SHAKESPEARE AND SCEPTICISM

by

Theo Olivier

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation is indebted to the scholarship of many, and all my conscious debts are acknowledged in the text and in the bibliography. If there are any of which I am no longer aware, I tender my gratitude here. This debt, which includes the inspiration of the essays of A.P. Rossiter, is considerable; nevertheless, the conception, shaping, and writing of the work are entirely my own.

Several people have helped me directly or indirectly; most immediately, Julia Shum and Kitty King (once again), whose criticism and guidance have always been constructive and encouraging. Most mediately, my mother and my late father; without their help I could not have accomplished this.

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1. Introduction

> '...the wonderfully philosophic impartiality of Shakespeare's politics.'
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> (S.T. Coleridge, Notes on *Coriolanus*)
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There is nothing remarkable about these attributes, for they are the norm of eulogy; we need not, and perhaps should not, take their consistent emphasis to signify anything important. Yet we might justifiably feel that such insistence on Shakespeare's immortality points to something more substantial than the conventions of a society bound to the sentiment of immortality - perhaps to some centrally important attitude, or theme, or philosophical doctrine, that inheres in the plays. There has, indeed, been no shortage of commentators willing to pursue

such a possibility, and we have consequently all kinds of Shakespeares offered us by such positive theorists. In Professor Kermode's terms, we have 'Senecan Shakespeare, Machiavellian Shakespeare, Shakespeare sipping at the mind of Montaigne. There are (also) the sectarian Shakespeares: Catholic, Protestant, Rosicrucian, Neo-Platonist'.[1] And, as J.W. Lever has shown, the list of such critics includes many of the weightiest names in the field: T.S. Eliot, W. Farnham, C.J. Sisson, R.W. Chambers, Hardin Craig, Lily B. Campbell, and E.M.W. Tillyard, amongst others.[2] Lever's essay adumbrates the development of two major and divergent directions in Shakespeare studies during this century: one in sympathy with this positively directed and rather rigidly historical approach, the other at odds with it and essentially dualistic, schismatic, and dialectical.[3] I have chosen to explore the second of these approaches, perhaps because the former approach has produced so many conflicting views (therefore contradicting the idea of a central view or doctrine), which have over and again left me in agreement with the view just presented, until I have read the next; perhaps because the sense of something else, equally substantial, persists in spite of this; or perhaps simply because the dualistic approach appeals more to my own taste and sense of infinite complexity when reading Shakespeare.

This approach is not as modern as might be suggested by the terms used above to describe it: as Lever points out, writers such as D.G. James, L.C. Knights, and A.P. Rossiter were 'returning to the concept of poetry as an autonomous pursuit of truth', and 'affirming the

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2. Cf. 'Shakespeare and the Ideas of His Time', *Shakespeare Survey* 29, p.79ff. In relation to Tillyard at least, compare my comments in chapter 4 below.

3. I am aware that I have used the term 'dialectic(al)' in my analyses in an untechnical way that Marxist critics might well regard as naive or even incorrect. I mean by it a straightforward sense of opposed possibilities, or the sense of disputation in the O.E.D. definition. However, my usage of the term is made in the context of epistemological questioning; Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p.375, comments that a proper Marxist literary criticism is identifiable through an 'epistemological shock' of consciousness about our own 'critical instruments', for such a shock 'is constitutive of and inseparable from dialectical thinking, as the mark of an abrupt shift to a higher level of consciousness'. It is also of the essence of this study to attempt to re-focus our critical instruments.

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> His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual: in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species. (2)

This note is echoed by Maurice Morgann, by Lessing, and by Schlegel, amongst others; but it is Coleridge who went to the heart of the matter in such perceptions as that cited above as epigraph, or his remark about Shakespeare's 'signal adherence to the great law of nature, that all opposites tend to attract and temper each other', or the following observation:

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> together...and perhaps your impression will be right. (1)

And this deliberate echo of Jonson nicely catches an important element of the modern position:

> He is of no age - nor, I may add, of any religion, or party, or profession. (2)

However, the best of the early formulations of the dialectical element in Shakespeare was penned by Keats in December 1817, and he saw it in terms which are strikingly appropriate to a description of the philosophy of the Pyrrhonean Sceptics. He called it 'negative capability', which he defined as the capability of 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.[3] This quality, which Shakespeare 'possessed so enormously', suggests quite clearly an ability and willingness squarely to face the world with all its varying, contradictory phenomena without becoming embroiled in the conflicts endemic to sectarian bias. Such an ability in an artist enables him to see and mirror the world with some accuracy and objectivity, and Shakespeare has constantly been credited with this quality.

In this formulation, however, it is a description of an attitude rather than an analysis of Shakespeare's dramaturgy; but Keats has another passage which provides for the methodology of the dramatist:

> As to the poetical character itself...it has no self - it is every thing and nothing - it has no character - it enjoys light and shade - it lives in gusts, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated, - it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the cameleon poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things, any more than from its taste for the bright one, because they both end in speculation. A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity; he is continually in for, and filling, some other body. (4)

This view of the chameleon poet is surely a strikingly valid description

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1. 'The characteristics of Shakespeare's dramas', *Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare, 1818*, Everyman Library edn., p.53.

2. Written 1834. Cited by K. Raine in her Penguin selection of Coleridge's Poems and Prose, p.230.

3. Lord Houghton, *Life and Letters of John Keats*, p.67.

4. Letter to Woodhouse, October 27, 1818. Ibid., pp.159-60.

of the kind of imaginative power needed by the dramatist - even more than the lyrical poet - to achieve success in the presentation of the differing characters of his *personae*. We have thus in Keats's analysis an attitude and a technique - or, more ponderously, a philosophy and a dramaturgy, which he saw as especially pertinent to Shakespeare. Regarding the philosophy, what Keats adds to Coleridge's sense of Shakespeare's impartiality is an awareness of doubt as a characteristic state of Shakespeare's mind - a state if not permanent, at least of some persistence, even normality. It is a state of *'being in'* doubt and, evidently, without the felt need to resolve the situation. It is therefore an undogmatising and unresolving philosophy akin to the ancient Pyrrhonean Sceptical philosophy which arose out of the recognition by some Greek thinkers that truth is always obscured by man's conflicting dogmas about experience - but Keats shows no awareness of this connection.

Many similar views, amounting to a kind of incognizant Scepticism because of their explicit or implicit recognition of the dialectical element in the age of Shakespeare, have been put forward since the Romantic period. Walter Raleigh held that Shakespeare's works present 'the creed of England...not a dogmatic or a narrow creed, (but)...full of thought and question'[1]; if this is valid, then the impact of Pyrrhonean thought on England, considered in chapter 4 below, was even greater than I have suggested. He remarks, perhaps confirmatively, that Shakespeare shares the English love of compromise, which has its origin 'not in intellectual timidity, but in a deep reverence for the complexity of human nature'.[2]

T.S. Eliot proposed a Shakespeare illustrating not Seneca but 'Senecan and Stoical principles',[3] and Stoicism has a clear relationship with the Pyrrhonean position, which is indicated in chapter 2 below. He also gives weight to Montaigne as an influence on Shakespeare, but denies that Shakespeare shows Montaigne's 'deliberate scepticism'[4] - which seems to me both to allow and disallow recognition of the sceptical element in Shakespeare, and probably reflects a loose usage of

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1. 'The Age of Elizabeth', in *Shakespeare's England*, p.44.
2. Ibid., p.45.
3. 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', in *Selected Essays*, p.131.
4. Ibid., p.134.

the term. With an emphasis, similar to that of Eliot, on their relevance to the age, Theodore Spencer includes Machiavelli and Montaigne in his schematic view of the opposition between optimism and pessimism in the Elizabethan world, thus introducing the sense of an immanent dialectic as characteristic of the age. The view of man as the centre of an ordered universe was held in conflict with that of his misery after the Fall: 'in the inherited...Christian view of man and his universe there was a basic conflict between man's dignity and his wretchedness'.[1] Spencer appositely cites John Davies's *Nosce Teipsum:*

I know myself a MAN,
Which is a proud, and yet a wretched thing.

And Spencer sees this late 16th century 'darkening view' of life reflected in Shakespeare's plays of this time, in the melancholy of Jaques, in the tone of *Twelfth Night*, in the heaviness of Brutus, and in *Hamlet*, where we have 'the conflict between the two views of man's nature which was so deeply felt in his age'.[2]

Henri Fluchère adds a sense of the dramatist's deliberate method, which is an important aspect of my analyses in chapters 6 to 9. Shakespeare is, paradoxically, able to arouse the enthusiasms of varied critical viewpoints because in him 'we find the whole of his age. He is all his contemporaries at once...(yet) he is strangely detached, unique, supreme'.[3] And the key to this is not in his psychology but in his poetry: 'the important thing is not how problems are solved but how they are posed';[4] they are posed in what Fluchère calls 'the poetry of doubt'.[5]

In a work which also adopts this technical approach, and which is described by Wilbur Sanders as a 'diagnosis of a new tone of scepticism and a new complexity of sensibility in the literature of the 1590s',[6] Patrick Cruttwell speaks of 'a multiple and divided

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1. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, p.28.

2. Ibid., p.94.

3. *Shakespeare and the Elizabethans*, p.180.

4. Ibid., p.185.

5. Ibid., p.196.

6. In a footnote in his own work, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea*.

personality'[1] which was a vital part of the spirit of the age. Such an analysis is, of course, psychological, and he suggests that this personality was 'a prey to uncertainty...It is this insecurity that makes the "problem-plays" problematical; there seems in their author...a radical doubt of his ultimate purpose'.[2] But Cruttwell's application of his analysis to the plays is technical; central to Shakespeare's style in this period is the juxtaposition and attempted reconciliation of contraries, incongruities - the cynical and the ideal, the grotesque and the beautiful, love and death. He sees Shakespeare as covering all subjects 'equally and impartially, with a hard smooth enamel of words... (in) the poetry of a man quite indifferent (in so far as he is a poet) to his subjects'.[3] This is obviously like Keats's image of the chameleon poet and, by implication, like Fluchère's dramaturgical approach. The latter likeness is made specific when he comments that Shakespeare, as a professional dramatist, had to write poetry that 'can never be analysed with the certainty that whatever is there represents what the whole of his mind would have wished to be there...His art...rejected nothing'.[4] The conceit is the 'most characteristic poetic weapon of the Shakespearean moment'[5] because it is a device for uniting disparate things.

