no one save himself had been trivial. Now the baby had gone, but there remained this vast apparatus of pride and pity and love. [...]

The course of the moment—that, at all events, was certain. He and no one else must take the news to Gino. It was easy to talk of Harriet's crime—easy also to blame the negligent Perfetta or Mrs Herriton at home. Everyone had contributed—even Miss Abbott and Irma. If one chose, one might consider the catastrophe composite or the work of fate. But Philip did not so choose. It was his own

fault, due to acknowledged weakness in his own character. Therefore he, and no one else, must take the news of it to Gino. (133-34)

Philip is still a messenger, but a messenger acting on his own accord, not on behalf of others. He also abandons his comic perspective and begins to see the events in tragic terms. The passage invokes key concepts of tragedy: the great or sublime in characters and events, the catastrophe, pity (one of the two principal emotions felt by the audience, according to Aristotle) and the fault (Aristotle's *hamartia*, the flaw of the tragic protagonist).<sup>24</sup> Earlier on, Philip thought that the people around him behaved like characters in a comedy; now he realises that the comic category of the "trivial" applies only to himself. The message that he now carries to Gino plunges him into the tragic world of suffering. In his first wave of grief at the death of his son, Gino turns against Philip, tortures him and almost kills him—until Caroline arrives on the scene and reconciles the two men.

Philip's improvement can also be traced in his changing attitude towards Caroline. When he arrives in Monteriano and catches his first glimpse of her approaching the station in a coach, she fully meets his comic prejudices, looking ridiculous while "holding starfish fashion onto anything she could touch" (15). His question how long Lilia has been engaged makes Caroline look "like a perfect fool—a fool in terror" (17). During the ensuing interview on the way from the station to the town, he feels very superior, adopting his "dry satirical manner" and asking questions as if in a cross-examination, while she is giving evasive answers and leaving her sentences unfinished (understandably enough because he does not know that Lilia is already married, and Caroline is afraid to tell him). However, in later conversations he gradually abandons his assumption of superiority and "grows large enough to appreciate Miss Abbott" (149), as Forster writes in his letter to Trevelyan. Occasionally, he still deplores her "usual feminine incapacity for grasping philosophy" (62), but he increasingly realises that Caroline is not the dull and dutiful woman he thought her to be, but a fellow critic of the rigid proprieties of Sawston—and moreover an unpredictable human being whose actions are often surprising. By the end of the novel, he loves her, admires her to the extent of regarding her as a goddess (139, 147), and he loses his capacity (or his pretence) to see through her:

“Why was she so puzzling? He had known so much about her once – what she thought, how she felt, the reasons for her actions. And now he only knew that he loved her, and all the other knowledge seemed passing from him just as he needed it most” (142).

It would appear that the appropriate conclusion of Philip’s improvement is a relationship with Caroline. He has grown mature enough to appreciate her, he has been punished for his faults and failures by Gino, he has decided to take the step from aesthetic observation to involvement and responsibility—does he not deserve the love of the woman who has similarly grown and matured through her experiences in Monteriano? “After all,” Philip thinks, “was the greatest of things possible? Perhaps, after long estrangement, after much tragedy, the South had brought them together in the end” (144). This is roughly what happens in Forster’s other Italian novel, *A Room with a View*, which concludes with the heterosexual union of two English travellers brought together by their experiences abroad. However, this is not what happens in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Philip’s hopes are disappointed. Caroline fails to return his love, and he seems to relapse into his former, non-involved self. In three crucial passages at the end of the novel, he is again described as a spectator of life. The first focuses on the moment when Caroline reconciles the two men after the baby’s death; Philip is contemplating Caroline and Gino as if they were a painting:

All through the day Miss Abbott had seemed to Philip like a goddess, and more than ever did she seem so now. [...] Such eyes he had seen in great pictures but never in a mortal. Her hands were folded round the sufferer, stroking him lightly, for even a goddess can do no more than that. And it seemed fitting, too, that she should bend her head and touch his forehead with her lips.

Philip looked away, as he sometimes looked away from the great pictures where visible forms suddenly become inadequate for the things they have shown to us. He was happy; he was assured that there was greatness in the world. (138-39)

The second passage follows the final and most striking of the many surprises that Caroline has in store for Philip. They are on the train, approaching the St Gotthard Tunnel and thus on the point of leaving the magical soil of Italy. Philip is waiting for a sign that she returns his love but instead she confesses to him that she loves Gino. She then proceeds to ask Philip to laugh at her:

"Laugh at love?" asked Philip.

"Yes. Pull it to pieces. Tell me I'm a fool or worse—that he's a cad. Say all you said when Lilia fell in love with him. That's the help I want. I dare tell you this because I like you—and because you're without passion; you look on life as a spectacle; you don't enter it; you only find it funny or beautiful. So I can trust you to cure me. Mr Herriton, isn't it funny?" (145)

Caroline has evidently been too preoccupied with Gino to recognise any changes in Philip. She still thinks of "Mr Herriton" as a detached connoisseur of the human comedy. The third passage describes Philip's response to her confession after he has understood all of its implications, in particular his own contribution to her falling in love with Gino:

"But through my fault," said Philip solemnly, "he is parted from the child he loves. And because my life was in danger you came and saw him and spoke to him again." For the thing was even greater than she imagined. Nobody but himself would ever see round it now. And to see round it he was standing at an immense distance. He could even be glad that she had once held the beloved in her arms. [...]

Philip's eyes were fixed on the Campanile of Airola. But he saw instead the fair myth of Endymion. This woman was a goddess to the end. For her no love could be degrading: she stood outside all degradation. This episode, which she thought so sordid, and which was so tragic for him, remained supremely beautiful. To such a height was he lifted that without regret he could now have told her that he was her worshipper too. (147-48)

Philip has become the kind of observer he formerly aspired to be. He is superior to everybody else—"[n]obody but himself would ever see round it now"—and, instead of feeling the pain of his disappointment, he experiences the situation in aesthetic terms. "[S]tanding at an immense distance," he views the events as an "episode" and as a literary myth that is "supremely beautiful." Philip is almost like a reader or critic, who, having arrived at the end of a novel, is in a position to see its "pattern," i.e. the structure or symmetry of relations that emerges when surveying a plot as a whole.<sup>25</sup>

To sum up, Philip's improvement seems to be arrested and even inverted precisely when it is bound to arrive at its logical conclusion. The final scenes push him back into the very role that is earlier presented as sadly deficient.<sup>26</sup> There are, to my mind, three explanations of this inconsistency.

The first could be labelled “poetic justice.” The final meeting between Caroline and Gino, which makes her fall in love with him for good, comes about as a result of Philip’s passivity and negligence. Philip himself is thus responsible for directing Caroline’s feelings towards Gino and for the impossibility of his own relationship with her. His improvement deserves the verdict “too little, too late.” The second explanation takes Forster’s sexual orientation into account. It turns the ending of the novel into a coded statement on homoerotic desire and the difficulties that it was faced with at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this explanation, the various relationships that we see at the end of the novel, both real and imagined, all stand for love between men. That the bond between Philip and Gino remains the only lasting outcome becomes a tacit assertion of this love. That Philip’s relationship with Caroline and hers with Gino are blocked serves as an acknowledgment that a full-scale union—“body and soul,” as Caroline says (147)—with the blessing of society is inconceivable between men.

While both of these explanations can be defended, I would like to make a case for a third, which is based on my metageneric argument and on the shift from comedy to tragedy. This shift also informs Philip’s puzzling relapse at the end of the novel. Admittedly, he returns to his former role as an observer of the spectacle of life, but the nature of the spectacle has changed; it is a tragedy rather than a comedy. When he sees Caroline embracing Gino, her eyes are “full of infinite pity and of majesty,” and Philip is assured that there is “greatness in the world” (139). The key term “great” occurs again in the passage describing his view of her in the final moments of the novel—“the thing was even greater than she imagined” (147)—and we also encounter an echo of Lilia’s “sordid tragedy” in the following sentence about Caroline: “This episode, which she thought so sordid, and which was so tragic for him, remained supremely beautiful” (147-48). Caroline presumably thinks of her love for Gino as “sordid” because of its physical aspect, but to Philip, this aspect does not degrade it in any way, which may be one of the reasons why “in the final scene he exceeds her,” as Forster writes to Trevelyan (149).<sup>27</sup>

It is not only the nature of the spectacle that has changed in the final scenes. The spectator and his relation to what he is observing have changed as well. Philip may be “standing at an immense distance” and lifted “to

such a height," but he is no longer in a position of superiority as both the spectacle and the spectator have been elevated at the same time. Philip now also offers the sympathy that, according to Aristotle, is felt by the audience of a tragedy; the "infinite pity" that he saw in Caroline's eyes is reflected in his own response to her: "In that terrible discovery Philip managed to think not of himself but of her" (146). Caroline needs someone to talk to about Gino—"if I mayn't speak about him to you sometimes, I shall die" (146)—and she needs someone to laugh at her, thus helping her to gain some sort of distance to, and control of, her feelings. Thus even the laughter and "the dry satirical manner" that Philip adopts when talking to her about her love for Gino become an expression of his sympathy. Playing the role of the detached observer has paradoxically become a mode of sympathetic involvement.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, the article by Giltrow.

<sup>3</sup>Pettit defines the central term of his argument only in passing: "O'Neill repeatedly experimented with the New Comic template. [...] The more troubling results I call metacomédies" (53). Elsewhere, he states that a feeling of queasiness on the part of the audience is "the essence of metacomedy" (56), or that "[b]y melding death and union [...] O'Neill nudges comedy into metacomedy" (57).

<sup>4</sup>This distinction is roughly equivalent with a distinction made by Hauthal et al. in "Metaisierung in der Literatur" (5); the German terms are "Erscheinungsorte" (my subject) and "Gegenstandsbereiche" (my object).

<sup>5</sup>Markus Klaus Schäffauer argues that the bestiary is especially favourable to meta-generic self-reflection because it is a genre about genres. This argument rests on the analogy between animal species (as described in a bestiary) and literary genres. I do not find this analogy and the case made for it by Schäffauer very persuasive.

<sup>6</sup>See Wolf 59-60; and Jakobson 370.

<sup>7</sup>Helpful typologies of self-reflexiveness in literature are provided by Wolf; Scheffel; and Hauthal et al., "Metaisierung in der Literatur."



<sup>8</sup>I owe this example to the broad and eclectic reading of my friend Maik Goth.

<sup>9</sup>See Frank Zipfel on the technique of using a play within the play to provide a different generic perspective on a theme or event also dealt with in the main play; Zipfel discusses four plays, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

<sup>10</sup>For the importance of prototypical texts in the perception of literary genres, see Fishelov (62-65).

<sup>11</sup>In my use of the terms *trans-*, *inter-* and *hypertextuality*, I follow Gérard Genette's *Palimpsestes*; see especially chs. I-VII (7-48). In the following sentences, however, *parody* is used not in the narrow sense of Genette, but in a broad and inclusive sense embracing all types of comic hypertextuality. Genette himself distinguishes six types (four of them comic); parody is only one of these.

<sup>12</sup>For a general discussion of the relation between parody and self-reflexiveness, see the chapter "Meta-fiction" in Margaret Rose's *Parody* (91-99); the proximity between the two is also pointed out by Linda Hutcheon (31). For a lucid study of parody as meta-genre, see Fishelov, "Parodies of Six-Word-Stories: A Comic Literary Metagenre" (forthcoming in this journal).

<sup>13</sup>See, for instance, Brecht's essay "Kleines Organon für das Theater."

<sup>14</sup>Taken from a description of foolish and forward critics in Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism": "No Place so Sacred from such Fops is barr'd, / Nor is *Paul's Church* more safe than *Paul's Church-Yard*: / Nay, fly to *Altars*; there they'll take you dead; / For *Fools* rush in where *Angels* fear to tread" (163, ll. 622-25). Forster's original title, *Monteriano*, was rejected by the publisher; *Where Angels Fear to Tread* was suggested by Forster's friend E. J. Dent (see the introduction to the edition quoted here [xii-xiii]).

<sup>15</sup>See the appendix of the edition quoted here (149).

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in P. N. Furbank's introduction to *Maurice* (9); the letter was written in 1915.

<sup>17</sup>"Only connect ..." is also the epigraph of the novel and one of its most important leitmotifs or "rhythms," in Forster's terminology (see ch. 8 of *Aspects of the Novel*); on this leitmotif and others, see the present writer's "E. M. Forster and the Supersession of Plot by Leitmotif."

<sup>18</sup>This shift from comedy to tragedy echoes the history of the English novel. Initially, novelists such as William Congreve and Henry Fielding defined the genre in comic terms (see Niederhoff, *Englische Komödie* 142), but in the nineteenth century novelists increasingly turned to tragedy as a model (see King).

<sup>19</sup>It might be argued that Philip is a mixture of two earlier characters who cultivate an observer attitude: Mr Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* (who emphasises the sense of humour) and Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (who emphasises the sense of beauty). Both characters also resemble Philip in that their attitude is shown to have highly problematic consequences.

<sup>20</sup>This is also pointed out by Richard Keller Simon who analyses *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in terms of three types, which he derives from Aristotle and James Sully's *Essay on Laughter*: the buffoon, who laughs too much; the boor, who laughs too little; and the well-balanced wit, who laughs in moderation. Keller Simon classifies Harriet as a boor

(plausible), Philip as a buffoon (questionable), and Gino as a well-balanced wit (no evidence in the text). He also fails to discern the improvement of Philip, which, according to Forster, is the main point of the book; nor does he see the shift from comedy to tragedy. This shift is also neglected by Wilfred Stone, who considers *Where Angels Fear to Tread* an unresolved mixture of comedy and prophecy (the latter term being derived from Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, where it is discussed in ch. 7).

<sup>21</sup>See *Poetics* 43 (ch. 11).

<sup>22</sup>There is a similar development in *Howards End*. Initially, Leonard Bast seems to be incapable of tragedy because of the "squalor" in which he lives (his poverty, his lack of education, his marriage to Jackie, etc.), but in the end he attains tragic status. This development is mirrored in how two leitmotifs of the novel, "squalor" and "tragedy," are first opposed and then combined: "Let squalor be turned into tragedy" (328).

<sup>23</sup>The involvement of the audience is also pointed out by Alan Wilde: "The opera house (as well as the Italy it represents) is where people can relate to one-another—the actors to the audience, the audience to the actors and to each other, the English to the Italians. Although it is the home of art, 'it aims not at illusion'; it is, indeed, completely antithetical to the frame of mind that so limits Philip's perceptions" (212). Wilde's article is similar to mine in that it traces Philip's development from aesthetic observer to active participant; however, it fails to discern the shift from comedy to tragedy.

<sup>24</sup>On pity, see *Poetics* 23 (ch. 6); on *hamartia*, see *Poetics* 47 (ch. 13).

<sup>25</sup>The term "pattern" is taken from *Aspects of the Novel*, where Forster defines and discusses it in ch. 7. I am introducing the term here because there is a further connection between the final scene of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and the remarks on pattern in *Aspects of the Novel*. The example which Forster analyses at length is Henry James' *The Ambassadors*, whose plot and "hour-glass" pattern are so similar to those of Forster's novel that it has been considered a source (see, for instance, Crews 80-81). In both novels, a messenger is sent to a foreign country to make a compatriot come home and to save them from moral shipwreck. What happens, however, is that the foreign experience changes the outlook of the messenger and that he eventually realises the foolishness of his mission. Moreover, in Forster's interpretation of *The Ambassadors*, Strether (James's messenger figure) exceeds the other characters in the final scene just as Philip does: "The Paris they revealed to him—he could reveal it to them now, if they had eyes to see, for it is something finer than they could notice for themselves, and his imagination has more spiritual value than their youth" (*Aspects of the Novel* 109). Both Strether and Philip are capable of seeing the patterns of their respective novels.

<sup>26</sup>Alan Wilde is, to the best of my knowledge, the only other critic to have noticed this problem. His explanation, which I find unsatisfactory, is based on a failure of the characters: Both Philip and Caroline lack the strength to go through with their development; there is something weak and inauthentic about their love.

<sup>27</sup>I would like to point out that my explanation of Philip's development in the final scenes—from comic, detached spectator to active participant to tragic, sympathetic spectator—does not do full justice to Forster's novel, which, despite its brevity and its being the work of a beginner, is rich and complex. Besides the shift from comedy to tragedy, there is also a religious dimension that draws on both pagan and Christian motifs: the image of the goddess to characterise Caroline, the myth of Endymion (also

implying a female deity, the moon goddess Selene), conversion (139), revelation (139, 147) and transfiguration (147). A satisfactory analysis of this dimension of Philip's improvement, however, would require another article.

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# Parodies of Six-Word Stories: A Comic Literary Metagenre\*

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This article is the first entry in a debate on a contribution on “Parodies of Six-Word Stories: A Comic Literary Metagenre.” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/parodies-of-six-word-stories/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

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## Abstract

The article discusses parodies of six-word stories and locates them within the broader context of metagenre in general, and humorous metagenre in particular. Parodies of six-word stories offer a playful, ironic perspective on the genre's form and its most famous example, the story (wrongly) attributed to Hemingway: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” The genre of six-word stories is a newcomer to the repertoire of narrative genres: it emerged in the 1990s and since then has become a fast-growing literary phenomenon with a great number of followers, both readers and writers. After describing the central characteristics of this peculiar mini-genre (e.g. the tip of the iceberg principle, the punch line structure, its poetic-like patterns), I focus on a detailed analysis of selected parodies of the form, and show how examples such as “For sale: this story format. Overused.”; “For sale. BMW. Blinkers never used.” and “Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin.” present a close imitation of conspicuous aspects of the generic model, in being embodied in its prototypical member, together with a comic, tongue-in-cheek, manipulation of that model. I conclude by arguing that parodies of six-word stories offer further indirect evidence of the diversity and productivity of this peculiar mini-genre.

## Introduction: Genre, Metagenre, Parody

In this article I will discuss parodies of six-word stories and locate them within the broader context of metagenre in general, and humorous metagenre in particular. Parodies of six-word stories offer a playful, ironic perspective on the genre's form and its most famous example, the story (wrongly) attributed to Hemingway: (1) "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."<sup>1</sup> Before discussing different examples of metagenre and parodies of six-word stories, I shall first briefly describe this peculiar genre (or mini-genre). This newcomer to the repertoire of narrative genres emerged in the 1990s and since then has become a fast-growing literary phenomenon with a great number of followers, both readers and writers, especially on the Internet. To illustrate the genre's growth suffice it to say that a search for the string "six-word stories" on Google in September 2017 produced 382,000 results, and by November 2021 the number had risen to 801,000. When we realize that some of these websites contain dozens of six-word stories, and others even hundreds,<sup>2</sup> the magnitude of the phenomenon becomes apparent (even after deducting the many repetitions). Can this popular form of creativity qualify for the title of a literary genre? To answer that question, and to prepare the ground for the analysis of specific examples, I shall first offer a working definition of the key concepts used in this article: genre, metagenre, and parody.

*Genre* is understood as "a combination of prototypical, representative members, and a flexible set of constitutive rules that apply to some levels of literary texts, to some individual writers, usually to more than one literary period, and to more than one language and culture" (Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre* 8). I add two clarifications to this working definition: first, it highlights the important role played by prototypical members in our understanding of generic categories. This emphasis is based on works in cognitive linguistics that demonstrate the central role of prototypical members in categories in general (see Rosch and Mervis; Rosch), and the pertinence of these works to generic categories

(see Fishelov, "Genre Theory and Family Resemblance"; Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre* 55-68; Fishelov, "The Structure of Generic Categories"); and, second, the postulation that generic rules apply to several levels of the text was introduced in order to distinguish literary genres from other types of rules (e.g. prosodic) that apply to only one level of the text. Whereas literary genres are usually associated with one dominant characteristic, be it formal (e.g. fourteen lines in sonnets), or structural (e.g. specific plot-structures in detective stories), or thematic (e.g. the theatre of the absurd), or rhetorical (e.g. criticizing and ridiculing social phenomena in satire), this dominant characteristic will usually be accompanied by other characteristics at other textual levels.

I shall briefly illustrate this working definition with the well-established literary genre of the Italian sonnet. The genre has many of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* as prototypical examples, and its rules apply to meter (fourteen hendecasyllabic lines), to rhyme-scheme (octave with ABBAABBA and sestet with CDECDE or CDCDCD), and to themes (first and foremost, romantic love with an idealized beloved). Thus, even a genre defined primarily by its formal, prosodic characteristics also has prevalent, characteristic themes. Whereas romantic love was closely associated with the genre, new themes were introduced (e.g. Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, Wordsworth's landscape sonnets), and of course new versions of the sonnet emerged (e.g. the Shakespearean sonnet in England), but these developments will not obliterate the genre's original, prototypical examples.

The working definition of genre can be equally applied to six-word stories. First, this genre has a universally accepted prototypical member: the Hemingway story. According to literary legend, the story was composed as part of a bet: Hemingway claimed that he could write a whole novel compressed into only six words, and won.<sup>3</sup> The Hemingway story is mentioned in almost every discussion of the genre, and has inspired many followers who have written innumerable texts.<sup>4</sup> Second, the genre has at least two essential rules: it is composed of exactly six words, and it is committed to tell a story (as opposed to, say, making a general statement). Whereas the formal rule of using only and exactly



six words is quite straightforward, the narrative element is sometimes less obvious, and some texts seem to hover between six-word *stories* and neighboring mini-genres which are not committed to tell a story (e.g. aphorisms, epigraphs). Still, in most popular and successful texts of the genre, the narrative element stands out.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for example, (2) “Best friends. Some beers. New lovers.” qualifies as a typical six-word story but “Passion is born deaf and dumb” (a saying attributed to Balzac) will be labeled as a typical aphorism, even if it is composed of six words: whereas the former invites us to imagine a specific chain of events with causal connection, the latter formulates a general truth. Perhaps Balzac’s general observation emerged out of witnessing chains of events like the one described in (2), but it does not tell a story. In addition, the genre has several prevalent structural rules such as the tip of the iceberg principle (i.e., important parts of the story are construed, not stated),<sup>6</sup> and a punch-line structure (i.e., the story’s last part is surprising and makes us reread the previous segments), as well as poetic-like patterns (e.g., the six words’ sequence is parsed into 2-2-2 or 3-3 segments).<sup>7</sup> Thus, our working definition of a genre can be easily applied to six-word stories, perhaps with one qualification: whereas other literary genres usually have several prototypical members (e.g. tragedy has Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, among others), six-word stories have only one privileged prototypical member, namely the Hemingway story.

*Metagenre* is understood as texts that call attention to the conventions of a specific genre or its prototypical members.<sup>8</sup> Note that this broad definition can be applied not only to literary works but also to scholarly discussions of genres. Since the present discussion is interested in literary works, it is useful to distinguish scholarly metagenre from literary metagenre: whereas the former aims at a systematic description and interpretation of genres, the latter strives to achieve artistic goals. Such texts offer a pleasurable invitation to reflect on the evoked genres by paying homage to or, alternatively, ridiculing their conventions. Literary metagenre may contain descriptive elements but such elements will be subordinated to its literary goals (in a complementary manner, a

scholarly discussion may use literary devices but these will be subordinated to its academic objectives).

Finally, *parody* is understood as texts that closely imitate but also distort a specific text, or a specific author, or a specific genre and its prototypical members, and this double structure is accompanied by a comic incongruity.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for example, (3) “For sale: BMW. Blinkers never used.” and (4) “Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin.” closely imitate the structure of the prototypical Hemingway story, but they both substitute the specific element offered for sale, and the specific substitutions create a comic tension (we shall later offer a detailed analysis of these two parodies, together with more similar examples, in the section “Parodies of Six-Word Stories”). As this working definition suggests, parody can be manifested in many ways.<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of the present discussion, I shall add four clarifications and distinctions. First, if we take parody as the umbrella term, we can distinguish within it between high and low burlesque: in the former, the “high” style of a genre is retained but its content (e.g. characters) is substituted with trivial elements. High burlesque can be best exemplified by Mock-Epic or Mock-Heroic in which the formal conventions of epic poetry (e.g. invoking the muse, extended similes) are used to describe the trivial quarrels of belles and beaux, rather than the bloody battles of dignified, mythical heroes (e.g. Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock”). In its mirror-like case of low burlesque (sometimes called travesty), a culturally “high” content (e.g. a knight) is described in low, colloquial style (e.g. Butler’s *Hudibras*).<sup>11</sup>

Second, unlike other genres, parody does not have any specific formal or thematic characteristics: rather, due to its “parasitic” or chameleon-like and protean nature, it adopts the specific characteristics of the text or genre that it chooses to parody—but with a twist. Still, like other literary genres, parody too has its prototypical members (e.g. Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock”). Third, formulating simple criteria is problematic when it comes to determining whether or not a specific imitation and distortion of a literary model produces a comic effect that is strongly associated with parody. Although *Paradise Lost* imitates certain conventions of the classical epic and substitutes the mythical, Greco-

Roman gods and heroes with the biblical G-d and his son, Adam and Eve, and Lucifer, among others, the text produces no comic effect whatsoever and should not be read as a parody of the epic tradition. The reason for this is probably because both substituted and substituting characters belong to an elevated cultural sphere, while a comic effect usually requires an incongruity between “high” and “low” substituted and substituting elements. Even after introducing this postulate, it is almost impossible to devise a specific formula for producing a comic effect in the double structure of imitation and substitution. To succeed in this endeavor, authors require talent, keen literary sensitivities and, of course, an excellent sense of humor. The fourth clarification, also pertinent to the discussion of parodies of six-word stories, is that the comic, critical element of parody can be put at the service of satirizing different goals.

### Criticizing the Parodied Genre *or* an External Target

To illustrate how parody’s comic “mechanism” and its satirical element can be aimed at different goals, let us look at two prototypical examples of parody of English literature. First, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 with its parody of Petrarchan love poems:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;  
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.  
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.  
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
 As any she belied with false compare. (*The Sonnets* 141)

The underlined words in the poem are the—here parodied—Petrarchan “building blocks.” Their comprising more than half of Shakespeare’s text manifests how closely Shakespeare’s parody is modeled after a Petrarchan love poem. While the Petrarchan parodied model is actually embedded in Shakespeare’s parody, instead of using the collection of beautifying similes as part of a eulogy of the beloved woman (with an edifying *blazon*), Shakespeare deflates them with the ironic needle of negation: e.g. his mistress’s eyes are *nothing* like the sun, etc. Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 perhaps parodies contemporary Elizabethan poets imitating Petrarchan love poems (e.g. Thomas Watson, Samuel Daniel, Richard Linche; see notes on Sonnet 130 in Kerrigan’s edition, 359-60) more than Petrarch himself. In any event, the constant move between the high images and the realistic appearance of Shakespeare’s beloved creates a comic tension. Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 calls attention to the conventions of a Petrarchan love poem (i.e., metagenre), and its comic element is at the service of satirizing the Petrarchan lover-speaker as someone detached from reality, absorbed in “false compare.”

Let us now look at the opening lines of another famous prototypical parody in English literature, Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock”:

What dire Offence from am’rous Causes springs,  
 What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things,  
 I sing—This Verse to *Caryll*, Muse! is due;  
 This, ev’n *Belinda* may vouchsafe to view:  
 Slight is the Subject, but not so the Praise,  
 If She inspire, and He approve my Lays. (*The Poems* 218)

Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock,” while imitating some conventions of classical epic poetry (e.g. a declaration of the subject matter of the poem in the opening lines, invoking a muse), does not seem to criticize the imitated model (or writers in that tradition). Rather, the butt of the satire lies within Pope’s contemporary social world, its mores, morals, and norms. The imitated conventions of elevated classical epics serve to highlight the triviality, or even the debasement, of the characters and

society that Pope is exposing. Belinda, the charming but superficial heroine, is nothing like the elevated Homeric heroes and heroines. The butt of the satire is definitely not that of the parodied generic model and its world.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the parodied genre of classical epic effectively sets a high standard against which the contemporary social world is judged as trivial and debased. Thus, although both Shakespeare's and Pope's parodies have the double structure of imitation and distortion, and both create a comical-critical effect, the butt of the satire of the two is each located in a different domain. Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 criticizes writers in the Petrarchan style for fostering "false compare" and for their inability to love a real, not idealized woman, and thus the butt of the satire is closely associated with the parodied genre, unlike in Pope where the butt of the satire is not related to the parodied model.

The distinction between parodies that criticize the parodied generic model and certain values and assumptions associated with it (as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130) and parodies that direct their criticism at cultural and social phenomena outside the imitated genre (as with Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"), is pertinent to parodies of six-word stories, as we shall shortly see.

### Serious and Comic Metagenre of Six-Word Stories

As most activity pertaining to six-word stories occurs on the Internet, the following examples are taken from a website devoted to posts and discussion of six-word stories: <https://www.reddit.com/r/sixword-stories/top/?t=all>. More specifically, they are taken from a collection of the top 500 stories in the year 2018 (indicated by the number of "Ups"—this website's version of "Likes"—they received from members of the community).<sup>13</sup>

In the above working definition of parody, I emphasized the humorous, comic tension that characterizes the double structure of imitation and distortion of the parodied model. We should not forget, however,

that comic tension can also be found in texts that are not parodic. Although the prototypical member of the genre of six-word stories (i.e., the Hemingway story) is in the realm of the tragic,<sup>14</sup> amusing six-word stories are not a rarity. Here are three randomly chosen amusing six-word stories:

- (5) I invented a new word: plagiarism.
- (6) I'm a prostitute, not your therapist!
- (7) Lincoln awoke, still drunk..... "Freed who?"

In example (5) the comic-satirical element is directed at the naivete, ignorance, and pretentiousness of the speaker; in (6) the butt of the satire seems to be the client of the prostitute, who mistakes her willingness to satisfy his sexual desires as the attentiveness of a therapist; and (7) invites us to substitute the accepted image of Lincoln as the heroic freer of slaves, with Lincoln as a confused drunk. All three examples, as well as many other amusing six-word stories, do not have any metageneric or parodic dimension.

One final clarification before we step into the realm of metagenre: while metagenre is closely related to the self-referential, these two concepts are not identical. Here, for example, is a six-word story with a clear self-referential element:

- (8) loop! Help, I'm trapped in a

By means of the abrupt, ungrammatical ending (a ... what?), the text invites us to go back to its beginning, thus creating a loop that foregrounds the structure of the text, its specific words, and how they can be integrated despite the ungrammatical ending. This self-referentiality of the text, however, should not be confused with metagenre: there is nothing in the text that directly or indirectly evokes the conventions of six-word stories. In order to illustrate the independence of self-referentiality from metagenre, let us imagine the following variation of (8):

- (8-a) loop! Help me, I'm trapped in a

This variation has the same self-referential structure, but it consists of *seven* words, and its self-referentiality has nothing to do with the meta-genre of *six*-word stories.

So far, we have looked at amusing six-word stories with no meta-genre element and a self-reflexive six-word story that cannot be qualified as metagenre. It is time now to read a few six-word stories that do qualify as metagenre, because they call attention to the specific conventions of the genre or to its prototypical member. Let us begin with a few examples of the six-word story metagenre without a comic effect and without the parodic double structure of imitation and distortion:

- (9) Redditor Tries [r/sixwordstories](#), Writes Headlines Instead
- (10) Attempting Haiku / Difficulty Magnified / Minimal Wordage
- (11) Happy six word story not marketable.
- (12) Challenge: write happier six word stories.
- (13) "Extra, Extra! Tiny Story Lacks Tragedy!"

Example (9) refers to someone in the sub-community of Reddit ("Redditor"), which is devoted to six-word stories ("r/sixwordstories"), and by pointing out that this Redditor shifted to write headlines, it invites the readers to think about the intriguing resemblance between the genre of six-word stories and the "genre" of headlines in a newspaper: apparently, in both cases very few words are used to evoke (or encapsulate) a whole story (or reported event). Thus, (9) is in fact a double metagenre: it makes us ponder on the conventions and formal constraints of two genres: six-word stories and newspaper headlines.

Example (10) also invites us to think about the conventions of two genres, this time regarding six-word stories and haiku. In these two genres authors work under strict quantitative constraints—to tell a story in only six words or to write a poem consisting of three lines of 5-7-5 syllables. While this example complies with the essential conventions of the two respective genres, it also emphasizes the difficulty of their production due to the double formal constraint ("Difficulty magnified").

The following three examples (11)-(13) refer to one conspicuous thematic characteristic of six-word stories, probably a result of the enormous influence of the tragic Hemingway story. These examples express discontent with authors' tendency to write tragic six-word stories. Examples (11) and (12) use a subtle and ironic tone to criticize this tendency, and example (13) invents a fictional, humorous scene in which the publication of a six-word story without a tragic effect becomes the headline of a special edition of a newspaper ("Extra, Extra!").

The humorous element in (13) brings us closer to the next category: six-word stories with a conspicuous metageneric element *and* a comic component. This category is very close to parodies of six-word stories but, as I will show, the two categories are not identical. Here are several six-word stories with a conspicuous metagenre element together with a comic touch:

(14) What are these? Stories for ants?

(15) FUCKYOUTHISISONEWORD

(16) Mods are asleep, post seven words.

(17) Mods are asleep, post seven word stories.

Example (14) resembles in one respect the above examples of (11)-(13): it criticizes the genre as inadequate, either because of its propensity to tragedy as in (11)-(13) or because of its very tiny nature as in (14). The two rhetorical questions of (14) suggest that six-word stories are not truly stories; rather, their extreme brevity makes them befitting "for ants." While the text does not specifically mention the number six, it criticizes the most conspicuous convention of the genre, namely its extreme brevity. Example (14) has, in addition to the metagenre element, a comic effect, which arises, first and foremost, from the exaggerated image of the ants.<sup>15</sup>

Example (15) can be described as a tricky version of Magritte's "ceci n'est pas une pipe": it is printed as one word in capital letters, but in the continuous sequence of letters in fact six words are hidden: "fuck you this is one word." Thus, the text simultaneously and paradoxically



exemplifies and challenges the basic rule of the genre, namely to use exactly six words, playing on the convention of putting spaces between words in printed texts.<sup>16</sup> Examples (16) and (17) address too, with a wink, the essential rule of using exactly six words. The authors hint that moderators (“Mods”) of the forum are absent and therefore cannot enforce rules, followed by the suggestion to break them. Example (16), which consists of six words, invites readers to imagine another text of seven words that was posted, and example (17) is even trickier: it humorously demonstrates the moderators’ lack of alertness by posting a text, this very text, which consists of seven words.<sup>17</sup> In all last four examples readers are invited, even compelled, to think about essential characteristics of six-word stories, notably its commitment to use only and exactly six words (hence, a metageneric dimension), and in all of them there is a comic element that raises a smile. This comic dimension, however, is *not* a result of a typical parodic structure: except for using six words (or referring to six words in a seven-word text as in #17) and telling some kind of a story—thus signaling that they are affiliated with the genre—these texts do not have the typical parodic combination of imitation and distortion of conspicuous characteristics of the genre and/or its prototypical member.

