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# Sceptical Responses in Early Modern Plays
## From Self-Knowledge to Self-Doubt in Marston's *The Malcontent* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*

Lucia Nigri (University of Salford-Manchester, UK)

**Abstract** Defined for the first time by Sir Thomas Elyot as a «secte of Phylosophers, whiche affirmed nothynge» (1538), the term 'scepticism' appears in all its variants only too rarely in the drama of the period. Chadwyck Healey databases (Early English Books Online and Literature Online) record only four different occurrences (Tomkis 1607; Jonson 1640; Cartwright 1651; Massinger 1655), in a span of time which runs from 1550 to 1655, although scepticism as a way of participating in, and responding to, life is registered on the London stages as an increasingly popular critical attitude. Vindice's «I'm in doubt whether I'm myself or no» is evidence of that suspension of judgment which is envisaged by the sceptics as the only viable answer in a world governed by the relativism of human knowledge. Against a theoretical and philosophical background which investigates the relationship between self-knowledge and scepticism, the article looks at how this early modern revival of scepticism – so profoundly influenced by the translation of Montaigne's essays – can couple with, and go beyond, an emergent awareness of inwardness, as the one hinted at in Marston's *The Malcontent* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. In particular, the essay examines the interplay between the revengers' responses to the adoption of different masks and the *dictum* of a philosophy which demands the deferment of any epistemological verdict. A discussion of the rhetorical strategies which better testify to the contradictions at the heart of this ontological impasse will then follow.



> The more I learnt the more I learn to doubt.
> (John Marston, *What You Will*, 2.2.153)

> We must know how to distinguish and separate ourselves from our public charges: every one of us plays two parts, two persons; the one strange and apparent, the other proper and essential [...] A man must serve and make use of the world such as he finds it; in the meantime, he must likewise consider it as a thing estranged from itself, know how to keep and carry himself apart, and to communicate himself to his own trustie good, howsoever things fall out with himself.
> (Pierre Charron, *Of Wisdom*)

## 1 Identifying (sceptical) selves in early modern literature

Defined for the first time by Sir Thomas Elyot as a «secte of Phylosophers, whiche affirmed nothynge» (1538, n.p.), and thus antedating the *OED*'s

first record of the noun in 1587, 'sceptici' appears in all its variant spellings and forms only too rarely in the drama of the early modern period, despite being widely employed in prose and poetry. Chadwyck Healey databases (Early English Books Online and Literature Online) register only five different occurrences of the term in plays between 1550 and 1655: in two comedies, Thomas Tomkis's *Lingua* (1607) and Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (1640); a masque, William Davenant's *Britannia Triumphans* (1638); a tragicomedy, William Cartwright's *The Lady Errant* (1651); and a comical history, Philip Massinger's *The Guardian* (1655). Although the term is rarely employed by playwrights, scepticism as a way of participating in, and of responding to, life is registered on the London stages as an increasingly popular critical attitude, which paradoxically finds its most intriguing ambassadors in the tragedies of the period where the term never appears.

This revival of scepticism, reinvigorated by the social, political, religious, and scientific turmoil of the age (see Spolsky 2001, pp. 62-63), as well as by the literary patrimony of Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays* (1603), and by the works of More, Sextus, and Erasmus, couples with an emergent awareness of inwardness, which is hinted at in Marston's *The Malcontent* (Kay 1998) and in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (MacDonald 2007), two plays which have received scant attention in discussions of sceptical selves, with the exception of Hamlin's treatment of the topic in *The Malcontent* and, more in general, in Middleton (Hamlin 2005).

As scepticism thus surfaces in the period, one may wonder how the revengers' response to the adoption of different disguises functions, if at all, according to the *dictum* of a philosophy that demands the deferment of any epistemological verdict and how the genre of the play may variously affect the playwrights' ways of dealing with this subject. From a dramatic perspective, we also need to know which rhetorical strategies testify to the contradictions at the heart of what becomes an ontological impasse ('who am I?') and how paradoxes inherent in the expression of the self may illuminate our understanding of early modern plays' engagement with scepticism.