Another critic who implicitly conveys a sense of inherent dialecticism in both the age and its writers, is E.W. Talbert who, speaking of Samuel Daniel and Fulke Greville, writes that the modes of thought of the time were such that a playwright's audience might well be interested in 'the equivocal nature of conventional precepts and in the way in which they could be turned, especially in the process of an oration or a debate, first in one direction and then in another. Such a play might well afford a "perspective into vice" and be designed to be intellectual and speculative only'.[6] He applies this approach to an analysis of *Richard II*, finding that it reveals in Shakespeare an artistry

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1. *The Shakespearean Moment*, p.24.
2. Ibid., p.27.
3. Ibid., p.57.
4. Ibid., pp.94 and 97.
5. Ibid., p.109.
6. *The Problem of Order*, p.144, citing Greville's *Life of Sidney*.

'that allows antithetical meanings to exist concurrently'.[1] This is 'a purposeful artistic ambiguity that would not only juxtapose but also fuse opposites...as Shakespeare dramatizes the history of a reign that had been recounted and interpreted with the greatest of differences and...so bequeathed to the Elizabethans'.[2] This dialecticism is seen as quite deliberate in Shakespeare's technique; Talbert uses the phrase 'purposefully equivocal',[3] thus echoing Coleridge and providing me with a concept which is elaborated in chapter 6 below. In addition, without using the term 'sceptical', he characterises Shakespeare's dramaturgy in terms that also describe the Sceptical position very closely:

> Drawing upon conflicting images, conflicting meanings of one image or symbol, and conflicting speeches and actions, Shakespeare intensifies his play-world...and fuses their contraries...into "one thing entire" though equivocal. By that equivocality, his representation of Richard's deposition expresses concisely but forcefully...a crux that needed no resolution in the political thought of those who rejoiced in the reign of Gloriana and who felt that...she, in contrast to earlier rulers, did do her duty... (Shakespeare and his contemporaries knew that sometimes) the truths of political commonplaces had conflicted and could not be resolved. Nor for a dramatist... was such a resolution needed. The crux could aid in making a drama absorbing. (4)

A.P. Rossiter's lectures on Shakespeare, delivered during the 1950s and edited by Graham Storey in 1961, were the original inspiration of this dissertation. The book, *Angel With Horns* is a mine of inspirational analyses that tend constantly towards a dialectical reading of Shakespeare's texts. As Graham Storey puts it in his preface:

> in them (the Histories, Problem Plays, and Tragedies) he was able to explore deeply what was, to him, Shakespeare's unique preoccupation: an inquisition...into the equivocal nature of the state of Man, and finally of Nature itself. (5)

For example, in the essay 'Ambivalence: the Dialectic of the Histories', Rossiter speaks of the pattern of 'retributive reaction' in the Histories,

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1. Ibid., p.171.
2. Ibid., p.173.
3. Ibid., p.196.
4. Ibid., pp.199-200.
5. *Angel With Horns*, p.x.

which he finds it difficult to think of as 'justice':

> Whether it is 'justice' or not, God knows...(Prof. Butterfield would have it that *he* knows too...To me, it is obscure, ironic, *and* as far as Shakespeare shows me the scheme of things - seemingly endless.) Taken all together, the Histories are a dark glass, where we gaze *per speculum in enigmate*. (1)

Further on in this essay he defines what he means by 'ambivalence':

> that two opposed value-judgements are subsumed, and that both are valid...The whole is only fully experienced when both opposites are held and included in a "two-eyed" view; and all "one-eyed" simplifications are not only falsifications; they amount to a denial of some part of the mystery of things. (2)

And near the end he makes the position quite explicit:

> Shakespeare's intuitive way of thinking about History... is *dialectical*...his thought is dynamic...(showing) a constant "Doubleness": a thoroughly English empiricism which recognizes the coextancy and juxtaposition of opposites, without submitting to urges...to obliterate or annihilate the one in the theoretic interests of the other. (3)

There are innumerable other instances throughout the book; I shall cite only one more, from the seminal paragraphs that initiated this dissertation. It occurs near the end of Rossiter's essay on 'The Problem Plays': one quality of these plays is a 'maskedness' which brings doubt and fear into the plays - a response epitomised in Lafeu's 'an unknown fear'. 'Doubt', writes Rossiter,

> the true Montaignian doubt (Que scay-je?) - has its own 'unknown fear' when the scepticism is about the maskedness of man. For...the overall qualities of the Problem Plays, I throw out the term *shiftingness*. All the firm points of view...fail one...these plays throw opposed or contrary views into the mind: only to leave the resulting equations without any settled or soothing solutions. (4)

Since Rossiter, there have been several like-minded critics. These include Frank Kermode, Wilbur Sanders and Harry Levin. Sanders has made the following important observation about the relationship of the artist to his time: that received doctrine is only half of a dialectical process, and that the culture of a period contains the seeds

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1. Ibid., p.43.

2. Ibid., p.51.

3. Ibid., p.62. Notice how close this is to Keats.

4. Ibid., p.128.

of the culture that will supersede it.

> It is at the heart of this dialectic...where we expect to find the great thinker taking his stand...not...on the dry land of current orthodoxy, refusing to accept that it will soon be sea. (1)

Of Shakespeare he has declared that he 'voices the dialogue of 16th century political controversy much more clearly than he adjudicates between the two sides'.[2] Harry Levin sends us back to the preliminary matter of the First Folio by affirming the permanence of Shakespeare and temporariness of doctrinal critical views, and back to Coleridge by affirming the view of Shakespeare's embracement of 'a whole spectrum of diverging opinions'.[3] Other critics are Terence Hawkes, R.A. Foakes, Norman Rabkin, and F.W. Brownlow, who are dealt with in chapter 6 below. This is by no means a complete catalogue of critics whose views seem to coincide in recognising in Shakespeare the complexities of a dialectical approach to the drama, but it seems to me a sufficiently substantial corpus of work to give the present dissertation a firm basis of precedents.

Obviously, I am in agreement with this approach to the reading of Shakespeare; but I have to do more than simply affirm an existing position. What strikes me as strange is that all these writers seem to believe that they are responding as they do to Shakespeare *ab initio*. There is no sense of indebtedness to Keats, or of a continuity or traditional line of thought. This lack would seem to offer a direction for my task: I have therefore attempted, by examining the Sceptical tradition, to show that there is a continuity, and, by herding some contemporary critics into a fold, to show the extent of critical agreement.

Now the term 'scepticism' arises quite frequently in relation to Shakespeare in the writings of the critics I have mentioned, and I have already indicated that it is closely associated with dialecticism. But the nearest approach to actual Sceptical thought made by any of these writers is in the association of Shakespeare with Montaigne.

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1. Op. cit., pp.110-111.

2. Ibid., p.151.

3. *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times*, p.98.

This is, of course, the major and obvious association to consider; yet, when one begins to probe, it is soon evident that Montaigne represents the tip of a fairly substantial iceberg of Sceptical thought. In addition, the scholarship that has attempted to link Shakespeare's works with those of Montaigne, has concentrated rather ponderously on verbal likenesses: only some more recent studies (and these are not very numerous), have suggested fundamental similarities in the thought processes of the two writers. I have attempted to make a small contribution to this field of study in chapter 5, because it seems that Montaigne's is the most likely work to have been the immediate source of Sceptical thought in Shakespeare.

Then there is the question of how critics have understood and used the term 'scepticism' in relationship to Shakespeare. In almost all cases where it is directly applied, I feel it has been used in a very loose sense, generally approximating to something like 'pessimism' or 'cynicism'. In other words, scepticism is usually understood as a negative philosophy. In chapter 2, I have attempted very briefly to show its proper significance, and, in chapter 3, to trace its lineage from Pyrrho to Montaigne. Finally, in applying the term to Shakespeare, its accurate meaning seems to me to make far better sense of the observed dialectical patterning of the plays than such a negative signification. I have tried in my analyses to show how Shakespeare constructs certain plays on a dialectical basis which constantly suggests the Sceptical position: enquiry that avoids dogma and suspends judgement. I have, in other words, tried to suggest and demonstrate a theoretical and historical basis for a quality that has long been sensed in Shakespeare, but which has only recently gained adequate articulation, and which is still only beginning to be appreciated on a wide scale.

2. Origins and Outline of Scepticism

It is no part of my plan to enter into a theoretical discussion or defence of the Sceptical position. That is a job for the professional philosopher, and even for him being a Sceptic 'usually means walking a lonely road'.[1] This opinion would not be worth mentioning if it did not reflect two factors that affect my task: Scepticism is distinctly the Cinderella amongst philosophical positions,[2] and, partly because of this relative disfavour, it is largely misunderstood. Especially to the literary student, with his awareness of mythological and doctrinal-poetic backgrounds to the art-form he loves, the word 'scepticism' tends to resolve into some other 'ism' - perhaps 'pessimism' or 'cynicism' - or at best it is understood in the sense commonly accepted as its main sense, as specifically religious doubt. This is so in spite of its being only the third signification given for the term by the O.E.D., the first signification being quite properly shown as the doctrine of the Sceptics. Perhaps the philosophical disfavour has helped to render the first and original meaning relatively obscure, while the second sense, 'doubt as to the truth of some assertion...also sceptical temper in general' suggests a meaning nearer to 'disbelief' - which is quite misleading to an understanding of the Pyrrhonean usage of the word that prevailed in Classical debate and even among Renaissance Christians.[3]

The derivation of the term gives an essential datum for the usage I have constantly in mind in this dissertation: the Greek term rendered 'skeptesthai' in modern English transcription, means 'to look out' or 'consider', while the Latin 'scepticus' gives the sense of 'enquiry'. This is the basic sense in which I intend the term in attempting to apply it to the analysis of Shakespeare's writing. It will be seen in the next section that this sense was almost exclusively intended by Renaissance thinkers who entered the epistemological debate, and that this sense did not in any way imply disbelief in a religious

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1. P. Unger, *Ignorance*, Preface, p.vii.
2. Cf. Unger, op. cit. p.47: 'Few philosophers now take Scepticism seriously'.
3. Another possible reason for this shift is that enquiry often leads to disbelief or doubt, and the enquirer becomes a disbeliever or doubter, either in fact or in reputation.

sense. A dictionary definition, however, is not enough to introduce the notional content of Scepticism; therefore a brief statement of the position and its derivation is necessary before we can consider its presence in the Renaissance mind.