### Parodies of Six-Word Stories

In the last few selected examples of humorous metagenre, the comic element was not related to the parodic double structure of imitation and distortion. In the following parodies of six-word stories, it is this relationship that is the source of the comic element. We can illustrate the relationship between metagenre and parody with an analogy, as a recipe for authors: take a metagenre element, combine it with the special comic mixture of imitation and deviation, and—voilà, you have a parody.

The most typical, easily identifiable, and prevalent parodies of six-word stories are those that imitate (and distort) a particular text, as opposed to texts that parody a general model. It is no surprise that the specific text chosen for the parodic manipulation is not just *any* six-word story, but the one most associated with the genre: namely, the Hemingway story. This offers further, indirect evidence of the important role played by prototypical members of genres in our perception of genres in general, and of the Hemingway story vis-à-vis six-word stories in particular.

Before analyzing a series of parodies that provide a playful version of the Hemingway story, let us examine two texts that humorously evoke it but nevertheless should not be treated as parodies:

(18) "Mine's still best" cried zombie Hemingway.

(19) Zombie Hemingway bellowed: "These aren't stories!"

Example (18) evokes the legend behind the creation of the Hemingway story, and example (19) may remind us of example (14) discussed above, because they both challenge the status of six-word stories as genuine stories. While (18) and (19) evoke the Hemingway story and both have a humorous aspect, they lack the double structure that is the hallmark of parody, i.e., imitation and distortion spiced with a comic tension.

The following parodies of six-word stories that offer a playful take on the Hemingway story are not only the most typical parodies of the genre but they are also the most prevalent: from the corpus that I used of around five hundred texts (see n13), about twenty are clear-cut cases of parodies based on the Hemingway story. While they make up only about four percent of the corpus, they are an identifiable and conspicuous group. Here are a few selected texts:

(20) For sale: This story format. Overused.

(21) For sale: baby shoes, contain feet.

(22) For sale: hipster music, never heard.

- (23) Guitar for sale. No strings attached.
- (24) Violin for sale, no strings attached.
- (3) For sale. BMW. Blinkers never used.
- (4) Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin.

All these examples use the opening two words of the Hemingway story ("For sale"), but play with the rest of the text. The fact that the majority of parodies of the Hemingway story use its opening phrase illustrate the "strategic" role of openings of texts, notably memorable ones, which become closely associated with them (e.g. *Anna Karenina's* "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way").

Example (20)—"For sale: This story format. Overused."—uses the famous two opening words ("For sale") but substitutes the remaining four ("baby shoes, never worn"). The explicit reference to the genre's format in (20) foregrounds the metageneric element. Note, however, that this explicit reference is not part of a scholarly discussion (aimed at describing and interpreting the genre) but, rather, works in the service of artistic goals: to create a humorous effect and to convey a critical comment on the parodied genre. The author suggests that there is an inflation of six-word stories ("Overused"), that too many of them are written, and most of them have very little literary value. In that respect, this parody recalls the critical element in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, directed at poets' overuse of hyperbolic similes.

The next example (21) is unique not only because it uses four out of the original six words, but also because the two last words ("contain feet") create a grotesque, gruesome, and even frightening image. Despite such effects, it can be argued that the text still belongs to the realm of the comic, perhaps to the black humor section, thanks to its parodic structure. Example (22)—"For sale: hipster music, never heard."—plays on a much lighter cord. Note that its criticism is directed not at practitioners of the genre of six-word stories but, rather, at a specific kind of artist and social milieu ("hipster music"). Here, again, we can see the usefulness of the distinction between the different kinds of crit-

icism that can be found in parodies: those that satirize elements associated with the parodied genre and more specifically the authors who practice these genres (e.g. Shakespeare's Sonnet 130; example #20), and those that satirize targets outside the parodied genre (e.g. Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"; example #22). The next two examples, (23) and (24), are very similar (the only difference is the specific string instrument), and their comic effect arises not only from the parodic structure but also from the pun of "no strings attached."

The next two examples, which were mentioned earlier (3)—"For sale. BMW. Blinkers never used." and (4) "Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin."—also offer a playful version on the selling of an item. Example (3) substitutes the simple and tragic content of shoes in the original story (presumably of a dead baby) with the selling of a luxurious car. On one level, we are invited to contemplate the contrast between the basic, intimate item offered for sale in the Hemingway story and the prestigious, luxury car in this parody. In addition, the unexpected detail used in the BMW ad ("Blinkers never used") may suggest not only that the car is brand new but also, perhaps inadvertently, implies that the car was involved in a serious accident probably caused by not using the blinkers. Despite the story's potentially sad implications (e.g. the driver was badly injured), the overall effect is humorous—again perhaps to be included in the black humour section—first and foremost because of the text's parodic structure. Another, less dramatic and more humorous reading of (3) is that it refers to a prejudice fairly common in Germany about drivers of BMWs: they always drive on the left lane (fast lane) and therefore never use (or know how to use) the blinkers.

Example (4)—"Fr sal: Typwritr. In mint cnditin."—can be described as a mock-epic that explores the comic tension between "mighty" and "trivial" things (to use Pope's terms). It opens with the misspelled first two words of the Hemingway story, but in this pretend-to-be ad, instead of a tragic story about the untimely death of a baby, we meet a swindler who tries to sell a defective typewriter. The humor in this example is not necessarily that of criticising the specific conventions of the genre of six-word stories. Rather, the typos in the ad suggest that

sometimes we cannot control technological tools that produce unintended mistakes, while also humorously exposing the seller as incompetent as he has failed to notice that the typed words betray the typewriter's defects. Another reading may suggest that words in the ad are not misspelled so much as offer a play on the abbreviated words (omitting vowels) used in ads to save space and money, which also functions doubly here to mock the seller's misguided attempt.

The salient opening phrase of the Hemingway story usually appears verbatim in most of its parodies, but there are those that use either the next pair of words ("baby shoes") or the final pair ("never worn" or a close paraphrase of it—"never used") to signal their status as parodies. Here are several examples:

(25) Clarification: Baby shoes were wrong color.

(26) Woo! Bought some cheap baby shoes!

(27) Blue and white facepaint, never used.

Example (25)—"Clarification: Baby shoes were wrong color."—presents itself as an addendum to the Hemingway story, undermining its tragic reading by offering an alternative, mundane explanation for the selling of the shoes. As opposed to the tragic reading that most readers opt for with the Hemingway story (i.e., the baby shoes are being sold because of the death of the baby), (25) suggests a different, trivial explanation: the shoes are offered for sale simply because they were the wrong color. This alternative explanation comically exposes the common tragic reading of the Hemingway story as just one possible reading, perhaps as too literary or even artificial. Thus, the satirical element of this parody may be directed at the readers of six-word stories who construe the missing element of a story (i.e., the hidden part of the iceberg) without considering alternative, perhaps even more plausible, interpretations.<sup>18</sup>

Example (26) also offers a materialistic version of the original. This time, instead of an addendum to the original ad, the text quotes what someone had presumably said after buying the advertised shoes. The joy of the buyer at getting a good deal stands in sharp contrast to the

tragic content of the original story and exposes the buyer as someone who is unable or unwilling to understand the tragic circumstances behind the original ad. Hence, the satire in this example is probably directed at insensitive readers of the original ad, or insensitive people in general and not at the genre and its practitioners.

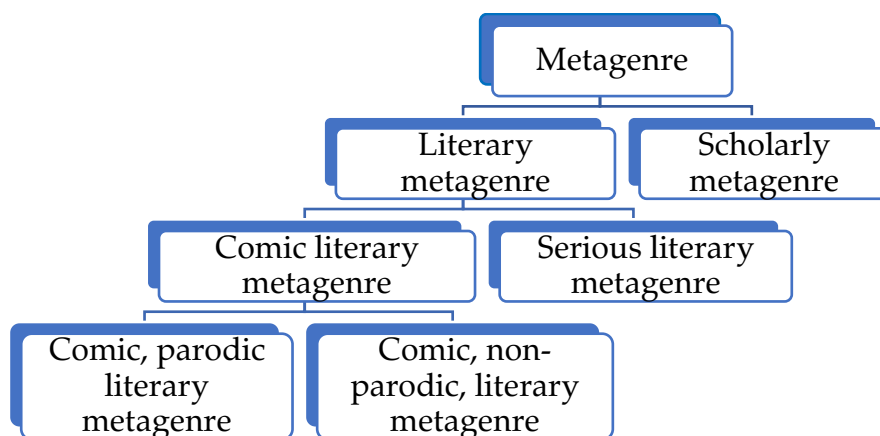
Example (27) can be read as a tragic story: a group of people (say, a tribe) that has the custom of painting their faces before going into battle, was surprisingly and viciously attacked and annihilated before they had a chance to use their warpaint. It can be argued, however, that, alongside this sad interpretation, the story has a comic element, thanks to the parodic use of the phrase “never used” that echoes Hemingway’s “never worn.” Admittedly, this is not a very typical nor a very funny parody of the Hemingway story. If we take into account the fact that (27) was posted in 2014, another plausible reading of the story is that it alludes to the unsuccessful Scottish Independence referendum of September 2014.

Just like in many parodies of other genres, the above parodies of six-word stories present a close imitation of conspicuous aspects of the generic model, in being embodied in its prototypical member, together with a comic, tongue-in-cheek, manipulation of that model. Note that all the above parodies of the genre of six-word stories adhere to this genre’s two essential rules: they use exactly six words, and they tell a story. In most of them we can also find several additional important conventions of six-word stories, such as the tip of the iceberg principle, the punch-line structure, and a rhythmic, poetic-like parsing of the sequence of six words.

### Concluding Remarks

Before offering concluding remarks based on the analysis of the examples, I present below a schematic summary of the different versions of serious, comic, and parodic manifestations of the general category of metagenre. Note that the following schematic distinctions do not pre-

sent separate, either-or categories; rather, they usually point out continuous, gradated distinctions reflecting categories that have a specific *dominant* element (e.g. literary against scholarly; comic against serious, etc.):



The umbrella term of metagenre refers to texts that call attention to generic conventions or prototypical members of a genre. This general category can be manifested in literary texts that aim at achieving artistic goals, or in scholarly texts (like the present article) that aim at a systematic description, interpretation, and possibly also explanation of genres. The literary metagenre can be divided into comic and serious versions. The comic version can be manifested in parodies, in which the comic incongruity is associated with the playful tension between imitated and distorted elements, and in non-parodic versions in which the comic dimension arises from incongruous elements not related to the parodic double structure. Thus, every parody of six-word stories has a metagenre element and a comic element; but not every metagenre, not even a comic one, is a parody, as the above examples (14)-(17) have shown.

Parodies of six-word stories resemble parodies of other genres in many respects. One shared aspect, for example, is the diversity of the targets of criticism: in some parodies, the parodic double structure is at the service of criticizing the parodied genre and its world (i.e., its writers, readers, and their values), but in others the parody is at the service of criticizing phenomena external to the parodied genre. Yet there is one interesting aspect in which parodies of six-word stories seem to

differ from parodies of other genres. Most readers of parodies of other genres (except of highly subtle parodies) can usually identify them *as* parodies, even if they do not have a first-hand acquaintance with the parodied genre. This ease of identification emerges from the exaggerated, hyperbolic, and incongruous elements in the parodic text. Most readers of parodies of six-word stories, however, need to have a first-hand acquaintance with the genre of six-word stories and its prototypical member if they are to identify the texts *as* parodies.

This point can be presented from another angle: readers of parodies of other genres can guess how the parodied original texts might have appeared even if they have never read one: e.g. readers of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 can construe a hypothetical Petrarchan love poem just from reading Shakespeare's poem; readers of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* can guess how a chivalric romance looks like without having read one; and readers of *Northanger Abbey* can have a pretty good idea about the parodied Gothic fiction just from reading Austen's novel. In reading parodies of the Hemingway story, by contrast, readers cannot guess the Hemingway story—or even know it existed—just from these parodies. In order to identify at least some parodies of six-word stories *as* parodies, and to fully enjoy their wit and humor, readers must be acquainted with the genre and its prototypical member. Without such prior knowledge, most parodies of six-word stories may look like short jokes or puns from which it is practically impossible to infer the parodied generic model. When we take this postulation into account, it becomes clear that authors of parodies of six-word stories assume, and rightly so, that their readers are familiar with the genre and its prototypical member. Thus, parodies of six-word stories offer further indirect evidence of the diversity and productivity of this peculiar mini-genre as well as of its popularity.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>To facilitate following the discussed examples, they will be numbered according to their order of appearance in the article.

<sup>2</sup>The six-word memoirs of the *Smith Magazine*, a category very close to six-word stories, has thousands of texts (see: <http://www.smithmag.net/sixword-book/about/>); and the Reddit sub-community devoted to six-word stories sends its members a six-word story every day (see: <https://www.reddit.com/r/sixword-stories/>).

<sup>3</sup>See O'Toole and Wright for a systematic discussion of different precursors of this famous story and a persuasive refutation of the urban legend that attributed it to Hemingway (perpetuated mostly by Miller). These two articles also identified the real source of the story in a play by De Groot, *Papa: A Play Based on the Legendary Lives of Ernest Hemingway* (1989). However, for convenience sake, I too refer to it here as the Hemingway story.

<sup>4</sup>A new genre emerges when writers start to imitate a text that serves as a model, just like the Hemingway story in the new genre of six-word stories (for the emergence of a new genre, see Fishelov, "The Birth of a Genre").

<sup>5</sup>In my discussion I rely on a basic meaning of a narrative element: a represented action that involves "a change of fortune" (see, for example, Aristotle 1451a) or a change or evolvment from one situation to a significantly different situation.

<sup>6</sup>The metaphor of the tip of the iceberg was used by Hemingway himself in discussing prose writing (*Death in the Afternoon* 227). The stated tip of the iceberg is in many cases understood as the result in a causal chain of events. Formulating the result while omitting possible causes is consistent with the process of summarizing stories, in which we tend to keep the result, perceived as the important part of a story, and omit its causes (see Shen). As far as poetic economy is concerned, the genre provides, in Aristotelean terms, an end (or a middle and end), and the reader supplies the beginning to make the story whole, or else the text provides the separate links of the chain and the reader adds the causal relation between the links to make it a whole story, like the above-mentioned example (2): "Best friends. Some beers. New lovers."

<sup>7</sup>For a detailed discussion of the characteristics of the genre of six-word stories, see Fishelov, "The Poetics of Six-Word Stories." Some, but not all of these characteristics are shared by texts of microfiction (for the latter, see Nelles).

<sup>8</sup>Niederhoff defines metagenre as "a quality or dimension of a literary text: the way the text reflects on the genre it belongs to" (Niederhoff 1), while the definition offered here is broader: it applies also to scholarly discussions of genres and does

not necessarily require a self-reflective element in the text itself. My definition also calls attention to prototypical members of a genre, a concept that can bridge the gap between generic categories and individual literary texts.

<sup>9</sup>For an emphasis on the discrepancy between the two textual levels of parody, see Tynianov 31. Whereas according to Tynianov parody's discrepancy is not necessarily comic, and hence parody of comedy can be a tragedy, my working definition of parody requires a comic tension between the two levels.

<sup>10</sup>For the multifaceted nature of parody, see the *Connotations* Symposium on "Sympathetic Parody": <https://www.connotations.de/special-issue/sympathetic-parody/>

<sup>11</sup>Interesting examples of low burlesque in late nineteenth-century English theatre were presented during the symposium by Dorothea Flothow in her talk on "Victorian Theatrical Burlesque as a Comment on Theatrical Genres and Conventions."

<sup>12</sup>For a useful distinction between parody as the manipulation of texts, and satire as the criticism of social reality, and for a study of whether the criticized social norms are part of the parodied text, see Ben-Porat; and Hutcheon 43-49.

<sup>13</sup>[https://www.reddit.com/r/sixwordstories/comments/9erwj1/top\\_500\\_six-word\\_stories\\_2018/](https://www.reddit.com/r/sixwordstories/comments/9erwj1/top_500_six-word_stories_2018/)

<sup>14</sup>For a detailed, sensitive reading of the Hemingway story as "a whole tragic world encircled by silence," see Gilead 120.

<sup>15</sup>Example (14) also has an intertextual element that is not related to six-word stories. For readers attuned to popular culture, it alludes to "What is this, a center for ants?" a memorable quote from the 2001 comedy film *Zoolander*. In the film the main character, Derek Zoolander (played by Ben Stiller), says the line in anger after confusing a scale model of his charity project "Derek Zoolander Center for Kids Who Can't Read Good" with the actual building itself.

<sup>16</sup>The *scriptio continua*, which is used here in a playful manner, was the norm of written classical texts for centuries until it was gradually replaced with texts that parse words, a practice that began with Anglo-Saxon Bibles and Gospels in the seventh century.

<sup>17</sup>Violating the essential rule of using only six words is very rare in collections of six-word stories. Authors will play with different linguistic norms (e.g. use short forms like "it's" instead of the normative "it is") in seeking to avoid breaking this rule.

<sup>18</sup>For the important role played by readers' inferences in interpreting very short stories and six-word stories—what is sometimes called gap-filling (Perry and Sternberg)—see Hurley and Trimarco; Irving; and Jhan.

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# Meta-Epic Reflection in Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer, or: The Meta-Epic Novel

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This article is the first entry in a debate on a contribution on “Meta-Epic Reflection in Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer, or: The Meta-Epic Novel.” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/meta-epic-novel/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

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## Abstract

The present article discusses meta-epic reflection in a selection of twenty-first-century novels based on Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It defines instances of “metagenre” and “metageneric texts” as texts which, explicitly or implicitly, reflect upon the nature of another genre or of their own genre; novels which comment on the features of the epic qualify as “meta-epic novels.”

In its main part, the article distinguishes between three modes of meta-epic reflection in the contemporary novel. It briefly discusses Daniel Mendelsohn’s *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son and an Epic* (2017) as an affirmative take on the ancient genre and Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) as a subversive one. Subsequently, it focusses on Natalie Haynes’s *A Thousand Ships* (2019) as an ambivalent approach to the epic. In this novel, meta-epic reflection takes centre stage through the character of Calliope, the ancient muse of epic poetry, who advocates a reform of her own genre: dissatisfied with its patriarchal traditions, Calliope calls for a new kind of epic which foregrounds the fates of the female characters. *A Thousand Ships*, which narrates the tragic stories of the women affected by the Trojan War, adheres to the rules of this new sort of epic. Adapting a term from Henry Fielding, the article reads *A Thousand Ships* as a “tragic epic poem in prose”—a prose epic for a twenty-first-century readership.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen the publication of an astonishing number of novels based on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. For instance, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) has the slave Briseis tell her version of the Iliadic events in the Greek war camp, Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) paints a complex picture of the sorceress Circe, who is infamous for turning Odysseus's comrades into pigs, Miller's previous *The Song of Achilles* (2011) depicts a homoerotic relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, and Stephen Fry's *Troy* (2020) provides a panoramic portrayal of the rise and fall of the ancient city.

A substantial number of these novels do not only retell or rewrite Homeric myths but also address how these myths are passed on through the ages, e.g. by way of the oral tradition or written epics. More specifically, some novels comment and reflect upon the nature of the genre to which their ancient predecessors belong, hence upon the characteristics of the heroic epic. Some ponder the features of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in particular, some the nature of the epic more generally and, consequently, some their own generic status between novel and epic. Thus, they are fictional texts which explicitly or implicitly reflect upon the nature of a specific literary genre; in other words, they are instances of "metagenre."

In the following, I will first of all define the terms "metagenre" and "metageneric text" as they will be applied in the present article. Subsequently, I will briefly illustrate the wide range of ways in which twenty-first-century Homeric rewritings reflect upon the ancient epic by pointing out the different functions of meta-epic reflections in two such rewritings: Daniel Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son and an Epic* (2017) exudes a contagious enthusiasm for Homer's *Odyssey* and the epic genre whereas Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) subverts and mocks the epic tradition. In the main part, I will focus on Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019), which, in its attitude towards the ancient epic tradition, occupies an intermediate position between Mendelsohn and Atwood. In this novel, meta-epic reflection takes centre

stage through the character of Calliope, the ancient muse of epic poetry herself. As I will show, Calliope is not a supporter of the genre she personifies. Dissatisfied with its patriarchal traditions, she advocates a reform of the epic, recommending that her genre should foreground the fates of the female characters on both sides of epic conflicts. Borrowing from Henry Fielding, I will suggest that, thanks to Calliope's interference, the novel *A Thousand Ships* becomes a "tragic epic poem in prose" and thus a representative of the reformed kind of epic favoured by Calliope.

## 2. Metagenre: A Definition

In recent decades, literary studies have seen a proliferation of neologisms introduced by the prefix "meta," among them "metafiction," "metanarrative," "metatheatre"—and "metagenre." The prefix "meta" has been transferred to literary studies from linguistics, where a "metalanguage" is a language about another language, i.e. a language A, or "metalanguage," that allows linguists to talk about a different language B, or "object language" (*OED*, s.v. "metalanguage" and "object language" 2.; see also Niederhoff's introduction to the present issue of *Connotations* 3-4). The prefix "meta" indicates that the metalanguage is set "on a higher level" than the object language.

When understood along these lines, an instance of "metagenre" or a "metageneric text" is a passage or an entire text which, either implicitly or explicitly, comments on the genre of another text; as an instance of genre A (meta-level) which reflects upon genre B (object-level), it requires the simultaneous presence of two different genres in a single text. In the following, I will deal with a specific form of metagenre, which I suggest to call the "meta-epic novel": a novel which comments upon the nature of the epic, i.e. a novel *about* the epic. In other words, the novel is the "medium" or "locus" of the metageneric reflection while the epic is its "object" (for the differentiation between "medium" or "locus" and "object," see e.g. Hauthal 84 and Wolf 33-34); as the "medium" of the discussion, the genre of the novel is a mere instrument

and relegated to the sidelines while the genre of the epic, as the “object” or topic of the discussion, is at the centre of attention. In this context, “meta-epic” serves as an attribute that characterises a particular type of novel.

Admittedly, levels A and B may also fall together. For instance, the term “metafiction” is usually employed by critics for a piece of fiction that reflects either upon fiction in general or plainly upon itself; the meta-level and the object-level are identical, and the metafictional text becomes self-reflexive or self-conscious. When the prefix “meta” is used to signify self-reflexivity (and it is so widely employed in this sense that it has almost become synonymous with “self-reflexive”), an instance of “metagenre” or a “metageneric text” is a (part of a) text which comments upon the nature of the text’s own genre. For instance, a “meta-novel,” or more precisely a “meta-novel novel,” is thus a novel that reflects upon the characteristics of the novel, i.e. a novel *about* the novel.<sup>2</sup> More generally, Burkhard Niederhoff in his introduction to the present volume of *Connotations* defines “metagenre” as “the self-examination of a literary text that is focused on, and limited to, its own genre” (7).

Needless to say, the two types of metageneric reflection—“other-reflexive” and “self-reflexive,” so to speak—cannot always be neatly distinguished. Robert M. Philmus characterises “metageneric texts” as texts which “implicitly comment on the genre(s) in relation to which they define themselves” (313).<sup>3</sup> Philmus may focus on the self-reflexive dimension of metageneric passages, yet his brief definition of “metageneric texts” indicates that texts can comment upon several genres simultaneously and thus also upon genres they are not ascribed to themselves. This definition is close to the understanding of the term I will apply in the main part of the present article because it implies that instances of “metagenre” and “metageneric texts” are passages or entire texts which ponder literary genres—either different genres or the ones they belong to; in the former case, metageneric reflection has an “other-reflexive” quality, in the latter case, it has a “self-reflexive” one. In both other- and self-reflexive cases, I allow for implicit as well as explicit



genre-related references. In this emphasis on the distinction between other- and self-reflexive cases of metagenre, my approach differs from Niederhoff's.

In the following, I will show that the Homeric rewritings examined are both other- and self-reflexive and that their other-reflexiveness contributes to their self-reflexiveness. As meta-epic novels, they have an other-reflexive dimension because, being examples of genre A, they comment on the nature of genre B. Still, I will also demonstrate that the novels appropriate characteristics of the epic, thus blurring the boundaries between the distinct genres. Hence, they have a self-reflexive quality because, imitating features of the epic, they become modernised, or reformed, epics which ponder their own innovative status between the two established genres.

### 3. Meta-Epic Reflection in Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer: Three Modes

#### 3.1 Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey*: The Affirmative Mode

Rewritings of the Homeric epics differ in whether and, if so, how they comment upon the ancient genre; they vary in the degree, manner and purpose of their meta-epic reflections. My first example is Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son and an Epic*, which carries its meta-epic nature in the (sub-)title. This book, which among other labels has been dubbed an "intergenerational *Bildungsroman*" (Riley 268), is best described as an amalgam of novel and autobiography, interspersed with scholarly interpretations of the *Odyssey* written for a popular audience. Mendelsohn, who teaches classics at Bard College, NY, is an academic and a writer. In *An Odyssey*, he narrates how his father, a retired scientist, sat in on one of his undergraduate classes on the *Odyssey*, and how he and his father subsequently went on an "*Odyssey* cruise" through the Mediterranean. Large sections of the book are explicitly meta-epic of the other-reflexive type: they depict a twenty-first-century classroom scenario in which Mendelsohn teaches his students (and his

father) the characteristics of the ancient epic. In many scenes set in the classroom and in lengthy passages that provide clarifications for readers who are new to the classics, Mendelsohn introduces and explains typical characteristics of the genre, such as epic similes (73-74), epithets (e.g. 62-63, 70, 73), and proems (10-15). Consider the following example:

I talked about the stock epithets, so useful for quick identification of the characters, so crucial for oral composition. I told them [the students] to look out for “epic similes”: passages in which the poet pauses to compare a character or an action in his fabulous tale, sometimes at considerable length, to something belonging to the everyday world of his audience—of *us*. (73; emphasis in original)

The meta-epic nature of the book relies strongly on explicit references to the ancient genre. Handling the epic in the manner of scholarly debate, the book supplies students and readers with the background information necessary to interpret the *Odyssey*. Mendelsohn and his students then analyse the *Odyssey* together in class, moving through the epic from Book 1 to Book 24 in the course of the semester.

In the classroom scenes and in the additional explanations, students, father and readers learn about the ancient world and its literature. Hence, the meta-epic nature of the book pursues a didactic and edifying goal: Mendelsohn means to inform and instruct, not only his undergraduates and his father (as an academic at Bard College) but also his readers (as the author of *An Odyssey*), and he intends to enable the latter group to pick up the *Odyssey* and to appreciate it. He generates interest in a poem whose characteristics are alien to today's readers. Besides, Mendelsohn may appear to be teaching objective facts, but he frequently refers to the epic(s) with epithets such as “classical” (10), “famous” (14) and “great” (55). The professor of classics does not merely lecture his audience on the features of the epic, but he also instils into them the greatness and artistry of the ancient genre. This favourable depiction of the genre is fully in line with the portrayal of its particular representative, the *Odyssey*, valued and cherished by almost every character in the book: from Mendelsohn and his own mentors over his father and his students to the tourists on the cruise liner. In the end, the

students write him flattering emails about how much they enjoyed the class and benefitted from his father's presence (see 273-77). On a more personal level, the *Odyssey* helps Mendelsohn and his father to bond after decades of strained relations. Reading and discussing the ancient epic accordingly has a positive effect on their father-son-relationship. The affirmative attitude towards the epic genre is also foregrounded through the self-reflexive dimension of some metageneric elements, among them various parallels between the plots of the *Odyssey* and of Mendelsohn's book as well as the very structure of the latter, as it is divided into sections titled "Proem (Invocation)," "Telemachy (Education)," "Nostos (Homecoming)," etc.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Mendelsohn's book is imbued with a sense of awe and respect for the epic as a genre and its specific example, Homer's *Odyssey*. The meta-epic nature of *An Odyssey* conveys Mendelsohn's enthusiasm for the classical languages and their literature in general<sup>5</sup> as well as for the *Odyssey* and the ancient epic more specifically.

### 3.2 Atwood's *The Penelopiad*: The Subversive Mode

While Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey* depicts a realistic twenty-first-century scenario in which academics and students explicitly discuss the genre of the epic (just like the writer and readers of the present article may do), Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is set among the original mythological characters. In long sections of the novel, Penelope serves as a cheeky, smart and provocative first-person narrator who tells her story with the benefit of hindsight. Penelope frequently refers to the conventions of the epic (in a manner more indirect than that of Mendelsohn's characters), and she mocks these conventions with dry comments on the customs of her age, its myths and gods, and also its songs and literature. She may never use the term "epic," but whenever she mentions the songs, stories and poems that circulated during and after her lifetime (e.g. 34, 39, 45, 49), she evidently refers to the oral tradition which preceded the written epics that have come down to us.

In doing so, Penelope pokes fun at the stylistic conventions of epics; for instance, she mocks their vocabulary. To indicate that some time has passed she states at one point: "The sun rose, travelled across the sky, set. Only sometimes did I think of it as the flaming chariot of Helios. The moon did the same, changing from phase to phase. Only sometimes did I think of it as the silver boat of Artemis" (81). Penelope alludes to the epic convention of signalling the beginning of a new day through a standardised reference to the movement of the heavenly bodies. She suggests that, while ordinary people think of the moon and other trivial objects in a direct and straightforward manner, singers use stock phrases of a poetic nature to refer to the most mundane issues. Thus, epics employ a fixed set of sophisticated vocabulary which embellishes real life. In a similar manner, Penelope alludes to the traditional epithets. Here's what she says about Menelaus: "The best that was claimed of Menelaus, once they started putting him into the poems, was that he had a very loud voice" (34). Clearly, Penelope refers to the epithet "master of the war-cry" (as it is translated by Hammond),<sup>6</sup> which politely conceals the fact that Menelaus is stupid and coarse (77) behind a somewhat flattering attribute. Likewise, she exposes the convention that depicts every female character as a superlative beauty rivalling the goddesses. In spite of her own average appearance, the singers describe her as "radiant as Aphrodite," which in Penelope's sarcastic opinion qualifies as nothing but "the usual claptrap" (28).<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, Atwood's novel questions the general truth value of the stories about Penelope's famous husband as we are familiar with them from Homer's epic. Commenting upon the various rumours which are spreading through Ithaca, Penelope states:

Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another, and the fight was over non-payment of the bill. [...] Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some; [...] she'd fallen in love with him and was feeding him unheard-of delicacies by her own immortal hands, and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam. (83-84)

Penelope implies that Odysseus's celebrated adventures, i.e. his encounters with giants, witches, and goddesses as narrated in the *Odyssey*, are nothing but sailor's yarn—or perhaps poet's yarn. The singers, whom she calls “minstrels,” seize upon the rumours and turn them into songs, but in the process they “embroidered them considerably” (84). Whenever the singers have several versions of the same event available, they choose the most flattering one when they perform in front of Penelope (84)—“[t]he improbably heroic versions, we are invited to notice, are Homeric,” as Sarah Annes Brown points out (213). Penelope thus doubts the truth of the stories as they have come down to us through Homer's epic. Here, too, she suggests that the epic genre has a tendency to embellish the truth. She may at times refer to one particular epic, but her remarks, especially those pertaining to the stratagems of the singers, indicate that she means the genre as a whole. Besides, as has often been argued, the truth value of Penelope's own narration is likewise questioned in *The Penelopiad*, especially by the “Chorus Line” of the maids, who, unjustly hanged by Odysseus and Telemachus, doubt Penelope's sincerity and marital fidelity (e.g. 147). As Susanne Jung puts it, “[t]he reader is offered a myriad of stories, theories, points of view of what might have happened, but knowledge of the ‘truth’ of what happened is forever deferred” (52). Thereby the maids' “Chorus Line” adds to the novel's subversive depiction of the *Odyssey*.

Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey* and Atwood's *The Penelopiad* deal with the epic tradition in very different ways. Mendelsohn's book treats the *Odyssey* as a work of literature and an object of scholarly debate, and it handles the epic tradition in the manner of academic discussion and literary analysis; by contrast, Atwood's novel rewrites the original *Odyssey* in the form of a literary parody, and it depicts the epic tradition from the inside, i.e. from the perspective of the characters who are part of it. Besides, while Mendelsohn's characters admire the ancient world and its literary forms, Atwood's narrator and characters make fun of them; while Mendelsohn's professor and students analyse and interpret ancient epics to get to their core and discover their meaning, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* questions the very existence of any true meaning

of epic stories; and while Mendelsohn's take on the epic is serious and affirmative, Atwood's is comic and subversive.

### 3.3 Haynes's *A Thousand Ships*: The Ambivalent Mode

#### 3.3.1 Excursus: Fielding and the "Epic-Poem in Prose"

In the following, I mean to show that, in its attitude towards the epic, *A Thousand Ships* occupies an intermediate position between Mendelsohn and Atwood: it is critical of the ancient genre, but it also makes explicit suggestions for reform. Let me begin, however, with a few historical and theoretical considerations. When the novel as we know it today was still in its infancy, various authors traced its origins back to ancient genres.<sup>8</sup> In his preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742), for instance, Henry Fielding connects his novel to the epic tradition, calling it a "comic Epic-Poem in Prose" (49).<sup>9</sup> Drawing upon Aristotle, who famously divides drama into comedy and tragedy and, along the same lines, epic into a comic branch (e.g. Homer's lost *Margites*) and a tragic branch (e.g. Homer's *Iliad*) (Fielding 49; Aristotle chs. 2 and 4), Fielding claims that romances share many salient features with epics, differing only in one crucial characteristic, namely that they are written in prose rather than in verse (49). Consequently, romances, i.e. works of narrative fiction, should be regarded as epics.