Literary scholars, as well as cultural historians, have recently discerned new scenarios on the relation between the private and the public sphere in the everyday experience of the early modern world. Words such as 'subject', 'subjectual', 'individual', 'identity', and 'inwardness' have therefore emerged as a new vocabulary to define the concept of Renaissance selfhood. These terms, however useful, may on occasion clash with the developing terminology of an age whose responses to questions on the nature of being inevitably differ from ours.

It is probably for this reason that readings of early modern plays may tend to privilege Stephen Greenblatt's coinage: 'self-fashioning'. In his influential New Historicist *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, the word has come to suggest a denial of any independent agency on the part of the individual

in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For Greenblatt, selfhood is fashioned as «the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society» (2005, p. 256). This presumed relational subjectivity, strongly informed by Foucauldian overtones, has offered new ways of «specifying the Subject» in a period when, according to Condren, «human social and moral identity, as opposed to material identity, was presented and presumably conceived not in terms of selves or individuals but personae [...] the moral world was overwhelmingly articulated as comprised of offices» (Condren 2006, pp. 35-36; see also Barker 1984).

Despite the fact that our understanding of Renaissance identity and culture has greatly benefited from these studies, a large group of scholars have been increasingly inclined to suspect New Historicist approaches as, borrowing John Jeffries Martin's words, «hold[ing] them [Renaissance identities] up as mirrors to ourselves, [so that] what we see depends almost entirely upon where we stand». Greenblatt's theory has in fact been charged with anachronism because of his attempt to define the «glimmerings of the postmodern self» (Martin 2004, p. 7). Indeed, the same uneasiness with Greenblatt's assumptions has also informed the critically acclaimed *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, where Katharine Eisaman Maus accuses that «the new-historicist critique insists that the 'self' is not independent or prior to its social context. Yet that critique often seems to assume that once this dependence is pointed out, inwardness simply vaporizes» (1995, p. 28). Although she agrees with some of the arguments offered by these postmodern readings, Maus believes that a preoccupation with a rhetoric of inwardness and privacy is manifest in Renaissance theatre, which investigates this «sense of discrepancy between inward disposition and outward appearance» (p. 13). Early modern identity has therefore become the focus of attention on problems of representations of the self as well as «the relation of one's inner experience to one's experience in the world» (Martin 2004, p. 15), as Geoff Baldwin also argues:

> At the beginning of the seventeenth century, there was a body of writers who developed ideas of the self which drew upon stoicism and ideas of office, but went beyond both of these. They pointed forward to more individualistic moral theories, as well as backwards to the conception of the individual as a performer of a variety of roles. (Baldwin 2001, p. 364)

Against this critical background, which tends to analyse early seventeenth-century English plays in relation to an emergent awareness of identity as a conflictual site between private and public selves in the drama of the period, this paper argues instead that early modern investigations of the self may also be informed by literary and cultural traditions of scepticism and that the resulting different degrees of self-knowledge achieved

by the revengers through their use of masks and disguise are variously expressed according to the generic requirements of the play considered. Even though it is too early to treat early modern characters as examples of the individualism one associates with Hobbes or with Milton's Satan, the revengers of this period can in fact be discerned as products of a discussion on self-examination. In an age where, as John Donne famously put it in his *An Anatomy of the World* (1611), «the new philosophy calls all in doubt» (Serpieri, Bigliazzi 2009, l. 205), the disguises adopted by these characters become means through which the experience of 'knowing (one) self' is structured around negotiated inner and outer conflicts and, as in the case of the tragedies, may paradoxically produce doubt in a new, emergent reconfiguration of the coordinates in the other relation. The masks of the malcontent or the knave, for instance, perfectly exploit the gap between external representation and internal truth in a metatheatrical game where the self-proclaiming revenger, suspicious of the unreliability of appearances and assuming a certain degree of self-knowledge, has to mould a new social identity. Functional to the reacquisition of a former public role in the tragicomedy, this cognitive process, which is here investigated through the lens of early modern scepticism, favours in the tragic revenger a new perception of his own interiority, which undermines his assumed self-knowledge.