We may start with the statement, 'the main task of the Sceptic is...to expose the folly of every form of positive doctrine'.[1] Seen as a consistent reaction to dogma and as embracing a spirit of enquiry, Scepticism seems to be ultimately Heraclitean in nature. Heraclitus's view that the world is a harmony of opposites, and that all things are in a state of flux, implied that things have no permanent identity and that our senses are therefore delusive. This entailed the view that opposite statements about phenomena may be equally true or false. Heraclitus was therefore claimed by later Sceptics as a pioneer in the philosophical reaction to dogma.[2] Later in the 5th century B.C., Democritus's atomist theory involved an explanation of sense-perception through sensory 'pores' of 'images' projected from the atoms or particles of the object. What appear to be the qualities of the object are thus only 'conventional', reality residing in the atoms themsleves. Knowledge gained via the senses is thus 'bastard', while knowledge gained by the understanding is 'genuine'. This view has a clear bearing on the Sceptical position's partial dependence on the weakness of sensory perception.

The Sophists of the 5th century shifted the stress in philosophy from nature to man: Protagoras's dictum, 'man is the measure of all things', is at the heart of the spirit of debate felt by the Greeks to be essential to 'virtue', or civic excellence. It is a dictum and a view that denies absolute standards since it means that each man's subjective impressions are true for him, and, (since *man* is the measure), that all opinions are equally true, even contradictory statements equally credible. Like Heraclitus, Protagoras rejects objective truth and denies the possibility of knowledge. This also has obvious significance for the Pyrrhonean view which developed into a school of thought a century later. However, the intervening century saw the advent of Socrates and

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1. R.G. Bury, Introduction to his translation of Sextus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. This essay is heavily indebted to his book.

2. But he and others were not regarded as Sceptics by Sextus. Cf. p.19 below.

his great admirer Plato, both of whom attempted to put knowledge onto an objective footing. Even Plato could achieve this only by attempting to reconcile the Heraclitean view with that of Parmenides, who held that 'only being is' - i.e. that the world is a self-contained unified being, uncreated and imperishable. He had, in other words, to reckon with the ever-present seeds of Sceptical thought, and could do this only by formulating the dualistic conception of a phenomenal world of the senses and an ideal world that is only intelligible. His Platonic and Neo-platonic descendants were to reflect this dualism, but combined with Pyrrhonism, in the Renaissance period.

After Aristotle, whose rational systematization of philosophy largely contradicted the Platonic view, a new element became evident in the systems of the Epicureans and Stoics: the aim of happiness, which Aristotle's *Ethics* had also embraced. For Epicurus, good was pleasure, pleasure being a state of rest or satisfaction, and freedom from pain. For the Stoics, Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus, the root of evil passions was intemperance; the ideal wise man is passionless, at peace, unperturbed by externals, and self-controlled. This too is a quality the Sceptics were to teach.

Thus several main elements of Sceptical thought - the fallibility of the senses, the doubt about objective standards of knowledge, and the need to be uninvolved - were largely contained by philosophy before Pyrrho of Elis began to teach imperturbability and abstention from judgement, probably responding in part to what he learned about indifference to circumstances while on an expedition to India with Alexander the Great. The Greek world of the late 4th century B.C., into which Pyrrho was born, was socially and politically disturbed, especially after Alexander's death. Coupled with a shaken belief in tradition and custom, and a sense of intellectual confusion arising from the multiplicity of philosophical doctrines, this disturbed mood is probably what brought the already existing elements of Scepticism together into a school of thought, as a kind of reaction - just as Epicureanism and Stoicism were reactions to changing circumstances. But whereas the Epicureans and Stoics pursued happiness along dogmatic lines, Pyrrho taught the satisfaction of a neutral or non-committal response to life and its problems. This attitude was known as 'ataraxy' and was, for Pyrrho, the best man could do in the pursuit of happiness. No record exists of Pyrrho's writings; he is known mainly through his reputation as the founder of

Scepticism and through the fragments of prose and verse left by his follower Timon of Phlius, who attacked dogmatic philosophy and popularized the Sceptical view that the best aim in life is to avoid becoming involved in dogmatic views and to cultivate mental repose.

Such a position is largely a practical response and was, as I have already said, probably a reaction to problems. It was refined into a theoretical system by the New Academy under Arcesilas and Carneades during the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. The Heraclitean and Protagorean rejection of objective criteria for knowledge was again stressed, and fallibility, which had been acknowledged for the senses, was extended by Carneades to include the reason as well. The stress here is different from Pyrrho's: although Carneades' position was agnostic, he was tending towards the negative dogma of the New Academy. Indeed, Aenesidemus, who revived Pyrrhonism during the 1st century B.C., denounced both Arcesilas and Carneades as covert dogmatists, and therefore not true Sceptics. Aenesidemus seems to have originally presented the 'Ten Tropes', or arguments to show the relativity of knowledge; but it is evident that some were derived from earlier thinkers who showed sceptical qualities, and they became traditional to later Sceptical attempts to refute dogma of all kinds.

This revived Pyrrhonism emerged during the first two centuries of the Christian calendar; for some obscure reason it was held by medical empiricists such as Menodotus and, most centrally, by Sextus, a Greek physician of the 2nd and early 3rd centuries, paradoxically called 'Empiricus' even though he seems to have followed the 'methodic' tradition in medicine rather than the 'empiric' tradition. Whatever the reasons behind this confused nomenclature, Sextus Empiricus is the main authority for the history and arguments of the Sceptical tradition. His *Hypotyposes*, or *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, is the central extant text of Classical Scepticism to have survived the first millenium and come down to Renaissance and modern times. Since this work is 'a kind of arsenal... from which the polemical Sceptic can choose his weapons',[1] and since it is the clearest statement of the Sceptical position, supposed to have influenced Montaigne, it is necessary to give some idea of its argument here. I can do no better than to cite salient points from Bury's translation.

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1. Bury, op. cit.

The first important point is the establishment of Pyrrhonism as the truest form of Scepticism:

> Those who believe they have discovered it (truth) are the 'Dogmatists'...Carneades and other Academics treat it as inapprehensible: the Sceptics keep on searching. Hence the main types of philosophy are three - the Dogmatic, the Academic, and the Sceptic.
> (1.3)[1]

This distinction means that the true Sceptic is the Pyrrhonist, while the Academic Sceptic is seen as a negative dogmatist, simply opposed to the dogma of positive thinkers and presenters of doctrine. The Sceptic is thus a searcher after truth rather than a presenter of truth. This implies that truth is elusive, and that the Sceptic is agnostic with regard to knowing the truth. This position is entrenched and expanded by the following:

> The Sceptic School...is also called 'Zetetic' from its activity in investigation and inquiry, and 'Ephectic' or suspensive from the state of mind produced in the inquirer... and 'Aporetic' or dubitative either from its habit of doubting and seeking...or from its indecision as regards assent or denial, and 'Pyrrhonean' from the fact that Pyrrho appears to...have applied himself to Scepticism more thoroughly...than his predecessors.
> (1.7)

> Scepticism is an ability, or mental attitude which opposes appearances to judgements...with the result that...we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of 'imperturbedness' or quietude. (Here 'appearances' refers to objects of sense-perception, 'judgements' to objects of thought, and 'suspense' to a state of mental rest owing to which we neither deny nor affirm anything.)
> (1.8)

Sextus comes thus to the main attack on dogma and the implied view of the dogmatist that his view presents the truth:

> The main basic principle of the Sceptic system is that of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition; for we believe that as a consequence of this we end by ceasing to dogmatize. (1.12)

The Protagorean denial of objective criteria for judgement is evident in this:

> The criterion...of the Sceptic School is...the appearance... For since this lies in feeling and involuntary affection, it is not open to question. Consequently, no one...disputes that the underlying object has this or that appearance; the point in dispute is whether the object is in reality such as it appears to be.
> (1.22)

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1. References are to book and section in Bury's translation.

And in this, is something of the Epicurean and Stoic:

> The Sceptic's end is quietude in respect of matters of opinion and moderate feeling in respect of things unavoidable... For the Sceptic... found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgement (and thus found quietude)...For the man who opines that everything is by nature good or bad is for ever being disquieted.
>
> (1.25-27)

Sections 40 to 145 are given to the ten supporting Modes or arguments that had become traditional after Aenesidemus, and are worth adumbrating here because they form the basis of many Renaissance arguments for the Sceptical position.

> The first argument...shows that the same impressions are not produced by the same objects owing to the differences in animals. (Examples are given of the different impressions brought about by different colour perceptions in different animals, by diseased organs, by enhanced night vision in some animals, and by different tastes).
>
> (1.40-58)

> (Thus the Sceptic says we can)...state our own impressions of the real object, but as to its essential nature we shall suspend judgement. For we cannot ourselves judge between our own impression and those of the other animals, since we ourselves are involved in the dispute and are, therefore, rather in need of a judge than competent to pass judgement ourselves.
>
> (1.59)

The second Mode is

> based on the differences in men...our own differences of themselves lead to suspense...As regards the body, we differ in our figures and 'idiosyncrasies', or constitutional peculiarities (with resulting differences in sense-impressions, tastes, physical responses to foods, climate, etc.).
>
> (1.79)

> Seeing...that men vary so much in body...men probably also differ from one another in respect of the soul itself; for the body is a kind of expression of the soul, as...is proved by the science of physiognomy. ...if the same objects affect men differently owing to the differences in men, then...we shall reasonably be led to suspension of judgement.
>
> (1.85-87)

The third Mode is based on differences in the senses: thus the same object affects different senses in different ways in the same person. This too leads to inability to decide on the real nature of the object. The fourth Mode is based on

> the 'circumstances', meaning...conditions or dispositions (the mental or physical state of the person at the moment

> of perception)...according as the mental state is natural or unnatural, objects produce dissimilar impressions.
> (1.100-101)

This means that every impression is biased in some way, thus the Sceptic can't decide on the real nature of the object and again suspends judgement. The fifth Mode involves positions, distances, and locations, all of which modify the appearance of the object and cause the Sceptic to regard judgements to be subjective. The sixth Mode is based on

> admixtures...because none of the real objects affects our senses by itself...we shall not be able to say what is the exact nature of the external reality. (This also applies to the perceiving senses; the eye is both membrane and liquid, hence our vision is dictated by this mixture. Similarly, substances in the nose, ears, and mouth prevent unmixed experiences of objects of smell, hearing, and taste).
> (1.124ff.)