Fielding thus calls *Joseph Andrews* an "epic in prose." Subsequently, he argues that prose epics are likewise divided into comic and serious/tragic ones. Here is an overview:

Drama:	Comedy	Tragedy
Epic:	Comic epic ex.: Homer, <i>Margites</i> (lost)	Tragic epic ex.: Homer, <i>Iliad</i>
	Comic romance "comic Epic-Poem in Prose" ex.: Fielding, <i>Joseph Andrews</i>	Tragic/serious romance

*Joseph Andrews*, Fielding's example of a "comic epic in prose," treats characters of inferior status in a light and cheeky manner. Besides, it features parody and burlesque (50) when it subverts the epic style. In other words, *Joseph Andrews* is comic precisely because of its ironic play with epic conventions, such as epithets, formulas and similes.

Leaving Fielding's argumentation behind, I contend that *Joseph Andrews* is "comic" due to its mock-heroic nature and "epic" not only because it is a piece of narrative fiction, but more particularly because it imitates stylistic features of the epic (similes, epithets, etc.). It is thus "more epic" than other pieces of narrative fiction as it makes use of quintessential features of the epic. Finally, let me emphasise that the overview in the previous paragraph is somewhat deficient because it leaves a gap below the "tragic/serious romance." Fielding implies the type of narration that is missing here, but never mentions it explicitly. Still, it follows from Fielding's argumentation that the gap can logically be filled with the term "tragic epic-poem in prose." I will come back to this concept.

### 3.3.2 Meta-Epic Reflection in Haynes's *A Thousand Ships*

Fielding provides me with a model for my own argument: like *Joseph Andrews*, *A Thousand Ships* should be regarded as an "epic in prose"; like *Joseph Andrews*, *A Thousand Ships* follows the epic tradition in some respects yet modifies it in others; and, like *Joseph Andrews*, it calls for a reformed kind of epic. However, in contrast to *Joseph Andrews*, it is primarily tragic rather than comic.

*A Thousand Ships* offers a panoramic portrayal of the Trojan War, foregrounding the fates of the many female characters affected by the siege and fall of the ancient city. The title of the novel refers to the (more than) one thousand ships which supposedly sailed from Greece to Troy.<sup>10</sup> It brings to mind the male warriors on their journey to the battlefield, raising expectations that the novel will focus on heroes well known

from Homer's epics. However, *A Thousand Ships* defies such expectations: instead, the novel treats the thousand(s of) female characters affected by the war, replacing the *Iliad*'s catalogue of ships and its male Greek warriors with the stories of the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters on both sides of the conflict. What is more, the title appears to be a specific allusion to Helen herself, who is famously referred to as "the face that launched a thousand ships" in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (5.1.90).<sup>11</sup> The elliptical nature of the quotation from Marlowe ("a thousand ships") elides the woman ("the face"). This also has a bearing on the feminist theme of the novel, which does the very opposite: it gives priority to the female characters whose experiences are often neglected if not outright omitted in the ancient stories. Each of the 43 chapters is dedicated either to one female character or to a group of female characters. Among them are Creusa, Briseis and Chryseis, Oenone, Penthesilea, Laodamia, Iphigenia, and many others. All chapters revolve around the war in Troy: some are set before, some during, some after the campaign. This creates thematic unity. Moreover, the chapters are also connected through recurring characters: while many women are only permitted a single chapter, Penelope is allowed seven chapters, the Trojan Women eleven, and Calliope also seven.

Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, in particular holds the many disparate stories together. She is granted the very first and the very last chapter of the novel so that the sections about the other women are both framed by and interspersed with Calliope's chapters. In her own chapters, Calliope serves as a first-person narrator. At the beginning, she is approached by a poet who asks her to help him compose an epic about the Trojan War (the name of the poet is never mentioned, yet his characteristics identify him as "Homer").<sup>12</sup> In her attempt to inspire this poet with the type of epic she wants him to create, Calliope shows him the stories of the women affected by the war. Thus, all the other chapters are, it might be argued, narrated by her; they are intradiegetic narratives which Calliope, whose chapters serve as the frame narrative, presents to the poet.<sup>13</sup>



Calliope does not only hold the separate episodes of *A Thousand Ships* together. She is also the primary reason why the novel is an instance of metagenre. Calliope's mere presence as the muse of epic poetry hints at the novel's meta-epic nature, i.e. at its metageneric quality of the other-reflexive kind. Besides, Calliope mentions thematic and stylistic characteristics of the genre she personifies. For instance, she points out in passing that epics deal with military conflicts and issues of state (1, 267), feature a large number of—mostly male—characters (1, 176) and cover a well-known range of stories, which they tell and retell again and again (1, 108). Calliope also touches upon the use of epithets (40) and the composition in metre (1).

In addition to such explicit, genre-related references, *A Thousand Ships* uses stylistic features apt for epics. Like an epic, the novel begins with the invocation of the muse—"Sing, Muse" (1)—, and it harks back to this invocation at the very end: "Sing, Muse, he said. And I have sung. / I have sung of armies and I have sung of men," Calliope states (339). The latter part of the quotation is less indebted to Homer's epics than to the beginning of Virgil's *Aeneid* ("ARMA virumque cano" I.1—"I sing about arms and the man," my translation),<sup>14</sup> yet it supports the notion that Haynes's *A Thousand Ships*, like Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, which employs epic similes, epithets and formulas, imitates certain facets of the epic genre. Also like an epic, the novel contains a considerable number of similes. For instance, a poet is likened to a warrior (1), Achilles to a lion (e.g. 103, 240), and his victims to grain ears (240). The similes in *A Thousand Ships* are not as elaborate and extended as many of the epic similes in the ancient tradition,<sup>15</sup> yet the frequent use of similes in the novel mirrors their use in the original genre. This connection is further emphasised by the vehicles in *A Thousand Ships*, which, like the lion and the grain stalks, are likewise reminiscent of the vehicles in the ancient tradition. The occasional use of epithets (e.g. "Odysseus of the many wiles" 193) has a similar effect.

However, Calliope does not emerge as a supporter of her own genre—at least not in its conventional form. *A Thousand Ships* occupies

a position half-way between Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey*: it is critical of the ancient genre, but it also offers specific suggestions for reform. When Calliope is approached by "Homer," she rejects him, for she does not want to help him compose another epic poem. Why not? And what does she mean to teach him instead?

Calliope claims that there are enough epics circulating already and that the world does not need another one. Here is what she says:

[...] it is surprising that he [the poet] hasn't considered how many other men there are like him, every day, all demanding my unwavering attention and support. How much epic poetry does the world really need?

Every conflict joined, every war fought, every city besieged, every town sacked, every village destroyed. Every impossible journey, every shipwreck, every homecoming: these stories have all been told, and countless times. Can he really believe he has something new to say? (1)

Calliope is annoyed and bored by the endless line of poets who file up to ask her for help. Besides, she suggests that the need for epic poetry is marginal, even more so since it is pointless to narrate the same old stories once again. As her repetitive list of topics indicates ("Every conflict [...] every homecoming"), epics are expectable and dull because of their limited range of topics and because their poets never add anything new to the tradition. Hence, Calliope sees no need for another epic, at least not in its conventional sense.

Consequently, Calliope demands a reform of her own genre, by way of a change of topic. She may not call for a fundamental transformation (she means to stick to "war" as her quintessential theme), but she means to broaden the topic so as to make it more diverse and inclusive. To be specific, she wishes the poets to treat the fates of the female characters in a manner equal to that of the male characters. For Calliope, women's deaths—far away from the battle—can be just as "heroic" (i.e. brave and fearless) as those of the male warriors in combat (109) while, in life, women can likewise be as "heroic" (i.e. courageous and daring) as men. Calliope points this out in her comparison of the nymph Oenone,

Paris's partner, to the Spartan king Menelaus, Helen's husband. According to Calliope, Oenone, who is deserted by Paris when he runs off with Helen, is just as heroic as Menelaus, who is deserted by Helen when she runs off with Paris (177). Calliope here draws attention to a widely forgotten story according to which Paris was in a relationship with Oenone and left both Oenone and their son behind on Mount Ida when he seduced Helen of Sparta.<sup>16</sup> Here's what Calliope has to say about this:

If he [the poet] complains to me again, I will ask him this: is Oenone less of a hero than Menelaus? He loses his wife so he stirs up an army to bring her back to him, costing countless lives and creating countless widows, orphans and slaves. Oenone loses her husband and she raises their son. Which of those is the more heroic act? (177)

The implied answer is of course "Oenone's." Calliope suggests that Oenone's manner of dealing with her abandonment (i.e. raising her son) is more laudable and exemplary than Menelaus's (i.e. starting a war and causing the deaths of thousands of people). Put differently, Calliope regards the everyday life of a single mother on Mount Ida as more admirable than the deeds of a general leading an army into battle.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, Calliope's reformed kind of epic at least partly relies on a reformed kind of heroism. Considering the range of other characters in *A Thousand Ships*, this new sort of heroism emerges as a multi-faceted phenomenon. It *does* include courageous deeds (and death) on the battlefield, as in the case of the Amazon queen Penthesilea, an experienced warrior who joins the conflict on the Trojan side, duels with Achilles and is wounded fatally by him before he can recognize her as his equal and soul mate. Similarly, it can signify brutal and bloody revenge, as in the cases of Clytemnestra and Hecabe, who either murder (Clytemnestra) or blind (Hecabe) the man who is responsible for the violent death of their child. However, the heroism of *A Thousand Ships* is not restricted to combat and murder. It can also mean stoic acceptance of one's fate, as in the case of Oenone (see above), or dignity and self-control in the face of death, as in the cases of Iphigenia and Polyxena, who

walk towards their respective sacrifices with composure. Heroism can also entail silent, benevolent self-sacrifice for the rescue of a companion, as in the case of Briseis, who hands over the herb which will protect her against being raped by her captor to her fellow captive Chryseis. And it can involve resilience and adaptability to hostile circumstances, as in the case of Andromache, who slowly learns to adjust to her new situation as concubine to the man who killed her infant son. As Haynes puts it in the afterword, "heroism is something that can reside in all of us" (345). Consequently, women can be as "heroic" as men, and therefore epic poetry, traditionally the realm of male heroism, should be concerned with women as much as with men.

Vice versa, Calliope also claims that whatever is considered "tragic" is worth narrating in an epic. For Calliope, "tragic" is linked to dramatic tragedy, and it implies mourning and lament. Consider her comments on the relation between "tragic" and "heroic" deaths:

Men's deaths are epic, women's deaths are tragic: is that it? He [the poet] has misunderstood the very nature of conflict. Epic is countless tragedies, woven together. Heroes don't become heroes without carnage, and carnage has both causes and consequences. (108-09)

Calliope suggests that, if poets consider men's deaths epic but women's deaths tragic, then they have misconstrued how conflicts work. Men's heroic deaths on the battlefields, as they are narrated in epics, do not occur in isolation; they are accompanied by the tragedies of friends and family members, usually women, who mourn these deaths. Whenever someone dies heroically in the battle scene of an epic, there is also somebody in the background of the same epic who laments this warrior's demise. Therefore, any conventional epic is full of unspoken tragedies, occurring in the gaps of the poem. As Calliope puts it, "[e]pic is countless tragedies, woven together"—yet these tragedies are not related in the epic because it focuses on the fighting. Thus, any epic already consists of a collection of tragedies, but it relegates them to the background. Hence, if poets suppose that "[m]en's deaths are epic" (heroic and

worth narrating in an epic), while “women’s deaths are tragic” (lamentable and worth staging in a tragedy), then Calliope considers their assumption wrong (for women can likewise be heroic). Besides, even if the poets’ view were correct, Calliope would say that it does not mean that women’s fates are not worth narrating in an epic. After all, they are already part of the epic (in the background and in brief laments, e.g. by Andromache and Hecabe in the *Iliad*); they only need to be foregrounded.

Calliope’s reform of her genre involves that epics should turn to the female characters and narrate their fates. This is of course what *A Thousand Ships* does—in the chapters not concerned with Calliope herself, but with Penelope, Andromache, Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Iphigenia, and the others. Calliope offers their stories to the poet so as to make him compose his poem about them. Consequently, within the diegetic world of the novel, the stories of Laodamia, Hecabe and so on are presented by Calliope to Homer; outside the world of the novel, readers have access to the very stories Calliope recommends to the poet—in the text of *A Thousand Ships*. In the end, Calliope is convinced that, no matter whether the poet follows her suggestions or not, the stories of the women will be narrated to a broader public at some point (see 339-40). This belief comes true immediately of course in the form of the novel in which it is expressed. *A Thousand Ships* tells the stories of the women, whereby the novel becomes the kind of “reformed epic” which Calliope advocates, and thus an instance of metageneric reflection of the self-reflexive type.

This feminist kind of epic depends on a variety of techniques to spotlight the experiences of the women. In some sections, *A Thousand Ships* stays close to its illustrious sources. The Penelope chapters, for instance, retell the events of her husband’s journey, well-known from the *Odyssey*. However, they do so with a twist, for the first-person narrator Penelope complains about her spouse’s long absence and implores him to return to Ithaca (e.g. 285), yet she also evaluates his adventures differently, e.g. when she explains his journey to the underworld by his self-importance and conceit (228). In other passages, *A Thousand Ships* uses

its renowned model(s) merely as a springboard. The section dedicated to Briseis and Chryseis, for example, takes its cue from the characters of these names who figure in the *Iliad*, yet it expands upon and adds to the original. Since the *Iliad* has little to say about the two women, who are mostly treated like pieces of property, Haynes fills the ensuing gap with a narrative which is largely her own invention. Besides, in numerous chapters, she supplements Homer's epics with other ancient sources (e.g. Attic tragedy; see also below) and, in a considerable number of sections, she brings to the fore an array of largely forgotten female characters today only known by those who take a special interest in the classics (e.g. Theano, Laodamia). The novel's feminist agenda thus relies on retelling, re-evaluating, and inventing.<sup>18</sup>

The traditional sort of epic is a "heroic verse epic" (both "heroic epic" and "verse epic" are tautological in this context). By contrast, Haynes's reformed epic is, for the most part, a "tragic epic poem in prose"—a term which I borrow from Fielding. In accordance with his preface to *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding would probably contend that *A Thousand Ships* is tragic because, due to its subject matter, it corresponds to the *Iliad* and to dramatic tragedy rather than to the lost *Margites* and dramatic comedy. Calliope, who is more concerned with the difference between "tragic" and "heroic" (rather than between "tragic" and "comic"), would claim that *A Thousand Ships* is tragic as it explicitly argues that any epic of the *Iliad*-type is tragic due to the many tragedies that occur in the gaps and in the background; she would further maintain that the novel is tragic because it narrates these very stories, foregrounding the fates of the female characters, which have often been considered "tragic" rather than "heroic." Additionally, I would like to suggest that *A Thousand Ships* is also tragic in that it draws its inspiration not only from Homer's epics but also from the works of ancient tragedians.

Although *A Thousand Ships* revolves around the war in Troy, which is largely associated with Homer's epics, and although it explicitly and implicitly reflects upon the epic genre, surprisingly few of its chapters are derived from the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Penelope's sections are the only ones which draw heavily upon the *Odyssey* while other chapters,

e.g. the part about Briseis and Chryseis, are at least loosely inspired by the *Iliad* (see also above). Considering the marginal role of female characters in the epics, however, it is plausible that, in her attempt to tell the women's stories of the Trojan War, Haynes had to go beyond Homer if she did not want to invent everything. A substantial number of her chapters are based on Attic tragedy, in which female characters feature more prominently. Haynes names (many of) her sources in the afterword, among them Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Trojan Women* as well as Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (341-42) as the primary sources for the chapters dedicated to Iphigenia, the Trojan Women and Clytemnestra. Here Haynes moves from heroic epic to tragic drama as her source text, a move that implicates a change from the battlefields to the domestic realm, from the male to the female sphere, and from admirable feats to pity and suffering. Her reformed epic tells many stories chiefly known from stage tragedy.

*A Thousand Ships* thus fulfils Calliope's requirements for a new sort of epic. However, there is a certain tension between Calliope's statements and the rest of the novel, or, to put it differently, between Calliope's theory and her practice. When Calliope finally comments "I have sung of armies and I have sung of men," this remark qualifies as ironic because singing of armies and men is precisely what Calliope tried to avoid. In other words, she may have sung about armies and men, but only in passing, relegating them to the background of the stories. Other discrepancies between her theory and her practice, however, appear to be less deliberate on Calliope's part. They indicate that composing the reformed epic that Calliope advocates is a challenging task which she is not quite up to. For instance, Calliope explicitly complains about the repetitiveness of the epic (every war, every conflict, and so on), yet *A Thousand Ships* may trigger the very same response in (some of) its readers. After all, *A Thousand Ships* retells, once again, the stories of Iphigenia, Clytemnestra and the Trojan Women—stories which readers who are familiar with the classics know very well from Attic tragedy and other sources. Besides, due to the great number and hence brevity of the chapters in *A Thousand Ships*, there is nothing particularly moving

or innovative about Calliope's take on these characters—some sections simply repeat a familiar story on only a few pages.<sup>19</sup> Also, while brevity is certainly not a problem of the seven sections narrated by Penelope, large parts of them merely retell the established myth, for Penelope, in an artificial and implausible manner, writes letters to her famous husband in which she tells him the stories of his adventures as they will later be handed down in the *Odyssey*.

Likewise, Calliope may claim that she means to depict the “heroic” nature of women's deeds and behaviour, yet she does not do so in all cases. Some of the human characters are not treated well by her. The most blatant example is Helen, the famous (or infamous) epitome of female beauty over whom the war was supposedly fought. Helen features in the chapters on the Trojan Women just as she does in Euripides's *Trojan Women*, which is a crucial source for Haynes (see above). In these passages, Helen appears among the captured women of Troy and discusses with them the reasons for the war, putting the blame elsewhere, before she is led away by Menelaus (Euripides ll. 860-1059; Haynes 132-38, 178-82, 207-11). Surprisingly, however, she is not granted a chapter of her own.<sup>20</sup> If the title *A Thousand Ships* is supposed to be reminiscent of Marlowe's reference to Helen (see above), the title draws attention to a conspicuous absence at the very centre of the novel—for which panoramic portrayal of the women of the Trojan War would ever be complete without Helen? Calliope explains that she has an aversion to Helen (40) and that she does not want to describe her beauty, a subject of endless praise and admiration by male poets (212); other characters refer to Helen in even more openly disparaging terms, e.g. Theano (37) and Penelope (58). In any case, there is nothing “heroic” about a Helen who is not allowed a chapter of her own.<sup>21</sup>

Besides, Calliope seems to distinguish between the human and the divine characters. While most of the human characters are given a fair and serious treatment by her and exhibit behaviour which can in some way or another be considered “heroic,” the divine characters are not.<sup>22</sup> The section dedicated to Aphrodite, Hera and Athena (139-56), for instance, stands in the mock-heroic tradition, portraying the Olympian



trio as self-centred, petulant and childish (and Zeus as cowardly and incompetent). Other episodes show the immortals as indifferent and neglectful if not outright nasty. Let me suggest three explanations for Haynes's comic handling of the divine characters. Firstly, the powerful position of the goddesses in the ancient myths of Troy makes it difficult to portray them as victims. Therefore, Haynes underlines their negative sides to emphasise how the indifference of those in power contributes to the misery of the mortal women. Secondly, inhabiting the world of the mock-heroic, the chapters about the goddesses rely on a long tradition that exposes the flaws and weaknesses of the divine characters, and also of the epic genre as a whole. Haynes thus opts for a traditional sort of genre critique. Thirdly, *A Thousand Ships* draws not only on Homer's epics but also on many other ancient sources, especially on Attic tragedy (see above). Considering that the novel spotlights the unhappy fates of many female characters, it is a modern tragedy just as it is a modern epic. Interpreting the novel as a sort of tragedy, in which one dreary story of loss and suffering follows another one, allows readers to understand its humorous sections as comic relief.

Finally, Calliope's chapters are not the only parts of *A Thousand Ships* which are explicitly meta-epic. There may be occasional allusions to epics in various sections of the novel (e.g. in the Creusa chapter [18]), yet the most openly meta-epic chapters, next to Calliope's, are Penelope's. Penelope is the only other first-person narrator in *A Thousand Ships*, and in the letters to her absent husband she repeatedly voices some of the concerns and complaints also formulated by Calliope. She frequently mentions the performances by wandering bards who sing about the adventures of Odysseus on his journey home. Like Calliope, Penelope points out that bards tend to glorify heroic deeds on the battlefield but to overlook "the courage required by those of us who were left behind" (185). Besides, Penelope relates many of the stories she has heard the bards sing about her husband; thus she re-tells numerous episodes known from the *Odyssey*. In a manner reminiscent of, yet more serious than Atwood's Penelope, she indicates that she considers some of these tales, e.g. those about Odysseus's encounter with one-eyed monsters,

unrealistic and unbelievable (157). She also suspects the bards to be skilled story-tellers who know very well how to arouse suspense (160) or how to manipulate and modify a story to appeal to the particular audience for which they are performing (e.g. 158, 184). While some of what Penelope has to say about bards is perfectly in line with Calliope's interaction with "Homer," her constant doubts about the truth value of the bards' performances seem to undermine any trust an audience can put in the epic genre (and thus in *A Thousand Ships* itself). If, however, readers understand Penelope's chapters as presented by Calliope to "Homer," they can also interpret them more specifically as undermining the male tradition and its fantastic stories.

#### 4. Conclusion

The novel *A Thousand Ships* tells the stories of the female characters affected by the war in Troy. What is more, it comments on how these stories have been narrated (or: not narrated) in the epic tradition. Thanks to this kind of meta-epic reflection, *A Thousand Ships* becomes a "meta-epic novel" that voices a veritable critique of the ancient genre, or at least of some of its characteristics. To be specific, the novel does not seriously criticise the form of the epic (stylistic features are mentioned in a neutral manner, like epithets, or even imitated, like similes). Rather, the novel constitutes a critique of the content, in particular of the choice of characters (most of them male) and events (most of them on the battlefields or on adventurous journeys). *A Thousand Ships* does not stop here, however, but also takes the next step and offers a solution to the problem: it suggests that epics should turn to the female characters, traditionally relegated to the sidelines, and foreground their fates. This reformed kind of epic is at least partly based on a reformed kind of "heroism," which is not limited to feats on the battlefields but extends to resolute and courageous actions in other areas of life.

Like Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey* and Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* is a hybrid text which crosses the borders

between novel and epic. All three books reflect upon features of epics, and they also draw upon features of epics for their own structure and composition. As indicated above, Fielding would call them “epics” simply because they are pieces of narrative fiction. Besides, I argued that they are “more epic” than pieces of narrative fiction generally are. They are more epic than, let’s say, Austen’s *Emma* or Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* because of their subject matter and style, for, while neither *Emma* nor *Mrs Dalloway* relies upon ancient subject matter or imitates stylistic features of epics, the pieces of narrative fiction examined in the present article do both. Haynes’s *A Thousand Ships*, for instance, treats the oldest and most conventional of all epic subject matters, the Trojan War, and it narrates the fates of many of its characters. Moreover, it imitates some characteristics of the epic style, such as the invocation of the muse and the use of similes. Hence, in subject matter and style, *A Thousand Ships* resembles the ancient epic more than most novels do. In the afterword, Haynes herself refers to *A Thousand Ships* as “my attempt to write an epic” (345). The modern epic is a prose narrative which draws upon features of the ancient epic; it is a continuation of the ancient epic in the form of the novel. In Haynes’s case, it is a tragic—and feminist—epic in prose.

*A Thousand Ships*, *An Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad* are epics written for the twenty-first century. After all, the novel is, one might say, the epic of the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries; the “prose epic” has long replaced the verse epic as the narrative genre which reaches the largest audience. Besides, the three books examined in the present article are epics for a twenty-first-century audience because they address issues that appeal to a wide readership. Ancient myth continues to fascinate people, and in particular the female perspective on well-known stories has recently found a global audience through novels like Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* but also Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* and Miller’s *Circe*, which I mentioned in the introduction. A significant number of other novels fall into the same category, among them Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Lavinia* (2008), Emily Hauser’s *For the Most Beautiful* (2016) and, most

recently, Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* (2021) as well as Claire Heywood's *Daughters of Sparta* (2021).<sup>23</sup>

Finally, I would like to return to the concept of "metagenre" and address two myths surrounding self-conscious literature. First, it has sometimes been suggested that the tendency of literary texts to revolve around literary texts is a symptom of crisis or an indicator of the "literature of exhaustion," as it was called by John Barth in 1967. However, it has likewise been observed that self-reflexivity in literature can stimulate development and even advance the evolution of new (sub-)genres (e.g. Hauthal). The examples discussed in the present article suggest the latter, namely that metareferences in fictional texts can be productive. The very existence of novels inspired by epics, i.e. of hybrid texts of two long-standing genres, proves that processes of self-reflexivity can be innovative and creative. Furthermore, neither of the texts declares the end of the epic, let alone the novel. On the contrary, they ensure that the epic lives on in a new form, and they mark the evolution of the novel in fresh and unexpected directions. Second, it may appear that literary self-reflexivity primarily serves a comic function, as in the mock-heroic tradition and in other self-reflexive games, because metareferences destroy illusion, create distance between audience and text, expose literary conventions, etc. Historically, as Werner Wolf points out, metareferences feature in dramatic comedies and comic novels more frequently than in tragic or serious texts, and it is only in the twentieth century that metatexts of a serious nature figure prominently (71-72). In line with Wolf's observation, my above analysis has shown that twenty-first-century metageneric reflections are just as likely subversive and comic (Atwood's *The Penelopiad*) as they are affirmative (Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey*) or tragic and serious (Haynes's *A Thousand Ships*).<sup>24</sup> While Mendelsohn's and Calliope's/Haynes's metageneric comments may raise the occasional smile, their overall tendency is a sombre examination of the nature of the epic. In their explicit references to the epic, these meta-epic novels investigate the features of the ancient genre in a manner comparable to that of academics who discuss a literary text.

Let me end with another remark about self-reflexivity. The analysis of *A Thousand Ships* has illustrated that the distinction between meta-genre as “other-reflexive” and metagenre as “self-reflexive” can be difficult to uphold. On the one hand, the novel explicitly comments on the nature of the epic. In this context, I used the term “meta-generic reflection” to denote references to a genre B in an instance of another genre A, and I described *A Thousand Ships* as a “meta-epic novel,” i.e. a novel which makes (critical) observations about the epic. On the other hand, I contended that *A Thousand Ships* may legitimately be considered an “epic” itself because it appropriates and imitates features of the epic. Consequently, *A Thousand Ships* is a modern epic which explicitly reflects upon and implicitly emulates the ancient epic. Its other-reflexive nature is tantamount to an explicit critique of the ancient epic while its self-reflexive dimension allows it to compete with and improve its predecessor, and hence to contribute to genre development. If, then, we regard *A Thousand Ships* and similar novels as epics for our time, their meta-epic reflections are self-reflexive reflections. Thereby, *A Thousand Ships* and similar texts become “meta-epic epics” in the end.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on a talk which I presented at the 16th International *Connotations* Symposium “Metagenre” in 2021. I would like to thank the participants of the conference for their helpful comments and suggestions during the discussion of my paper.

<sup>2</sup>Lowenkron coins the term “metanovel” and applies it to a novel revolving around a novel; discussing early plays by Eugene O’Neill, Pettit defines “meta-comedy” as a comedy which exposes the conventions of its own genre; reading David Mamet’s *Oleanna*, Mason understands “meta-tragedy” as a metatheatrical tragedy; and analysing sonnets by E. E. Cummings, Huang-Tiller discusses “meta-genre” with the help of a “meta-sonnet,” which is a self-reflexive sonnet. For Giltrow, “meta-genres” are texts which prescribe or comment upon the nature of a genre; this includes guidelines how to compose a particular type of report as well as remarks by a professor about a student’s essay. For Hauthal, a “meta-genre” is a

literary genre whose members share metareferential features, such as fictional metabiographies, which reflect upon the features of biographies. For this specific type of meta-genre, see also Nadj.

<sup>3</sup>Philmus discusses works of science fiction by Stanislaw Lem as metageneric texts.

<sup>4</sup>Structural parallels of this kind are also pointed out by Riley, who reads Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey* as a Telemachy (268-78).

<sup>5</sup>This enthusiasm is perhaps best encapsulated in the passage in which Mendelsohn relates his first encounters with the Greek language: "More than anything I loved the elaborate richness of the verbal system. [...] What thrilled me above all were the fantastically metastasizing verb tenses, the shifts in time signaled by prefixes that agglomerated like crystals, by endings that pooled at the ends of the words like honey that has dripped off a spoon onto a saucer." (115; emphases added)

<sup>6</sup>The reference is to the epithet "βοὴν ἀγαθὸς" (e.g. *Iliad* 2.586 and Hammond 33).

<sup>7</sup>In a similar fashion, Staels claims that *The Penelopiad* "undermine[s] high Homeric style" and relies on a "debunking of epic events and characters" (107). Nischik also points out that Penelope "subverts the Homeric epic, elevated style" (263) and generally "question[s] epic authorities and norms" (264).

<sup>8</sup>Previously, William Congreve linked his "novel" *Incognita* (1692) with the dramatic tradition. In his view, drama is superior to any other genre, wherefore he imitates its features (*Preface* 33-34).

<sup>9</sup>As has been pointed out, Fielding intends to raise the status of his own work (e.g. Watt 239, 258).

<sup>10</sup>The precise number listed in the catalogue of ships in Book 2 of the *Iliad* is 1,186. Yet, as Gilbert shows, "one thousand ships" is a stock phrase already used in ancient texts.

<sup>11</sup>The reference is to the A-Text.

<sup>12</sup>The poet is old, blind, and successful, and he wishes to compose an epic about the subject matter of the Trojan War (2, 267).

<sup>13</sup>In case it may seem questionable whether *A Thousand Ships*, with its 43 chapters and myriads of characters, can legitimately be called a "novel," I would like to emphasise the following: first, all chapters focus on essentially the same topic, i.e. the Trojan War, which allows for thematic unity. Second, the chapters are often smoothly connected through transitions from one episode to the next. In several instances, chapters are dedicated to characters whose names are mentioned at the end of the previous section, as when the "Penthesilea" chapter (46-56) immediately follows a mentioning of the death of the Amazon queen in a conversation between Hecabe and Polyxena (45). Last but not least, all chapters are linked through Calliope, who presents them to the poet to make him compose his epic.

<sup>14</sup>Fairclough in the Loeb Classical Library edition renders the passage as "ARMS I sing and the man."

<sup>15</sup>For the differentiation between short and long similes in Homer, see, for instance, Edwards (102).

<sup>16</sup>For Oenone, see Graves (159.h, q and v, and 166.e).

<sup>17</sup>This passage has frequently been foregrounded in reviews of the novel, e.g. by Lowry in *The Guardian* (n. pag.).

<sup>18</sup>For Haynes's sources, see also her afterword (341-45).

<sup>19</sup>In a review in *The Spectator*, Womack raises similar issues. He criticises Haynes for being "too faithful" to her ancient models and he points out "that the multiplicity of viewpoints means that quite often we get straightforward retellings of very well-known myths" (n. pag.).

<sup>20</sup>That Helen is not given a chapter of her own is also noticed by Brilke and Werner (106), who conducted an interview with Haynes in which they asked her many pertinent questions, for instance about her reasons to exclude Helen. Haynes answered that she did not exclude Helen deliberately but left her out for compositional reasons (111-12).

<sup>21</sup>Haynes makes up for this neglect by dedicating a chapter to Helen (57-84) in her non-fiction book *Pandora's Jar: Women in Greek Myths* (2020).

<sup>22</sup>As Haynes herself puts it in the interview conducted by Brilke and Werner, "[t]he chapters with goddesses are generally quite funny, the chapters with Trojan women are quite sad and the chapters with Greek women can go in both ways" (111).

<sup>23</sup>The recent rise of women's rewritings of the classics has been remarked upon, for instance, by Brown and by Theodorakopoulos; the significance of women's rewritings of Homer in particular has been pointed out by Gentzler and especially in the collection *Homer's Daughters: Women's Responses to Homer in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, edited by Cox and Theodorakopoulos. However, the popularity of twenty-first-century Homeric rewritings is by no means restricted to feminist adaptations, as testified by Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey*, Fry's *Troy* (mentioned in the introductory section) and a variety of other works, such as David Malouf's *Ransom: A Novel* (2009), and Zachary Mason's *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* (2010).

<sup>24</sup>For functions of metareferences, see also Wolf (64-68).

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# The Woman Taken in Adultery: A Literary Perspective on Christ's Writing in John 8:1-12

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## Abstract

Jesus' writing in John 8:2-12 is a silence that has raised scholarly discussion from the very beginnings of the Early Church. Jesus has just forgiven the sins of an adulteress, and wittily dispersed her prosecutors. Then, he "stoop[s] down, and [writes] on the ground" (John 8:8). What did Jesus put down, and to what end? Why is there a double emphasis on the scholarly act, while no other passage in the New Testament even mentions that Jesus is able to write? We propose that the striking gesture serves both the characterisation and authorisation of Jesus. Considering his writing in the light of (1) historical criticism (i.e. Roman criminal law) and (2) theological criticism (i.e. as a demonstration of Jesus' messianic claim), it will be shown that the act of writing reinforces John's High Christology: it expresses Jesus' divine nature, connecting his own literary undertaking to other instances of writing in the Old and New Testament that carry the same connotations of creative power and authority. Without Jesus' writing, the pericope would be out of place in the chapter; including the mysterious action, however, it prepares readers for the theoretical superstructure that follows immediately after: "For I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me" (John 8:16).