## 2 Tragicomical Self-knowledge in John Marson's *The Malcontent*

By offering an interesting perspective on the conflicts between inward observation and outward representation in early modern drama, Duke Altofronto epitomises the revenger's struggle with the adoption of a mask: «Oh God, how loathsome this toying is to me, that a duke should be forced to fool it! Well, *stultorum plena suntomnia*; better play the fool lord, than to be the fool lord» (5.3.41-44). Performed between 1602 and 1604, *The Malcontent* is the only play of the period where the malcontent persona – self-consciously performed by the protagonist to achieve his own personal revenge and recognised as a codified cultural type by the other characters on stage – is given the status of a character in a play. In this tragicomedy, Malevole, Altofronto's alter-ego, is a sceptic who can «give his judgement free», as in Richard Brathwaite's definition of the type in his 1615 *Strappado for the Divell* (quoted in Hamlin 2005, p. 98). That in Brathawaite the «scepticke» comes to define something different from what we have encountered so far testifies to the polisemic nature of a term that may refer to either the doubters (in the Phyrronian fashion) or someone who, with his opinions, «do [*sic*] small harme to mens integrity», as in Marston's play (quoted in Hamlin 2005, p. 98). Malevole is in fact presented as consistently satirical in his language and attitude (Peter 1956; Kernan 1959;

Axelrad 1955) and content to act the fool and to be taken to be one. His malcontent credentials are limited to the fact that he casts himself as an outsider and thinks badly of the world.

Criticism has long debated the relationship between Altofronto and Malevole, speculating on the different degrees of contamination between the two and, eventually, agreeing on taking the deposed duke as the real malcontent of the play's title who adopts his fake malcontent persona in order to regain the power and status he has lost. On this subject, T.F. Wharton claims that «disguise serves as more than a convenient trick. It involves a definite loss of the habits, values, and restraints of one's normal identity. It frees the disguiser to do things which would be otherwise inconceivable, as he in a sense becomes what he poses as» (1988, p. 24; on the notion of self-alienation and self-concealment, see Gomez 1991, p. 52; Lanier 1987; Clark 1983; and Kinney 2005, p. 416). Malevole's cynical persona is therefore absorbed into the duke's, as evidenced in the play's closing moments when the malcontent alarmingly remains on stage wearing Altofronto's clothes.

William Hamlin's reading of the play reinforces Wharton's position since he believes that «Altofronto enjoys his role as Malevole, and thus appears to *be* Malevole in some sense worth considering; it follows from this that if he is not precisely 'intrapped' in the role, the role nonetheless functions as a part of him – an extension or development, perhaps» (2005, p. 188). Hamlin, however, goes beyond conflating two characters in one to argue that Altofronto/Malevole is actually

> practic[ing] *in utramque partem* argumentation but conclud[ing] that *both* sides are true. He thus follows a sceptical trajectory to the extent that he entertains 'cross'd opinions' and refuses to choose between them, but he abandons the trajectory in departing from the Pyrrhonian principle of non-assertion. Instead of 'A, but not-A, therefore neither', he presents us with 'A, but not-A, therefore both' (2005, p. 189).

That the disguise becomes part of the disguiser remains, of course, a critical speculation rather than an element of a plot where the donned mask, in order to be a successful tool for revenge, has to distinguish itself from its bearer, despite sharing with him several attitudes. After all, as Dzelzainis states, following Francis Bacon's *Of Simulation and Dissimulation*, «to be open and truthful (or *apertus et vera*x or *libera e vera*) is in fact the best way to render oneself and one's dissimulation 'almost invisible'» (2000, p. 238). Hence, although Malevole's denunciation of the dukedom is Altofronto's denunciation of the corrupted Genoa, the different social roles of the characters (a malcontent and a former Duke) help preserve the scope of the planned revenge: interestingly, as long as Altofronto is invisible, Malevole's invectives are not perceived as a real danger to the

constituted authority.