The seventh Mode differentiates appearance and experience of objects according to quantity and constitution; examples refer to the difference between the whole object and shavings or powder made from the object. The effects of food and wine differ in proportion to the amount consumed. These considerations also tend to cause doubt about the real nature of the object. The eighth Mode invokes the relativity of all things, which prevents judgement on their absoluteness. The ninth Mode is based on constancy or rarity of occurrence, which has to do with the acceptance of phenomena through custom. The sun is more familiar than a comet, earthquakes are less alarming to those who are accustomed to them than to those who are not. This implies that the perception of objects or phenomena varies with rarity or familiarity, hence we cannot know their true nature. The tenth Mode points to the great variety of rules of conduct, habits, laws, in different places. No knowledge is possible about the ultimate nature of such things. At 1.178, the Modes are summarised in the argument that nothing is apprehended either through itself or immediately, or through another thing or mediately. Everything is thus subject to doubt.

As early in the work as 1.15, Sextus had expressed an awareness of a very vulnerable point in arguing for the Sceptical position:

> The Sceptic enunciates his formulae so that they are virtually cancelled by themselves, (thus) he should not be said to dogmatize in his enunciation of them...in his enunciation of these formulae he states what appears to himself and announces his own impression in an undogmatic way, without making any positive assertion regarding the external realities.
> (1.15)

This awareness reappears at 1.178 in the statement, 'the Sceptic has to formulate his attitude to reflect his suspension'. Thus, through the use of devices such as elliptical expressions and questions, Sextus can claim this of the Sceptical expressions:

> In regard to all the Sceptic expressions...we make no positive assertion respecting their absolute truth, since... they may possibly be confuted by themselves, seeing that they...are included in the things to which their doubt applies, just as aperient drugs...also expel themselves along with the humours.
> (1.206)

The first book closes on a note of stringency as Sextus excludes all predecessors from the Sceptical School: Heraclitus, Democritus, and the Academics, are all excluded for the dogmatic elements in their philosophies, and Sextus says:

> The man that dogmatizes about a single thing, or even prefers one impression to another in point of credibility or incredibility, or makes any assertion about any non-evident object, assumes the dogmatic character.
> (1.223)

In the second and third books, Sextus approaches logic and philosophical systems to see whether external criteria for truth will stand up to the Sceptical attack. The syllogism is rejected on the ground that it depends on circular argument; induction fails because of the possibility of some contradictory particular case; and Sophism is dismissed as a juggler's trick:

> Just as we refuse our assent to the truth of the tricks performed by jugglers and know that they are deluding us, even if we do not know how they do it, so likewise we refuse to believe arguments which, though seemingly plausible, are false, even when we do not know how they are fallacious.
> (2.250)

Dogmatic views of causes, principles, or origins are assailed through their controversial nature:

> Following the ordinary view, we affirm undogmatically that Gods exist and reverence Gods. (But, because of the disagreement over the conception of God, the Sceptics must suspend judgement as to his existence or non-existence. This controversy applies to all causes, primary matter, motion, space, time, etc.).
> (3.2-6)

The final chapter confirms what was suggested at the beginning, that the primary target of the Sceptic is the arrogant self-confidence that the dogmatist shows in asserting his opinion as the truth:

> The Sceptic, being a lover of his kind, desires to cure by speech...the self-conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists.
> (3.280)

This is of course a drastic summary of the Sceptical position and arguments; but I think enough has been presented here to make the next chapter on the Renaissance usage of Pyrrhonism intelligible. Some important stresses of this later usage are also evident here: the equality of opposed statements, which anticipates dualism and dialecticism; the ideal of temperance or moderation, which becomes the *via media*; the realisation that truth is complex, expressed later in dialectic and paradox.

3. Scepticism in European Thought

'In the beginning were Plato and Aristotle...Europe was reborn most especially in the image of Plato' claims the introduction to a recent book of Renaissance writings, which goes on to suggest the centrality of Platonism to the Renaissance.[1] It is this received view or orthodoxy of the Renaissance that I have to consider first, because it is so utterly dominant. While it would be logical to work chronologically from Sextus towards the Renaissance, I feel it will be useful to describe this orthodoxy briefly, the better to recognise it before tracing the more neglected tradition of dualistic and Sceptical thought. Writing in 1965, Charles G. Nauert refers to Eugenio Garin's criticism of a "conspiracy of silence" by which 'modern scholarship has passed over...those elements in 16th century thought, such as magic, which may not suit the taste of those who want to make the Renaissance the enlightened and reasonable starting-point of our own supposedly enlightened and reasonable age'.[2] This picture of the Renaissance is typically of a broad stream of ancient learning - which had become glacial - flowing again through Europe from the 14th to the 16th century. This is true in spite of a dispute during most of our century over the "Renaissance problem";[3] the term is still defined broadly as 'the revival of art and letters, under the influence of classical models, which began in Italy in the 14th century'.[4] And while it rejects the view of the Renaissance as a milestone on the road of progress and challenges notions that have accumulated about the term, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* concedes that it is 'a term commonly used... to denote...a "rebirth"...or "revival" of learning.'[5] Collier's *Encyclopedia* (of 1966), like the *Britannica*, concedes the need for flexibility in any general view of the Renaissance, but it too points to the orthodox view: 'the direction in contemporary study of the Renaissance is clear. Historians today are concerned above all with...significant

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1. S. Davies, *Renaissance Views of Man*, p.1.

2. *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought*, p.2. Garin's work is *Mediaevo e Rinascimento*, 1954.

3. Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, says this problem has become one of the most hotly debated issues in modern historiography.

4. Shorter O.E.D., 1933, reprinted 1968.

5. 1971 edition.

innovation, pointing to the development of modern Europe wherever it may be discerned'. This is seen as confirming the original view of the period, held by writers from Petrarch on, that theirs was a new age - in Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* (1550), in Pierre Bayle's Dictionary (1695), and in Voltaire who 'considered the Renaissance a crucial stage in the liberation of the human mind from superstition and error'. This developed into 'the great standard interpretation with which all subsequent thought about the Renaissance has had to come to terms'. Michelet's volume on the Renaissance in his *History of France* (1855), gave expression to his vision of 'the momentous opening of a new phase in human history', while Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), extended this view into all fields of human endeavour, emphasizing the emergence of individualism - 'ruthless individuals, free spirits, and many-sided men of genius'. While this standard view has been attacked frequently since the late 19th century, it has not yet been generally repudiated. The dispute already mentioned, and the modern tendency to see, not so much *the* Renaissance as a continuous process of revivals or renascences beginning during the middle ages,[1] have done little to make less solid the sense of a mainstream period, recognisable and definable as the persistence of the term and the need to attack it seem to indicate. Thus, arguing from the expressed opinions of contemporary artists and theorists that their period was 'a "new age" as sharply different from the medieval past as the medieval past had been from classical antiquity, and marked by a concerted effort to revive the culture of the latter';[2] and from the demonstrable fact that art of the period is radically different in kind from medieval art, while it is clearly based on classical forms, even Panofsky concludes that there was indeed a Renaissance which 'started in Italy in the first half of the 14th century, extended its classicizing tendencies to the visual arts in the 15th, and subsequently left its imprint upon all cultural activities in the rest of Europe'.[3] And in a very recent work, Isabel Rivers[4] gives a thoroughgoing selection of texts that includes areas neglected by the standard or traditional view - areas such as Platonism and numerology; yet she too concedes the term 'the Renaissance' as a 'standard label'.

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1. Panofsky provides a full bibliography of this area of study.

2. Panofsky, op. cit., p.36.

3. Ibid., p.42.

4. *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry*, p.192.

It is against the background of this standard view that I want to suggest the material of this chapter, as a tributary stream, sometimes even as a counter-current to the main stream of thought. The modern debate about the nature of the Renaissance has expanded its frontiers not only in the temporal sense, but also in its inclusiveness of fields previously rejected or neglected by tradition. One such field is that of epistemology; there is, of course, a great deal of scholarship in the theory of knowledge as a purely philosophical concern, but the effect that views of knowledge must have had on literature seems to have been relatively untouched - especially so in the case of Pyrrhonist Scepticism. Where tradition has mainly seen the Renaissance as a great clearing of the darkness, the dawn of reason and enlightenment in art as well as in thought, modern epistemologists have shown the existence in the Renaissance of a considerable body of writings that reflect both the Academic and the Pyrrhonist views of knowledge - a large body of doubt, the effect of which on art, especially on literature, has been largely neglected. My task in this chapter is limited to drawing attention to the ubiquitous presence of such doubt in the thought of the Renaissance; later in this dissertation, I shall try to show its effect on Shakespeare, the most representative Renaissance literary artist. Although the focal point of this task must be the appearance of Sextus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in Latin translation in mid-16th century and its ultimate recognition in Montaigne's *Apologie of Raymond Sebond*, together with the implications of this for my thesis about Shakespeare, it will be valuable to my purpose to show, also in brief and selective historical outline, the path followed by Scepticism through the Renaissance, for this knowledge seems to have become obscured by the dominance of main-stream views of the great revival.

What, we must first ask however, of the interim? Richard Popkin[1] says that the post-Hellenistic period shows little apparent influence of Pyrrhonism, and that Academic Scepticism was known mainly in terms of Augustine's treatment of it. Bertrand Russell suggests that the temper of the times after Sextus 'demanded a more definite and comforting system of beliefs. The growth of a dogmatic outlook gradually overshadowed the sceptic philosophy'.[2] He also makes the point that the

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1. *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, Preface.

2. *Wisdom of the West*, p.107.

Middle Ages (with their Aristotelian Scholasticism) were actively hostile to Pyrrhonism because of its denial of the first principles of deduction. The early centuries of Christianity were, of course, fully engaged with dogma[1] and it seems therefore reasonable that Scepticism, the great antagonist of dogma, should have been forced into the background; but the mere fact that Sextus's text survived to reappear in Latin versions in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, suggests that the seeds of epistemological doubt were never entirely devitalised by dogma.[2] This is indeed true of all non-Christian thought during the great millenium of the Church's ascendancy. As Russell says, 'philosophy in the West became an activity which flourished under the patronage and direction of the Church'.[3] Thus, typically, Pelagian moderation which opposed the doctrine of original sin and which might be seen as reflecting the spirit of philosophical enquiry (if not directly of Sceptical enquiry), was the chief target of Augustine's theological polemics. Yet, paradoxically, Russell points out that Augustine foreshadows Descartes in his subjective interpretation of time: for Augustine, the present 'is the only thing that really is', since past and future are functions of present experience, and for Descartes, 'the only thing that one cannot doubt is that he thinks'.[4]

It is also obvious that the recovery of classical texts by Renaissance Humanists implies the survival of such works as that of Sextus, and presumably of such thoughts, right through the centuries of struggle for dominance between Popes and Emperors. A factor such as geographical isolation could enable such an anachronistic phenomenon as the ninth century flowering of classical learning in Ireland. John the Scot was Pelagian in outlook and Neoplatonist in thought - a combination of qualities that was to recur in Renaissance thinkers who wrote about the theory of knowledge. John did not broach the subject directly, but in dealing with predestination and free will he showed signs of the

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1. Russell describes this period as 'a world hostile to detached and reasonable enquiry, an era infested with superstition and rank with deadly zeal', op. cit., p.137.