## Editors' Note

Alan Rudrum, one of the founding members of the editorial board of *Connotations*, sent us an earlier version of this article several years ago. The editors were intrigued but reluctant—the latter because *Connotations* is not a

journal of biblical studies but of literature in English. Still, our reluctance was tempered by the fact that the topic of the article, “one of the most memorable” stories “in the Christian scriptures” has had an inspiring influence on English literature, Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* being a prominent example. Moreover, the article—and the biblical passage discussed in it—raises issues of general interest to literary scholars. The question of textuality, for example: to what end was the story of the woman taken in adultery added to John? And questions of (divine) authorship: what is the effect of Jesus being portrayed as a silent writer in the sand? Does the passage figure within itself the zeal and need for interpretation even where texts are silent? Last but not least, Rudrum addressed the topic with verve and engaged with some of the imaginative responses it has prompted. With Zane C. Hodges, for example, he wondered about the adulterer. “‘What then,’ he asks, ‘had happened to the man? Where was he? Had he escaped? Had they let him go? Was he, indeed, a friend of theirs—a scribe or Pharisee like they were?’ In response to this rather breathless series of questions, almost onomatopoeic of pouncing scribe and disappearing adulterer, my wife suggested that he might simply have been ‘nippier on his pins,’ or less colloquially, ‘faster off the mark.’” Our consulting reviewers shared our interest and fascination but demanded an update of the theological literature quoted, which would also entail a refocusing of the paper. This is where Julia Schatz comes in, doctoral student in the Tübingen research group on the “De/Sacralization of Texts”. With critical care and acumen, she has devoted herself to both tasks, and we are happy to see a collaborative outcome that will take the discussion of the story in John—we hope—right into the heart of literature in English.

## Introduction

<sup>1</sup>Jesus went unto the mount of Olives.

<sup>2</sup>And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

<sup>3</sup>And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

<sup>4</sup>They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

<sup>5</sup>Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

<sup>6</sup>This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

<sup>7</sup>So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

<sup>8</sup>And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

<sup>9</sup>And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

<sup>10</sup>When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

<sup>11</sup>She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

<sup>12</sup>Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

*(King James Bible, John 8:1-12)*

It can hardly be her fascinating personality that leads one to the woman taken in adultery. Nevertheless, her story is surely one of the most memorable in the Christian scriptures. This is not only due to Jesus' astonishing and poignant acquittal of the adulteress—"Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:11)—but also because the short pericope is the only text in the Second Testament that presents Jesus as a man of letters: not once, but twice in 12 verses does he "stoop down" and write "on the ground" (John 8:6,8). Yet, as is generally the case in narratives, whether religious or secular, this one too foregrounds certain elements and is silent or ambiguous about others; particularly, in this case, what it is exactly that Jesus writes, or why. The extraordinary number of textual interpolations in the passage attests to the desire of copyists to explain those places where the text is silent,<sup>1</sup> and modern interpretation is largely a continuation of that process. In this paper, we wish to consider the silence surrounding Jesus' writing in the passage, and we argue that the gesture conveys a soteriological symbolism that authorises Jesus' actions and words as rightfully divine. To this end, the pericope's authority itself will be assessed by means of textual criticism and historical evidence. Once this frame is established, Jesus' writing will be considered against the background of historical criticism (i.e. Roman criminal law) and theological criticism, reading the

scholarly act as a demonstration of his messianic claim. By drawing on further examples of divine writing from the First and the Second Testament, it will be shown that Jesus indeed does not just “stoop down” (John 8:6,8) to stall for time<sup>2</sup> but that the action reinforces John’s High Christology, instating Jesus as God Himself. It is exactly this message, reinforced by Jesus’ writing, that explains the pericope’s insertion in the book of John and its popular reception.

### 1. John 8:1-12: Apocryphal, Authoritative—or Both?

The narrative authority of the *Pericope Adulterae* is such that one is surprised to find that scholars are uncertain as to where it belongs in the canon. They have generally agreed that it does not belong in its traditional place (John 7:53 to 8:11), and in modern Bibles with scholarly pretensions it is relegated to an appendix.<sup>3</sup> Scholars appear to be ambivalent: on the one hand, the lack of a generally agreed place for the story seems to hint at doubt about whether it should have been given a place in the canon; on the other hand, it cannot be denied that the story must have been of some importance in order to be added to John. Thus, a consideration of its turbulent textual history is necessary to shed light on a possible symbolic meaning of Jesus’ writing.

Considering the internal and external textual evidence, the pericope “cannot be genuine,” as Lightfoot bluntly puts it (R. H. Lightfoot 168). According to the textual apparatus of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle et al. 325), John 8:1-12 was not part of the papyri of the second and third century (Papyrus 66, c. 200 AD; Papyrus 75, 3rd ct. AD), and neither does it appear in the Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (4th ct. AD) nor the Codex Alexandrinus (5th ct. AD). While neither Tertullian nor Chrysostomus mention the text (cf. J. B. Lightfoot, Witherington and Still 168), a first allusion to the pericope can be found in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, where the Greek historian recounts “the story of a woman with many flaws, who threw herself upon the Lord” (own translation; original: “ἱστορίαν περὶ γυναικὸς ἐπὶ πολλαῖς ἁμαρτίαις διαβληθείσης ἐπὶ τοῦ κυρίου,” 3.39.17). Yet, it is at best speculative to consider this vague description as a reference to the

pericope; furthermore, the text is not a biblical manuscript. The text was first definitely used in the fifth century: in the Bezae Codex Cantabrigiensis, the familiar story is finally recounted in John, with Jesus “writing with his finger on the ground” (τῷ δακτύλῳ κατέγραφεν εἰς τὴν γῆν; Nestle 325). In this form, the text is also a constituent of Hieronymus’ Vulgate, which makes it safe to say that, by the early fifth century, “Jesus’ writing had become an established feature of Johannine versions of the pericope” (Knust and Wassermann 417).

The pericope’s late addition to the Gospel of John, of course, undermines its textual authority; in the same vein, it has often been mentioned that the internal evidence of textual criticism, too, suggests rather obscure origins that are by no means characteristic of John’s Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Considering the overwhelming evidence that the story is not part of the original material of John, it is even more remarkable that it has still become part of the canon.

It is, at this point, important to assess what the term “canonicity” implies. While it has been established that the *Pericope Adulterae* cannot have been part of the original Gospel’s canon, “from a historical perspective, the events reported in the pericope are no less authentic than the rest of the deeds of Jesus described in the Fourth Gospel” (Baum 19). In this sense, Baum summarizes his line of argument: “the words of Jesus quoted in the pericope adulterae are fully orthodox” (Baum 19); other scholars go as far as to state that “the account has all the earmarks of historical veracity” (Metzger 220). Thus, the historical and theological probability of the text—its message does not conflict with Jesus’ teachings elsewhere in the Second Testament—justify its inclusion in the biblical canon despite its obscure origins. The fact that it was indeed included points to the importance of John 8:1-12: it is not just another story about forgiveness. We suggest rather to pay attention to the whole discourse of Jesus which follows this passage, with its clear messianic claim. If we pay careful attention to that discourse after reading the passage of the adulteress as if its intention were Christological rather than pastoral, then the passage may well look integral rather than interpolated. And, further, one might suggest that, if we look carefully at the passage which it follows with this Christological reading in mind, then the pericope of the adulteress looks less like a clumsy insertion than

like a sardonically humorous comment upon the Pharisees—and a claim to the divinity of Jesus.

## 2. Why did Jesus Write? Roman and Rabbinic Law as Frames of Reference

Another factor for the popularity of the pericope—especially among theologians—is the sense of mystery that accompanies it: no matter how much research and scholarly discussion is undertaken, we can never know what Jesus wrote on the ground in John 8:6,8. This is why this article is not concerned with such speculation; rather, Jesus' writing is going to be considered in its social and historical context, with the hope of inferring meaning from the action that must have had an important, if not symbolic, message for the contemporaries of Jesus and those who deemed it worthy to become part of the biblical canon—a text, however fictional it may be, with as many links to historic actuality as this one has, calls for something akin to historical criticism.

### a. Roman Law

The courtroom in first- and second-century AD Rome was significantly different from today. Starting in 149 BC, the *questio perpetua* was established in Rome, a “permanent jury-court” that gradually replaced moving courts and the *iudicium populi* that supplemented them (Deminion 29). This development is crucial for the understanding of John 8:1-12, because the new permanent courts served as a social meeting-point where moral and social questions were negotiated; the process of jurisdiction became “a public gathering containing strong elements of performance and spectacle” (Bablitz 1). Thus, the courtroom was not just a place of legal discussion, but “one of a relatively small number of public ‘stages’ where Romans of the elite class [...] could promote and advertise themselves” (Bablitz 1).

The process of using a show-trial to stage authority is also prevalent in the pericope at hand. It takes place at the time of a high festival, “the Jew's feast of tabernacles” (John 7:2); Jerusalem would have been “crowded with

pilgrims" then, "strangers were thrown together at close quarters" (Hodges 48). Precisely at this time, Jesus goes "into the temple," the most prominent religious location in Jerusalem, "and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them" (John 8:2). He is, therefore, surrounded by a considerable audience when "the scribes and Pharisees [bring] unto him a woman taken in adultery" (John 8:3), and it is emphasised that they "set her in the midst" (John 8:3) of the temple, at the centre of the action. Their subsequent question, too, sounds rather like showcasing rhetoric than a genuine address at a rabbi: "Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?" (John 8:5). The provoking opening "now," the omission of the object, merely denoting the woman with "such" (one can imagine the Pharisees theatrically pointing a finger at the woman), and the expositional "but," handing the stage over to Jesus, make the readers of the pericope participate in the courtroom spectacle. The Pharisees' words of provocation have set up a trap: if Jesus opts for the Mosaic law and upholds stoning, he can be denounced to the Roman authorities, who arrogated to themselves the right to impose death penalty. If he does not uphold the Mosaic law, he can be denounced to the Jewish people at large as a bad Jew. Yet, Jesus does not step into the trap. Instead, he makes the courtroom his own stage through the very action that has puzzled generations of Bible scholars: he "stoop[s] down, and with his finger [writes] on the ground" (John 8:6). By doing so, he raises suspense, adding a "retarding moment" to the scene (Baltensweiler 127). Thus, Jesus' writing shows that he, too, can use the courtroom stage to his own advantage. And he knows his role—as he writes, he mimics the "well-known practice in Roman criminal law, whereby the presiding judge first wrote down the sentence and then read it aloud from the written record" (Manson 256). Afterwards, he proclaims his sentence, condemning not the adulteress but her accusers—what a theatrical turn of events!—"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:7). Thus, it is precisely through a public spectacle that Jesus instates himself as the ultimate judging authority. In front of a crowd of people, he "defeats the plotters by going through the form of pronouncing sentence in the best Roman style" (Manson 256), rhetorically outwitting them. The second time Jesus writes on the ground also precedes judgment, this time pardoning the



adulteress (cf. John 8:9-10), which corroborates our hypothesis. This possible reference, in the writing of Jesus, to Roman legal custom is compatible with the high Christology of St. John's Gospel. As a sign, Jesus is here putting himself in the place of God, the ultimate judge—as, in terms of Jewish understanding, he had to do if he was to let the woman go free. The implications of Jesus' proclamation of judgment *in the temple* will be explored in the following.

#### b. Rabbinic Law

Jesus' writing prior to dispensing justice does not only raise associations with Roman law but also to rabbinic law and custom—after all, he is introduced as a rabbi at the beginning of the pericope (“and he sat down, and taught them,” John 8:2). While Roman law was enforced in the first and second centuries AD, reserving the right to decide over matters of life and death, rabbinic teachings and the laws of the First Testament were still present in Jewish and early Christian communities.<sup>5</sup> The pericope itself yields evidence for this as the Pharisees still use the Mosaic law as a basis for their moral judgment (cf. John 8:5: “Now Moses in the law commanded us”). Thus, Jesus' writing is not only connected to Roman practice, but, as he does so in the temple, he instates himself as a Jewish temple judge.

In the Second Temple period, the court of the Jewish people (*Sanhedrin*) was at the heart of the temple. The Mishnah Sanhedrin describes the “Courts of the Temple” (1:5) as consisting of one “greater Sanhedrin [...] made up of seventy one [sic] and the little Sanhedrin of twenty three [sic]” judges (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 1:6). Note that, again, writing plays an important part in the judicial process:

There were three [scribes]: one wrote down the words of them that favored acquittal, and one wrote down the words of them that favored conviction, and the third wrote down the words of both of them that favored acquittal and them that favored conviction.

In John 8:1-12, however, there is no multitude of judges. Jesus is on his own, “in the midst” (John 8:3) of the temple with the adulteress. The roles are

being utterly reversed as “the scribes and the Pharisees” (John 8:3) do not, as usually, sit in the judges’ rows, but play the part of the accusers. Jesus, by contrast, is instated as the only judge of the trial, fulfilling all its functions: listening, writing, and answering.<sup>6</sup> The pericope, therefore, depicts Jesus as the sole religious authority, a corporal religious law. This is in line with Matt. 5:17 (“Think not I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil”): the act of writing creates a reference to the rabbinic temple court and thus reinforces Jesus’ messianic claim.

Jewish custom, too, attributes notions of divine authority and salvation to writing, especially to writing “in the ground,” as is emphasised in John 8:6,8. The Greek word “γῆ” literally means “earth,” which establishes a connection to Jer. 17:13, the precedent of the phrase that is repeated two times in our short passage:

O LORD, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me [i.e. God] shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters.

The implications of this verse for John 8:1-12 are twofold. Firstly, it is crucial to note that, in Jer. 17:13, God speaks Himself, with ultimate authority. Again, the action of His writing is connected to judgment: everyone who “departs from [Him] shall be written in the earth”; thus, the phrase both serves as a reminder for humankind’s creation from earth, reinforcing God’s sovereignty,<sup>7</sup> and as a contrast to heaven and salvation: the earth is opposed to “the fountain of living waters,” which is God Himself. In this light, Jesus’ writing in the dust in John 8:6,8 gains a new dimension of meaning. By physically enacting the phrase from Jer. 17:13, he expresses that it is the scribes and Pharisees who have “turned from” the Lord and “forsaken” Him (cf. Jer. 17:13)—note that, afterwards, they indeed turn from him and go “out one by one” (John 8:9). At the same time, he claims God’s authority to write in the dust as his own.<sup>8</sup> Viewed on the background of Jer. 17:13, the pericope reveals itself as a theatrical enactment of Jesus’ messianic claim, a fulfilment of the prophetic outlook given in the book of Jeremiah.

Of course, the reference only holds up if readers and believers can actually make the connection. The case of Jer. 17:13 is, in this respect, a lucky

one, as its reception in Jewish and early Christian faith is unprecedentedly well-documented. Every year at the Jewish Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), the verse was recited at the final celebration after the ceremonial cleansing of the High Priest (cf. Zempelburg 253). It carried, therefore, all implications of soteriological power and authority as described above, and it was well known to every attendee of the *Yom Kippur* festival. It is documented from manuscripts and polemics about the early Christian churches that many Christians still visited the spectacle of redemption,<sup>9</sup> so the verse was likely present in these communities, too. The association of Jer. 17:13 with Jesus' writing in John 8:6,8 is, through the twofold verbatim repetition of the phrase, evident. It gives a new meaning to the action, and it delivers a plausible reason why the pericope was canonised after all: as a sign, Jesus is here putting himself in the place of God. In an exemplary, almost theatrical manner, the pericope stages Jesus' soteriological authority that lies at the heart of the Book of Signs. And, as to confirm this, immediately after the episode we have been discussing, he proclaims: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

### 3. Writing: A Messianic Sign

The soteriological symbolism of Jesus writing has been noted above. It is worth recalling other instances in the First and Second Testament that draw on the same concept to reinforce that writing was not, as during the Renaissance, for example, directly linked to scholarliness. Contrarily, in rabbinic oral culture, "rabbis memorized both the text of Scripture and oral traditions [...] books existed not so much to be read as to be heard" (Bauckham 280). The act of writing, therefore, was not associated with learning, but with the authority and notions of divine creation that precede it: God *makes* what others will use to learn in the future.

A popular instance of writing in the First Testament supports this line of argument: in Ex. 31:18, God gives "unto Moses [...] tables of stone, written with the finger of God." The Ten Commandments are engraved by God's own hands, for the people to live by ("These are the words which the LORD hath commanded, that ye should do them," Ex. 35:1). Writing, in this case,

not only constitutes God's authority but also His all-encompassing creative power.<sup>10</sup> Considering the implications of this observation for John 8:1-12, it is noteworthy that, in the covenant narrative, God writes twice just as Jesus writes twice in the *Pericope Adulterae*. Even more so, the motif of forgiveness pervades God's second act of writing in Exodus just like Jesus's forgiving follows his writing in John 8:8: "And the LORD said unto Moses, Hew [sic] thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest" (Ex. 34:1). In John 8, Jesus forgives the adulteress just as God does with the Israelites, which puts him in the same authoritative position:

Linking divine law as given through Moses, on stone and with the divine finger, with divine writing inscribed on the ground and revealed by Christ, this detail implies that Jesus is equal or even superior to Moses, who simply receives rather than writes divine law. (Knust and Wassermann 411)

The *pars pro toto* of the "finger" of God as the instrument of creation is a popular trope in the First Testament. Examination on the entries of finger and fingers in Young's *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* yields a rich harvest of significance. In Exodus 8:19 we have the magicians saying to Pharaoh "This is the finger of God" as they describe the plagues befalling the Egyptians, and in Psalm 8:3, God is addressed: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained," again raising notions of providence ("ordinance") and authority in connection with the divine hand. The Second Testament, too, provides meaningful examples: in Luke 11:20, Jesus says "if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come unto you." Here, too, the identification of Jesus' fingers with those of God establishes a frame of reference that bestows him with the same authority and dignity. Notably, Jesus uses the same rhetorical technique here as in John 8:1-12, but on a theoretical level: instead of acting it out, he verbalises the comparison.

The examples above outline the undertones of sovereignty and divine creation that are produced by references to writing and, by extension, the "work of [...] fingers" (Ps 8:3) in the First and Second Testament. Jesus, by inserting himself into this tradition, enunciates his claim to divinity. It may prove beneficial to examine subsequent literary sources that draw on the

same rhetorical strategy to assess whether it is used with the same implications, and to find out how and to what end the concept of divine writing is evoked with reference to the biblical source material.

## Conclusion

What all this amounts to is that, to read John 8:1-12 synchronically, with an eye to textual criticism, leads to an understanding of the passage of the adulteress as primarily pastoral and out of keeping with its context in John; to read it diachronically, with an ear for its echoes of contemporary legalisms and First Testament significances, results rather in an understanding of the passage as signifying a version of the messianic claim. What is central to this claim is the action of writing: it serves as a frame of reference for divine authority and ultimate creative power, a connotation that is established not only through the reference of Jesus' "writing in the dust" (John 8:6,8) to Roman and rabbinic law, but also to other popular instances in both the First and the Second Testament that reinforce God's creating finger as the source of power, justice, and authority.

Having established that the textual criticism of the pericope merely paints a blurred picture of the origins of the story, the reasons for its addition to the canon must remain uncertain. It is, however, likely that the story was deemed important for the very act that otherwise seems like a "detour [...] interrupt[ing] the flow of the debate, unnecessarily separating answers from questions" (Minear 24): Jesus' writing. It is not "unnecessary"; quite the opposite: it symbolises Jesus' messianic claim. By staging a mock trial that not only follows Roman legal customs but also Judaeo-Christian biblical tradition, the twelve verses of the pericope display the divine nature of Jesus, both on a practical and on a theological level. Like this, the pericope is by no means out of place in the chapter, but it prepares readers for the theoretical superstructure that follows immediately after: "For I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me" (John 8:16).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>R. H. Lightfoot writes that “the various readings are more numerous than in any other part of the New Testament” (346).

<sup>2</sup>This has indeed been suggested by numerous theological scholars, very famously so by A. J. Wensink, who compares Jesus’ doodling in the ground in John 8 to a Muslim hadith that recounts how the prophet Mohammad, too, stooped down and wrote in the dust to gain time to recollect his thoughts (see 300). The argument, however, is anachronistic and not very convincing, considering that the passage is otherwise sparse with details.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., the *New English Bible* and the *Revised English Bible*. Most others add the pericope but signify its special status by adding brackets or an explanatory footnote (e.g., *New Revised Standard Version*, *New Jerusalem Bible*, *New International Version*, *New American Standard Bible*, *English Standard Version*).

<sup>4</sup>The internal evidence for this claim is based on stylistic anomalies, e.g. the abundant usage of the particle δέ (11 times in 12 verses), which is unusual for the Gospel of John, who rather uses οὖν. Further indicators are speech introductions like “εἶπεν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς” (John 8:11) that only appears in this instance in the whole Gospel (cf. Baum 7), and “individual expressions” like “πᾶς ὁ λαός, καθίσας ἐδίδασκεν αὐτούς, οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ etc. as well as many individual words, e.g. ἐπέμενον, ἀναμάρτητος, κατελείφθη etc.” (J. B. Lightfoot, Witherington and Still 169).

<sup>5</sup>For an extensive exploration of the relationship of Roman jurisdiction with the Jewish Sanhedrin, see Müller 35-38.

<sup>6</sup>The reversal of roles also becomes apparent at the end of the story, as the accusers go “out one by one, beginning at the eldest” (John 8:9)—“[i]n non capital cases and those concerning uncleanness and cleanness [the judges declare their opinion] beginning from the eldest”, the Mishnah states (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:2). As the eldest are accredited the greatest wisdom, ironically, they are the first to acknowledge Jesus’ ultimate authority and draw their consequences from it.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Gen. 2:7: “And the LORD formed man of the dust of the ground.”

<sup>8</sup>The reference to Jer. 17:13 is strengthened by the passage that directly precedes the *Pericope Adulterae*, where Jesus states that “rivers of living water” flow from his body (John 7:38). Here, too, he proclaims himself as the Messiah, as a personified cleansing bath, a characteristic that is inherently God’s, according to Jer. 17:13.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Stökl Ben Ezra: “[D]as Tempelritual an Jom Kippur [zog] schon früh eine Großzahl von Schaulustigen an, wie wir im Schlusslied von Jesus Sirach und in der Mischnah lesen können. Die Massen wollten am exklusiven [...] Opferritual teilhaben” (103). He also stresses that sources like Josephus, John Chrysostom, and the Barnabas letter indirectly yield evidence that many Christians attended, too (104-05), by asking them to refrain from the now-obsolete practice: “Some of these [Christians] are going to watch the festivals and others will join the Jews in keeping their feasts and observing their fasts. I wish to drive this perverse custom from the Church right now” (Chrysostom 1.5).

<sup>10</sup>In the same vein, 2 Cor. 3:3 states that Christians are themselves a product of divine writing: "You are a letter from Christ [...] written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." The implications of this as well as its reception in Christian culture and literature should be explored in further research.

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# Romance and Metagenre: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff

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## Abstract

This short essay constitutes a reflection on meta-generic strategies and practises employed by authors of romance fiction. Conceived as a response to Burkhard Niederhoff's article published in *Connotations*, it aims at making literary criticism and romance fiction dialogue with one another by discussing several of the same texts analysed by Niederhoff from the perspective of Romance Studies.

More specifically, this contribution to the debate on metagenre aims at making available some of the concepts developed by scholars of the romance novel to literary scholars. Adopting Pamela Regis's definition of the happy ending as “betrothal,” the essay sketches a short progression of this trope as heading towards increasingly visible self-reflexive “metageneric” solutions. The outline begins with a discussion of E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) as a “failed romance” which aims at complementing Niederhoff's reflections on the novel's ending in connection to its protagonist's inner development and maturation. It continues with an examination of E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) which focuses on “the bitter notes” hidden within its apparently uncontentious happy ending, and it ends by analysing some of the explicit metageneric devices employed in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).

In recent years, several edited volumes have been released on literary fiction and genre, and on the centrality of generic narrative forms to past and present developments in the field of Anglophone literary studies (see, e.g., Frow; Dowd and Rulyova; Cooke). Although this move towards genre has

been amply recognized and elaborated upon by literary critics (Dorson; Lanzendörfer; Rothman), the romance genre has been almost entirely neglected by the recent increase in scholarship on generic forms of literature.

I would like to take this opportunity to make literary criticism and romance fiction enter into dialogue with one another by discussing several of the same texts analysed in Niederhoff's article from the perspective of Romance Studies. More precisely, I will adopt Pamela Regis's definition of the happy ending as "betrothal" (37-38) to sketch a short progression of this trope heading towards increasingly visible self-reflexive "metageneric" solutions. The outline will begin with a discussion of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) as a "failed romance" and will continue with *A Room with a View* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. This response aims at making available to literary scholars some of the concepts developed by Romance Studies researchers. Although I largely share Niederhoff's reading of these texts, a perspective from Romance Studies might add to his point of view.

Before going forward, I should elucidate the notion of happy ending as betrothal. In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), Regis individuates eight essential narrative elements to be used as analytical categories of the romance novel, several "events" in the storyline which must occur for a romance novel to be defined as such:

Eight narrative events take a heroine in a romance novel from encumbered to free. In one or more scenes, romance novels always depict the following: the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal. These elements are essential.<sup>1</sup> (30)

This schema allows for a virtually endless number of variations: the meeting between heroine and hero can be recounted in flashbacks, for instance, or the barrier(s) can be thoroughly internal, that is to say constituted by the "attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs held by heroine and hero that prevent the union" (Regis 32). Accordingly, the "betrothal" has been adapted to the needs of contemporary taste in storytelling. Sequences depicting the romantic protagonists (no longer necessarily a man and a

woman) sharing an ice-cream or dancing together at the end of the narrative qualify as scenes of betrothal. In other words, a “betrothal,” in order to be such, must contain the indication of a continuing romantic union or of “an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending to a central love story” (Carter 12).

### One Moment Short of Connecting: *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

Niederhoff observes that “Philip cultivates his sense of humour to achieve a feeling of superiority that is unfounded” (20), adding to this remark that precisely his lack of self-knowledge, or “Pusillanimity” (20), will get in the way of seizing the opportunity to change the course of events. I see Philip’s essentially failed attempt at acting upon his acerbic improvement in time to change the course of his life as constituting a shift from comedy to tragedy—the very shift Niederhoff calls attention to throughout his article.

Although Philip, by the end of his trip to Monteriano, understands more of himself, his awareness of this (newly acquired) ability to connect is far too timid to allow him to make a convincing attempt at securing Caroline’s affection at the end of the narrative. Philip ponders too long and, at that point, Caroline’s unexpected confession of her love for Gino silences Philip’s declaration to her, making Philip fall back into his old patterns of passive observer.

Caroline, over the course of an important exchange with Philip, tells him: “your brain and your insight are splendid. But when you see what’s right you’re too idle to do it” (124). Shortly after, she adds: “There’s never any knowing—how am I to put it?—which of our actions, which of our idlenesses won’t have things hanging on it for ever” (127). This is an exact prediction of what will happen in the last scene. Philip’s hesitation will for ever seal his destiny of passive spectator.

Hence the story concludes with Philip’s aborted attempt at rebelling against his conscious condition of “puppet” (71) governed by society’s restrictions, perfectly embodied by his mother, whom he sees as a “well-ordered, active, useless machine” (71). Indeed, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is not a romance novel, but resembles, rather—as Harriet herself observes in

a clearly ironic meta-generic remark: “one of those horrible modern plays where no one is in the right” (57). Nonetheless, analysing this novel as a failed romance reveals that precisely what makes it fail as a romance—the misalignment of the elements of “recognition” and “declaration”—impresses onto its ending a final tragic note.

The missing “nugget” Philip needs in order to complete the mosaic of a more complete and freer existence is described by Forster as follows: “[Philip] concluded that nothing could happen, not knowing that human love and love of truth sometimes conquer where love of beauty fails” (57). Understanding this lesson too late—the immediacy and physicality of love beyond its aesthetic dimension—Philip loses Caroline, and with her the possibility to access a less contrived mode of existence.

Caroline understands the concrete nature and carnality of love from her own attraction to Gino, and from observing him with his baby. However, she does not dare letting this knowledge change the course of her life, as she knows—from Lilia’s parable—that a concrete trespassing would ruin her. In this sense, Philip, as Forster himself phrases it and Niederhoff reports in his article, “exceeds” (16) Caroline at the end of the narrative: he would dare to change; Caroline would not. Philip, the reader suspects, needs a “nudge,” an encouragement that Caroline is not able to provide.

Niederhoff calls attention to the narrative gradually shifting from comedy to tragedy. The same (reversed) movement is detectable, on a smaller scale, in the opera sequence, where Forster, through an intertextual reference to *Lucia di Lammermoor* (the story of a fragile woman caught between two families), stages a rapid shift from tragedy (the story of Lucia as intended) to a comic performance—divesting the original story of all its gravity by representing the joyous participation of an anarchic audience.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of the sequence, in which the capacity of each character to live fully and emotionally is tested, Harriet and Gino remain, untouched, at the opposite poles—Harriet will remain incapable of feeling; Gino *only* feels—Caroline and Philip let themselves be affected by the performance, and, by extension, by the Italian experience, but they will elaborate upon it differently. This inconsistency will ultimately lead to their alienation from one another.

Claude J. Summers writes that “[t]he underlying sadness of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* stems from its apprehension of the atomized self, of the near impossibility of connecting the intellect, the soul, and the body, either in a balanced individual or in complementary relationships” (40-41). “Just as the three great attractions of Monteriano’s piazza symbolize the intellect, the soul, and the body,” Summers argues, “so do Philip, Caroline, and Gino also represent these parts of an entire person” (40).<sup>3</sup> “Throughout the book,” he adds, “Gino is associated with unconscious sexuality and physicality” (41). The latter are the very elements that British culture, according to its own perception, has lost on its way to modernity and progress, and tragedy occurs every time a British character unthinkingly approaches that existential sphere.

From this perspective, Caroline might be seen as a reconciling figure placed between two extreme positions unlikely to bring about good results: whereas Philip is too cerebral for his own good (as the last scene will make painfully evident), Gino is unaware of his elemental nature. Caroline occupies a space of conciliatory mediation between the two domains, a role she plays throughout the novel.

For Forster, happiness in interpersonal relationships and self-knowledge are closely related—“recognition” and “declaration” being another set of terms for the same dyadic mechanism—the capacity to read oneself and only then reach out to others. Three years after *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Forster publishes a novel in which all these elements finally align. Lucy Honeychurch will be able, after much “muddle,” clumsiness, and a final decisive nudging from Mr. Emerson, to recognise and admit her feelings for George.

### The Seed of Decay: *A Room with a View*

*A Room with a View* is a romantic story of great formal complexity and extraordinary existential depth, with an H. E. A.—romance scholars’ jargon for “happily-ever-after”—of astonishing realism and gentle sadness. In addition, the novel makes apparent the changing episteme of personal and

romantic relationships pertaining to courtship and the choosing of a partner.<sup>4</sup>

In this novel as well—as it is well-known—Italy plays a crucial symbolic role in the heroine's transformation and in her discovery and acceptance of honest and unaffected values. The novel seems to perfectly epitomise the dichotomy between Italy as a spiritual/sensual world and England as a rational one. Over the course of the narrative, Lucy overcomes society's restrictions, and her self-imposed renunciation (the "muddle"), to achieve a better knowledge of herself that does not deny her love for and sexual attraction to George Emerson.

Regis's eight elements are all present, but "hidden" within a narrative that works them to the point of making them unrecognizable: "Where Austen employed them quietly, submerging them in the narrative, Forster manipulates them brazenly" (Regis 100). For instance, Forster creates two points of ritual death: the well-known "Piazza della Signoria" scene, as well as Lucy's denial to Cecil (her fiancé), Mr. Emerson (George's father), and herself, of her feelings for George. Chapter IV introduces the long segment of the novel in which barriers must be removed: engagement to the wrong man, geographical distance from George, Charlotte's (apparent) disapproval of the union between Lucy and George. The most cumbersome barriers, however, are Lucy's internal ones: her fear to recognize and act upon her feelings for George.

Over the course of a long conversation between Lucy and Mr. Emerson, Forster makes three of the eight elements happen simultaneously: the second point of ritual death, Lucy's recognition of her true feelings, and the declaration of love between heroine and hero which, quite uniquely, takes place in George's absence, as Mr. Emerson makes it on George's behalf. This is indeed an interesting turn, especially if we read it in light of Lisa Fletcher's understanding of romance as a genre defined by the speech act "I love you," the performative utterance which constitutes, in Fletcher's view, the very essence of the genre.<sup>5</sup>

Lucy achieves happiness and freedom with George at the price of a break with her family. She atones for her emancipation with a (temporary?) alienation from her mother and brother which taints the blissful mood of the

novel's happy ending: "[George's] content was absolute, but hers held bitterness: the Honeychurches had not forgiven them; they were disgusted at her past hypocrisy; she had alienated Windy Corner, perhaps for ever" (218).

Detecting its ambiguous note, critics have diversely commented on the novel's happy ending. Barbara Rosecrance, for instance, affirms that, "despite the happy ending, Forster implies a modern condition" (90). Such condition, I wish to argue, is precisely given by the ending's deliberate characteristic of defectiveness. On the one hand, Forster writes his happy ending, and, on the other, he has clearly learnt (from Austen perhaps?) the lesson that freedom, self-knowledge, and personal emancipation come at the price of coming to terms with one's flaws, sometimes the most aggravating to acknowledge.

The conclusion of the novel—and the final sequence of its best-known cinematic transposition, in which Lucy and George kiss on the windowsill of their Florentine hotel room, enveloped by the warm rays of the sun<sup>6</sup>—sees Lucy and George looking out of the window together. The window, of course, frames the "view" the protagonist has fought for all along, and marriage is the beginning of another—unknown—story which unfolds before Lucy and George just like the course of the river Arno. I believe there is, in Forster's reticence to wholly embrace a happy ending, an elusive but telling clue of his liminal position vis-à-vis the novelistic form he is dealing with. In a way, Forster is at a window too—a threshold perhaps—contemplating the future of romantic stories.

Hence the reflection, on the author's part, on the romantic genre which the narrative exemplifies through a note of unmistakable bitterness. The novel's ending seems to encapsulate a meditation upon the genre based on Forster's "modern" view on marriage, which he expresses, in the essay "Pessimism in Literature" (1907) as follows: "We of today know that whatever marriage is, it is not an end. We know that it is rather a beginning, and that the lovers enter upon life's real problems when those wedding bells are silent" (135). Just a little later in the same essay, Forster asks: "Is there any happy situation on earth that does not contain the seeds of decay, or at all events of transformation?" (137).

*A Room with a View* is one of the last canonized Anglophone romances of the pre-wars period. After a long intermission, literary fiction slowly reprises the canonization of its romances. This occurs towards the second half/end of the century, with texts—such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990)—that thoroughly display a view of the romantic as a fundamentally conflicted and, by then, controversial genre.