However, what is really at stake here is not so much the ways in which Altofronto's identity is perceived as the duke's awareness of a gap between his private self (variously adulterated by his public persona as former duke) and the new public mask that he now creates for himself. Altofronto is in fact aware of the importance of representation in order to manipulate the others – «inconstant people | Love many princes merely for their faces | And outward shows» (5.6.139-141) – and he seems constantly in control of the assumed role, as is evident in the stage direction «*Bilioso entering, Malevole shifteth his speech*» (1.4). Following the *esse est percipi dictum* (to be is to be perceived), the revenger forges a persona (here a malcontent) according to the characteristics that society would impose on that specific figure, thus demonstrating an ability to interpret the ways in which the others perceive the malcontent and forge him discursively as well as the ability to undergo a certain degree of self-examination. The mask of the malcontent becomes therefore the arena where the tension between socially constructed figures and self-conscious reflection takes place, where the 'being' *versus* 'seeming' topos, one of the «literary paradigms of early modern scepticism» listed by Hamlin, is made manifest (2005, p. 124; see also pp. 124-137). As Malevole states: «Oh, my disguise fools him most powerfully. | For that I **seem** a desperate malcontent» (3.3.33-34; my emphasis). Interestingly, it is the old panderess of the play, Maquerelle, who also relentlessly comments upon the same topos by catechising her interlocutors on the public exercise of honesty: «Have you the art to **seem** honest?» (2.4.24; my emphasis) and «Honesty is but an art to **seem** so» (5.3.12; my emphasis). And yet, Altofronto's responsiveness to the conflict between outward representation and intimate understanding is informed by a more philosophical tone, which he exhibits also in lecturing a shocked Pietro who has just discovered her wife's sexual affairs:

> Pietro: All is damnation, wickedness extreme; there is no faith in man.
> Malevole: In none but usurers and brokers, they deceive no man; men take 'em for blood-suckers, and so they are. Now, God deliver me from my friends […] there's nothing perfect in it [the world] but extreme, extreme calamity, such as comes yonder. (4.4.16-31)

In this exchange, the two dukes perfectly fulfil another of Hamlin's literary paradigms of early modern scepticism, «that which develops from a collective sense of human weakness and mental frailty, [which] may be explicitly accounted for by reference to the Fall» (2005, p. 124). Human defectiveness and insufficiency become, therefore, the leitmotif of a play where knowledge is damnation, as Pietro's cue perfectly epitomises:

Oh, would I ne'er had known
My own dishonour! Good God, that men should
Desire to search out that which, being found, kills all
Their joy of life! To taste the tree of knowledge
And then be driven from out Paradise! (3.114-118)

The fact that the play's epistemological scepticism is voiced by a malcontent (the Duke in disguise), a usurper (Pietro), and an old panderess can be seen as a further signal of Marston's distinctive way of shaping the satirical tone of his tragicomedy.

If, as William Hamlin rightly asserts, «scepticism is less a school of thought than a temper of mind: a set of characteristic mental attitudes and practices» (2005, p. 5), then this play resonates with sceptical preoccupations in the very references to the unreliability of appearances (seeming *versus* being) and to the assertion of human weakness and insufficiency, as pungently articulated in the epilogue to the play: «He that knows most, knows most how much he wanteth» (l. 18). On the contrary, the Phyrronian lesson (the «A, but not-A, therefore neither») does not inform Altofronto's response to the adoption of the mask: the Duke's performance of the malcontent is never translated in the disguiser's suspension of judgement determined by a new perception of his (double) self (as it is in *The Revenger's Tragedy*). The camouflage does not provide Altofronto with anything but his lost authority and the consequent recovery of a former public identity which, in this play, coherently merges with the idea that the Duke already possesses of himself. And it is perhaps for this reason that, once regained his power and despite wearing Malevole's clothes, the revenger never comments on his disguise.

## 3 Questioning the Self in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*: The Knowledge of Self-doubt

If in *The Malcontent* Altofronto's disguise is not really functional to the disguiser's reconsideration of 'who he is', the mask being merely a means to regain social power, in *The Revenger's Tragedy* the guises occasionally worn by Vindice (Piato and Hippolito's discontented brother) do offer the revenger a prismatic range of identities that urge him to question himself – by questioning his own self. I have elsewhere explored how this game of identities works in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (Nigri 2011 and 2014), but here I want to investigate Vindice's sceptical responses to the masks and to a game which seems to escape containment and control on the part of the disguiser. Vindice's «O, I'm in doubt | Whether I'm myself or no!» (4.4.24-25) can therefore be read as one of the character's many capitulations to a world where revenge does no longer lead to the reconstruc-

tion of a renewed moral and political order and where the suspension of judgment envisaged by the sceptics offers the only viable response to a universe governed by the relativism of human knowledge.