2. On the contrary, as in classical times, it was the variety of dogmas in conflict that engendered Scepticism.

3. Op. cit., p.122.

4. Ibid., p.135.

Sceptical unwillingness to make a choice between opposing doctrines, seeing reason and revelation as independent sources of truth which need not be in conflict. Although Renaissance Sceptics attacked reason as a source of knowledge, they constantly argued the undeniability of faith in revealed knowledge.[1]

This dualistic approach to knowledge was enshrined four centuries later in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Revelation was seen as a separate and independent source of knowledge from reason, which depended on the senses. This dualism was perhaps inevitable in an age when dogmatic religion occupied such a large place in men's thoughts. What is interesting here is that Aquinas's dualism stems from the other pole of the traditional classical division - from Aristotle rather than from Plato, who was the source of John the Scot's dualism. It seems to be suggested that epistemological speculation, from whatever source, tended towards dualism, which became a constant in Renaissance thinking about knowledge.[2] Given the finite of bodily experience and the infinite of the mind, man tends to develop different criteria for the knowledge each gives him.

The division of knowledge was made more distinct by the empirical thinking of the Franciscans Roger Bacon and Duns Scotus. Theology and philosophy were felt to belong to different spheres and each should be free to operate independently of the other. And since philosophy included natural philosophy, scientific observation and experiment were given an impetus, further aided by the Neoplatonic interest in mathematics. And while Duns removed God from rational argument, William of Occam's principle of economy, that 'entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity',[3] implied that being could be accounted for without the elaborate Aristotelian arguments of the Scholastics: 'reality attaches to the individual, singular thing, and this

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1. By contrast, the Mohammedan philosopher Averroës (who exercised considerable influence on Classical studies) held as a basic tenet that reason was superior to faith as a source of knowledge. This allies him to Scepticism in the sense of religious doubt.

2. The attraction of Platonism for such thinkers is clearly due to Plato's central division between the worlds of experience and ideas.

3. This is 'Occam's razor', cited by Russell, op. cit., p.162.

alone could be an object of experience yielding direct and certain knowledge'.[1] Russell specifically relates Occam to Scepticism because of the radical nature of his relegation of belief in God to the sphere of faith: 'God cannot be known through sense experience and nothing can be established about him by our rational apparatus. Belief in God... depends on faith, and so does the entire system of dogmata about the Trinity, the immortality of the soul, creation and the like'.[2] Russell goes on to say that, in this sense, Occam is a Sceptic, but that it would be wrong to think of him as an unbeliever, since faith was untouched by the division of belief and reason. While this allows that Sceptics could still accept faith, it tends to encourage the popular conception of the religious sceptic.[3] Occam's acceptance of sense experience as a criterion of knowledge disqualifies him from the label "Sceptic" in the Pyrrhonean sense; nevertheless, the fact that he 'set philosophy on the road back to secularism'[4] makes him significant to the rediscovery of the enquiring attitude which empirical science and Scepticism held in common.

This brings us to the 14th century and the beginning of the Renaissance. Dogmatism endured throughout this period too, of course, and is still a familiar phenomenon; but, as Russell puts it, the change from the medieval world to the Renaissance was very largely a matter of putting theological dogmatism in its place. Strikingly enough, it is the great literary figure Petrarch who first calls our attention to the anti-dogmatic movement in the Renaissance. Ernst Cassirer remarks that 'the spell with which dogmatic medieval ideas had bound nature was first broken by Petrarch's lyric poetry'.[5] He is most famed for his poetry and as the "father" of Italian Humanism: in this latter role, however, as a student of classical thought, he wrote prose treatises and many letters which focus on the epistemological thought of the time. The letters

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1. Russell, ibid., p.162.

2. Ibid., p.163.

3. Russell confirms this interpretation by this later comment: 'the wider scope of enquiry together with a measure of scepticism, born of the gulf between faith and reason, turned men's minds away from things not of this world and taught them to try to improve their lot'. Ibid., p.165.

4. Ibid., p.169

5. *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, p.143 (hereafter, *I.& C.*)

include the following:

> Truth is difficult to discover, and, being the most humble and feeble of all those who try to find it, I lose confidence in myself often enough. So much do I fear to become entangled in errors that I throw myself into the embrace of doubt instead of truth. Thus I have gradually become a proselyte of the Academy as one of the big crowd, as the very last of this humble flock. I do not believe in my faculties, do not affirm anything, and doubt every single thing with the single exception of what I believe is a sacrilege to doubt. (1)

Here is a clear reflection of the dualism that had grown in epistemological thought, and a direct reference to the Academy - although his description of the Academic qualities shows that he did not distinguish between Academic and Pyrrhonean Scepticism. Then there is a treatise, *On His Own Ignorance*, which expresses the humble Christian ignorance which was to be formulated more fully by Nicholas Cusanus, and to recur frequently, notably in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. Petrarch writes thus:

> How infinitely small...is the greatest amount of knowledge granted to one single mind!...what a man knows...is nothing when compared...with his own ignorance. (2)

His main point about ignorance is that ultimate knowledge is knowledge of God, and that even the greatest of philosophers is ignorant. Attacking the supposedly learned Scholastics, he writes:

> in the judgement of such people nobody can be a man of letters unless he is also a heretic and a madman...No wonder my friends declare me not only ignorant but mad, since they doubtless belong to that sort of people who despise piety...and take diffidence to be a religious habit. They believe that a man has no great intellect and is hardly learned unless he dares to raise his voice against God and to dispute against the Catholic Faith, silent before Aristotle alone'. (3)

Knowledge based on faith is the only true knowledge, and all other knowledge 'is not a path but a road with a dead end...not knowledge but error'.[4] In the following there is the sense of outrage at the arrogance of the dogmatist, already seen in the Pyrrhonists' position:

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1. Letter to Francesco Bruni, Oct.25, 1362. Translated by H. Nachod in Cassirer's *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, pp.34-5.

2. Cited by Cassirer, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, pp.66-7 (hereafter *R.P.M.*)

3. Ibid., p.117.

4. Ibid., p.117.

> No wonder human arrogance meets countless rugged cliffs when it unfolds its unfledged wings to the wind in this penury of knowledge. How copious and how ridiculous are the vanities of philosophers, how many contradicting opinions show up; how great is their obstinacy, how great their impudence! How many quarrels break out, how ambiguous are all matters, how great and entangled is the confusion of words'. (1)

Citing Cicero, Petrarch reports that Socrates says "this one thing I know, that I know nothing", and comments thus:

> This most humble confession of ignorance Arcesilas blames as still too bold, asserting that "even this knowing nothing cannot be known". A glorious philosophy that either confesses ignorance or precludes even the knowledge of this ignorance!...It is by now a well-known fact that man cannot know everything, not even many things. On the other hand, the Academy is disapproved and rebutted long since, and it is established that something can be known when God reveals it. (2)

Obviously, Petrarch has his own dogmatic view about the truth of things, but his awareness of the Academics and the Pyrrhonean view, albeit confused as one school, establishes him firmly as the father of Renaissance Scepticism too. In the earlier work cited above, Cassirer describes Petrarch as engaged in a constant struggle between 'the requirements of ancient humanism and of medieval religiosity'.[3] All the intellectual values of life - fame, beauty, love - are belittled in the religious viewpoint, and he is caught in a dualism that causes a 'schism within his mind, that sickness of the soul...depicted in...the dialogue *De secreto conflictu curarum suarum*'. This conflict leads him to 'resignation, surfeit with the world...pessimism and ascetism'.[4]

This response to doubt reflects one result of Scepticism and accounts for one of the ways in which the term is commonly understood;[5] but it is not the only response possible, as the work of Nicholas Cusanus shows about a century after that of Petrarch. Cusanus shows an

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1. Ibid., p.125.

2. Ibid., p.126.

3. *I.& C.*, p.37.

4. Ibid., p.37.

5. T. Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, p.48, comments that the cult of melancholy 'had affinities with the practicality of Machiavelli and with the skepticism of Montaigne'. The roots are clearly much older.

optimistic response in his epistemological struggle. Continuing the line of empirical thought of the Franciscans, his *De docta ignorantia* (c1440) rejects rationally based theology; the finite and the infinite are incommensurable, and 'there can be no progression from empirical or rational "truths" to the absolute truth'.[1] Experience contains knowledge, but 'this knowledge...can only reach a relative aim and end, never an absolute'.[2] Cusanus, in other words, affirms the impossibility of knowing God in any empirical way, and turns in dualistic fashion to a mystical theology which links man immediately to God in what he calls an "intellectual vision". Here again we have an epistemology that differentiates the criteria for knowledge of the finite and the infinite. However, he differs from his predecessors in the essential freedom and creativity he allows to the human mind, which has basic forms of intuition - space and time, concepts of number, size, and logical categories. 'In the development of these categories the mind *creates* arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy...all conceptual differences...emerge from the human intellect ...Invention does not come from without; it is simply the material and sensible realization of the concept'.[3]

This is to put a very high valuation indeed on man's powers,[4] and really prevents our calling Cusanus a Sceptic; but the fact of his dualistic epistemology and the possibility of his influence on great minds of the Renaissance - Cassirer sees him at the bottom of much of the spirit of learning evident in thinkers of the age such as Bruno, Alberti, Leonardo, and others - make him an important link in the continuity of the enquiring spirit. His importance can be seen more clearly in A.O. Lovejoy's declaration of Cusanus's thought and its implications: 'there is no reason why the earth is the earth or man man, except that he who made them so willed. This logically implied the impossibility of any *a priori* knowledge about what exists'.[5]

Lorenzo Valla is another who regarded faith and reason as

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1. Cassirer, *I. & C.*, p.22.