If, as we will shortly see, Fowles himself appears as a character in his own narrative, voicing concerns regarding the tenability of the happy ending in current times, Byatt's novel chiefly displays the strategies of intertextual references and "*genre within genre*" (Niederhoff 9)—fairy tales and poems embedded in the main narrative and functioning as commentary to it. *Possession* follows two storylines, the Victorian and the modern-day, interrogating, from today's disenchanted perspective, the possibility of romance. Disillusionment weighs on Maud and Roland, the contemporary protagonists, setting them apart from their Victorian counterparts. Maud reflects on how love and desire would have been experienced by men and women in the past:

I was thinking last night—about what you said about our generation and sex. We see it everywhere. As you say. We are very knowing. We know all sorts of other things, too—about how there isn't a unitary ego—how we're made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things—and I suppose we *believe* that? We know we are driven by desire, but we can't see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we—we know it's a suspect ideological construct—especially Romantic love—so we have to make a real effort of the imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things—Love—themselves—that what they did mattered— (318)

Both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession* create multiple possibilities for the story to conform and/or question the conventions of romantic fiction, particularly in relation to their respective endings. They may undermine the construct by doubling it and examining it, but by dissecting it, they also celebrate it and give it its due importance. As Niederhoff points out: "a text may repudiate a genre while simultaneously practicing it" (15).



### An Explicit Questioning: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

I will return for a moment to the essay "Pessimism in Literature". Forster opposes his notion of "modern marriage" to the older Victorian one:

The early Victorian woman was regarded as a bundle of goods. She passed from the possession of her father to that of her husband. Marriage was a final event for her: beyond it, she was expected to find no new development, no new emotion. And so the early Victorian novelist might reasonably end his book with a marriage. (135)

The first of *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* "final" endings<sup>7</sup>—a novel Niederhoff rightly regards as exemplary of a new way of reflecting on fictionality—has been read as a competent and gentle parody of early Victorian endings, with Charles and Sarah (the protagonists) reuniting with each other, and Sarah (plausibly) abandoning her personal development and pursuits to be with Charles and mother their child. Charles Scruggs, for instance, reads this ending as caricaturing "the false sense of closure so typical of Victorian novels in general" and maintains that the second ending is "the least clichéd, the more open-ended (hence the more modern)" (96).

True: the second ending seems to be created by Fowles in exact opposition to the early Victorian one, as it significantly focuses on Sarah not wishing to renounce her situation of freedom and independence. According to this alternative conclusion, Sarah continues to live as a single working woman. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel built on the gradual but constant emancipation of its heroine, and Scruggs is right, I believe, in stressing the link between her continuous development, deliverance from social constraints, and the frequent references to Marxist and Darwinian theories present in the novel.

Forster sees marriage as the beginning of a new story; the ending in which Charles and Sarah separate and follow different paths is regarded by Scruggs as "more modern." That discordant note at the end of *A Room with a View* suggests a modern condition. If it does not signify the continuation of the story at a narrative level, it conjures up the notion of continuous work and inner restlessness (will Lucy reconcile with her family?). As we

progress in time, therefore, it is not the “happiness” of the happy ending that becomes increasingly problematic, but its conclusiveness and finality.

It is not a coincidence that the author-narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—who appears in the novel as a character—is tempted to leave Charles on a train “for eternity on his way to London” (405), in a frozen image of movement, but then observes that “the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending” (405).

Indeed, today's literary romances tend to resemble modulations more than conclusive narrative parables. In a recent analysis of Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), I discussed the trajectory of the novel as destabilizing the notion of a positive (or negative) accomplishment of existence as purposeful, teleological tale. The novel, by making its protagonists' relationship continue beyond the last page of the novel, subscribes to an understanding of love as ongoing pursuit.<sup>8</sup>

Philip and Caroline will not connect with one another. Lucy finds love at a cost. Charles and Sarah question love, bringing attention to the increasing precariousness of romantic relationships. Most contemporary romantic fiction fully recognizes the fragility of today's relations, making of it a necessary narrative element to be dealt with. As a genre, the romance is haunted by past accusations of naïve lack of depth, mawkish sentimentality, and optimism. Such allegations are often counteracted by the genre's enhanced inquisitiveness of its own forms, which makes of the romance a literary context of particular interest if one wishes to observe the current literary construction of love and the meta-generic strategies and practices employed by authors in the field.

This response was conceived from this perspective, as an encouragement to extend the debate on metagenre to scholars of romance literature, and a reflection weaved upon the numerous stimuli provided by Niederhoff's article.<sup>9</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The “freedom” Regis mentions is not absolute, it is the freedom to marry/engage in a relationship with the person chosen by the protagonist (no longer necessarily a “heroine”). Pamela Regis’s *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* has played a fundamental role in re-routing scholarly approaches to romance from ideological and psychologising to straight-forwardly academic. As Eric Selinger explains: “by doubling back to pre-feminist, non-Freudian approaches to the romance novel, Regis essentially hit the reset button on the whole enterprise of popular romance studies” (3). In this work, Regis puts together a modern canon of the romance novel, sketching its history and pre-modern literary affiliations. Regis borrows and elaborates upon Northrop Frye’s notion of “ritual death” formulated in his *Anatomy of Criticism*.

<sup>2</sup>For an extensive analysis of the theatre scene, see my article “Multitudes of Otherness.”

<sup>3</sup>The three attractions are the Palazzo Pubblico, the Collegiate Church, and the Caffè Garibaldi.

<sup>4</sup>*A Room with a View* is one of the first modern romantic narratives to display the emergence of what Eva Illouz calls “the regime of emotional authenticity” (31), an important turn in romantic relationships, as well as in literature about them, towards conceiving of courtship, and the choice of one’s partner, as a fundamentally individual and private matter, rather than a process a young woman would go through from a position of encasement within familial protective relations.

<sup>5</sup>“I love you,” Fletcher points out, “is a confession and a cliché” (41). By “mutely confessing” to Mr. Emerson her love for his son, Lucy achieves the performative effect of a confession avoiding the reiteration of its banality.

<sup>6</sup>*A Room with a View*. Directed by James Ivory, performances by Helena Bonham Carter, Maggie Smith, and Julian Sands, Merchant Ivory Productions, 1985.

<sup>7</sup>John Fowles writes three endings to the novel, one of which he indicates as false. The remaining two endings conclude the narrative.

<sup>8</sup>For an extensive analysis of the novel, see my article “Sharing the Same Soil.”

<sup>9</sup>After reading the following passage, in which the 2021 *Connotations* conference is described: “At the *Connotations* conference on metagenre, papers were given on tragedy, the epic, stand-up comedy, pastoral poetry, the verse essay, six-word stories, the short story, the novel, the memoir-novel and dramatic burlesques” (Niederhoff 7), I wished to add a Romance Studies perspective.

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# Forster's Self-Ironizing in "The Road from Colonus": A Response to Laura M. White<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

E. M. Forster's "The Road from Colonus" is a tale about the loss of inspiration. Its allusions to Sophocles' "Oedipus at Colonus" and, more recently, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," have been well recognized. But no attention has been paid to the relationship between the tale and the author's life. This essay first studies the extraordinary affinity Forster had for Coleridge because of the former's belief in the centrality of inspiration, then takes a biographical approach to investigate how the tale is derived from Forster's personal experiences, particularly his troubled relationship with his mother, who Forster feared would interrupt his writing in the same way the epiphany in his story is interrupted by the protagonist's youngest daughter.

"The Road from Colonus," probably the most famous tale written by E. M. Forster, is a well-known case of literary intertextuality. Its titular allusion to Sophocles's "Oedipus at Colonus" is obvious and has been frequently commented upon by critics.<sup>2</sup> But another allusion seems to have eluded critics for decades, until Laura M. White's 2006/2007 essay, which, as far as I know, is the first and only one to recognize Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" as another model for Forster's tale (see 184-89). Lucas's inspirational experience in the trunk of an enormous plane tree

in front of a country inn is similar to Coleridge's visionary dream after taking laudanum<sup>3</sup>; Lucas's fellow English tourists, notably Ethel, who interrupt Lucas's extraordinary vision, are comparable to the person from Porlock who interrupts Coleridge's dream. While Coleridge continually yearned for his lost poetic vision, Lucas is entirely unconscious of his loss, which makes the latter "suited only for irony" (189). White's approach is largely based on textual comparison and does not sufficiently expound the profound influence Coleridge had on Forster when it comes to inspiration; nor does she investigate the particular circumstances in which the tale was written, particularly Forster's ambivalent attitude towards his mother during this period. My essay is less a challenge than a supplement to White's argument, taking a biographical approach. It first demonstrates the extraordinary affinity Forster felt for Coleridge, and then reads the tale alongside accounts of Forster's journeys to Greece and Italy, viewing the father-daughter (Lucas-Ethel) relationship in the tale as a metamorphosis of the mother-son relationship in Forster's own life. Forster was a believer in the importance of human relationships, and this tale betrays his anxiety about his troubled relationship with his mother and her role as a potential interrupter of his writing when inspiration came.

Though mainly known as a novelist, Forster maintained a lifelong interest in poetry—even writing poems occasionally (as demonstrated in his posthumous *Creator as Critic* 724-41). From his many talks, lectures, essays and diaries, we learn that he adored Housman, Wordsworth, Whitman, Lawrence, Eliot, Auden, Tagore, Cavafy, and, particularly, Coleridge. He often mentioned Coleridge's name, and his views on Coleridge's literary career remained consistent throughout his life: as a great Romantic poet, Coleridge was accomplished both in poetry and criticism, like "a mountain with two peaks" (*BBC Talks* 62). The first peak "rises to an immense height but covers a very small area" (*BBC Talks* 63), and is best represented by the three visionary poems "Kubla Khan," "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "Christabel," the early drafts of which were composed in one year. But Coleridge very soon

discovered that he had lost the ability to write great poems. Opium inspired his writing, but meanwhile sapped his strength and spirit. Coleridge was destroyed as a poet at thirty—he had not yet reached the midpoint of his life. But he later reached another peak of creativity as a critic, his greatest accomplishments being his *Lectures on Shakespeare* and *Biographia Literaria*. Forster believed that Coleridge turned to literary criticism because his well of poetic inspiration had dried up: “Good as a critic because dead as a poet” (*Commonplace Book* 86).

In fact, Forster was talking about himself by way of commenting on Coleridge. Forster died at the age of 91, but his most productive period as a novelist lasted not more than 20 years, with a clear sign of decline after the midpoint of this period. His novels, six in total, were all conceived and mainly published before his middle age: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), *Maurice* (initially drafted in 1913-14 and published in 1971). His most acclaimed novel, *A Passage to India*, was not published until 1924. He had a dreadful apprehension that he “somehow dried up after the *Passage*” (*Creator as Critic* 318). As it turned out, with 1924 as the watershed (when he reached the midpoint of his life at 45), he stopped writing novels altogether. Except for some occasional short stories, he turned to memoirs, travelogues, reviews, broadcasts—largely works of non-fiction. He had lost his inspiration for creative writing, which he rued bitterly in 1930:

I am like C. in many ways, though heading for a different kind of crash. I have his idleness, diffidence, self-consciousness, gentleness, and am a gentleman. Consequently find it difficult to look at his work apart from the agencies that produced or curtailed it. I see him too much under the rule of Time. “And I the while the sole unbusy thing, / Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.” (*Commonplace Book* 85)

The two lines here are excerpted from “Work Without Hope,” a not very well-known poem by Coleridge, which indicates that Forster was quite familiar with Coleridge’s poetry in general. More than that, he was so fascinated with the latter’s life that he even wrote a character sketch based on Coleridge’s legendary experience in the army. The title

of the sketch is "Trooper Silas Tompkins Comberbacke," the name Coleridge adopted as a trooper (*Abinger Harvest* 225-32).

As arguably the most famous dream poem in English, "Kubla Khan" is frequently cited by Forster as the best example of a piece of writing which was the result of inspiration. In the essay "The Creator as Critic" (1930), Forster states that the act of creative writing is comparable to dreaming in sleep, "I mean by Creation an activity, part of which takes place in sleep. [...] Dreams and poems have a common origin, [...] a dream actually *is* a poem" (*Creator as Critic* 65). He cites "Kubla Khan" as a remarkably involuntary poem which is inspired, or rather, is wholly written, in a dream: "'Kubla Khan,' composed entirely in sleep and under drugs, is from one point of view an abnormal production. From another point of view, it is more normal than most poetry, because it is a direct arrival from dreamland, without rearrangement or dressing up" (*Creator as Critic* 65).

In another essay, "The *Raison D'Etre* of Criticism in the Arts" (1947), Forster further explains the relationship between writing, sleep and the subconscious: "What about the creative state? In it a man is taken out of himself. He lets down as it were a bucket into his subconscious, and draws up something which is normally beyond his reach" (*Two Cheers* 114). Once again, Forster takes "Kubla Khan" as an example. Its many images may come from Coleridge's voracious reading—Forster mentions in particular John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*, renowned for the author's indefatigable hunting down of all the possible sources for the poem's fantastical images. Coleridge's unconscious memory of his reading may have found its way into this poem, but the poet, says Forster, is by no means conscious of those images at the moment of its creation, because writing, like dreaming, takes place in a half-awake state and the writer becomes conscious only when the work is finished: "He had created and did not know how he had done it. [...] There is always, even with the most realistic artist, the sense of withdrawal from his own creation, the sense of surprise" (*Two Cheers* 114-15).



Once again, Forster is self-revealing through his commentary on Coleridge's poem. He believed his writing practice was dependent on inspiration. Having this belief, he wishes it to be a regular occurrence—as Frank Kermode put it: “pick up the pen and the flow begins” (44). In 1947, he published a collection of tales (all of which were written before WWI) with a preface in which he particularly emphasized the preternatural conditions under which three of his fantasies were written: while sitting in a valley in 1902, “suddenly the first chapter [...] rushed into my mind as if it had waited for me up there. I wrote it out as soon as I returned to the hotel,” which led to “The Story of a Panic.” On another occasion, while in Cornwall, “a story met me in the open air,” which later evolved into *The Rock*. As to “The Road from Colonus,” it was composed without much difficulty, for the whole of it “hung ready for me in a hollow tree near Olympia” (“Introduction,” *Collected Tales* vi).

Therefore, inspiration is not only central to the life of the protagonist of “The Road from Colonus,” but also to the life of its author. Since Forster's fictional works are viewed as closely connected with his personal experiences,<sup>4</sup> we cannot help asking to what degree “The Road from Colonus” is autobiographical.

This tale was written in 1903 when modern technological revolutions were sweeping across Europe. Factories, railroads, telegraph systems and cars were being developed at an unprecedented rate. Cities were transformed beyond recognition, whereas the countryside, along with traditional rural life, was on the brink of disappearance. Lucas, the protagonist of “The Road from Colonus,” is lost, for a moment, in the beautiful Greek countryside after drinking the water from a fountain near an inn. Later, when constrained in his suburban apartment after his return to England, he becomes disgusted with the running water in the plumbing. Lucas's aversion to modern plumbing seems to mirror Forster's own attitude towards the drastic changes in his time: “it has meant the destruction of feudalism and relationship based on the land, it has meant the transference of power from the aristocrat to the bu-

reaucrat and the manager and the technician. Perhaps it will mean democracy, but it has not meant it yet, and personally I hate it" (*Two Cheers* 273). In the spring of the year he wrote the story, Forster was travelling in Greece. As the fountainhead of western civilization, this ancient nation appealed strongly to him. Preparing carefully in advance, he even transcribed Pindar's Eighth Pythian Ode on a slip of paper as a charm. But to his disappointment, when he arrived, the scenery turned out not to be as amazing as he had expected: "Marathon was no more than a view, and 'Aegina by moonlight did not come off.' As for Troy, its ghosts were too military for his taste" (Furbank 1: 102). Not until he reached the old city of Cnidus on a rainy day did he feel overwhelmed by the country's beauty.

Something similar happens to Lucas.<sup>5</sup> When newly arrived in Greece, he thinks "Athens had been dusty, Delphi wet, Thermopylae flat" (*Collected Tales* 127). Not until he comes to the inn does he feel the journey is worth it. The key scene of the story is well known: Lucas is indulging in the mystical vision he has while sitting in the ancient tree when suddenly his fellow tourists come up, causing his vision to disappear once and for all. In contrast to the person from Porlock, who interrupts Coleridge's opium dream of Kubla Khan and who may be a personification of the censorious, repressive mind (the faculty of reason), interruptive of the imagination (see Wheeler 23-24), Lucas's interrupters represent, as White notes, "society itself and society alone" (187). White goes on to say that Forster's "modernist demythologizing" leads to "a reduced level of interiority in Forster's representation of inspiration and interruption" and regards Forster's achievement "less humanly plausible than Coleridge's projection of the person from Porlock" (187-88). Admittedly, there must be an element of hyperbole at play in the description of Lucas as a hollow man with no inward life who completely forgets his vision in Greece after his return to London (Coleridge, by contrast, goes on yearning for the return of his lost vision). But I would like to suggest further that Forster's description of Lucas as a benumbed curmudgeon is intended to show the importance of social re-

lationships and the irremediably disastrous effect of an unkind interruption by an outsider from the protagonist's immediate social circle. By contrast, the theme of social relations in *Kubla Khan* is kept to a minimum, if not left totally absent. The person from Porlock comes on business and his interruption is deemed as accidental, not as intentionally unkind.

Forster's writing always emphasizes the value of social relationships: "personal relations mean everything to me" (*Prince's Tale* 318). In his essay "Notes on the English Character," he describes the flaws of English people, by which he largely means the middle-class, as those with "undeveloped hearts": "it is this undeveloped heart that is largely responsible for the difficulties of Englishmen abroad" (*Abinger Harvest* 5). Both before and after his stay at the inn, Lucas's heart is undeveloped. In terms of dispassion, he is comparable to Henry Wilcox in *Howards End*, but Henry is lucky enough to meet the brave and imaginative woman Margaret Schlegel, who believes she can awaken his undeveloped heart: "She would only point out the salvation that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect!" (*Howards End* 159). By contrast, Lucas has no such person in his life devoted to personal connection: "His friends were dead or cold" (135). None of his fellow travelers truly understand him: Mrs. Forman does not allow him to air any opinions, and Mr. Graham looks polite but can be coercive, even brutal. Ethel is considerate and continually hovers over her father but is unmindful of his heart's yearning. She does not inquire about the reason for his decision to stay at the inn; instead, she teases him. Most ironically, when hearing news of the death of all the inhabitants of the inn, she congratulates him by saying: "Such a marvellous deliverance does make one believe in Providence" (143). She has no idea that her father has been deprived of his golden opportunity for spiritual redemption. She attends to her father only in a socially appropriate manner, making sure of his physical welfare yet ignoring his spiritual life. If he had been allowed to stay overnight at the inn, Lucas could have had a dignified death like Oedipus, but due to the lack of a person committed to connection, he is reduced to a soul-dead existence.

In Forster's real-life journey to Greece, there were his Cambridge teachers and friends. He particularly enjoyed the company of an undergraduate, R. B. Smith, and they even decided to ride a donkey (parallel to Lucas riding a mule in the story) for their sightseeing. Forster's mother Alice Clara Lily had meant to join him, but he made a point of sending her off to Italy, "leaving her there while he peeled off to join the tour" (Moffat 66). In the previous year, Forster and his mother had been to Italy, but had had a terrible time together. Forster was chronically forgetful: "missed trains, misread directions, lost gloves, mislaid guidebooks, left maps behind at every stop" (Moffat 59). To make the matter worse, he sprained his ankle, broke his arm and ended up bed-ridden in a hotel. It was Lily who bathed him (when Lucas means to stay at the Greek inn, the first question Ethel asks is "How would you get your meals or your bath?" [136]). By the time of the Italian journey, Forster was already a 23-year-old man. His mother was kind enough to look after him, but not without complaint. She not only found fault with him in others' presence, but asserted that she "never saw anybody so incapable" (qtd. in Moffat 59). In fact, Forster was not that hopelessly inept, but was made awkward by his mother's presence. As Moffat notes, "he might have done differently if he had not been traveling with Lily" (58). They looked amicable on the surface, but, deep down, Forster must have been displeased with his mother's excessive care and constant company: her presence in travel would inevitably unnerve him. The best alternative was to keep her away, which is what happens at the beginning of "The Road from Colonus": Lucas rides by himself, leaving Ethel far behind.

Critics tend to regard Forster's short stories as little relevant to his life. Even Nicola Beauman, one of his biographers, holds that Forster "mostly used imagination pure and simple for his short stories" (106), but, based upon the above analysis, we can clearly say that the tale is informed by Forster's travel experiences. The figure of Ethel is derived from Lily, whereas the senile Lucas is based on the young author himself. Forster said: "Growing old is an emotion which comes over us at almost any age. I had it myself violently between the ages of twenty-

five and thirty" (qtd. in Moffat 80). The tale was published in June 1904 when the poet had just turned 25. We do not know the exact reason for his fear of aging because he kept no diary, except a few pages of notebook between November 1901 and December 1903 (Beauman 99, 103, 142). We can only speculate that his fear might have come from his insufficient sense of accomplishment as a writer. In hindsight, we could say he was on the threshold of a creative outburst (1905-1910), but Forster himself was unsure at the time whether he was capable of writing truly great works. Assuredly, he could be proud of a few tales newly published, but at the same time must have been crestfallen about his failure to bring off more ambitious work: a *Lucy* novel was started as early as 1901, but abandoned in 1903, only to be restarted in 1904 (finished in 1908 as *A Room with a View*). On New Year's Eve in 1904 (his twenty-fifth birthday), he wrote a very dismal note doubting whether he would end up accomplishing anything: "My life is now straightening into something rather sad & dull to be sure [...]. Nothing more great will come out of me" (qtd. in Furbank 1: 121). As it turned out, things did not happen immediately in the way he dreaded. He published four novels within six years and became a famous novelist. It is curious that a promising young writer should sound so diffident and anxious about losing his writerly ability.

Anne M. Wyatt-Brown suggests Forster's literary career was shaped by and ended mainly for two reasons, both of which involved Lily (112). One had to do with his lifelong sense of inadequacy. Forster's relationship with his mother was both close and tense. He lost his father at the age of 22 months. With a moderate inheritance (£7,000) from the father, and later from a great aunt (£8,000), the son and the mother lived a comfortable, if not wealthy, life. Lily was, by nature, authoritarian and possessive, often reprimanding Forster for his awkwardness and timidity. When he failed to meet her demands, she would blame him, which led to his guilt and sense of uselessness. By 1912, he had become one of the most famous English novelists and enjoyed great critical acclaim, but he still wrote sulkily in his diary concerning his mother: "I know she does not think highly of me. Whatever I do she is thinking 'Oh that's

weak'" (qtd. in Furbank 1: 218). The second reason for Lily's influence on Forster's career as a writer had to do with his worry about loss. At the age of 14, Forster and Lily were driven out of the family home of Rooksnest due to Lily's failure to renew the rental contract. This old redbrick house was an idyllic place for the young Forster to grow up, embodying his fond memories of childhood. His happy time in the house provided rich material for his future writing. Among the concerns in his fiction are people's sense of belonging, rootlessness and powerlessness in the face of the will of others. The fact that Lucas is not allowed to do things on his own and is compelled to leave the inn—the locus of what he believes will be his spiritual redemption—can be viewed as an expression of the despair Forster must have felt in the years before.

Weighed down by Lily's suffocating care, Forster could only endure their existence together with brief escapes. He confessed: "Am only happy away from home. If only she would come away more...." (qtd. in Furbank 1: 204). Fond of social life, Lily "spent endless hours determining who was too 'vulgar,' who 'genteel' enough to visit or invite to tea" (qtd. in Moffat 83), prudishly critical of her son's works and insensibly unaware of his inner life. She disapproved strongly of Helen Schlegel's illegitimate baby in *Howards End*, as seen in Forster's diary: "Mother is evidently deeply shocked by *Howards End*... I do not know how I shall live through the next months... Yet I have never written anything less erotic" (qtd. in Beauman 13). When he was privately complaining about his decreasing interest in heterosexual love, she kept urging him to write a sequel to *Howards End*. Though living under the same roof as him, Lily, who did not die until 1945, probably never knew for certain why her son remained unmarried. Once prodded to publish *Maurice* by Joe Ackerley, who cited André Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt*, Forster replied flatly, "[b]ut Gide hasn't got a mother!" (qtd. in Moffat 244). In 1935, Forster, at 56 years old, had to undergo an operation. Before the operation, he wrote to Lily: "You sometimes say that I am bored at home—I am not at all, but I do get depressed [with] so much supervision..." (qtd. in Moffat 235). In 1938, he confided to a friend:

Although my mother has been intermittently tiresome for the last thirty years, cramped and warped my genius, hindered my career, blocked and bugged up my house, and boycotted my beloved, I have to admit that she has provided a sort of rich subsoil where I have been able to rest and grow. (qtd. in Wyatt-Brown 121)

As Wyatt-Brown suggests, the comparison of his mother to a mulch heap is quite a “sad commentary” on Forster’s predicament and indicates “how little Forster was able to give up the relationship in spite of the obvious restrictions that it caused him” (121). Just as Lucas could not live without Ethel (though annoyed by Ethel’s interruption, Lucas is happy with her visit afterwards: when she offers him “[s]ome more toast,” his reply is, “Thank you, my dear” [141]), Forster would never make a complete break with Lily. The complex relationship between mother and son haunted him so much that he even wanted to write a novel about it:

*Idea of Mother and Son.* She dominates him in youth. Manhood brings him emancipation—perhaps through friendship or a happy marriage. But the mother is waiting .... She gets her way and reestablishes childhood, with the difference that his subjection is conscious now and causes him humiliation and pain. [...] That’s the only serious theme worth treating.... (qtd. in Wyatt-Brown 121).

As we know, this novel about “a devouring mother and a weak son” (Wyatt-Brown 124) never materialized. But “The Road from Colonus,” written years earlier, centering on a devouring daughter and a weak father, could be considered as a veiled reflection of his anxiety about the fatal threat his mother might eventually pose to his writing. Though there is no record of Forster ever being interrupted by his mother when he was engrossed in writing a great work, in the manner of Coleridge being interrupted by the person from Porlock, we can say for certain that Lily’s demand for obedience must have made him raise his heckles, even sent shivers down his spine: “Mother freezes any depth in me. Alone, I can cling to beauty...” (qtd. in Beauman 240).<sup>6</sup>

Forster once said that there were only three types of character in his works: “the person I think I am, the people who irritate me, and the

people I'd like to be" (*Creator as Critic* 318). In view of the circumstances in which he was writing the tale, there is no denying his deft appropriation of his personal experiences. Lucas is modelled on himself, whereas Ethel is the younger representative of Lily, with the generations reversed. The tale demonstrates the enormous power of inspiration and the fatal results when such inspiration is disrupted by an outsider. The young Forster desired and cherished whatever flashes of inspiration came his way, but was deeply worried that the lack of an intimate person in his life committed to a more nourishing kind of relationship ("connection") would make his inspiration vanish for good. Given the fact that the tale was written at the beginning of his writing career and that his worry materialized into deplorable fact in the long term—he did lose his inspiration early due to Lily's prying eye—it is not an exaggeration to say "The Road from Colonus" is a sadly prophetic tale. Mr. Lucas, unable to live up to the heroic stature of Oedipus, is not only a laughable figure for the author's detached irony, but also a pathetic figure worthy of readers' sympathy, because he is an author surrogate.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This response is partly based on my previous Chinese paper entitled "灵感的忽至与永逝——‘离开科罗诺斯的路’主题新探" ("The Dawning and the Vanishing of Inspiration: A New Thematic Approach to Forster's 'The Road from Colonus'"), published in the Chinese journal *Foreign Languages and Cultures* 5.4 (2021): 1-11.

<sup>2</sup>Having said this, we should note that the title of the tale is "The Road FROM Colonus," for Mr. Lucas is forcibly taken away from Colonus in the end and not given the chance of spiritual redemption as per Oedipus' example. Lucas's tale occurs not in Colonus, but in Plataniste, in the province of Messenia. Yet, on further reflection, the allusion to Oedipus seems so obvious that we cannot help doubting whether the author means it seriously. We are told twice that Mrs. Forman insists upon this obvious connection: "Mrs. Forman always referred to her [Ethel] as Antigone, and Mr. Lucas tried to settle down to the role of Oedipus, which seemed the only one that public opinion allowed him" (*Collected Tales* 126). Later in the tale, we see her teasing Lucas for wanting to stay at the inn: "Oh, it is a place in a thousand! [...] I could live and die here! I really would stop if I had not to be back at Athens!



It reminds me of the Colonus of Sophocles" (*Collected Tales* 132). Mrs. Forman, whose surname suggests her subscription to social formality, is a typical middle-class woman, endorsing the conventional virtue of filial duty. The titular Colonus looks more like a red herring deliberately deployed by the author, warning us not to fall into the trap set by the priggish Mrs. Forman. Given the fact that Lucas's heartfelt yearning for redemption is thwarted by Ethel in contradistinction to Oedipus' wish for death fulfilled in the absence of Antigone, Colonus seems like a salute to—but in fact is an ironic rebuttal of—Mrs. Forman's self-congratulatory comparison.

<sup>3</sup>Though there has been continuous controversy over the true identity of the speaker in "Kubla Khan," Forster never seems to have doubted that the speaker could be any figure other than Coleridge himself.

<sup>4</sup>*The Longest Journey* and *Maurice* were based on Forster's life at Cambridge; *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* were inspired by his travel experiences in Italy; the first few chapters of *A Passage to India* were written soon after his arrival in India, after which he balked and could not go on the writing until he revisited India ten years later. The estate of *Howards End* was based upon Rooksnest where he spent his childhood. Sometimes Forster represents himself via a gender reversal: Lucy Honeychurch, in *A Room with a View*, initially tries to conform to middle class social etiquette by suppressing her desire, which aligns with Forster's experiences at the time of the novel's composition. As his biographer Wendy Moffat said, Forster "based his complex characters on models from his life" (100).

<sup>5</sup>Lucas's visionary experience has been variously called "illumination," "revelation," "epiphany," and "inspiration"; see Abrams 1977; Herz 59; Moffat 66; Stone 145.

<sup>6</sup>It seems Forster loathed interruption from a young age. As a precocious boy, Forster taught himself to read as early as four years old. When summoned by a nurse to join the grown-ups (Lily included, of course) for conversation, he had the audacity to admonish her with the words "Tiresome to be interrupted in my reading when the light is so good. Can't you tell the people I am busy reading?" (King 12).

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# Blaming Helen in Twenty-First Century Myth Writing: A Response to Lena Linne

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For further contributions to the debate on “Meta-Epic Reflection in Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer, or: The Meta-Epic Novel,” see <http://www.connotations.de/debate/meta-epic-novel/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

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## Abstract

This response to the article “Meta-Epic Reflection in Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer, or: The Meta-Epic Novel” takes as its starting point the author’s metageneric interpretation of twenty-first century myth writing, and her use of Fielding in exploring the tragic and heroic motifs in the texts. It goes on to focus primarily on Linne’s interpretation of Haynes’s *A Thousand Ships*. I gesture towards another route research in this field may take: the adaptation of ancient tragedy, and analysis of multiple feminist responses to a single mythical figure. This response summarises some of the issues that arise in adapting Helen. Helen’s contentious blame and divisive agency have been inextricable parts of her myth since its conception, and it is within this tradition that contemporary adaptations of Helen necessarily operate.

The timeliness of the article “Meta-Epic Reflection in the Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer, or: The Meta-Epic Novel” can hardly be overstated. The literary vogue for women writers adapting Greek myth with overtly feminist aims within the past two decades is evidenced by texts such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Lavinia* (2007), up to the proliferation of more recent novels including Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), as well as Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and its recent sequel *The Women of Troy* (2021). This response will provide a brief commentary on the article

overall, before paying particular attention to the author's analysis of Helen in Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019).

Linne's article is written in the knowledge of the current momentum for revisionist mythmaking, though its scope is not limited to women's writing: apart from Atwood and Haynes, the article discusses Daniel Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic* (2017). Linne analyses the given texts as meta-genre, that is "a passage or an entire text which, either implicitly or explicitly, comments on the genre of another text" (58). Linne's definition of the term is accessible and inviting, but it also considers the term in relation to the current theoretical favour afforded to neologisms with the "meta"-prefix. The article's thesis is that the meta-genre of the texts allows them to be both self-reflexive, as well as other-reflexive in their commentary on Homeric epics. The article proposes Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey* as an intergenerational *bildungsroman*: the affective nature of the text creates a "meta-epic [that] conveys Mendelsohn's enthusiasm for the classical languages and their literature in general" (62). Linne then goes on to interpret the dramatic irony and mockery in Atwood's *The Penelopiad* as a burlesque commentary on the oral tradition of Homeric epic, with a particular focus on undermining the male heroes that are foregrounded in those epics.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most original contribution to knowledge provided by Linne in the article is the use of Henry Fielding to explore the relationship between these modern novelistic interventions in the epic tradition and ancient epic and tragedy. This theoretical intervention allows for the interpretation of Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* as a "tragic epic poem in prose" (66). While Fielding was concerned with the difference between "tragic" and "comic," Calliope (the implicit narrator of Haynes's polyphonic novel) is more interested in the distinction between "tragic" and "heroic." Men's deaths are epic (heroic and worth narrating in epic), while women's deaths are tragic (lamentable and stageable in a tragedy; see 71-72). The article expertly discusses the complexities and apparent contradictions in Calliope's stance: women are worthy of being considered epic and heroic (since they, too, are brave and fearless); the male model of heroism (of the sorts advanced by Achilles and Menelaus) is only admirable within a framework

of violence and anxious masculinity; and the epic as a form should be afforded to women, reformed, and/or altogether abandoned. As Linne succinctly puts it, "*A Thousand Ships* tells the stories of the female characters affected by the war in Troy. What is more, it comments on how these stories have been narrated (or: not narrated) in the epic tradition" (77). The article ultimately concludes that all three novels are "prose epics" for the twenty-first century, at once engaging in a tradition that can be traced from antiquity to the eighteenth (and nineteenth and twentieth) centuries, as well as meta-genre texts that comment upon themselves as a novelistic phenomenon and upon the epic tradition, especially the Homeric epic tradition.