If in Marston's play the audience is never involved in Altofronto's decision to wear a mask – as the play starts, we are introduced to Malevole, and it is through him that we come to know Altofronto, the disguiser –, Middleton's tragedy makes the audience participate in Vindice's escalating rethinking of himself through the different roles which he happens to perform. In the revenger's opening monologue (the only one in the whole tragedy), in fact, he says nothing about camouflage: Vindice only announces his intentions to revenge, its motive (the murder of his betrothed Gloriana), and the objects of his vengeance («four exc'llent characters», 1.1.5). It is only later in the scene that the occasion to put his thoughts into practice arrives: Lussurioso, the Duke's son, is looking for «some strange-digested fellow forth | Of ill-contented nature, either disgraced | In former times or by new grooms displaced | Since his stepmother's nuptial» (1.1.76-79). Vindice grabs an opportunity he cannot miss. Despite his pronouncement that he will «put on that knave for once» (1.1.93), the revenger's ability to conceive his disguise as 'other' from himself is only occasional. In this tragedy, the act of 'putting on' the mask soon transmutes into 'being' that new mask, as Vindice does not fail to note: «Brother I'll **be** that strange composed fellow» (1.1.96; my emphasis). In a play where the disguise can no longer be seen as a mere instrument for revenge, seeming turns into being. The 'seem' of the revenger in Martson's tragicomedy («For that I **seem** a desperate malcontent», 3.3.34; my emphasis) becomes the 'be' of the revenger in Middleton's tragedy.

The objectification of the mask as something distinctive from the disguiser's self («I'll quickly turn into another», 1.1.134) is hardly convincing in Middleton's work; in fact the revenger increasingly loses control over a performance which, to his fear, he cannot really master. Vindice's uneasiness and anxiety about role-playing are sharply voiced in his dialogue with Hippolito, where he asks: «What brother, am I far enough from myself?» (1.3.1). The same fear pugnaciously reappears in the second act when, during his performance as Piato, he addresses Lussurioso in his own voice: «Vindice: My lord. || Lussurioso: Who's that?» (2.2. 39). Conceivably providing a moment of comic relief in the tragedy, what we are dealing with here is a volatile self which, as it spirals out of Vindice's power, overshadows the role performed, thus blurring the distinction between the representation of another public persona and that «inward heart» (3.5.9) Vindice attempts to preserve. And in fact, despite the overall success of his performance, the tragedy makes it difficult to distinguish Vindice's «inward heart» from the masks which he assumes, as demonstrated by the character's increasing pleasure derived by his role and the punishments increasingly enjoying the role and the punishments which he inflicts on people: the attempts to prostitute Gloriana and Gratiana and the progres-

sively indiscriminate murders which he is now ready to commit («As fast as they peep up let's cut 'em down», 3.5.220).

The ephemerality of the self in a tragedy, where the revenger's own personality is thinned down into that of his mask, is indeed a concern shared by many characters in the play. Characters constantly interrogate themselves or the others about lost and forgotten selves, substituted selves, and selves that demand reconfirming. The topic of forgetting one(self) is not new to this period. The 1608 English translation of Charron's *De La Sagesse* (1601; translated into English as *Of Wisdome*) also registers the age's anxiety regarding self-knowledge: «Thou **forgetest** thy self, and **losest** thy self about outward things; thou **betrayest** and **disrobest** thy self; thou lookest alwaies before thee; gather thy self unto thy self, and shut up thy self within thy self: examine, search, know thyself» (1608, p. 2; my emphasis). The same insistence on losing and forgetting oneself is one of the recurrent tropes of the play: Lussurioso consents to «forget [himself] in private» (1.3.38) – here with the meaning of temporarily disregarding his social rank; Hippolito fears to «lose ourselves» (4.2.199); and Vindice accuses his mother to «uncivilly forget [her]self» (4.4.19). In Lussurioso and Vindice's examples, the fear of forgetting or losing the self becomes a fear of invalidating the social identity of, both, the son of the Duke and the mother. In other words, the self is persistently mistaken here for the public role held by these characters, as when, spurred by Hippolito to remember their roles in the revenge («Oh brother, you forgot our business», 4.4.83), Vindice dreams of an ideal human condition where «man's happiest when he forgets himself» (4.4.85; see also 2.5.29). With this statement, one of the most powerful in the tragedy, Middleton seems to recuperate that sceptical trope of the inadequateness of men also explored by Marston in the same years.