2. Ibid., p.23.

3. Ibid., pp.41-2.

4. It is essentially an echo of the Pelagian view.

5. *The Great Chain of Being*, p.114.

irreconcilable. His dialogue on free will, *De libero arbitrio*, (c1436), shows some of the earliest signs of the revival of the Pyrrhonist suspension. Again there is a direct reference to the Academy:

> Let us dismiss the Academics with their point of view, who, although they would put all in doubt, certainly could not doubt of their own doubts; and although they argued nothing is known, nevertheless they did not lose their zeal for investigation. (1)

Besides indicating his distaste for most schools of ancient philosophy, this suggests a Pyrrhonean neutrality which is confirmed by Cassirer's estimate that in *De libero arbitrio*, 'we sense...that new, modern critical spirit which is beginning to become conscious of its strength and of its intellectual weapons. Valla created that form of dogma-criticism used in the 17th century by (Pierre) Bayle...(he) leaves the *decision* to other instances; but he demands that the investigation be conducted exclusively from the point of view of reason'.[2] Cassirer perhaps overstates this; it seems reasonable to surmise that Valla, knowing of the Academy, should also know of Pyrrhonism. Although the rediscovery of Sextus is generally regarded as belonging to the 16th century, Bury's edition of the *Hypotyposes* records manuscripts in Greek and Latin dating from the 14th. Indeed, this comment by Cassirer also suggests the suspensive attitude typical of Pyrrhonist thought: the question of man's free will 'can no longer be answered by philosophy. Only resignation remains, only refuge in mystery...(This) is completely consistent with the whole of Valla's intellectual constitution. Neither here nor elsewhere does he want to present us with final conclusions. He is satisfied with placing the question before us'.[3] Valla can hardly be seen as *creating* dogma-criticism, he is rather one of those who transmitted the Pyrrhonist view to the Renaissance.

Marsilio Ficino has perhaps little place in the present context, for he tends to move away from the dualism that allowed philosophers to doubt the grounds of knowledge and at the same time profess Christian belief. He is syncretic, attempting to merge Platonic and Christian

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1. Translated by C.E. Trinkaus Jr., in Cassirer, *R.P.M.*, p.159.

2. *I.& C.*, p.78.

3. Ibid., p.80.

doctrines,[1] and for him, in Cassirer's words, 'philosophy is religious, and religion philosophical'. Nevertheless, he separates the mind from the bodily senses in qualitative terms that lead him to conclude that the soul is miserable in the body. Through its nature it is restless: 'driven by nature, it searches eagerly for the reasons and causes of things...Reason is always uncertain, vacillating and distressed'.[2] And, perhaps significantly, the Promethean myth which Ficino uses to symbolise this vacillation, is seen as an allegory of the mind's anguish over perpetual uncertainty in the search for truth:

> Instructed by the divine wisdom of Pallas, he gained possession of the heavenly fire, that is, reason. Because of this very possession, on the highest peak of the mountain, that is, at the very height of contemplation, he is rightly judged most miserable of all, for he is made wretched by the continual gnawing of the most ravenous of vultures, that is, by the torment of inquiry.[3]

But this anguish was presented in a framework of Pelagian, Cusanian valuation of the worth of man. Prometheus represents creative man: 'man is not a slave of creative nature...he is its rival, completing, improving, and refining its works'.[4] This is essentially Humanistic thought, and not strictly Sceptical, but its bearing on Sceptical enquiry can be seen in Cassirer's comment that before this 'advance of the principle of freedom...dogmatic theology had gradually but necessarily to retreat'.[5]

One of the central texts of Humanistic thought is the *Oratio de hominis dignitate*,(c1486), by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a friend and follower of the older Ficino. This oration on the dignity of man, in Cassirer's words, 'summarizes the whole intent of the Renaissance and its entire concept of knowledge'.[6] Once again the outlook is syncretistic, attempting to show the unity of truth in differing philosophies, but this is combined with a view of man 'free as air to be whatever he likes, making him potentially not just the equal but the superior of any other

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1. His main work is *Theologica Platonica.*

2. *Five Questions concerning the Mind*, (c1450), translated by J.L. Burroughs, in Cassirer, *R.P.M.*, p.208.

3. Ibid., p.208.

4. Cassirer, *I.& C.*, p.96.

5. Ibid., p.98.

6. Ibid., p.86.

single created being, angels included'.[1] Here too is an anti-dogmatic attitude, comparable to that of Lorenzo Valla, in that it presents not so much a doctrine as a view of the reconcilable nature of different doctrines. The greatness of man resides in his variety; thus Pico argues that God's words to Adam were: 'Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature'.[2] Man has the seeds of all kinds given him by God:

> Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being...Who would not admire this our chameleon? (3)

Again the Humanistic valuation of man recalls Pelagius and Cusanus, and the notion of free man, while not strictly Sceptical, conveys an immanent doubt about the value of dogmatic doctrine, especially one which sees man as born in sin. The widely accommodating nature of Pico's view is perhaps akin to the dualism seen in earlier attempts to satisfy the different epistemological demands made by the finite and the infinite. Thus, on the one hand, Pico is strongly influenced by magical and cabalistic thought: he regards natural magic (as opposed to demonic magic) as a 'higher and more holy philosophy',[4] and the practitioner of natural magic, the magus, as a revered being who 'brings forth into the open the miracles concealed in the recesses of the world, in the depths of nature' and 'nothing moves one to religion and to the worship of God more than the diligent contemplation of the wonders of God'.[5] Pico claimed that he had read the Jewish cabalistic books, and these too bring out his syncretic view: 'I saw in them...not so much the Mosaic as the Christian religion ...(and) in those parts which concern philosophy you really seem to hear Pythagoras and Plato, whose principles are...closely related to the Christian faith'.[6]

On the other hand, Cassirer claims that Pico becomes a critic

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1. S. Davies, op. cit., pp.62-3.
2. *Oratio*, trans. by E.L. Forbes, in Cassirer, *R.P.M.*, p.225.
3. Loc. cit.
4. Ibid., p.247.
5. Ibid., p.249.
6. Ibid., p.252.

of knowledge, establishing the concept of *vera causa*, later embraced by Kepler and Newton as the basis for inductive knowledge:

> Although Pico does not enunciate this principle with the same clarity as do the founders of the mathematical science of nature, he nevertheless makes constant use of it as an immanent criterion...The astrological vision of the world was overcome...neither by empirical and scientific reasons, nor by new methods of observation and of mathematical calculation...The agent of liberation was not the new view of nature but the new view of the value of humanity. (1)

Edgar Wind sees a direct connection between Pico, Ficino, and Cusanus, by calling the *docta ignorantia* a refinement of 'the portentous power of the negative',[2] Ficino, Pico, and other Neoplatonists, challenging the tradition that saw the blind Cupid as a symbol of animal passion, all saw love's blindness as suggesting 'the sacred blindness produced by the immediate presence of the deity'.[3] This led them to what is perhaps the ultimate anti-dogmatic position, that God is better honoured and loved by silence than by words, and better seen by closing the eyes to images - a view they related to Pythagoras's "negative theology", to which was opposed Aristotle's "demonstrative theology".[4] Wind cites Pico's words on this:

> Let us enter into the light of ignorance and, blinded by the darkness of the divine splendour, exclaim with the prophet: I fainted in thy halls, O lord! (5)

Wind comments that Pico believed that man must surrender himself utterly to a state of unknowing in approaching the divine. This is mystical, but the retreat into mystery is surely an attempt, like that of the Pyrrhonists, to avoid the contradictions of opposing dogmas. Silence is a kind of suspension.

Finally, this passage from the oration suggests a main feature of the Sceptical position, the desire for peace, to be attained by avoiding dogmatic conflicts:

> We have around us grievous internal wars, wars more than

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1. *I.& C.* pp.117-20.

2. *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, p.54.

3. Ibid., p.53.

4. Loc. cit.

5. Ibid., p.56.

> civil, which, if we do not want them, and if we strive for that peace which can carry us up on high so that we may stand among the elevated ones of the Lord, philosophy alone will truly curb and calm in us. First of all, if our man will only seek a truce with his enemies, moral philosophy will destroy those unbridled sallies of that hydra-headed beast and the leonine passions of quarrelling and wrath. If then, consulting within ourselves as we need to, we desire eternal, untroubled peace, it will come to us and abundantly fulfil our prayers...Dialectic will subdue the turmoils of reason which has been made distressed and confused through contradictions of language and the sophistries of the syllogism. Natural philosophy will soothe the disagreements of opinion which agitate, perplex, and rend in pieces the unquiet soul from all sides. But she will calm them in such a way as to make us remember that nature, according to Heraclitus, was born from Strife and was on this account called 'Contention' by Homer. Therefore it is not in her power to give us true quiet and the stability of peace, for that is the responsibility of her mistress, that is, it is the duty and prerogative of holiest theology. (1)

The anti-dogmatic mood seems thus to be quite well established by the end of the 15th century, and from this point of view, we may claim that an important element of the Sceptical Position had thereby been retained and developed. However, the Neoplatonists considered here were also, as we have seen in their Humanism, advocates of the value and power of human rationality - which the Pyrrhonists of the later Renaissance set out to attack. Cusanus used mathematics as a means to raise the mind to the "intellectual vision" mentioned above. And Ficino, in *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*, argues that man is superior to the animals since intellect is superior to the senses: 'by means of the function of intelligence, he approaches the infinite perfection which is God'.[2] 'The man in us' is identified with reason, and 'the beast in us' with the sensory functions. For Leonardo da Vinci, mathematics was 'the only true medium for knowing nature',[3] since mathematics was seen as an instrument of rational arbitration whereby the mind could distinguish 'necessary' from 'accidental' phenomena. The experimental and theoretical aspects of form and construction underlying the art of Leonardo, Alberti, and others suggest the kinship that was felt to exist between the

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1. Translated by Douglas Brooks-Davies and Stevie Davies, in *Renaissance Views of Man*, pp.73-4.

2. Op. cit., p.207.

3. Cassirer, *I.& C.*, p.153.

intellect's ordering powers and its creativity. Thus 'Leonardo can immediately take up Cusanus. And...Galileo uses Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian to demonstrate his conception of the human intellect'.[1] Through mathematics, 'rules are established for distinguishing the true from the false and for separating the scientifically feasible from the impossible and the fantastic. Now, man understands the purpose of his knowledge as well as its limits. He is no longer immersed in that fruitless uncertainty which causes him to despair and leads him to scepticism'.[2] Thus reason becomes 'the immanent, unbreakable law governing nature'[3] and it seems as if the path of Scepticism comes to an abrupt halt.