Linne notes that Haynes draws on different ancient texts to construct her retelling due to the paucity of women's experiences in Homer: "A substantial number of her chapters are based on Attic tragedy, in which female characters feature more prominently" (74). This shift from heroic epic to tragic drama implies "a change from the battlefields to the domestic realm, from the male to the female sphere" (74), which fulfils the intradiegetic narrator's desire to depart from rehashing the male heroic narrative in favour of depicting the suffering and heroism of women's deeds and behaviours. Linne discusses the apparent conflict surrounding Helen in *A Thousand Ships*, since the title is named after her legend, and no "panoramic portrayal of the Trojan War" (75) could be complete without Helen, the ostensible cause of the war; yet the Muse makes clear her disdain for Helen: "I'm offering him the story of all the women in the war. Well, most of them (I haven't decided about Helen yet. She gets on my nerves)" (*A Thousand Ships* 41). Helen is also not afforded a chapter of her own. Instead, she features in the *Trojan Women* chapters, which aligns with her presence in Euripides's *Trojan Women*. Though Linne's focus is on Homeric adaptation, she does specify that Euripides's *Trojan Women* is a crucial source for Haynes, and Helen's defence of her actions and more equitable allotment of blame in *A Thousand Ships* is drawn from the Euripidean drama. I would add that Euripides alone offers multiple interpretations of Helen. In *The Trojan Women*, Helen launches a full-scale legal defence of herself, representing herself in a trial for her life, while Hecuba unequivocally blames her for the fall of her city and the suffering of her people. In *Helen*, she is completely relieved of blame, sequestered, as she is, in Egypt; meanwhile,

in Troy the men are fighting for the prize of an eidolon in the shape of Helen. In *Orestes*, Helen is arguably a figure at once shamefaced and vapid, with Haynes going so far as to call her a “bimbo” in her radio programme *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics*, for her reluctance to cut her hair in mourning. Hence, in Euripidean drama alone, we find multiple, contradictory iterations of Helen.

Haynes’s choice to deny Helen a chapter of her own appears at first to be illogical given Helen’s significance not only to the Homeric epic, but also to the title of the novel. While Linne opines that Haynes remedies this by affording Helen a chapter in her nonfiction text *Pandora’s Jar*, it is also worth noting the long tradition of struggling to contend with Helen in literature. Hughes and Maguire agree that writing Helen is a complicated matter, due in part to the centuries of debate surrounding her agency. Put simply, either Helen is an evil seductress entirely to blame for the thousands of deaths in a decade-long war, or she completely lacks agency because she was stolen and then used as an excuse for a war about trade.<sup>2</sup> Her story is therefore either one of elopement or abduction, so Helen is either a guilty adulteress, almost entirely to blame for the Trojan War, or she is an innocent victim, unable to be held accountable for any of her actions (Maguire 109). Hughes agrees in *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (2009) that “[f]or two and half millennia [...] tradition recognised a feistier heroine. Not just a woman of straw, but a dynamic protagonist, a rich queen. A political player who [...] controlled the men around her” (140), though in relatively recent history she has morphed into a vacuous, submissive, passive prize, as exemplified by Diane Kruger’s Helen in *Troy*. This “feistier” Helen does not necessarily engender respect—once Helen is the active agent of her fate, rather than the passive partner, men rush to label her a whore. Hughes credits this sex-based discreditation to the increasingly Christianised world from the second century AD onward, where “Helen has become just another nail in the coffin of womankind” as the Church used Helen as part of their systematic “demonising [of] women and their sexual power” (144). When considering Helen’s agency, it is important that it is not equated to liberation, because “Helen, as an active partner in her own abduction, is not Helen the empowered woman but Helen the dangerous slut” (144). Maguire agrees that “[a] tactic used in

both defences and accusations of Helen is the granting of sexual agency" (124)—Helen's consent rescues her from victimhood, but it does not necessarily rescue her from blame. Maguire traces literary instances where (1) Helen is an active participant in her own abduction, such as in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Euripides's *Women of Troy*, and the anonymous *Excidium Troiae*; (2) Helen is defended by blaming someone else, such as in the cases of Hesiod's *Cypria* that blames Aphrodite, or Quintus of Smyrna's *War at Troy* that blames Paris, or the *Ars Amatoria* in which Ovid mockingly blames Menelaus for being too dull, thus encouraging his wife's adultery; (3) there is joint culpability—Helen sometimes shares the blame with Aphrodite, and in later writers such as Euripides, Herodotus, and Isocrates, there is a *felix culpa*, as they admit that Helen's adultery had military and trade benefits (110-12). There is another tradition that places the blame with Aphrodite. Although depictions of Helen as a rape victim or a scheming seductress have become the more favoured interpretations for writers and artists, there is also the literary tradition that begins with Sappho, which renders Helen a woman helpless against the powers of Aphrodite, whose divine will is abetted by Paris (Hughes 139). For O'Gorman, Helen's myth is an obvious choice when considering the women's history in warfare, since women's position as the implicit cause of wars ("this is all for you") is explicit in the case of Helen: she is at once the reviled cause of war and the sanctified object of military protection (196; 208). More directly relevant to Linne's article is Helen's morality in Homer, which is presented ambiguously: no one is a harsher critic than herself, yet "Paris says he 'carried [her] away' (3.444) and Hector accuses him of taking Menelaus's wife (3.53) (both of which could imply abduction)" (Maguire 114). Homer is less interested in blame than in emotional crises, and his Helen "is willing and passive, to blame and not to blame" (Maguire 115). Helen's contentious blame has been an inextricable part of her myth since its conception, and it is within this tradition that contemporary adaptations of Helen necessarily operate.

Overall, Linne's article is a vital critical investigation of selected texts within this genre. Her particular focus on the metagenetic qualities within these texts and the adaptation of, and creative responses to, Homeric epic lays bare some of the most significant aspects of this literary phenomenon.

In my own response, I have gestured towards another route research may take: the adaptation of ancient tragedy, and analysis of multiple feminist responses to a single mythical figure. I wish to end this response with a comment regarding the study of the ongoing genre of contemporary novelistic adaptations of Greek myth. Lena Linne's postdoctoral research into twenty-first century responses to Homer (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) operates in conversation with my own doctoral thesis, *Contemporary Feminist Adaptations of Greek Myth* (University of Glasgow), as well as Harriet MacMillan's 2020 doctoral project (University of Edinburgh) on feminist rewritings in the Canongate Myth Series (in which *The Penelopiad* was the inaugural publication). Studies of the current literary climate need to include this popular and proliferating genre which is rapidly changing the shape of both the contemporary novel and classical reception. Additionally, this genre is emblematic of current literary marketing, since these books are foregrounded in online social spaces such as Bookstagram and BookTok, and their online presence is supplemented by the social media, blogs, and podcasts that the authors run or participate in. I would invite academics interested in adaptation, gender studies, classical reception, radical translation praxes, and digital humanities to continue research in this area.

University of Glasgow

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Of course, parodying ancient epic is as established as the epic itself as a form—Homer himself was originally attributed with writing the *Batrachomyomachia*, or “The Battle of the Frogs and Mice,” a parody of the *Iliad* and the Trojan War. Though the mock-epic may have been written instead by Pigres, it can still be categorised as Homeric by the era in which it was written and its form as an epic poem (see Rose). Atwood's novella thus becomes as much a part of the epic tradition as the Homeric epics.

<sup>2</sup>In the chapter on “Blame” in *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* (2009), Maguire expounds that Helen is always either held accountable for the Trojan War, or her accountability is reduced at the cost of her agency.



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# “That we shall die we know”: Historical Fetters and Creative Liberation in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*<sup>1</sup>

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This article is the first entry in a debate on a contribution on “‘That we shall die we know’: Historical Fetters and Creative Liberation in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/shakespeares-julius-caesar/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

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## Abstract

In his tragedy *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare builds largely on the 1579 translation of Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, usually referred to as *Parallel Lives*. Shakespeare’s rendering of the events around the assassination, however, diverges substantially from his source material. Nor does his tragedy end with the death of Caesar: it is located right in the middle of the play, and more than half of the action follows afterwards, with a focus on Brutus and his suicide. The very fact that the eponymous hero dies halfway through the performance and the focus shifts to one of his murderers, Brutus, suggests that this play has two heroes rather than one. In our paper, we take these reconfigurations as a starting point to reflect on the tension that arises from the collation of historical matter on the one hand and generic restraints of tragedy on the other. The tragedy is a double one, and the double constraint thus reveals itself to be a creative liberation from the fetters presented by history and the main source text: where in the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch sets up Julius Caesar in comparison the Alexander the Great, and Brutus in comparison to Dion, we find Julius Caesar and Brutus in the play posited as foils to one another and thus presenting another set of “parallel lives.” In Shakespeare’s play both characters are marked by fatal self-deception, which is underscored by structural parallels throughout the play. By showing the parallel moments of personal choice that lead to historical events, Shakespeare triggers a reflection on historical truth as well as tragic recognition.

*Julius Caesar*, perhaps the first of Shakespeare's plays performed at the newly-built Globe Theatre in 1599 (see Cox), lends itself particularly well to an exploration of "self-imposed fetters," since with Shakespeare's choice of subjects comes the challenge of avoiding "a mere repetition of what has been told a hundred times before" (Bauer 13): a tragedy<sup>2</sup> of this name will necessarily be concerned with the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March by a group of conspirators including Brutus and Cassius.<sup>3</sup> Yet to regard the play as a mere retelling of historical events fails to acknowledge that the well-known subject matter "trigger[s] the author's [in this case Shakespeare's] inventiveness by turning a story into a means of communication for a new idea" (Bauer 13), despite his strict adherence to genre (tragedy), historical events and considerable debts to source texts. Most prominent among those is Thomas North's 1579 translation (reissued in 1595 and 1603) of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romanes* (from Jacques Amyot's French version), commonly called *Parallel Lives*. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, however, deviates substantially from what Plutarch and others have to say about Caesar's assassination and the surrounding events.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Shakespeare's tragedy does not end with or shortly after the assassination, but rather locates it right in the middle of the play, in Act 3, Scene 1: more than half of the action comes afterwards, with a focus on Brutus and his suicide. This is followed by a short but telling spotlight on Antony and Octavius, who would become central to the story of *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606). The very fact that the eponymous hero dies halfway through the performance and the focus shifts to one of his murderers, Brutus, suggests that this play has two heroes rather than one.<sup>5</sup>

Shakespeare, as is well known, generally transformed the sources he used, although there are some critics who claim that the "norm" in his plays is "considerable fidelity to historical material" (Whitaker 142). In the case of *Julius Caesar*, the changes are functional in the overall context of the play, to the effect of a structural re-configuration of the historical matter and, more importantly, the relation of the characters involved.

In what follows, we will explore the tension that arises from the collation of historical matter on the one hand and generic restraints of tragedy on the other. Shakespeare works with his source text in different ways to further his own creative agenda: he specifies and extends Plutarch's temporal references; he amplifies the role of prophecies; in some places, he also adds to the source text and changes speech attributions of characters. As a result of these various re-configurations, the tragedy turns out to be a double one, and the double constraint thus reveals itself to be a creative liberation from the fetters presented by history and the main source text: where in the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch sets up Julius Caesar in comparison to Alexander the Great, and Brutus in comparison to Dion,<sup>6</sup> we find Julius Caesar and Brutus in the play posited as foils to one another and thus presenting another set of "parallel lives." Shakespeare's focus, however, is different from renderings of the story so far: while history had written the subject matter as a political tragedy, in Shakespeare's tragedy both characters are marked by fatal self-deception, which is underscored by structural parallels throughout the play. Our hypothesis is hence a paradoxical one: the addition of restraints leads to creative liberation. In other words, Shakespeare, in this play, is out-Plutarching Plutarch in that he ties the fetters ever faster and thus eventually overcomes them to provide an innovative reading of the historical events. By showing the parallel moments of personal choice that lead to historical events, Shakespeare thus creates a sense of transpersonal historical connectedness.

### 1. Extending and Specifying Temporal Structure(s): Moving Towards the Ides of March

The historical events underlying the plot and action of the play provide an apt starting point to the discussion of Shakespeare's use of sources as well as their transformation. He partly diverges from, partly specifies Plutarch's order of events leading up to the assassination; overall, Shakespeare's treatment of time leads to an acceleration and temporal



daunger" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326; emphasis added), but does not go into further detail. Plutarch's "long time affore" is accordingly specified by Shakespeare: it is now more or less exactly a month before the Ides of March.<sup>9</sup>

With the beginning of Act 2, the play again moves forward in time: Brutus is sleepless at night and calls for his servant Lucius, whom he asks, "Is not tomorrow, boy, the first of March?" (2.1.40). The question is somewhat odd: why should Brutus (not) know the date? That Brutus brings up this question provides orientation to the audience, who will recognize the historical dimension of the unfolding incidents and anticipate the infamous event. It is all the more striking, then, when Lucius—after looking up the date in the calendar—does not confirm but correct Brutus: "March is wasted fifteen days" (2.1.59), pointing out that Brutus's sense of time was off by two whole weeks.<sup>10</sup>

The dramatist thus constantly foregrounds the passing of time. Brutus was first taken into the conspiracy during the feast of Lupercalia by Cassius; apparently, he has been pondering on the matter since then and lost track of time over this: "Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar / I have not slept" (2.1.61-62). The text here simultaneously reminds its audience of the significance of the date to ground the action firmly in history/historiography, and it uses the discrepancy between Brutus's initial assumption and the actual date to emphasize his deliberations and to point to his not acting rashly at all but after some consideration and even hesitation.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the passage brings us up to speed with the fact that events have moved on to the eve of the Ides of March, which raises audience expectations as everybody knows what will inevitably happen next. The audience is left with a heightened sense of anticipation, since Lucius's news confirms that the pivotal moment in a tragedy about Julius Caesar—his assassination—is closer than originally thought: we are still only at the beginning of Act 2, and the greater part of the tragedy is yet to follow. In the course of the first act, incidents were considered that were months apart; and now they have once again moved forward and been speeding up, almost unwittingly, between Acts 1 and 2. The danger for Julius Caesar

becomes imminent, even more so as the action moves quickly from the first scene, with its focus on Brutus and Portia, to the second: the house of Caesar and his conversation with his wife Calphurnia.

## 2. Amplifying the Source Text: Prophetic Visions and Calphurnia's Dream

Simultaneous with Brutus's sleepless night before the Ides of March, the following scene (2.2) provides the audience with insight into the state of Caesar's household: set at night, its beginning is concerned with Calphurnia's prophetic dream. This dream harkens back to Caesar's assertion in 1.2 when he calls the Soothsayer a "dreamer" (1.2.24), which means, retrospectively, his ignoring the truth of both visions.<sup>12</sup> This second instance of a prophetic vision is preceded by a number of strange signs. Following Plutarch,<sup>13</sup> Caska (in 1.3) reports that "A common slave—you know him well by sight / Held up his left hand, which did flame and burn / Like twenty torches joined; and yet his hand, / Not sensible of fire, remained unscorched" (15-18).<sup>14</sup> Calphurnia also speaks of fiery elements, and Shakespeare thus takes up the fire imagery as used by Plutarch to foreground it through repetition:

Fierce fiery warriors fight upon the clouds  
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,  
Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol.  
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,  
Horses do neigh, and dying men did groan,  
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.  
O Caesar, these things are beyond all use,  
And I do fear them. (2.2.19-26)

The doubling of instances in which fire visions are used as prophetic signs is part of the paradoxical liberation Shakespeare finds in letting himself be determined by his sources: he takes up the image from Plutarch with Caska but then moves on to repeat it in relation to Calphurnia; Caesar's neglecting and not taking seriously the warning signs is amplified, and the possible avoidance of his fate foregrounded. With

regard to the anticipation of the (known historical) events, this may further affect the perception of Caesar as a tragic hero<sup>15</sup>: his failure lies in ignoring the signs, even when their meaning is spelt out, in this case by Calphurnia, who comments that "[w]hen beggars die there are no comets seen; / The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes" (2.2.30-31).

As the scene continues, a servant tells of augurs that sacrificed a beast and found no heart in it (2.2.38-44), which is based on an episode in Plutarch, who, however, has Caesar make the sacrifice himself.<sup>16</sup> In presenting the signs preceding the assassination, the text overall remains fairly close to its sources and, apart from the repetition discussed, only implements minor changes. And yet, there is one feature that Shakespeare does significantly alter, namely, Calphurnia's dream itself, described by Plutarch as follows:

For she dreamed that Caesar was slaine, and that she had him in her armes. Others also doe denie that she had any suche dreame, as amongst other, Titus Livius wryteth, that it was in this sorte. The Senate having set upon the toppe of Caesars house, for an ornament and setting foorth of the same, a certaine pinnacle: Calpurnia dreamed that she sawe it broken downe, and that she thought she lamented and wept for it. Insomuch that Caesar rising in the morning, she prayed him if it were possible, not to goe out of the dores that day [...]. (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326)

In Shakespeare, the dream has a slightly different quality that ominously foreshadows the play's action beyond the assassination itself.

CAESAR

Calphurnia here, my wife, stays me at home.  
 She dreamt tonight she saw my statue,  
 Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,  
 Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans  
 Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it.  
 And these she does apply for warnings and portents  
 And evils imminent, and on her knee  
 Hath begged that I will stay at home today.<sup>17</sup>

DECIUS

This dream is all amiss interpreted.  
 It was a vision, fair and fortunate.  
 Your statue spouting blood in many pipes



In which so many smiling Romans bathed  
 Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck  
 Reviving blood, and that great men shall press  
 For tinctures, stains, relics and cognizance.  
 This by Calphurnia's dream is signified. (2.2.75-90)

Rather than bring up an image of Caesar's lifeless body, Decius (who is one of the conspirators) redirects the attention to a monument erected in his honour, similarly to the "pinnacle" in Calphurnia's dream as reported by Plutarch. Yet Shakespeare does not merely depict a pinnacle breaking down; rather he gives the dream a more urgent spin when the statue starts running blood and people bathe their hands in it.<sup>18</sup> The religious dimension of this image becomes even more emphasized in Decius's (treacherous) interpretation of the dream<sup>19</sup>: he deems the blood "[r]eviving." On the extramimetic level of communication, the reference is to the image of sacred blood, as put forth in Rev 1:5 "Prince of the kings of the earth [...] washed us from our sins in his blood" (Geneva; cf. *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 224n83-89).<sup>20</sup> For the audience, the notion of the blood as "reviving" is linked to a religious dimension when it becomes a reinvigorating force for the Romans: it invokes the meaning that Jesus, through dying, took away death from the world; his death literally "revived" humankind in saving it from death perpetual.<sup>21</sup> The "[r]eviving blood" also has implications for the ruling of a country and monarchy, again referring to the extramimetic level: "The monarch as both father and nursing mother of the people was a Tudor commonplace" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 224n88). The bathing in the blood furthermore evokes images of martyrdom, and Decius expands on this association by mentioning "tinctures, stains, relics."<sup>22</sup> Decius's deceptive interpretation is hence ambiguous: intramimetically, it refers to both Caesar and his party as well as to the conspirators (see the "reviving blood" in 3.1.105-14). Extramimetically, Caesar is turned into a *figura Christi*, which foreshadows his later apotheosis.<sup>23</sup> And as Calphurnia speaks of her "fear" with regard to all the strange signs she notices, one may begin to wonder whether the audience are to fear for and perhaps even pity him, too, conforming to his role as tragic hero.

In this way, Shakespeare, by aligning Caesar with Christ in a way that obviously could not have been warranted by Plutarch, puts forth conflicting options for evaluation. Caesar's sacralization is presented to be accepted (as dramatic fiction) or rejected (as blasphemous and inadequate). This invitation to an affective or critical response is enhanced by doubling the role of the tragic hero in Brutus.

The image of men bathing or washing their hands in Caesar's blood is essential to his role as tragic hero and his ongoing influence even beyond his death (e.g. when he appears as a ghost): it recurs three times overall and shows itself at its most momentous after the assassination:

BRUTUS

[...]

So are we Caesar's friends that have abridged  
His time of fearing death. Stoop, Romans, stoop,  
And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood  
Up to the elbows and besmear our swords.  
Then walk we forth even to the market-place,  
And waving our red weapons o'er our heads  
Let's all cry, 'Peace, Freedom and Liberty.'

CASSIUS

Stoop, then, and wash. How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over  
In states unborn and accents yet unknown? (3.1.104-13)

Brutus and Cassius inadvertently allude to the dream of Calphurnia: once again, one item of the source is taken up and wound around other elements of the story; the acceptance of the restriction in his source texts thus paradoxically becomes a means for Shakespeare to be creative. In the *Life of Marcus Brutus*, Plutarch writes: "But Brutus & his consorts, having their swords bloody in their handes, went straight to the Capitoll, perswading the Romanes as they went, to take their *liberty* again" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 342; emphasis added). "Liberty" is the one item from the source that Shakespeare uses in his play; as he embeds it in the context of a metatheatrical comment ("this our lofty scene"), the reference reads almost like a comment on his own authorial strategy.

By referring to the historical event as a scene that is to be “acted over” again and again, Shakespeare via Brutus implicitly claims the event on stage to be completely determined by the original scene. But then Brutus’s claim is *not* shown to be true, as the scene we witness is very different from the one he envisages. The fetters history puts on drama are thus shown to be illusionary, since history itself will have to be reimagined, whatever the sources will prescribe. The event may nominally stay the same, but its evaluation will never do so. Accordingly, Shakespeare diverges from Plutarch in having Brutus and Cassius ask their fellows to literally “wash” their hands and swords in Caesar’s blood. This act is seen, by Brutus and Cassius, as a “reviving” of the Roman people in the sense of regaining their “Peace, Freedom and Liberty.”<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare invents this incident and, in doing so, points not only to the brutality of the act,<sup>25</sup> but on the extramimetic level once again joins the religious aspect with the political: the very fact that the characters want to believe the murder is a sacrifice, “or else it were a savage spectacle” (3.1.244), points again to the metadramatic reflection and invites the audience to evaluate history transformed to drama. As Antony will later note, Brutus and his companions have committed treason: “Then I, and you, and all of us fell down, / Whilst *bloody treason* flourished over us” (3.2.189-90; emphasis added). In their own perspective, however, their action of killing Caesar, the tyrant, is linked to one of cleansing, and they now want to wash themselves clean in Caesar’s blood as a symbolic act linked to their regained liberty, even extending to Cassius’s reference to grace: “Brutus shall lead, and we will grace his heels” (3.1.120).<sup>26</sup> Intramimetically, Cassius refers to Brutus’s new role as leader and their own subordinate roles in relation to him<sup>27</sup>; extramimetically, however, the audience (knowing the outcome of the play based on the fetters Shakespeare imposed upon himself), will be able to read this also as a cynical statement of religious hubris: not only is murder hardly graceful, but the conspirators even regard themselves as dispensators of grace.

Antony's funeral speech marks the final instance in which Caesar's "sacred blood" is mentioned, and another link to Calphurnia's dream is being established through repetition:

Let but the commons hear this testament—  
Which, pardon me, I do not mean to read—  
And they would go *and kiss dead Caesar's wounds*,  
And *dip their napkins in his sacred blood*,  
Yea, beg a hair of him for memory,  
And, dying, mention it within their will,  
Bequeathing it as a rich legacy  
Unto their issue. (3.2.131-38; emphasis added)

The connection of the imagery from the earlier dream and the assassination shows that Caesar's death is not merely a political spectacle, but that his blood is repeatedly sanctified and brought in connection with redemption and grace. Antony's eulogy makes obvious that Caesar is (to be) regarded a martyr rather than a tyrant. And not only that: extramimetically, he once again consolidates the connection to Jesus Christ, foregrounded in the final act, when Octavius relates that Caesar suffered "three and thirty wounds" (5.1.52), as opposed to the less significant number 23 in Plutarch (see *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 301n52). While certain aspects of the source material are quite conventionally maintained as guidance (or, indeed, fetters), Shakespeare repeatedly adds new dimensions to them and extends elements he finds in Plutarch; he thus puts his own aesthetic stance onto the plot and achieves creative liberty by (literally) adding links to the chain of the fetters. In this instance, his changes and additions to the original dream vision of Caesar's wife establish a complex interplay of politics and religious/Christian symbolism.

### 3. "*Et tu, Brute?*": Transforming and (Re-)Attributing Character Speech

The assassination scene contains one of the most famous quotations from Shakespeare's works that has been associated with the death of Caesar ever since: "*Et tu, Brute?*," the last words Caesar utters before

he dies (3.1.77). As Daniell notes in the Arden edition: "The famous phrase is in Suetonius in Greek καὶ σύ, τέκνον; (*kai su, teknon*) [...] meaning 'and thou, child (or son)?'" (237n77). Daniell also comments that Shakespeare's "Et tu, Brute?" cannot be found in classical sources; it has been assumed that the phrase goes back, most probably, to the lost Caesar-play by Edes (1582; see Wiggins 2: #723 and "Caesar Interfectus" in Lost Plays Database).<sup>28</sup> In Plutarch, by contrast, Caesar addresses another one of the conspirators: "O vile traitor Casca, what doest thou?" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 329). In the *Life of Brutus*, this sentence by Caesar is taken up again (see *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 341). Shakespeare not only omits these words but adds "Then fall, Caesar" (77)<sup>29</sup> to the Latin tag. It is in this instance that the concept of *parallel lives*, in the middle of the play, overrules Plutarch's having Caesar address Casca in his last moment. The sense of foregrounded personal interaction is highlighted even more in the repetition of two monosyllables followed by a proper name: "*Et tu, Brute?* / *Then fall, Caesar*"; the consecutive clause follows from the implied answer to the rhetorical question: "yes." Caesar here intricately links himself and his fate to Brutus,<sup>30</sup> and this link is not merely established on the level of events but also on that of language and sound.<sup>31</sup>

This transformation of the source material in Shakespeare's dramatic alterations is decisive for his moving within self-imposed fetters and going beyond them: in this instance of the assassination, he foregrounds the close link between Brutus and Caesar that is at the heart of the whole tragedy. And this tragedy, despite the death of its eponymous hero, is far from over.

#### 4. The Double Tragedy

The link between Caesar and Brutus has structural implications, too. Whereas the first half of the play has focused on Caesar, it shifts to Brutus as a second tragic hero and the events following upon the assassination for the remainder of the tragedy. So far, we have seen how

Shakespeare transforms the historical matter that he finds in his sources, especially in Plutarch, to his own artistic ends: he emphasizes plot elements and characters (as well as their constellations) and, in adhering to the fetters of his sources and amplifying them, finds liberation. These transformations may, in a next step, be linked to the genre of tragedy: the double fetters of history, on the one hand, and generic restraints, on the other, become a creative source. In the context of genre, the “double lives” presented by Shakespeare (in variation from Plutarch's) become a particularly efficient force as they introduce the doubling of the tragic hero. It is Cassius who first verbalizes the link between Caesar and Brutus, ironically when discussing with Brutus the necessity to cut down Caesar:

‘Brutus’ and ‘Caesar’: what should be in that ‘Caesar’?  
 Why should that name be sounded more than yours?  
 Write them together: yours is as fair a name:  
 Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well.  
 Weigh them, it is as heavy: conjure with ‘em,  
 ‘Brutus’ will start a spirit as soon as ‘Caesar’. (1.2.141-46)

Brutus and Caesar are to be seen as equals: they both incite “spirit” in men who will follow their lead in equal measure. Equality is of course the whole point of the conspiracy, to cut down the one who would be greater than the other (or others). Yet, the (literal and metaphorical) fall of Caesar<sup>32</sup> leads to the rise of Brutus,<sup>33</sup> and the dynamics of rising and falling, as well as doubling, is underpinned by the overall structure of the play as well as in a few exemplary instances: the arrangement of the scenes in which Portia and Calphurnia, the wives of Brutus and Caesar, appear in Act 2, in Mark Antony's funeral speech, and, finally, in the ending of the tragedy.

#### 4.1 Portia and Calphurnia

In the first and second scenes of Act 2, the wives of the two tragic heroes appear subsequently, and the scenes mirror each other in various

ways.<sup>34</sup> In Scene 1, the audiences witnesses Brutus's deliberating on the state of Rome, and his course of action; he finally decides to be part of the conspiracy and to act. Likewise, in scene 2, Caesar fatally decides to ignore Calphurnia's pleas and go to the Capitol after all, which ultimately leads to his death. We find both Brutus and Julius Caesar in their private rooms; both of their decisions take place late at night or in the early morning. The fact that these scenes immediately follow upon each other links the wives and contrasts them at the same time: in each scene, we see the men interact with their wives in matters directly pertaining to the conspiracy and assassination; what is more, Shakespeare also introduces similar imagery to link the scenes to one another.

After Brutus has reflected on the conspiracy and finally come to a decision (e.g. 2.1.169-71), Portia enters to ask what it is that Brutus has been concerned with for a while now: she convinces Brutus to share his plans as well as his conscience with her.<sup>35</sup> Whereas her begging—"upon my knees / I charm you" (2.1.269-70)—is futile, her last step towards persuading her husband to confide in her is by inflicting a bodily wound to herself (2.1.298-301).<sup>36</sup>

The physical act of self-injury is meant to demonstrate her (typically Roman) steadfastness. And while Brutus promises to share his "secrets" (2.1.305) with her, he is called away before he can do so, and their conversation ends. The audience is not to witness what passes between them: in fact, they never share another private moment together, as Brutus leaves immediately with Ligarius.<sup>37</sup>

The scene shifts to the house of Caesar, with him "in his nightgown" (2.2 SD) to indicate the simultaneity of events—and, quite literally, parallel lives—to the preceding scene. In the context of Calphurnia's prophetic dream vision, the significance of Portia's voluntary drawing of blood to convince her husband is highlighted<sup>38</sup>: blood is again used as a motif. Both women want their husbands' confidence as much as their safety: Calphurnia asks Caesar to stay at home, while Portia seeks her husband's trust. This means that, in both cases, blood (or its image) is used with the aim to persuade someone to act in a particular way. Calphurnia's dream is interpreted such that it acquires the opposite of her

intended (and, as we learn, correct) meaning, whereas Portia's "O Brutus, / The heavens speed thee in thine enterprise" (2.4.45-46) is directed at his success and his return home. The phrase is ambiguous in that "speed thee" may be read either as a wish for success and good fortune or as the desire that he return home as quickly as possible—because this is where he is safe. Whether Portia knows about the conspiracy at this point remains unclear; yet she clearly contextualizes herself socially in her bonds to the conspirators, both as Brutus's wife, and as Cato's daughter, that is in relation to the past (her father) and the present (her husband).<sup>39</sup>

Portia's anxieties in 2.4, speaking of her husband's "enterprise" and encountering the Soothsayer with suspicion about whether he knows that "any harm's intended towards [Caesar]" (2.4.35-36), admit the possibility that she has been brought into the loop in the interim, but the window of opportunity would have been small after the interruption of their conversation by Caius Ligarius in 2.1. It is only five hours later that the conspirators are with Caesar. If she had no time to talk to her husband and be let into the secret, then her following actions in 2.4 point to a foreboding similar to Calphurnia's.

The outcome of their actions is very different, and this contrasts the wives as much as their husbands: while Portia succeeds in strengthening Brutus's determination, Calphurnia achieves the contrary, and though she briefly manages to wrest from Caesar his resolve to stay at home as she wishes him to do—"for thy humour I will stay at home" (2.2.59)—, her entreaties are ignored as soon as Decius Brutus enters the scene and offers his own interpretation of Calphurnia's dream. Caesar even comments: "How foolish do your fears seem now, Calphurnia? / I am ashamed I did yield to them" (2.2.109-10).<sup>40</sup>

Through the parallel arrangement of the episodes with Portia and Calphurnia, Shakespeare not only extends the concept from Plutarch even to the women but moreover allows insight into the private spheres of Brutus and Caesar. The thematic and structural similarities of these scenes hence make possible a pointed look at the moment of decision for each of these characters as they settle their fate, for better or for



worse, in the intimate setting of their private rooms during the small hours. At the same time, this parallel arrangement leads to a contrastive relationship, similar to the dynamic of rising and falling, as the same motif is used for different ends, and the action is brought forward: Caesar leaves his home to be assassinated, while Brutus leaves his home to assassinate Caesar.<sup>41</sup> What is more, the private sphere of both protagonists is foregrounded in these scenes, while the public sphere and how they each relate to it, is represented by Mark Antony and, eventually, by Octavius.

#### 4.2 "The noblest Roman of them all": Mark Antony's Speech

Mark Antony's significance to both Brutus and Caesar is structurally highlighted by his re-entry after an absence since 1.2 to face the conspirators in the exact middle of the play, following the assassination: he thus strengthens the parallel lives of Caesar and Brutus. To the Plebeians, Antony asserts that "Brutus [...] was Caesar's angel" (3.2.193); an ambiguous remark that may refer to both Caesar's favouritism of Brutus, and Brutus's role in Caesar's death: Brutus accordingly doubles as Caesar's protégé and as his angel of death.<sup>42</sup> This particular ambiguity is indicative of the overall ambiguity and irony of the scene, in which Antony gradually empties the attribute "honourable" of meaning through repetition and by juxtaposing the "honourable" action with the actual deeds of Brutus and his fellow conspirators.<sup>43</sup> Antony's manner of speech in relation to the conspirators is deceitful, and this deceit (based on ambiguity) is also apparent in moments other than the forum speech. Once left alone with Caesar's corpse, Antony says of Caesar:

ANTONY

[...]