If in the case of Gratiana her self is one with her role as mother when long as she protects daughter from prostitution, then Castiza's incredulity in the face of her mother's eventually pushing her towards it, stigmatises the woman as being not only lost («Pray, did you see my mother? Which way went she? | Pray God I have not lost her», 2.1.157-158) but also other than herself: «Why, are you she? | The world's so changed, one shape into another, | It is wise child now that knows her mother» (2.1.160-162). The daughter's reflection on her mother's transformation suggests that one 'lost being' (being a mother) is replaced with another, opposite 'being' (being a pimp), as evidenced in the following dialogue where Castiza voices her dismay at her mother's suggestion that she 'must' become Lussurioso's mistress:

Castiza: Mother, come from that poisonous woman there.
Mother: Where?
Castiza: Do you not see her? She's too inward, then. (2.1.232-234)

Gratiana, in other words, is seen by Castiza as 'another' Gratiana – «Are not you she» (4.4.127) – and the identity split she senses in her is significantly translated into a figure of pronominal equivocation similar to diaphora and contiguous to paradox (on the metalogic function of diaphora see Bigliazzi 2011, p. 136]. The play acclaims, therefore, the definitive collapse of the unified self of humanist tradition, as further testified to by the mutability of selves (and identities) depending on role-playing. This emerges, for example, when the old Duke suspects his son of treason («This boy, that should be myself after me, | Would be myself before me», 2.3.19-20), or when Lussurioso perceives of his self through the office he will hold («If e'er I live to be myself, I'll thank you», 3.2.4), or when Dondolo makes sharp remarks on his own striving «would strive a little to show [him]self in [his] place» (2.1. 20-21).

Demanding confirmation on 'who I am' is another specific concern of this tragedy. The characters' destabilising sense of their selves (and their roles) is expressed in the rhetorical questions of Gratiana to his daughter («Am I not your mother?», 4.4.8) and of Lussurioso to vindice and the nobles, respectively («Am I a lord for nothing» and «Am not I duke?»; 5.1.62 and 5.3.19). By demanding confirmation of their roles, these characters demonstrate a concern with the way their authority is perceived by others. As Sylvia Adamson points out,« 'Who (or what) am I?' and 'Who (or what) are you?' are asked repeatedly by protagonists for whom the unity or distinctness of the categories of personal self and social role has become a pressing issue, imposed by a sudden imperative demand either for self-knowledge or for knowledge of the other» (2010, p. 64).

Vindice, on the contrary, never asks 'who am I?' and, from the third act of the tragedy on, he assertively declares his identity as a revenger to those characters who, as the dying old Duke and his dying son, know him as either Piato or Hippolito's «discontented brother» (4.2.35): «'Tis I, 'tis Vindice, 'tis I» (3.5.167) and «And I am he» (5.3.79). Arguably, these assertions must be read more as sadistic and instrumental to his own revenge than as an answer to his reflections upon the identity game. It is, instead, in Vindice's joke – «O, I'm in doubt | Whether I'm myself or no» (4.4.24-25) – that, as pointed out by MacDonald P. Jackson in his edition of the play, Vindice «raises a deeper question about his true identity [provided that he has one] than [he] intends» (2007, p. 583). Failure to gain a definitive homogeneous sense of his own identity and an emergent alertness to a more sophisticated and complex self-knowledge is also evidenced in Vindice's final statement when, seized by guards and ready to be executed for an excessively violent revenge and for constituting a danger to the new order, he affirms that «'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes» (5.3.109; see also 4.1.61). Middleton's revenger fails where Marston's succeeds because, while Altofronto seems to some extent aware of the coherence of his own personality and always in control of his performance as a malcontent,