Certainly, the Petrarchan response to doubt had been left behind, but the flaw in Cassirer's argument here is his portmanteau usage of the term "scepticism": at the beginning of his book he uses the words "resignation", "pessimism", and "ascetism" in the same way as he uses "scepticism" here.[4] This usage does not at all include the qualities of Pyrrhonism, and therefore does not jeopardise my argument. The state of thought was so fluid that a Humanist like Pietro Pomponazzi could move in a contrary direction to the Neoplatonists - back towards Scholastic Aristotelianism - and still produce similar epistemological ideas to those already seen.[5] The value he placed on reason led him to separate it from faith, the familiar dualistic tendency, albeit with 'the centre of gravity...moved very far in the direction of reason'.[6] He tried to re-establish astrology on a rational basis of knowledge rather than belief. In nature he saw (on Aristotelian lines) 'an orderly uniformity of law that admitted no miracles, no demons or angels';[7] these had been invented for the sake of the vulgar who could not understand the non-physical:

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1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.155.

3. Ibid., p.158.

4. Ibid., p.37; cf. p.28 above.

5. Cf. my comments on Aquinas and John the Scot, p.25 above.

6. Cassirer, *I.& C.*, p.81.

7. Cassirer, *R.P.M.*, p.277.

> For the language of religions, as Averroës said, is like the language of poets: poets make fables which though literally impossible yet embrace the truth of the intellect. For they make their stories that we may come into truth and instruct the rude vulgar, to lead them to good and withdraw them from evil, as children are led by the hope of reward and the fear of punishment. (1)

Yet, at the same time, his most famous work, *De immortalitate animae*, (c1516), begins with the view that human nature is multiple and ambiguous, a mean between mortal and immortal. Like Pico, he sees man's chameleon nature, his power to develop whatever nature he will, and his attitude to the questions posed is, like that of Valla, quite Pyrrhonean:

> If you examine knowing itself, especially that which is concerning the gods...even concerning natural things, and what belongs to the senses, it is so obscure and so weak that it ought more truly to be called a twofold ignorance, of negation and of disposition, than cognition. (2)

> We must say that the question of the immortality of the soul is a neutral problem...for it seems to me that no natural reasons can be brought forth proving that the soul is immortal, and still less any proving that the soul is mortal...We shall say, as Plato said in the *Laws* i, that to be certain of anything, when many are in doubt, is for God alone. (3)

This brings us into the 16th century; Erasmus had already, in 1509, produced his *Praise of Folly*, which clearly sounded the note of doubt by questioning just about every conventional virtue, and the assumption of certainty by the wide variety of philosophers, theologians, and others. Again there is an allusion to the Academy together with a qualification that suggests that the Pyrrhonean attitude is intended:

> (Man's happiness) depends on his opinions. For human affairs are so complex and obscure that nothing can be known of them for certain, as has been rightly stated by my Academicians, the least assuming of the philosophers. (4)

The presumably *most* assuming philosophers are treated in the following

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1. *De naturalium effectuum admirandorum* (1520), translated by J.H. Randall, in Cassirer, *R.P.M.*, p.278.

2. Tr. W.H. Hay, *R.P.M.*, p.304.

3. Ibid., p.377.

4. Tr. Betty Radice, p.135. Her footnote is illuminating: 'Although there is a clear distinction between the Stoics and the Academicians or Sceptics, the 16th century very often confused the two, powerfully assisted by Cicero who makes Pyrrho...sound like an exaggerated Stoic.'

fashion:

> Theirs is certainly a pleasant form of madness, which sets them building countless universes and measuring the sun, moon, stars and planets by rule of thumb or a bit of string, and producing reasons for thunderbolts, winds, eclipses and other inexplicable phenomena. They never pause for a moment, as if they'd access to the secrets of Nature, architect of the universe, or had come to us straight from the council of the gods. Meanwhile Nature has a fine laugh at them and their conjectures, for their total lack of certainty is obvious enough from the endless contention amongst themselves on every single point. They know nothing at all, yet they claim to know everything. (1)

In his later quarrel with Luther, religious issues 'were forced to embrace the epistemological ones',[2] for when Luther made man's conscience rather than the church the criterion of religious truth, he necessarily contradicted the thinking of Humanism on dogma. The individual conscience is little better than an individual opinion and therefore of the same source and kind as dogma - as the subsequent fragmentation of the Protestant churches clearly shows. Erasmus was moved to attack Luther in *De libero arbitrio*, (1524), seeing the new criterion as a futile step in the quest for certainty about religious truth. He enters the fray apologetically as one who has 'always had an inner temperamental horror of fighting':

> And, in fact, so far am I from delighting in 'assertions' that I would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Sceptics, wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures...I prefer this disposition of mine to that with which I see some people endowed who are so uncontrollably attached to their own opinion that they cannot bear anything which dissents from it; but they twist whatever they read in the Scriptures into an assertion of an opinion which they have embraced once for all. They are...like two combatants who, in the heat of a quarrel, turn whatever is at hand into a missile...I ask you, what sort of sincere judgement can there be when people behave in this way? Who will learn anything fruitful from this sort of discussion - beyond the fact that each leaves the encounter bespattered with the other's filth? (3)

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1. Ibid., p.151.

2. Popkin, op. cit., p.2.

3. *De libero arbitrio*, tr. E. Gordon Rupp and A.N. Marlow, in S. Davies, op. cit., p.87.

And if this is not specific enough, his Pyrrhonean attitude comes out in the following:

> I admit that many different views about free choice have been handed down from the ancients about which I have, as yet, no fixed conviction, except that I think there to be a certain power of free choice...even though I believe myself to have mastered Luther's argument, yet I might well be mistaken, and for that reason I play the debater, not the judge; the inquirer, not the dogmatist: ready to learn from anyone if anything truer or more scholarly can be brought. (1)

His own moderation thus tended towards a Sceptical suspension of judgement and, as with Montaigne at the end of the 16th century, an acceptance of the Catholic rule of faith. It was to avoid the inevitable conflict consequent upon doctrinal differences that the Neoplatonic Humanists had separated the criteria of religious knowledge from those of secular knowledge. Luther's legacy to western man was a revitalization of dogmatism, and the battles both physical and intellectual which raged in the name of doctrinal difference for the two following centuries, did much to push the more moderate thought of the 16th century neo-Pyrrhonists into the background.

But the rediscovery of Pyrrhonist Scepticism was also a 16th century phenomenon. Erasmus, coming at the beginning of the century, in a sense leads the way, but he is really one of the last Humanists, in whom the tendency towards Sceptical qualities has been suggested, as his preoccupation with countering the dogmatic arrogance of Luther confirms. In this he recalls Pico quite remarkably. However, the central work was an edition of Sextus Empiricus's *Pyrrhonean Hypotyposes* by Henri Estienne, which appeared in 1562, and again in 1569, edited by Gentian Hervet. I have tried to suggest that Pyrrho exercised an influence on several important thinkers before this, but there is at least one 16th century writer to whom Sextus's work was definitely known and who adopted the Pyrrhonist suspension: this was the nephew of Pico, Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola, whose *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis christianae disciplinae* (1520) discussed Pyrrhonism as expounded by Sextus, with a Fideistic emphasis on the validity of faith, also shown by his uncle and, indeed, by Erasmus, but with an anti-rational bias that was to become (together with the Fideism just mentioned) a feature of

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1. Ibid., pp.87-8.

16th century epistemological debate down to Montaigne.[1] These qualities should be sufficiently evident by now, but they bear repeating as the main points of the Sceptical position as it stood at the time of Montaigne and Shakespeare. Popkin puts the matter most clearly:

> Since the term 'scepticism' has been associated in the last two centuries with disbelief, especially disbelief of the central doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it may seem strange at first to read that the sceptics of the 16th and 17th centuries asserted, almost unanimously, that they were sincere believers in the Christian religion...The acceptance of certain beliefs would not in itself contradict their alleged scepticism, Scepticism meaning a philosophical view that raises doubts about the adequacy or reliability of the evidence that could be offered to justify any proposition...One might...maintain ...beliefs, since all sorts of persuasive factors might operate on one. But these persuasive factors should not be mistaken for adequate evidence that the belief was true...Hence, 'Sceptic' and 'believer' are not opposing classifications...the Sceptic may, like anyone else, still accept various beliefs...Those whom I classify as fideists are persons who are sceptics with regard to the possibility of our attaining knowledge by rational means, without our possessing some basic truths known by faith (i.e. truths based on no rational evidence whatsoever). (2)

Also before the mid-century reappearance of Sextus, there were several other works that involved Pyrrhonism in varying degrees. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, the Agrippa of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*,[3] is rejected as a Sceptical philosopher by Popkin, but his place in the ranks of writers who continued the trend of Sceptical thought is undeniable if only because of his relative fame (even notoriety), and his being one of Montaigne's sources. His case provides one of the clearest instances of the combination of belief and doubt that was characteristic of the Pyrrhonists and foreshadowed by the Neoplatonists. Like the elder Pico, Agrippa is closely involved with magical, cabalistic, and mystic philosophy, but he differs from Pico in his Sceptical devaluation of the power of reason. Nauert describes this as 'a peculiar mixture of doubt about rational knowledge and absurd gullibility where the irrational and fantastic were concerned'.[4] This is not simply a derogatory description,

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1. C.G. Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought*, p.148, says that this work 'marks a decisive stage in the introduction of ancient skeptical influences into 16th century discussions'.
2. Op. cit., Preface pp.xiii-xiv.
3. Cf. *Doctor Faustus*, I.i.111.
4. Op. cit., p.241.

but one that expresses the intellectual spirit of the times and reflects the character enquiry had assumed from Cusanus on, necessarily distinguishing between experience of the finite and of the infinite, and while not contemning the former, usually regarding it as less valuable than the latter. As did Pico and the Neoplatonists generally, Agrippa held natural magic and the magus in high esteem, and while we may look back and see him as gullible, educated men of the Renaissance did not.[1]

The two sides of Agrippa are represented in two works, *De occulta philosophia*, (c1510, though not published until c1530), and *De incertitudine et vanitate scientarium declamatio invectiva*, (1526), which have been held to be contradictory works, but which Nauert presents as reconcilable, even complementary. The occultism was an expression of dissatisfaction with orthodox religion which had moved away from mystery. Thus he explained the contemporary church's inability to show miracles (as the early church *had* been able), as proof of its corruption. In Nauert's words, 'their error was that they founded their knowledge on reason instead of on faith. They were adulterating the word of God with their own attempts to bend it to the demands of human reason'.[2] This is scarcely different from the thinking of the Neoplatonists considered already; but Agrippa does tend to emphasize the anti-rational element, and in this he moves away from the Humanistic valuation of man's powers, developing the mood of the younger Pico. Nauert says that it is difficult to trace the true sources of Sceptical thought in *De vanitate*, but, citing Popkin, concedes that 'the general intellectual situation of early 16th century Europe, with the continual clashing of authorities... was in many ways strikingly similar to the situation which had produced ancient skepticism'.[3] He also concedes that the growth of classical learning, including ancient Scepticism, was very considerable, and that 'references to ancient skeptical authors, and expositions of their thought, were so numerous that Agrippa could hardly have avoided learning much about their viewpoints'.[4]

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1. Pomponazzi is perhaps an exception.