Thou art the ruins of the noblest man

That ever livèd in the tide of times. (3.1.256-57)<sup>44</sup>

Given their friendship and his true mourning, the eulogy (voiced in a soliloquy) is not surprising. The specific wording, however, the superlative and the attribute of being "the noblest man," is then surprisingly

repeated in the final scene, when Mark Antony is confronted with the body of Brutus, who has committed suicide:

ANTONY

This was the noblest Roman of them all:  
 All the conspirators save only he  
 Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.  
 He only, in a general honest thought  
 And common good to all, made one of them.  
 His life was gentle, and the elements  
 So mixed in him that nature might stand up  
 And say to all the world, 'This was a man!' (5.5.69-76)

In Antony's words, first Caesar and then Brutus are noble superlatives (which entails a semantic contradiction; see Zirker "Some Notes")—and this despite the fact that Brutus is one of Caesar's murderers. If we take Antony's claim over Brutus's being "the noblest Roman of them all" seriously, his saying that Caesar was "the noblest man" establishes their equality, if not even their identity. There is, however, good reason to believe that he is more serious with regard to Caesar, especially so as he speaks about him in a soliloquy.<sup>45</sup> Later, the repetition extramimetically opens the potential for ambiguity—in a sense very similar to the notion of "honourable" and its change of meaning in his earlier speech. This ambiguity, whether it is Caesar or Brutus, or either of them who are "the noblest man," is further highlighted in the context of an earlier statement of Mark Antony's in 1.2 in which he misjudges a character: the question accordingly is how reliable his character evaluations are anyway. In the earlier scene (1.2.202-03), Antony's "dismissal of Cassius"<sup>46</sup> (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 176n195-96) not only turns out to be a misjudgement but, in hindsight, also proves to be injurious. It is, in this case, Caesar who doubts Cassius's integrity: "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look: / He thinks too much: such men are dangerous" (1.2.193-94)<sup>47</sup>; later, he will reject similar warnings given by others, first and foremost Calphurnia's. Yet here it is Antony who gets things wrong,<sup>48</sup> and on the intramimetic level, at least, Antony remains an opaque, if not ambiguous, character<sup>49</sup>: whether he speaks in seriousness

at the end of the play in praising Brutus, in an attempt to make his peace with him, or whether this eulogy serves as an ironical send-off that deliberately echoes his reaction to Caesar's murder, remains unresolved.

## 5. Conclusion: Chiastic Dynamics and Parallel Lives

This ambiguity within one character and the resulting dynamics makes us (re)turn to the double tragedy of Caesar and Brutus: as noted above, the fall of Caesar leads to the rise of Brutus; yet, in a manner of speaking, the opposite is equally the case, and, after his death, Caesar continues to determine the fate of Rome, while Brutus moves towards his downfall. As early as in Antony's speech in the forum, immediately after the assassination, we witness him turning around public opinion; while Brutus had managed to appease the people in explaining how Caesar's demise should be to their benefit, Antony sways their judgement once more to Caesar's benefit and against the conspirators. This is dramatically epitomized in the brief yet poignant scene in 3.3. when the Plebeians kill Cinna the Poet for the sole reason that he shares the same name as one of the murderers. What follows the speeches in the forum is a period of civil war, and one of death, instigated by Antony's "Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot: / Take thou what course thou wilt" (3.2.251-52). The parallel lives and dynamics between the two heroes accordingly affect the life at Rome in a similar fashion: While the conspirators had claimed to act in order to protect the many over the one, they provoke greater turmoil than ever.

Even Caesar has not left the action, nor the play, after his assassination and appears as a ghost to Brutus in 4.2, who continues to invoke him to the very last: in 5.3, upon finding Cassius dead, he exclaims: "O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet" (5.3.95). Brutus equally concludes his suicide with the invocation, "Caesar, now be still" (5.5.56), alluding to the continued influence and presence that Caesar has in the second half of the play. While Caesar's death has raised Brutus to become a leader and, as far as the play is concerned, also the protagonist, it is this

same event which causes Brutus's downfall as well as, one might argue, Caesar's apotheosis.

The double tragedy that results from this movement may once more be linked to the topic of "self-imposed fetters": Shakespeare moves within the fetters of history and genre as well as beyond them. Not only does he draw on the concept of the *Parallel Lives* and present two protagonists as mirroring each other, but he reflects on this structurally by combining parallelism and chiasmus in their portrayal: As Caesar falls, Brutus rises; as Brutus falls, Caesar rises. Unlike what we find in Plutarch, Shakespeare invests his play with the recurring theme of mirroring and a constant trade-off between similarity and contrast to bring Julius Caesar and Brutus closer to each another and dramatize the course of history. Most importantly, he does so by means of doubling: the doubling of protagonists, Brutus and Caesar; of parallel episodes and Portia's and Calphurnia's roles; of the private and the public; and the meaning of words and ambiguities that extend beyond the ending of the play. As the generic fetters of a double tragedy require a double peripety and a double downfall, the play not only introduces two heroes and parallels Caesar and Brutus but also augments them into chiasmic foils to one another. The self-imposed fetters of history and the source text result in artistic and aesthetic liberty, and even in the innovative generic twist of a double tragedy: he presents another set of "parallel lives" to enhance the tragic effect of each.

This transformation of the source material becomes possible through the fictional nature of the text, by its being "a play and not e.g. a chronicle" (Riecker). The audience knows the story of Julius Caesar and the civil war in Rome following his assassination; this knowledge, however, is changed throughout the play, and "their future remembrance of history" (Riecker) is altered. The aesthetic effect of Shakespeare's tying himself more thoroughly than necessary to his historical source and out-paralleling Plutarch's parallel lives is thus one of out-historizing history, possible in the realm of fiction alone (see Riecker). The historical overdetermination allows the dramatic fiction to present a critical

view of history itself. The audience realizes that the actions and characters they are presented with are idealized by the historical figures represented on stage, and since this is done in a double, parallel fashion, the impossibility of such an idealization is brought home to us: for example, two men cannot concurrently represent the identical superlative notion and both be “the noblest.” Shakespeare exaggerates the idealizing notions he finds in his historical source material, for example, when he has Brutus, after the assassination, claim that the mimesis will be determined by the original scene—but what follows turns out to be quite different from what Brutus had envisioned. Shakespeare’s self-imposed fetters of history and dramatic genre accordingly result in both restriction and liberation, and a reimagination of events that prompts us to reflect on the truth-claims of both history and tragedy.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>We would like to thank the participants of the 14th International Connotations Symposium in 2017 for their feedback as well as the reviewers, Matthias Bauer, and David Scott Kastan for reading and discussing the paper with us.

<sup>2</sup>The “Catalogue” of the First Folio lists the play as *The Life and Death of Julius Caesar* under “Tragedies”; see <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/shakespeares-first-folio>.

<sup>3</sup>The number of plays about Julius Caesar reflects on the matter’s popularity during the period: Wiggins records at least four prior to Shakespeare’s 1599 play. Two of them are concerned with the triumph of Caesar over Pompey (1580 and 1594), whereas the other two (of which one, in 1595, is a sequel to the 1594 *Caesar and Pompey*) deal with the murder of Caesar, most notably the 1582 *Caesar interfectus*, in which Brutus kills Caesar “with notable cruelty” (Wiggins 2: #297).

<sup>4</sup>Much of what Shakespeare says about the assassination in fact comes via Plutarch’s *Life of Brutus*. See Daniell in the Arden Introduction on historical transformations of the character of Julius Caesar (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 29-38).

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Paolucci who remarks on the title hero and his demise by the middle of the play: “In naming the play after Caesar, Shakespeare may have been suggesting that to understand the tragic denouement properly we must see it through the eyes of Brutus, who, with a mistaken sense of values, killed Caesar because he saw

in Caesar something more than was there" (330); in her view, Caesar is not the tragic hero (see 329) but serves as "the contrast between Brutus' idealized conception of Caesar as a 'hero' and the real Caesar, reminding us that it is this discrepancy which is responsible for Brutus's tragic fall" (330).

<sup>6</sup>"In Plutarch's *Lives* Brutus as a Roman is set against Dion, a Greek, who was also a tyrannicide" (Kullmann 168).

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g. Daniell's note on "Thunder and lightning" that opens 1.3: "The sudden huge noise [...] and lightning [...] come directly on Cassius's intention to *shake* Caesar, or *worse days endure* [in 3.2.321; the line concluding 1.2]" (184n0.1).

<sup>8</sup>All quotations in this paper follow the Arden edition of *Julius Caesar* by Daniell, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>9</sup>The feast of Lupercal is moreover symbolically significant regarding Caesar's ambition: it is associated with sterility (see *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 162n0.1). Antony's taking part in the race foregrounds another change introduced by Shakespeare: he makes "Calphurnia's curse of barrenness [...] dominant at Caesar's first entry. He has no legitimate son. He needs an heir. He is immediately vulnerable in his dynastic ambition" (163n9).

<sup>10</sup>While it says "first" in the Folio, since Theobald this dating has often been emended by editors to "Ides" (see Kermode 1100). One may even go so far as to suggest that Brutus's sense of time is off politically as well: Rome may just not be ready for his Republican idealism. The temporal confusion may even point at a joke directed at the audience: Brutus's losing track of the date may possibly also be regarded as a reference to the calendar reform in Europe, instituted by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 (but not officially introduced in Britain before the mid-eighteenth century). As David Scott Kastan reminds us: at least some people in the audience or reading the play were aware that dates differed on each side of the channel. A great example is the assassination of King Henry IV of France on 14 May 1610. At almost the same time, "News from France" reporting the event was registered with the Stationer's Company in London. The date was 10 May 1610. The joke is of course that Brutus seems to stick to what in Shakespeare's time was the "Julian" calendar (i.e. Caesar's). See also <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/almanac-for-1585>.

<sup>11</sup>See Kullmann, who notes that Brutus's "torment of mind foreshadows that of later tragic Shakespearean heroes about to go wrong," including, for example, Macbeth (172).

<sup>12</sup>Daniell comments in his note on 1.2.24 that "attention to this [first] 'dream,' as to Calphurnia's (2.2.2-3) would have saved Caesar's life and changed the history of the world" (164n24).

<sup>13</sup>"But Strabo the Philosopher wryteth, that divers men were seene going up and downe in fire: and furthermore, that there was a slave of the souldiers, that did cast a marvellous burning flame out of his hande, insomuch as they that saw it, thought he had bene burnt, but when the fire was out, it was found he had no hurt" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326).

<sup>14</sup>See Plutarch (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326): "Certainly, destinie may easier be foreseen, then avoided: considering the straunge & wonderfull signes that were sayd to be seene before Caesars death. For, touching the fires in the element, and spirites running up and downe in the night, and also these solitarie birdes to be seene at no one dayes sittinge in the great market place [...]."

<sup>15</sup>From the beginning, his charisma is undermined: in 1.2.1-2, his address to his wife is followed by Caska's sycophantic half-line completion; then he is "turned to hear" the Soothsayer (1.2.17), but we learn that he is deaf in one ear (212-13).

<sup>16</sup>"Caesar selfe also doing sacrifice unto the goddess, found that one of the beastes which was sacrificed had no hart: and that was a straunge thing in nature, how a beast could live without a hart" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326).

<sup>17</sup>This gesture is doubled: in 2.1 Portia was begging of her husband not to leave the house, even "upon her knees" (2.1.269). On further parallels between the two wives, see subsection 4.1 below.

<sup>18</sup>See Kirschbaum 519-24 on the stage effect of this scene.

<sup>19</sup>See, e.g., Charney; and Starks-Estes.

<sup>20</sup>See also Daniell, who refers to the "drinking of the blood" here as well as in "sacramental references throughout the New Testament" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 224n85-89).

<sup>21</sup>See Zirker, *Stages of the Soul* 136-37. On the analogy of Jesus Christ and Julius Caesar see, e.g., Bradley; Geddes 46, 54; Sohmer 27-28, 136, esp. 139-41; see Tobin for Shakespeare's references to *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem* by Thomas Nashe; Hunt also refers to "the fact that both men's names begin with the same initials" (112). Kaula reads "Caesar as Antichrist" (201).

<sup>22</sup>Daniell here refers to a commentary in the Oxford edition: "sacred tokens coloured and stained with the blood of martyrs" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 224n89). See Donne's sermon "Preached at Hanworth" where he calls martyrs "the twice-baptized [...]" (baptized in *water*, and baptized in their owne *blood*)" (4: 6.176). See also Gray.

<sup>23</sup>What is more: Decius's words can also be interpreted as announcing Caesar's martyrdom, but he does so on the intramimetic level of communication. If read as such, it appears as if, in a strange way, Decius was in two minds about the assassination: for he *actually* speaks about relics and veneration intramimetically, not just by the application of an external context such as the Bible.

<sup>24</sup>Lüdeke and Mahler emphasize the performativity of this scene: "The meta-theatrical framing of Cassius's speech makes clear that, as a consequence of the performative weakness of discursive empowerment, the current and newly established Roman order will from now on invariably depend on theatre-like enactments, or 'performances'" (216).

<sup>25</sup>See Antony's reference to "brutish beasts" (3.2.105) that puns on Brutus's name as presented in Knappe and Winkler.

<sup>26</sup>Daniell comments: "Cassius uses the word for the men who have just butchered Caesar and bathed in his blood. It is a question how far they have convinced themselves of the virtue of the act, and how far the word is cynical" (214n120). See also Brutus's use of the word in 3.2.58: "Do grace to Caesar's corpse and grace his [Mark Antony's] speech."

<sup>27</sup>See OED, "grace, *v.*" 3.a.: "To lend or add grace to (a person or thing); to adorn, embellish, set off. Hence (more loosely): to furnish, array"; and 5.ta.: "To confer honour or dignity upon (a person or thing). Also: to do honour or credit to. *Obsolete.*" 8. has a particularly strong religious connotation—as befits the context: "To endow or favour (a person or thing) with (divine) grace."

<sup>28</sup>Wilson, in his edition of *Julius Caesar*, has a slightly more detailed note on the origin of the phrase: "Prob. orig. derived from Suetonius (*Div. Julius*, S2)—'tradide-runt quidam, Marco Bruto irruenti dixisse: καὶ σὺ, τέκνον...'. The Latin form, almost certainly post-classical if not renaissance, is first found in *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of York* (1595), a 'reported' text of 3 *Hen. VI*; but since the words are an addition by the 'pirate' (*True Trag.* 5.1.53=3 *Hen. VI*, 5.1.81) the tag must have then been familiar to the stage. Mal. conj. that it first occurred in a Latin play, *Caesar Interfectus*, by Richard Edes, acted in 1582 and now lost (*Eliz. Stage*, III, 309). But if so, its appearance in *True Trag.* suggests that it reached Sh. through an intermediate source, and one may note that 'What, Brutus too?', found in *Caesar's Revenge* (c. 1594) is virtually a translation of it (v. *Intro.* p. xxvi). There is no hint of Brutus's supposed sonship to Caes. in Sh., but that the story was current is proved by 2 *Hen. VI*, 4.1.137, which speaks of Caes. being stabbed by 'Brutus' bastard hand'" (151n77). See also the editions by Dorsch 67n77 and Spevack 122n77. Most editions comment on this phrase.

<sup>29</sup>"Then" has been read as ambiguous: Daniell notes that it may mean either "... (a) because my dearest friend (even son) has betrayed me; (b) because I must deserve to die if Brutus thinks so. It is of course the play's stroke of genius to limit personal interaction between the two to this inarticulate moment" (237n77). See Yu more generally on ambiguities in the play.

<sup>30</sup>Further instances of such a link can be found in the structural parallels between 2.1 and 2.2 (see below); as well as in Brutus's speech at 5.1.123-26 and by Caesar himself at 2.2.26-27.

<sup>31</sup>The notion of falling becomes almost a leitmotif in the course of the play. Early on, in a foreshadowing, Cassius, Brutus, and Caska talk about Caesar's fainting: "CASSIUS But, soft, I pray you: what, did Caesar swoon? / CASKA He fell down in the market-place, and foamed at mouth, and was speechless. BRUTUS 'Tis very like: he hath the falling sickness. CASSIUS No, Caesar hath it not; but you and I, / And honest Caska, we have the falling sickness" (1.2.250-55). Similarly, Antony later speaks of the moment when "great Caesar fell": "O what a fall was there, my countrymen! / Then I, and you, and all of us fell down, / Whilst bloody treason flourished over us" (3.2.187-90).

<sup>32</sup>Both meanings are implicit when he says, at the moment of his death, "Then fall, Caesar" (rather than, for example, "Then die" or "Then go" etc.).



<sup>33</sup>See also Whitaker, who links this aspect of JC to the double tragedy of sorts in R2: "the life and coronation of Bolingbroke" and "death of R2" (147).

<sup>34</sup>Daniell, for instance, comments on the structure of the play (Introduction 75-79) and in particular on Jones's notion of "structural rhyming" (77, see Daniell 75); Jones, however, merely refers to the fact that "the two parts of the play have like endings" (77).

<sup>35</sup>There are some striking resemblances to the interaction of Kate and Percy in the earlier *1 Henry IV*: "O my good lord, why are you thus alone? / For what offence have I this fortnight been / A banished woman from my Harry's bed? / Tell me, sweet lord, what is't that takes from thee / Thy stomach, pleasure and thy golden sleep?" (2.3.36-40); "O, what portents are these? / Some heavy business hath my lord in hand, / And I must know it, else he loves me not." (61-63). His reaction is, equally, similar to that of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* 2.1: "Whither I must, I must, and, to conclude, / This evening must I leave you, gentle Kate. / I know you wise but yet no farther wise / Than Harry Percy's wife. Constant you are / But yet a woman; and for secrecy / No lady closer, for I well believe / Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know. / And so far will I trust thee, gentle Kate" (2.3.101-08). As David Scott Kastan reminds us, this parallel is suggestive of how Shakespeare uses his own works as a "source" as well.

<sup>36</sup>For an analysis as regards the semiotic significance of the blood drawn by Portia, see especially Marshall.

<sup>37</sup>Portia appears again in 2.4, and her nervous behaviour may be explained as an effect of her forebodings.

<sup>38</sup>Hogan moreover points out the "technique of emotional intensification" (39) that he repeatedly finds in Shakespeare, with "the death of the usurper's beloved, often through suicide, and usually at a moment of particular conflict and suffering" (39). He cites the news of Portia's death to Brutus as one example.

<sup>39</sup>Cato was an ally of Pompey's and committed suicide before allowing Caesar to capture him.

<sup>40</sup>Ironically, Caesar is convinced to go forth into the Capitol by the misrepresentation of a conspirator, which is another parallel with Brutus, whose reflections about what he must do are propelled by Cassius's forged handwritten notes.

<sup>41</sup>See Zirker, "Performative Iconicity," on the function of parallelism and chiasmus in Shakespeare.

<sup>42</sup>The following line: "Judge, o you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him" arguably also shows an ambiguous addressee, since Antony both calls on the ultimate judges—the Gods themselves—but also functionally addresses the Plebeians, whose judgement he wishes to evoke here. The function of this ambiguity might double with the conspirators' quasi-godlike actions, in their tyrannicide, which are to be judged accordingly.

<sup>43</sup>For an analysis of Antony's speech with regard to rhetoric and ambiguity, see especially Knappe and Winkler. See also Pestritto, and Kullmann on notions of honour in *Julius Caesar*.

<sup>44</sup>The phrase will be echoed by Brutus in 4.3.216-22: "There is a tide in the affairs of men [...] / And we must take the current when it serves." Brutus (unwittingly) establishes a parallel between Antony's words about Caesar and his own words about himself (and his party).

<sup>45</sup>On seriousness in soliloquies, see Zirker, *Shakespeare and Donne*, ch. 8, esp. 173-83.

<sup>46</sup>His last words before leaving the stage are about Cassius: "Fear him not, Caesar, he's not dangerous. / He is a noble Roman, and well given" (1.2.195-96).

<sup>47</sup>Misjudgement is a recurring theme in the play; Caesar equally says about Cassius that he is a "great observer" who "looks quite through the deeds of men" (1.2.201-02), but then, later, Cassius says about himself "my sight was ever thick" (5.3.21), Pindarus misjudges the battle, and Cassius kills himself in the name of Roman honour.

<sup>48</sup>Daniell refers to the similarity of this scene with a later one: "Antony's speech, almost his first, expresses a misjudgement of Cassius that parallels Brutus later (3.1.231-53)" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 176n195-96), namely when Cassius warns Brutus of allowing Mark Antony to speak in the forum.

<sup>49</sup>On the ambiguity of Antony, see Zirker, "Some Notes."

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# Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*: John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Critical literature has variously described *The Duchess of Malfi* as tragedy, tragicomedy, or anti-tragedy. The play actually features two interrelated journeys traceable to conflicting generic backgrounds carefully yoked together. One, shaped by Benjamin's martyr drama, underlines the Duchess's determination and resistance. The other is Bosola's tragic journey as a figure divided between conflicting loyalties, who eventually recognizes the wrongness of his choice and undergoes a moral transformation together with a dramatic conversion from hitman to avenger. Envisaged historically, Webster's counterpoint of tragedy and *Trauerspiel* is evidence at once of overall generic readjustments in the period, and of the specific crisis of revenge drama, as detected by Fredson Bowers. As an example of ongoing generic readjustments, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* reflects the historical moment when drama addresses the social emergence of bourgeois figures and shifts from male, heroic subjects to increasingly female, domestic ones. Responding to the generic crisis of revenge drama, it challenges the system of norms which supports tragic discourse, inviting instead a recognition of the Duchess as the martyr, and her brothers as the tyrants of *Trauerspiel*.

I do not altogether look up at your title; the ancientest nobility being but a relic of time past, and the truest honour indeed being for a man to confer honour on himself

(John Webster, [Dedication] To the Right Honorable George Harding)

The Quarto title page of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* loudly proclaims the play a TRAGEDY, in bold caps and typeface so large it eclipses the protagonist's name. Middleton's commendatory verse confirms the label in English and in Latin, but it was to be questioned later by neoclassicists steeped in Aristotelianism and mindless of early modern generic flexibility. In 1818, John Wilson first remarked on the heroine's untimely death at the end of Act 4, a charge that was to endure (Moore 209). The Duchess should have died hereafter<sup>2</sup>; she also fails to go through the prescribed tragic recognition stage and pointedly dies unchanged (see Baker), which started to prompt doubts over her status as a tragic heroine. Thereupon, her executioner turns into an unlikely revenger after converting to remorse over her dead body. The much maligned fifth act—"an afterthought" (Jankowski 244)—sees him on a grotesque killing spree to avenge his victim. In 1920, William Archer called the play "a broken-backed" (128) piece of work, and the prejudice lasted well into the 1950s: in 1959, Richard Heilman was still uncertain if the play qualified as a tragedy, and Jane Marie Luecke argued in the early 1960s that, if a tragedy at all, it was marred by injudicious mixing with comic and satiric elements (see Luecke 275-76).

Over the past fifty years, a new wave of critics have questioned the relevance of judging a baroque composition by classical standards, and submitted alternative labels more consistent with the period's generic versatility, melodrama, tragicomedy, she-tragedy (Callaghan), victim tragedy (White 203), and tragedy of state (Lever 95). Jacqueline Pearson offers to call it anti-tragic: after the fairly regular tragedy of the first four acts, she argues, the deaths of Cariola, Julia, Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Antonio in Act 5 each appear as "the centre of a tiny anti-tragedy" (95), in which "tragic structures are suggested only to be negated, in-

verted, or parodied" under pressure from comic and tragicomic incidents (90). Despite sensitiveness to "the unruliness of a theatre where genre was not static but moving and mixing" (Danson 11), these labelling arrangements fail to offer a controlling vision of the play. Its rationale remains elusive and its design embarrassingly chaotic—efforts to rationalise Act 5 only expose the entrenched prejudice that it is an awkward appendix. Alone among critics, Ralph Berry holds that Webster's methods, albeit "the reverse of the classical," are nonetheless "based on a coherent artistic design" (Berry 5) but is at a loss to decide what this artistic design might be.

It is a well documented fact that, despite efforts by the likes of Sidney and Gascoigne, experimenting with generic and tonal fluidity was the rule and not the exception on the early modern stage. Polonius famously goes for generic concatenation, and Shirley declined to assign a specific genre to his *Cardinal* (1641): "Think what you please, we call it but a play" (Prologue 11). The irregularities that plagued twentieth-century critical reception of *The Duchess of Malfi* are evidence that Webster may have been experimenting with generic fluidity. Nevertheless, his remarkable insistence on calling his play a tragedy suggests he was concerned with the genre itself, not its combination—by then fairly common—with dark comedy or satire.

One of the pitfalls of revaluation is to declare original and stimulating the same features that had previously been considered flawed. They must be envisaged instead in a fresh way, not as a confusing, motley set but as parts of a system in which they interact with one another. Building on the play's most salient issues—the protagonist's death in Act 4, her lack of a discernible *anagnorisis*, the tool villain's change into an avenger—I propose to see *The Duchess of Malfi* as a generic transaction between tragedy and the baroque *Trauerspiel*<sup>3</sup> described by Walter Benjamin in his 1928 *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. This is likely to give new insight into the play's generic setup and resolve some of the difficulties identified in twentieth-century critical literature.

Although Benjamin, true to his method of indirection, fails to spell out a formal definition, he nevertheless regrets that the *Trauerspiel* is

often misunderstood as “a caricature of classical tragedy” or mistakenly equated with it (Benjamin 50). Tragedy and *Trauerspiel* develop on distinct historico-philosophical premises: one has its roots in pagan myth and cult, the other in history and spectacle. Where the death of the tragic hero is a sacrifice to a transcendental, meaningful ideal, *Trauerspiel* is a “secularized Christian drama” of “insuperable despair” (Benjamin 78), expressing the scepticism of the Baroque age in the face of a transient universe that offers neither meaning, redemption, nor transcendence. While Benjamin's main concern is with German drama, he gestures toward Calderón and Shakespeare. His famous gloss of *Hamlet* as a touchstone of *Trauerspiel* (158) is pursued by Julia Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard in the direction of Freud and Lacan, and by Hugh Grady who finds in Benjamin's theory of fragmented allegory a prototype of Derrida's logic of deferral.<sup>4</sup> Susan Zimmerman argues that *Trauerspiel* is broadly relevant to English Renaissance tragedies beyond *Hamlet*, and she sees in Act 4 of *The Duchess of Malfi* “one of the clearest early modern English examples of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*” (Zimmerman 167n54).<sup>5</sup>

Webster's experimenting with *Trauerspiel* in *The Duchess of Malfi* is not confined to Act 4. Crossing into metageneric territory, the play brings together as well as contrasts revenge and *Trauerspiel*. Taking my cue from Jameson's distinction between form and syntax and his insights into the privileged relationship between historical materialism and genre study (160), I wish to argue that the respective journeys of Bosola and the Duchess figure a dialogue between Aristotelian tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, and that they are engaged in a functional relationship in which one form exists to complement or challenge assumptions about the other.

## I. *The Duchess of Malfi*, a Tragedy?

### 1. Webster's Generic Signals

The sheer number of generic cues in *The Duchess of Malfi* suffices to confirm Webster's concern with the genre(s) of his play. The dying Bosola looks back on it as a drama of revenge:



Revenge—for the Duchess of Malfi, murdered  
 By th' Arragonian brethren; for Antonio,  
 Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,  
 Poisoned by this man; and lastly for myself,  
 That was an actor in the main of all [...]. (5.5.79-83)

The Duchess accounts the world a “tedious theatre” (4.1.81), a theatre of *taedium vitae* (4.2.35). The slightly discordant labels suggest a tension between revenge tragedy and what could tentatively be termed at this stage a tragedy of melancholy mourning. The text additionally summons generic markers at critical junctures. Cariola’s choric conclusion to the wedding scene of act 1 is a compact metageneric statement:

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* (1.1.487-89; my emphasis)

Cariola rehearses the classical definition of tragedy as the fall of the great; summons the joint concepts of pity and fear,<sup>6</sup> the catalysts of *catharsis*, as broad signals that the tragedy is underway; and singles out the Duchess’s marriage as the tragic error prompting the downfall to come—a questionable labelling in view of the no less questionable nature of the Arragonians. Along the same lines, Webster’s use of “wake” attends moments of recognition and self-discovery. Bosola’s execution of the Duchess is an eye-opener that wakes him up to a new perception of himself:

I stand like one  
 That long hath ta’en a sweet and golden dream:  
 I am angry with myself, now that I wake. (4.2.307-09)

Other generic signals include the enlisting of humoral/medical language in the service of *catharsis*. Ferdinand’s neurotic preoccupation with “purg[ing]” his sister’s “infected blood” (2.5.26) climaxes in the grotesque masque of madmen, a raucous performance allegedly devised to “cure” and “break th’ impostume” of her melancholy (4.2.42).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, moving from discourse to figure, Webster frames his play between the tying of a knot and the tightening of a noose, a literal rendering of Aristotle's terms for complication and denouement, *desis* and *lulusis*, binding together and loosening. One must assume Webster had some Greek—as well as a grim sense of irony for choosing the garrotte as the instrument of his provisional “denouement” in act 4.<sup>8</sup>

When, to return to Berry's phrase, a playwright's methods are the reverse of the classical, markers of tragedy are likely to draw attention to customs that are more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Webster's generic terminology is no sign of deference to classical tragedy but serves instead to identify departures from it. While Bosola by and large can be said to follow the classical course through inner conflict, *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis* and *catharsis*, the Duchess pointedly does not. They go their separate ways, Bosola to tragedy and the Duchess to *Trauerspiel*.

## 2. Bosola's Classically Tragic Course

Bosola's inner conflict, one of the most baffling in Jacobean drama, is that of a Machiavellian henchman with a conscience, conflicted between his moral sense and his sinning self. Torn between perverse loyalty to his masters and an enduring sense of right and wrong, he hates the Arragonians even as he serves them, and hates himself for serving them. On hearing the Duchess has married below her status, he praises her choice of founding preferment on merit but feels nonetheless compelled to inform his master against her. His lament that “we cannot be suffered / To do good when we have a mind to it” (4.2.344-45) rehearses the definition of the tragic conflict as one between the ethos of the protagonist and that of society—a depraved ethos as things stand.<sup>9</sup> Unable to adjust his actions to his proclaimed moral standards, Bosola is “at once an agent of God and of the Devil” (Gunby 226).

Bosola's memorable *hamartia*, it would appear, is to accidentally stab the very man he had pledged himself to protect. *Hamartia*, the tragic

error, was originally identified in the *Poetics* as an action that materially brings about the hero's fall, not as an instance of "vice or depravity" (53a7), a sense it only acquired later when the notion was reassigned to the sphere of character. Webster acknowledges the concept's initial sense when Bosola, failing to recognize Antonio in the dark, mortally wounds him:

MALATESTTE (*To BOSOLA*) Thou wretched thing of blood,  
How came Antonio by his death?  
BOSOLA In a mist; I know not how—  
Such a mistake as I have often seen  
In a play. (5.5.91-94)

*Play*, *mist* and *mistake* metadramatically intimate the nature of the moment as an instance of "missing the mark," the literal sense of *hamartia* (from *hamartano*, to err). Yet, Bosola's stabbing of Antonio is only the material counterpart of his character flaw, blindness to the Duchess's true nature. More than a prop, the dark lantern he carries about is a symbol. The hired intelligencer tracks information and interprets clues but fails to draw appropriate conclusions. He correctly establishes the Duchess's condition, noticing how she gets rounder by the day, but fails to identify the child's father until the horoscope fatefully drops out of Antonio's pocket. A fine connoisseur of men, Bosola judges the Arragonians and Antonio for what they are, but choosing not to act upon this knowledge, he embraces instead the brothers' depraved perspective. However reliable his compass may be—*bóssola* is the Italian for compass<sup>10</sup>—he knowingly goes down the wrong path in accordance with the original sense of *hamartano*:

I served your tyranny, and rather strove  
To satisfy yourself than all the world;  
And, though I loathed the evil, yet I loved  
You that did counsel it, and rather sought  
To appear a true servant than an honest man. (4.2.313-17)

It takes the execution of the Duchess for Bosola to experience *anagnorisis*, Aristotle's "change from ignorance to knowledge" (52a29), and grasp the consequences of not acting according to his conscience.<sup>11</sup> Now

available for pity and repentance, the cold, dry melancholic finds himself accessible to tears:

This is manly sorrow:  
 These tears, I am very certain, never grew  
 In my mother's milk. My estate is sunk  
 Below the degree of fear. Where were  
 These penitent fountains while she was living?  
 Oh, they were frozen up. (4.2.346-51)

From the vantage point of his newly acquired awareness, Bosola sets about purging the world of its vitiated humours—himself being one—, a task for which his posture as a satirist uniquely qualifies him.

### 3. The Duchess's Eccentric Course

The Duchess, however, hand fails to experience any of this. Hers is another voyage. Within minutes of her brothers prohibiting marriage, she moves on to challenge them and weds her steward without so much as the hint of a scruple. Her desire never wrestles with moral/social imperatives she does not share. When Antonio expresses misgivings about future strife should her brothers find out about their marriage, she replies, embracing him: "All discord, without this circumference, / Is only to be *pitied* and not *feared*" (1.1.456-57; emphasis added). By naming the component notions of tragedy, language registers the symbolic import of the moment, but by asserting their discontinuity—discord is *only* to be pitied and *not* feared—the Duchess simultaneously appears to repudiate the very possibility of tragedy. It takes Cariola to restore it as she reflects the Duchess's spirited action "shows / A fearful madness" deserving "much of pity" (488-89), a tension that increasingly exposes the double system of reference underlying Webster's "Tragedy."

In most of the play's analogues, and notably in Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, the Duchess's lack of remorse is offered as evidence of the moral failure of women. A lascivious creature who takes a husband to "glut her libidinous appetite" after her first lord's death, she adds insult to injury by following "a poor and simple gentleman [...] that was the

household servant of her court" (Painter 146-47). Webster instead shifts the Duchess's clear conscience from evidence of moral bankruptcy to evidence of unfailing honesty, and methodically plays down lustful appetite and mismatch. The Duchess radiates healthful companionate love, not lust. Nor is Antonio a poor and simple gentleman. He is a devoted spouse, noble in mind if not in title, and with enough wealth for his estate to be worth confiscating. The Duchess's tragic error does not lie in transgressing a brother's order so much as in believing she can shrug off the injunctions of a society whose hierarchies are based on degree, not on merit (Coddon 34), as well as in her firm conviction that "time will easily / Scatter the tempest" she has raised (1.1.458-59). Underestimating her move's tragic potential and overestimating time's healing power are the twin errors she repeats again on the cusp of the tragic reversal. "You shall get no more children till my brothers / Consent to be your gossips" (3.2.67-68), she playfully declares, unaware that the bantering intended for her husband is being picked up by her brother, a permutation of addressees that achieves the play's brutal reconnection with the tragic.