Vindice misses the opportunity to direct the action of his own revenge with some distance from his camouflage: his «inward heart» (3.5.9), in other words, indiscriminately flows into the public mask he has created, thus producing an identitary friction between what he thought he was and what he thinks he is now. As Geoff Baldwin pertinently points out:

> In order to present a public *persona* […], it was important not to put one's whole self into this *persona*, so that the individual could not be described by referring to the sum of duties or offices held. Something unique had to be retained that could not be crushed, […], by the destruction of those other *persona*. Not only this, but the self which was reserved had to be capable of judgement, so that it could discern the deception of the world and direct the operation of one or more persona. This made it possible to **act** in flawed world, and remain true to oneself and therefore potentially free. (2001, pp. 363-364)

Vindice, on the contrary, cannot be 'free' simply because he cannot remain true to himself without discharging the masks which he progressively assumes and which, paradoxically, are now part of himself, as suggested by Vindice's reply to Hippolito's diaphoric «you're yourself» in the scene where the revenger 'disguises' as the discontented Vindice Lussurioso assumes to know:

> Hippolito: So, so, all's as it should be; you're yourself.
> Vindice: How that great villain puts me to my shifts! (4.2.1-2)

However, in this complex short-circuit of roles, the revenger does gain what we may define as a performative self-knowledge: through the adoptions of several roles, the disguiser achieves a certain degree of understanding of himself, which he now expresses in sceptical argument. The only accessible self-knowledge which Vindice can access is, in fact, self-doubt, in the fashion of Pyrrhonian investigation of a truth which is impossible to claim with certainty (as opposed to the Academic philosophers who, according to Sextus, negate human knowledge). Vindice's suspension of judgment between the «we» perceived as both «ourselves» and «our enemies» (5.3.109) substantiates the sarcastic 'doubt' expressed in his statement – «O, I'm in doubt | Whether I'm myself or no» (4.4.24-25) – where the revenger is not simply making fun of the performative multiple personae.

Middleton's construction of self-doubt in *The Revenger's Tragedy* could also be linked to the notion of selfhood propounded by Calvin, especially in view of his uncompromising separation of a hidden, spiritual self from an outer, social one (Stachniewski 1991; see also Cox 2007). The play, however, seems to draw more consistently upon the same philosophical context from which Montaigne's «Du Repentir» nourishes itself. According to Luiz Eva's

reading of the French essayist's introductory passage, Montaigne argues that «the way in which different changes overlap leaves us without benchmarks by which to determine what is true. […] Insofar as we cannot tell if our changes are properly changes of what we are ourselves, or changes due to exterior causes, we cannot take these changes as representing knowledge of the self» (Eva 2012, pp. 78-79).

Likewise, at the end of the play, Vindice is forced to reconsider his own self, to borrow Fingarette's vocabulary on self-deception, as a «community of subselves» (quoted in Cox 2007, p. 11), all simultaneously dissenting and – somehow at the same time – all true, thus differing from Montaigne's impossibility to define truth. Vindice's ontological and epistemological understanding is prompted by this very coexistence of the masks within himself. On the other end of the spectrum is, instead, Gratiana's response to an identity game, which can only be possible in an asynchronous timeframe. Her resurrection as a loving mother is in fact possible only in the moment she rejects her other role (the pimp), as she does not fail to recognise: «'Tis unfruitful, held tedious, to repeat what's past. | I'm now your **present** mother» (4.4.132-113; my emphasis). There is no ontological gain deriving from the change of roles: she can be either one or the other.

The revenger thus appears as the only one able to achieve some renewed knowledge of his own presence in the world. His masks offer him the occasion to transform himself and, in the process of (re)presenting himself as 'other', to embrace, as a palimpsest, all his previous selves and, at the same time, to doubt them all. Self-doubt is in fact the price to pay in order to gain knowledge, and the tragedy ends with the character astray in the face of an unsolvable instability at the roots of his own being.

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