At no point, and significantly not at the moment conventionally assigned for tragic recognition, does the Duchess assess her choice as a moral lapse. Unmoved by Bosola's attempt to bring her to "mortification" (4.2.164), she remains "duchess of Malfi still" (131), utterly unchanged, another of Webster's persistent signals that she does not belong with classical tragedy. The Duchess's *anagnorisis* is of a different order, not the recognition of past error but a clear vision of the nature of death and how to welcome it stoically: "I perceive death, now I am well awake, / Best gift is they can give or I can take" (4.2.210-11). Proof against *anagnorisis*, she is impervious to *catharsis*: Ferdinand's interlude of singing and dancing bedlamites is ineffectual. Far from distressing her, the spectacle of madness "keep[s] [her] in [her] right wits" (6). The sight of rope, bell and coffin arouses no fear, much to Bosola's metagenic dismay to find her immune to his tragic strategies: "this cord *should* terrify you" (201; emphasis added). Alien to tragedy in the Aristotelian sense, the Duchess rather stands as the protagonist of martyr

drama, where “not so much the deeds of the hero as his endurance” matter (Benjamin 58). The play must be observed in a different light and its central figures recast under a different name to discover that *The Duchess of Malfi* is actually two plays in one.

## II. Reading *The Duchess of Malfi* as *Trauerspiel*

### 1. Recasting the Tragedy: Martyr, Tyrant, and Intriguer

Unlike tragedy, *Trauerspiel* is rooted in history, one that is haunted by the idea of catastrophe and devoid of any sense of eschatology. The setting is a mostly corrupt court with the sovereign at its centre, “the representative of history” who “holds the course of history in his hands like a sceptre” (Benjamin 65), but is left to mourn the misery of those that are born great in a transient world forsaken by God.

The *Trauerspiel* sovereign, subject to his moral and political choices, evolved one of two faces, the martyr and the tyrant. “For the ‘very bad’ there was the drama of the tyrant and there was fear; for the ‘very good’ there was the martyr drama and pity” (Benjamin 69). The Duchess is the sovereign/martyr, the “radical stoic” (73) put to the test in a struggle at the end of which torture and death await her. Opposite her, the Arragonian brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, are an augmented version of the merciless sovereign/tyrant. Ruled by their passions—incestuous jealousy for one and a collection of all the vices associated with the catholic stage prelate for the other—they sadistically unleash unspeakable torments on their intractable sister, torture, murder and, like the emblematic tyrant Herod, child slaughter, until Bosola exacts retribution, moving the play in a new direction.

What engaged German dramatists in *Trauerspiel* was how this “summit of creation,” the seventeenth-century ruler, could be overwhelmed by the magnitude of his own crimes and turn into a maddened autocrat, “erupting into madness like a volcano and destroying himself and his entire court” (70). Like Hallman’s Antiochus on seeing a dead fish’s

head, Ferdinand is plunged into madness on gazing upon the face of his dead sister. He externalises his creaturely nature in the shape of a werewolf, like Hunold's Nebuchadnezzar growing feathers and talons when exiled from mankind to graze with the animals (86). Mad or murdered, the martyr and the tyrant fall victim to the disproportion between the power they are invested with and the absolute infirmity of their earthly condition (70).

Deploring this tragic contrast while exploiting it to his advantage, the intriguer is the third black star in the *Trauerspiel* constellation. A courtier, servant or henchman, he plays on the sovereign's foibles to orchestrate the plot. He is also the provider of grim humour, an apparent paradox that exposed the affinity between comedy and *Trauerspiel*. Comedy, or rather "the pure joke," Benjamin argues, is "the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt" (125). Bosola, planted by the Arragonian brethren to spy on the Duchess, has none of the latitude of a Iago, however. Most of the time, he merely implements the brothers' designs. The stratagem of offering a dish of unripe apricots to verify his suspicion of the Duchess's pregnancy is entirely his own, but the sick turns of act 4 are of Ferdinand's devising, not his. Yet, lack of direct information from the mad Duke<sup>12</sup> together with Bosola's active participation in the sequence—he introduces, comments upon the "sad spectacle" (4.1.56) and comforts the Duchess—make it seem as if he bears full responsibility for running the show. This, combined with his satirical turn of mind, is enough to make him the comic/devilish intriguer while crucially ensuring that his change of heart retains credibility.

## 2. Portrait of the Heroine as a Protestant Martyr

*Trauerspiel* found its breeding ground in the political and religious upheavals that had rocked the period for almost a century. If Haugwitz looked as far back as the death of Mary Queen of Scots for his *Maria Stuarda* in 1683, *Carolus Stuardus* (1649) was Gryphius's immediate response to the execution of Charles I. The same shift away from tragic-

mythological to historical subjects is detected across Europe. It is Shakespeare's linkage of tragedy and history as early as the 1590s that enables Martinez to identify in *Richard II* elements of *Trauerspiel* long before it developed as a genre in Germany.

The true story of Giovanna d'Aragona is not History as much as *fait divers*, admittedly, but it obliquely returns to the religious issues that were shaping the English nation. When "English identity was defined as Protestant" and Roman Catholicism was "the hated and dangerous antagonist" (Marotti 9), Jacobean Italianate plays, drawing on Protestant satires of the Roman Church, fuelled anti-Catholic sentiment. Webster's scheming Cardinal fits the conventional representation of the popish stage prelate exposed as an Antichrist by his ambition to achieve the papacy. Opposite the Romish tyrant, Huston Diehl has persuasively argued, the unbroken Duchess is in many ways aligned with the reformed religion:

First, by locating her conflict with her brothers in the issue over whether a private vow of marriage is a legitimate one, [Webster] links her to some of the more radical Protestant positions on ritual and authority. Second, by depicting her as a rebel against powerful agents of the Roman church [...], he appeals to English prejudices against the Roman clergy and implicitly associates her with English Protestantism. Finally, in portraying her responses to her tortures, he emphasizes her renunciation of earthly things [...] precisely the qualities celebrated in Protestant martyrs. (Diehl 198)

Webster's appropriation of the "rhetoric of martyrdom" deployed by Foxe in *Acts and Monuments* is explicit, Diehl writes (197). The Duchess stoically meets the vengeful sadism destined to break her will as much as her will to live. Her suffering, fortitude and characteristically her "long[ing] to bleed" are those of a martyr (4.1.106). They are remarkably recognisable as the categories and the language of *Trauerspiel*, as in this outcry addressed by the martyr to the intriguer about the tyrant:

Let [my brothers], like tyrants,  
Never be remembered but for the ill they have done!  
[...]  
Let heaven, a little while, cease crowning martyrs,  
To punish them! (4.1.100-08)



In line with the view of martyrdom as *Imitatio Christi*, the Duchess's stoic death and brief resurrection make her into a Christ-like figure, Celia R. Daileader has argued (67).<sup>13</sup> Building on gender and role, Webster seizes the opportunity to combine *Imitatio Christi* with a Protestant take on *Imitatio Mariae*.<sup>14</sup> The Duchess's seemingly unexplained pregnancy gestures toward Mary, and the birth of her son at Christmas time has been identified with a Nativity of sorts (see Garcette 169-77). Wry at first—her delivery is farcically triggered by Bosola's dish of unripe apricots—it turns tragically serious as the play moves on. Her flight to Loreto—home to a major Marian shrine—has been identified with the flight into Egypt (Borlik 141) and the slaughter of her children with the Massacre of the Innocents (Mitchell and Brady).<sup>15</sup>

This sustained flow effectively constructs *The Duchess of Malfi* as *Trauerspiel*: it grounds the play in history, constructs the heroine as a martyr and sets a framework for assessing her merits. Unlike the hero of classical tragedy, the perfect hero/martyr of *Trauerspiel* "must be the embodiment of all virtues" (Harsdörffer, qtd. in Benjamin 72). Such is the Duchess, as Antonio establishes in the opening moments<sup>16</sup>:

Her days are practiced in such noble virtue  
That sure her nights—nay more, her very sleeps—  
Are more in heaven than other ladies' shrifts.  
Let all sweet ladies break their flatt'ring glasses  
And dress themselves in her. (1.1.194-98)

Antonio's praise, "She stains the time past, and lights the time to come" (202),<sup>17</sup> makes her an undisputed model for emulation. Her death prompts in Bosola the same conversion the death of martyrs achieved for onlookers: "God knows it is not force nor might, [...] that must convert the land, / It is the blood by martirs shed."<sup>18</sup> His conversion is identified here with the character's *anagnorisis* and dramatically coincides with the play's turn into a new direction. The spectacle of martyrdom has worked its miracle.

### 3. Appointing Genres

Bosola's transformation is the moment when the values of *Trauerspiel* challenge the tenets of revenge tragedy, for Christian martyrdom is *not* meant to excite revenge. As the Duchess briefly revives, Bosola reassures her that her family are alive:

DUCHESS Antonio!

BOSOLA Yes, madam, he is living.

The dead bodies you saw were but feigned statues;

He's reconciled to your brothers: the Pope hath wrought

The atonement.

DUCHESS            Mercy! *She dies.* (4.2.334-38)

"Mercy" is indifferently a word of gratitude ("thank you"), a plea for compassion ("have mercy"), or even the bow of a player before they take their leave. But the religious phrasing of the exchange, "heaven," "reconciled" and "atonement," together with the Duchess's brief resurrection, rather suggest a plea for pardon at the exact point where Bosola prepares to engage in violent expiation. The play is at a generic crossroads. Bosola's compass points him the way to retribution, and he sets about setting up Act 5 as a tragedy of blood against the dying wish of the *Trauerspiel* heroine. That his botched, grotesque endeavour results in the parody of a tragedy (Pearson 90) is a measure of the folly of his choice. Bosola "misses the mark" again—adding generic *hamartia* to the list of his errors.

*The Duchess of Malfi* thus offers two narratives of murder and retribution, interwoven albeit distinct, and developing on either side of a dividing line that is the Duchess's death. They are assigned two distinct albeit related generic codes, concerned with choices between right and wrong, punished or vindicated by death as the case may be. The question is now that of their relationship to each other as a generic system. By the late 1600s, the popularity of Kyd's mix of ethics and action in revenge drama had begun to ebb. Attention was relocated away from the moral, social and political issues characteristic of early revenge plays to the thrill of horror, and from the tortured mind of the avenging

hero to the tortured bodies of the villain's victims. Ever more sophisticated crimes called for ever more sophisticated plots and for ever more flexible notions of revenge to secure variety. Motives ranged from avenging murder to avenging flimsy points of honour to opposing all manner of restraint, eroding revenge as a moral issue. The brethren's offered reasons for dispatching the Duchess are a mix of lineal concerns, incestuous lust and greed. The villain gradually took centre stage. Webster's villains are a spectacularly sick triad, a Machiavel, a pervert, and their henchman. Even when, from act 4, the Duchess's death, not social prejudice, is the wrong to be righted, seemingly returning the play to formerly moral configurations, Webster nonetheless continues to wreak havoc on moral dichotomies and to overturn tragic expectations, structure, and tone. The Duchess's unlikely avenger is a two-time murderer, a choice unlikely to restore the distinction between right and wrong, while her natural avenger, decent, upright Antonio, is kept away from the main action, unaware of his spouse's death. Ferdinand's tragic recognition never takes place, precluded first by wilful blindness ("Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle" [4.2.249]), then by insanity. The range, variety, and ultimately the sheer absurdity of the final bloodbath shift the focus away from death as a marker of justice to death as a marker of theatrical ingenuity. The quasi-mechanical arrangement of the final carnage recalls Bergson's definition of laughter as "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (Bergson 37). But laughter, Bergson observes, "imposes silence upon our pity" (4). The audience's cathartic experience is accordingly compromised, and tragedy dissolves in grim farce, while the mixture of tones resonates like a confirmation the generic framework guiding reception is fractured. Like the bodies which Bosola imagines festering underneath rich tissue, the tragic corpus rots away.

Fredson Bowers has described Bosola as a complex, self-conscious misfit, a villain somehow engaged in a self-reflexive assessment of his own typecasting<sup>19</sup> or, in metagenetic terms, aware of the impasse revenge drama has reached. It is by inviting *Trauerspiel* into his tragedy

that Webster draws attention to this impasse. Nor is it a strategy of substitution whereby he would offer martyr drama as an alternative to restore awareness of moral issues. Martyr drama is a product of Baroque scepticism. The martyr's sacrifice carries no sense of achieving a spiritual realm. *Trauerspiel* is "countertranscendental" (Steiner 16), "confined to a context of strict immanence, without any access to the beyond of the mystery plays [...], limited to the representations of ghostly apparitions" (Benjamin 80). Though the Duchess greets death "[k]nowing to meet [...] excellent company / In th'other world" (4.2.198-99), the other world extends no further than the outskirts of Amalfi and the ruined churchyard where her disembodied voice issues futile warnings to Antonio. The horrific titillation of death which drew audiences to the stage in the 1610s, Webster suggests, have obliterated considerations of the hopelessness of the human condition. This is the lesson the audience receives from Bosola as he displays for them—for us—the melancholy props of Benjaminian allegory: effigies, hand, and coffin.

#### 4. Allegories

Benjamin does not envisage allegory as a way of accessing the transcendent via the material but as a mode of representation that disrupts the illusion of their continuity. Allegory does not denote "the will to symbolic totality" (which Benjamin locates in the symbol); it lays bare the fragmentation of living matter, its irredeemable thing-ness (186). This explains the baroque cult of the ruin and its human counterpart, the corpse, Benjamin's emblems of fragmentation, and the signature of Webster's art.

"Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (178). On his way to the Cardinal, Antonio walks past the ruins of an abbey:

I do love these ancient ruins:  
We never tread upon them but we set  
Our foot upon some reverend history;

And questionless, here in this open court,  
 Which now lies naked to the injuries  
 Of stormy weather, some men lie interred  
 Loved the church so well, and gave so largely to't,  
 They thought it should have canopied their bones  
 Till doomsday; but all things have their end:  
 Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men,  
 Must have like death that we have. (5.3.9-19)

For an English audience, Antonio's musing would have conjured up memories of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, offering visual proof of the success of the Reformation (see Diehl 210), or voicing nostalgia for the Catholic past (see Borlik 143). From the perspective of the *Trauerspiel*, Antonio's reflection on the transience of marble and gilded monuments uncannily rehearses Benjamin's view of the connection between history and the ruin:

The word "history" stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history [...] is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. (187)

The Duchess herself wastes away. Transience/history stands written on her countenance. "Who do I look like now?" she asks Cariola. "[L]ike some reverend monument / Whose ruins are even pitied" (4.2.29, 32-33). Before the scene is out, the ruined Duchess will have turned into a corpse, "the pre-eminent emblematic property" (Benjamin 218). "The characters of the *Trauerspiel* die, because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory," Benjamin writes: "It is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse" (217-18). The function of the corpse is to lay bare the degradation, the meaninglessness and the corruption of human existence. The corpse is not the ending—the term—but the end—the ultimate aim—of the *Spiel*. This is the truth revenge tragedy has turned its back on in pursuit of cheap audience gratification, and which *The Duchess of Malfi* as *Trauerspiel* mercilessly restores.

With the new art of anatomy, one of the play's ruling tropes, the Benjaminian corpse is an endless reservoir of props / dead objects. The mad Ferdinand roams graveyards with a man's leg slung across his shoulder. The dead hand he extends to the Duchess instead of his own was probably cut off from the body of some anonymous criminal in the cabinet of an anatomist.<sup>20</sup> Webster annexes the props of revenge drama to make them into *Trauerspiel* props endowed with allegorical meaning. Bosola is uncommonly alert to the melancholy thing-ness of the human condition. A philosopher/satirist capable of giving an extempore speech on funeral monuments, he points to the skull beneath the skin, the corpse always already buried within the living body: "we bear about us / A rotten and dead body" that "we delight / To hide [...] in rich tissue" (2.1.56-58). In his capacity as tomb maker-cum-executioner, he is a maker of dead objects, effigies, rope, and coffin. The Duchess's continually pregnant body cannot compete with the host of dead bodies spawning dead fragments that he seems to marshall. He confronts her throughout Act 4 with the "*facies hippocratica*," the death's head that bespeaks man's subjection to nature (Benjamin 166), and with the fluids of bodily decomposition, the ultimate stage of fragmentation. "Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best but a salvatory of green mummy. What's this flesh? A little cruded milk, fantastical puff paste" (4.2.115-17), he muses in response to the Duchess's ontological question, "[w]ho am I?"

The Duchess thus learns the *Trauerspiel* lesson under the instruction of Bosola, her mentor/tormentor. His "bóssola" points her the way to the corpse, her assigned journey. She travels from celebrating life as a wedded wife and mother to "mourning for mortality" (Zimmerman 15); from the attempted totality of the closed, perfect circle of married life to melancholy dissolution; from happy mother to "green mummy" (4.2.116); from proliferating subject to proliferating earthworms, and from ruler to martyr. Apprehending death at the heart of life is the recurring motif of the torments devised for her. She is first made to grieve for a spouse and children who are actually still alive, then, moments before her death, to apprehend herself as an already decomposing corpse. In both instances, the matters she is confronted with, body rot

and wax, operate like ruins on the borderline between existence and obliteration, something and nothing. Rot is the quintessence of eternal transience, the something that remains behind to mourn nothingness. It represents and somehow freezes the moment and process of *unbecoming*. The wax effigies standing for the supposedly dead bodies of the Duchess's kin blur the boundaries between animate and inanimate—wax is known for its eerie capacity to imitate the flesh. More significantly, they enshrine—for what is the space discovered behind the traverse but a monstrous shrine?—the concept of the human as object. Wax and rot encapsulate between them thing-ness and eternal decay, the concepts at the heart of *Trauerspiel* which it exists to mourn. Mourning is also the disposition, Benjamin notes, “in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it” (139). The Duchess finally acknowledges, “now [she's] well awake,” that the end the brothers have engineered for her is the “[b]est gift they can give or [she] can take” (4.2.209-11).

### III. Reading Tragedy and *Trauerspiel* Historically

In his analysis of the relationship of romance and comedy, Jameson has shown the value of a “historical regrounding” of genres (157) beyond the mode/syntax, Frye/Propp dichotomy that has governed contemporary criticism for over sixty years. They have valid intuitions to offer but they would carry more weight if tethered to a concrete historical situation, enabling a reading of forms as ideological formations. A historical regrounding of the dialogue of tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, so far developed in terms of syntax and mode, is thus called for to make sense of their coexistence within *The Duchess of Malfi* as an individual work.

The conceptual category informing both tragedy and *Trauerspiel* is the hero's submission to an existing order or law, human, divine, or social as the case may be. Conceived as a “balance in nature” which the hero's free act briefly disturbs, order “sooner or later *must* right itself” (Frye 209). The function of tragedy is to “lead up to an epiphany of law, of

that which is and must be" (Frye 208). In *Trauerspiel*, it is the tyrant, no matter how discredited, who embodies the law, for "not even the most dreadful corruption [...] can really disturb this norm of sovereignty" (Benjamin 69-70). The Duchess's move to marry regardless of blood and lineage disrupts the "balance in nature" (Frye 209), whereupon the Arragonians, corrupt as they are, act to reassert "that which is and must be" (Frye 208), namely what is declared "good" under the(ir) law.

As it stands, this framework undermines both order and sovereignty. The Arragonians at first shroud their marriage prohibition in authoritative, quasi-sacred mystery—"Do not you ask the reason, but be satisfied / I say I would not [have her marry again]" (1.1.250-51). Yet, their declared concern for the purity of "[t]he royal blood of Aragon and Castile" (2.5.22) exposes it as an ideological formation that "draw[s] the boundaries of a given social order and provid[es] a powerful internal deterrent against deviancy or subversion" (Jameson 140). Bosola eventually cancels the Arragonians' aristocratic revenge by a revenge of his own that brings a socially mixed ruler, Antonio's son and heir, to the throne. It vindicates the Duchess's initial breach, *de facto* questioning the law that initially organized the tragedy. *Trauerspiel* reshapes the perception of sovereignty, unassailable as it is, by lodging it in the hands of a ruthless, mad autocrat. It redeploys the categories of good and evil, locating good on the side of the martyr, while the fountain-head of rule is "poisoned" (1.1.14). Generic counterpoint thus redistributes categories of good, evil and order in ways that are likely to unsettle the reception of the drama. "What is and must be" (Frye 208) is no longer aligned with, or irrelevant to, questions of good and evil. It stands pitted against moral categories, questioning the justice of the law. Resulting uncertainties over type (is the Duchess a type of the lusty widow?), genre (is the play tragic or anti-tragic?), and meaning (how far does the Duchess actually transgress?) are evidence of the tensions induced by the coexistence of dramatic codes, what Whigham in a different context called "uneasy dissonance" (177).

These tensions, of course, can be and have been imputed to an evolution of revenge tragedy "away from a worn-out convention" in the mid-



1600s, an evolution predictably prompted by the usual suspect, “the coarse taste” (Bowers 155) of popular audiences. Able dramatists were persuaded against their better sense to jettison the hero of older Elizabethan drama. Too “narrow” a type, it was unable to adjust to the new demand for “more variety and less high seriousness” and “violent, far-fetched, and surprising situations” (155). “Far-fetched” is the giveaway term establishing absence of cause as a valid reason for the emergence of new trends. Genre criticism should realize instead that “generic affiliations and the systematic deviation from them provide clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a prototypical response to a historical dilemma” (Jame-son 157). The “historical dilemma” that informs Webster’s tragedy is twofold. One branch is the decline of the aristocracy and the pressures induced by the emergence of a new social formation; the other is its counterpart, the redefinition of the place of woman in Jacobean society. The early modern declining elite came to regard intermarriage as “contamination [...] by invasion from below,” Whigham recalls, following Lawrence Stone (168). Ferdinand’s incestuous inclination toward his sister, Whigham famously postulates, is “a *social* posture of hysterical compensation—a desperate expression of the desire to evade degrading associations with inferiors” (169). Opposite him, the two servants represent emerging, socially mobile classes—or tentatively so. Antonio must be coerced into social mobility, while Bosola never achieves it. The former is at first taken aback by the Duchess’s marriage proposal, having duly internalised the ideological hierarchy of rank, the law which in a not so distant past kept everyone in their right place. He is reluctant to seize the opportunity she offers him to leave behind his obsolete, socio-economically fruitless stance: “You may discover what a wealthy mine / I make you lord of” (1.1.417-18). Inhibited by residual processes from “the time past,” he is not ready to step into “the time to come”: “his horizon of mobility is clearly circumscribed; beyond its limits he is ill at ease, unprepared for a society open to the top” (Whigham 175):

ANTONIO    There is a saucy and ambitious devil  
Dancing in this circle.

DUCHESS                      Remove him.

ANTONIO                                      How? (1.1.400-01)

Bosola on the other hand cannot find a place for himself in the proto-capitalist framework. His aspiration to “thrive some way” (1.1.37) is regularly frustrated: he goes his way through the play claiming due payment for service. An unrewarded henchman he begins (he never got cash payment from the Cardinal for committing a murder on his behalf), an unrewarded henchman he ends, vainly claiming from Ferdinand his reward for killing the Duchess (4.2.278).<sup>21</sup> Yet, characteristically, his final complaint is that he dies “neglected” (5.5.84), not cheated out of his wages. Beyond cash payment, what he longs for, Whigham suggests, is the identity that service used to confer in the feudal system. Between feudal and capitalist discourses, Bosola fails to recognize that “cash payment is the full exchange value to be got from his employer” (Whigham 178)—and ironically does not even get that. As much as Antonio, the aspiring Bosola is hampered by residual processes.

Mediating between feudality and the marketplace, upper and emergent classes, the widowed Duchess holds the key to “the invasion from below.”<sup>22</sup> She authorises mobility across class lines by marrying Antonio (and by readily turning into a bourgeois wife as if she were born to it), while Bosola offers the ideological subtext to her move—before he informs against her to Ferdinand. His discourse on merit and the revolution that merit will work on existing social practices is worth quoting at length:

Fortunate lady!

For you have made your private nuptial bed  
The humble and fair seminary of peace.  
No question but many an unbeneficed scholar  
Shall pray for you for this deed, and rejoice  
That some preferment in the world can yet  
Arise from merit. The virgins of your land  
That have no dowries shall hope your example  
Will raise them to rich husbands. Should you want

Soldiers, 'twould make the very Turks and Moors  
 Turn Christians, and serve you for this act.  
 Last, the neglected poets of your time,  
 In honor of this trophy of a man,  
 Raised by that curious engine, your white hand,  
 Shall thank you in your grave for't, and make that  
 More reverend than all the cabinets  
 Of living princes. For Antonio,  
 His fame shall likewise flow from many a pen,  
 When heralds shall want coats to sell to men. (3.2.268-85)

Ingrained relics of obsolete ideologies are a measure of the difficulty of navigating paradigm changes. The progressive Duchess is at first dismissively returned to the stage type of the lusty window (see 1.1.330). By the end of Act 4, the order of tragedy has prevailed. But its rules are discredited enough to ratify the presence of *Trauerspiel* as an alternative mode, one that can harbour a positive reading of the Duchess. It eventually takes Bosola's revenge to precipitate the end of aristocracy by eradicating the household of Aragon and Castile, substituting a new generation of "young hopeful gentlemen" (5.5.110) to whom signs of worth, crown, nobility and fame, are transferred:

*Integrity of life is fame's best friend,  
 Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end.* (5.5.118-19)

The redefinition of gender roles in Jacobean society—the Renaissance controversy about women—is a special chapter in ongoing social changes (see Crunelle-Vanrigh). Long viewed as vehicles securing the continuity of lineage, pawns in alliances that fostered male wealth and influence, or cultural embodiments of evil sexuality, women were being gradually invited as equal partners in the joint venture of companionate marriage. Protestant discourse dignified matrimony as a central institution; the private sphere was granted significance on a par with the public, the political and the spiritual spheres (see Rose 97-98). By the time Webster composed *The Duchess of Malfi*, the change had started to affect cultural production, prompting generic readjustments. With

*Romeo and Juliet*, marriage had ceased to be an exclusively comedic motif and competed with matters of state as a valid subject for nobler genres. It conquered further territory at the turn of the century when the cultural significance of the warrior, the staple of heroic tragedy, waned under the combined influence of the decline of the aristocracy and the accession of a pacifist sovereign. Playwrights turned away from the battle front to the home front, from the public to the private sphere, and from an all-male world to one where women possessed or tried to achieve agency. The Duchess metagenerically registers the change when she describes her move in the military idiom, redefining it as a heroic endeavour and herself as a hero of marriage:

[...] as men in some great battles,  
By apprehending danger, have achieved  
Almost impossible actions—I have heard soldiers say so—  
So I, through frights and threat'nings, will assay  
This dangerous venture. (1.1.334-338)

The Duchess's venture is fraught with peril for the course of change, empowerment and disempowerment never did run smooth. "[T]he historical moment blocks off a certain number of possibilities which had been unavailable in earlier situations, all the while opening up certain determinate new ones which may or may not then come into being" (Jameson 158)—and the issue is tragic when they do not. The dramatic landscape of *The Duchess of Malfi* is an instance of Jameson's "limiting situations," not of triumphant empowerment. The Duchess is likely to founder at every step of the way, tripped by unwanted relics of the past: the ambiguity of her marriage contract, valid but marginal; her position as a widow, legally autonomous but actually dependent and as likely to be forbidden to remarry as to be coerced into an unwanted union. Like Bosola, she belongs nowhere, a condition epitomised by her undecidable position as ruler and wife, both superior and inferior—the historically embedded version of the elevated/ creaturely dichotomy which Benjamin detects in the ruler.

## Concluding Remark

The tragic *agôn* of *The Duchess of Malfi* is thus inscribed in a historical determination opposing old to new standards at the juncture between two paradigms. The standards of the past materialise in the Arragonians' "anachronistic neofeudal regime in the process of decline" (Rose 157), while bold, pioneering, but doomed choices are located in the Duchess, only too aware of the risks of breaking new ground: "I am going into a wilderness / Where I shall find nor path nor friendly clew / To be my guide" (1.1.349-51). To weather the dangers of the moment, she alternates between the court and the bedchamber and confines her utopia to a parallel world that never sees the light of day. As long as the same rules do not prevail for all, hers is a mock revolution that is not destined to last, doomed before it is (belatedly and perhaps artificially) vindicated. This is the conclusion invited by Webster's choice of combining tragedy and *Trauerspiel* as reading contracts. It endorses the Duchess's aspirations and mourns her tragic failure. It also explores the twilight zone between the "time past" and the "time to come," the dangerous interstice Antonio tragically fails to envisage in his original praise of the Duchess.<sup>23</sup> For between the moment the old world dies and the moment the new world is born, there is the time of monsters, of martyrs and of tyrants.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am deeply grateful to my anonymous reviewers for their insightful remarks and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup>The death of Julius Caesar in Act 3, Scene 1 similarly prompted nineteenth century critics to question Shakespeare's construction and raised controversy about who is the real hero of the play. For a related discussion, see Zirker and Riecker in this volume of *Connotations*: <http://www.connotations.de/debate/shakespeares-julius-caesar/>

<sup>3</sup>A group of plays by Gryphius, Lohenstein, Hallmann, Haugwitz and several others, the genre of *Trauerspiel* contributed to shape a national German literature in the second half of the seventeenth century.

<sup>4</sup>Building on Benjamin's view that the death of Socrates is the *Ursprung* of *Trauerspiel*, Lupton and Reinhard suggest the death of Hamlet is its *Untergang*: "Hamlet appears as the English flower of German drama, which, blossoming before the fact, cankers all future Germanic production"

(Lupton and Reinhard 49). Grady focuses on Benjamin's theory of fragmented allegories and finds allegorical dynamics in *Hamlet's* props, stage effects and imagery—the Ghost, the unweeded garden, Ophelia's flowers, Yorick's skull, the king's signet, the sword, the pearl and the poisoned cup. "These allegories for Benjamin are typically ambiguous, and in this quality *Hamlet* is quintessentially allegorical" (Grady 104).

<sup>5</sup>For Benjaminesque takes on English early modern drama, see among others Zenon Luis Martinez on *Richard II*, Margaret Owens on *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and William Remley on *Timon of Athens*.

<sup>6</sup>A similar collocation occurs on Bosola's transformation from hitman to avenger (4.2.347-52).

<sup>7</sup>Webster may have been aware of Aristotle's reference to musical forms of *catharsis* in book VIII of the *Politics*, ch. 6 and 7. The sequence gestures toward the medical dimension of catharsis which Jacob Bernays was to explore in the nineteenth century.

<sup>8</sup>The young Webster was educated at Merchant Taylor's School (possibly under the instruction of Richard Mulcaster before Mulcaster left as first headmaster in 1586). An early advocate of English as a language of learning, Mulcaster taught the usual Latin and Greek courses and had an interest in drama, a favourable context for Webster to develop his sense of how "the figural inhabits discourse" (Lyotard 279).

<sup>9</sup>For Huston Diehl, the play is "deeply informed by English Calvinism" and explores "Calvinist notions of predestination" (182) through the character of Bosola, who cannot do good despite his better knowledge.

<sup>10</sup>"*Bóssola*, a boxe that mariners keepe their compasse in. Also taken for the com|passe. *Bossolare*, to put in a boxe" (John Florio, *A vvorlds of wordes, or Most copious, and exact dictionarie in Italian*, 1598). The sense anticipates Bosola's self-presentation as the Duchess's grave maker (4.2.110).

<sup>11</sup>"What would I do, were this to do again? / I would not change my peace of conscience / For all the wealth of Europe" (4.2.323-25). Bosola's sudden awareness matches Frye's gloss of Aristotle's *anagnorisis* as "the recognition of the determined shape of the life [the hero] has created for himself, with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken" (Frye 212).

<sup>12</sup>Prior to the severed hand/wax effigies scene, Ferdinand's "Inform her what I told you" (4.1.17) is characteristic of Webster's reticence to have the audience identify Ferdinand too closely with the specifics of the torments.

<sup>13</sup>The garrotting is frequently staged as a Crucifixion of sorts, see Dominic Dromgoole's production (Globe Theatre, 2014).

<sup>14</sup>Protestants no longer regarded Mary as an intercessor, yet devotion to the Virgin was still vivid under Anglicanism.

<sup>15</sup>The Duchess's fake pilgrimage to Loreto to meet up with Antonio contains elements of anti-Catholic satire, reviving the Reformers' association of pilgrimage with erotic trysts. But the principal butt of the satire in the complex pantomime at the shrine of Our Lady (3.4) is the Cardinal more than the Duchess. "The minimalism of the stage direction in which the Duchess presents herself constitutes a simple act of piety, shorn of the trappings of Marian idolatry," contrasting with the elaborate, sacrilegious ceremony of the Cardinal's instalment as a soldier (Borlik 142).

<sup>16</sup>Antonio speaks here in his capacity as the trusted Chorus before he is drawn into the action as a participant.

<sup>17</sup>The line is borrowed from "A Monumental Column" (1613), Webster's elegy on the death of Prince Henry in 1612, widely regarded as a national tragedy. Inserting in Antonio's tribute to the Duchess a line lifted from Webster's own heart-felt tribute to the young heir is suggestive of the status he intended for her. On the influence of Prince Henry's funeral on the wax figures episode, see Owens, "John Webster, Tussaud Laureate."

<sup>18</sup>From a poem uncertainly attributed to Thomas Pounce, "The complaynt of a Catholike for the death of M. Edmund Campion," Guiney 131, 11.69-72.

<sup>19</sup>"Enough of his independent better self are shown to stir the interest of the audience and the more to horrify them by the cynical brutality that follows. Indeed, Bosola has an almost surgical interest in torturing the human spirit to see how much it can endure before the veniality he seeks as the excuse for his own existence is forced to the surface. The unworldly bravery of the duchess proves to Bosola that his theories are false" (Bowers 178-79).

<sup>20</sup>As in Rembrandt's "Anatomy lesson" (1632), and as early as Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), dissection was performed on the bodies of recently executed criminals, long before the practice was written into law in 1752. With the Barber-Surgeons' Hall looming large in the background (see 5.2.76), and with Ferdinand roaming graveyards for dead bodies, Jacobean audiences would have been in no doubt about the origin of the severed hand.

<sup>21</sup>For Whigham, Bosola is the first tragic figure of the worker alienated from his own work (see 178).

<sup>22</sup>The Duchess is nominally free from her brothers' domination. Widows and women who were heads of households were the only women assumed to have any independence (see Cressy 34).

<sup>23</sup>Webster represents aristocratic prerogatives as perverse or unnatural but does not authorize new possibilities to come to fruition yet. It comes as no surprise that the dish of apricots triggering the Duchess's delivery of the fruit of her marriage to Antonio is reputed to have been ripened in horse dung (2.1.137).

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