2. Op. cit., p.49.

3. Ibid., p.140.

4. Ibid., p.142. One such source was Cicero's *Academica*, which described many of the philosophical controversies.

However, even failing any direct influence of Pyrrhonism, which seems unlikely, Agrippa did contribute to the growth of doubt in the 16th century by his attitude towards human learning - which was, consciously or unconsciously, an echo of the Pyrrhonean attitude as expressed in the modes outlined in Sextus's *Hypotyposes*. Quite simply, knowledge of the finite world depended on the senses and was therefore dubious, while knowledge of the infinite could be held by faith, a direct communion with God without the mediation of corrupt senses or rationality.[1] From this position to Montaigne's is but a short step. In Nauert's words, 'the fundamental constructive message left by *De vanitate* is that only the word of God...is worthy of man's trust, while all human sciences are vitiated by errors and uncertainties'.[2] And perhaps the very conflict between doubt and belief in Agrippa's two works is a sign of his essentially Pyrrhonean disposition of suspensive enquiry. He seems to have vacillated from one view to the other, at one stage denying the value of his work on the occult, but showing nevertheless a lifelong interest in the subject. Perhaps a sense of intellectual chaos amidst the perpetual conflict of views led him to the belief in revelation - that of the Christian Gospels, without totally discounting the revelatory possibilities of the occult writings. Certainly, his association with the Faust legend can be taken to indicate his significance as symbolizing 'the intellectual malaise of the 16th century'[3] - the disenchantment with orthodox learning and the search for some deeper source of knowledge. And the centrality of this legend can be gauged from the extremes of its literary expression: at one end of the spectrum is Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, and at the other is *The Tempest*.

Not a philosopher or epistemologist, but certainly an influential figure in the period, was Baldassare Castiglione, whose *Book of the Courtier*, (begun in 1508, in manuscript circulation from about 1516, and published in 1528), has been described as possibly the most representative book of the Renaissance because it is 'largely a series of echoes: of medieval ideas of chivalry, of classical virtues and of contemporary humanist aspirations'.[4] Thus, and because of its wide

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1. Carneades extended the fallibility of the senses to the reason. Cf. p.15 above.

2. Op. cit., p.143.

3. Ibid., p.195.

4. G. Bull, Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition, p.12.

influence in England after Hoby's translation in 1561, Castiglione's awareness of Sceptical thought is worth noticing here, even though it is only a brief and relatively unimportant part of his work:

> In everie thing it is so hard a matter to know the true perfection, that it is almost unpossible, and that by reason of the varietie of judgements...thus doth everie man praise or dispraise according to his fancie, alwaies covering a vice with the name of the next vertue to it, and a vertue with the name of the next vice...Yet doe I thinke that eche thing hath his perfection, although it be hid, and with reasonable discourses, might be judged of him that hath knowledge in that matter... Neither will I...stand stiffe, that mine is better than yours, for not onely one thing may seeme unto you and an other to me. But also unto my selfe it may appeare sometime one thing, sometime an other. (1)

The Pyrrhonean is evident in this, as it is in the later passage when Castiglione, in the preamble to book 2, speaks of old men always believing in the glory of the past and the corruption of the present:

> For the senses of our bodies are so deceivable, that they beguile many times also the judgement of the minde.

The old themselves are to blame, not the time they live in. Their senses and judgement are corrupted,

> even as to them that bee sicke of a fever, when by corrupt vapours they have lost their taste, all wines appear most bitter, though they be...delicate in deede: so unto olde men for their unaptnesse...pleasures seeme without tast and cold, much differing from those that remember they have proved in fore time. (2)

A more substantial example of the Pyrrhonean influence occurs in Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, (c1535), when, in chapter 35, the philosopher Trouillogan delivers an equivocal answer to the question whether one should marry or not marry. At the beginning of chapter 36, Trouillogan is described as 'the Ephectic[3] and Pyrrhonian philosopher', and in the text, his evasiveness gives rise to much amusing dialogue, of which the following is a sample:[4]

> Panurge: By the flesh, blood, and body, I swear, reswear, forswear, abjure, and renounce: he evades and avoids, shifts

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1. Translated by Sir Thomas Hoby, 1561. E.M.L., p.31.

2. Ibid., p.87.

3. The term means 'suspensive'. Cf. p.16 above.

4. The relevant extract is reproduced in full in Appendix 1, p.214 below.

> and escapes me, and quite slips and winds himself out of my gripes and clutches.
>
> At these words Gargantua arose, and said, Praised be the good God in all things, but especially for bringing the world into the height of refinedness beyond what it was when I first became acquainted therewith, that now the most learned and most prudent philosophers are not ashamed to be seen entering in at the porches and frontispieces of the schools of the Pyrrhonian, Aporrhetic, Sceptic, and Ephectic sects. Blessed be the holy name of God! Veritably, it is like henceforth to be found an enterprise of much more easy undertaking, to catch lions by the neck, horses by the mane, oxen by the horns, bulls by the muzzle, wolves by the tail, goats by the beard, and flying birds by the feet, than to entrap such philosophers in their words. Farewell, my worthy, dear, and honest friends.

This is, of course, a lampoon of the Pyrrhonean philosopher, but it nevertheless gives the strongest possible evidence of the spread of Pyrrhonism even before the mid-16th century editions of Sextus.

To return to the philosophical Sceptics, the position before 1562 is described by Popkin as showing a growing interest in Academic Scepticism, especially in Fideism, as doubt about human reason inspired faith in revelation. Writers, especially critics of the Sceptics, did not always grasp the difference between the Academy's negative position and the Pyrrhonists' suspensive attitude. Thus both Petrus Ramus, who discussed the two kinds of Scepticism in *Dialecticae partitiones*, (1543), and Omer Talon, who wrote a history of Academic Scepticism in 1548, were attacked as 'nouveaux academiciens' in P. Gallend's *Contra novam academicam Petri Rami oratio*, (1551). Again, what is of interest here is not the weight or value of the arguments, but the mere fact that such matters were at issue in mid-16th century. The appearance of Estienne's edition of Sextus in 1562 was not an isolated piece of scholarship in a remote backwater of learning, but the climax to a long continued consciousness of doubt as a philosophy. Sextus's text made the truest form[1] of Scepticism unequivocally available to this debate, providing the impetus that made Scepticism a force to be reckoned with in the work of Montaigne which, in Popkin's words, 'was read everywhere, and became the prevailing view of the avant-garde intellectuals of the early 17th century'[2] - a period which includes such major figures as Francis Bacon, Descartes,

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1. Cf. p. 16 above.

2. *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, p.10.

Pascal, and Pierre Bayle. What made Pyrrhonism so attractive to the 16th century was the room left for belief, which is immanent in the suspensive attitude, and specific in Sextus's third book.[1] This was in harmony with the Fideistic attitude mentioned, which was closely allied to the mystical ideas of Neoplatonism. Both Estienne and Hervet (in 1569) saw Pyrrhonism as confirming revelation as the only kind of knowledge to be trusted. Hervet wrote:

> In Sextus one can find a fitting answer to the Nouveaux academiciens and Calvinists. Scepticism, by controverting all human theories, will cure people from dogmatism, give them humility, and prepare them to accept the doctrine of Christ. (2)

Sextus's most important proselyte was undoubtedly Montaigne. It is not for me to estimate his significance in history or philosophy, but in his relation to both Sextus and Shakespeare, he stands at the very centre of my thesis, and his kinship with Shakespeare is discussed in a later chapter. In Popkin's estimate however, he 'discerned the relativity of man's intellectual, cultural and social achievements, a relativity that was to undermine the whole concept of the nature of man and his place in the moral cosmos'.[3] And of Sextus's part in this upheaval, Popkin comments thus:

> The occurrence of Montaigne's revitalization of the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus, coming at a time when the intellectual world of the 16th century was collapsing, made the "nouveau Pyrrhonisme"...not the blind alley that historians...have portrayed, but one of the crucial forces in the formation of modern thought. By extending the implicit sceptical tendencies of the Reformation crisis, the humanistic crisis, and the scientific crisis, into a total *crise Pyrrhonienne*, Montaigne's genial *Apologie* became the coup de grace to an entire intellectual world. (4)

If Montaigne had the effect on Shakespeare that I think he had, then a line of development runs back from Shakespeare through Montaigne, Rabelais, Castiglione, Agrippa - and all the traditions of dualistic epistemology in Humanism and Neoplatonism, ultimately to Sextus and his

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1. Cf. *Hypotyposes*, 3.2, summarized on pp.19-20 above.

2. Translated by Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, p.36.

3. Ibid., p.44.

4. Ibid., p.55.

master Pyrrho, the teacher of imperturbability and abstention from judgement, constituting a tradition of considerable dimensions and at least as important as more orthodox views of the growth of reason and enlightenment in the Renaissance. I think that A.O. Lovejoy implied as much when he wrote, more than forty years ago:

> Much of the credit given to Descartes for the widening of the universe is misplaced...it belongs to the thinkers in the Platonist and Scholastic traditions...but Descartes' popularity and authority probably helped to establish the view firmly. (1)

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1. *The Great Chain of Being*, p.124.

4. Sceptical Thought in England

1. English awareness of European thought

English insularity has never been quite complete; Romans, Vikings, and Normans have bridged the Channel successfully, and left their cultural marks on the country and its people. Perhaps it is fortunate, however, that the much-feared Spanish invasion of the late 16th century did not come to anything, for then the course of English literary history might have been very different. But military invasions are not essential for one society to affect another: the subtle currents of intercultural influence have flowed with increasing strength ever since the lines of communication between people of different nations were made easier by the possibility of travel between continents, and the wide dissemination of printed books. Without a Thomas More for Erasmus to befriend, there would have been no *Praise of Folly*, for example, perhaps even no *Utopia*. It is, I think, a point that does not need further illustration. We need only recall that literary education in England was largely involved with classical authors until this century; that French was commonly spoken at court until the middle of the 14th century at least; and that English literature *per se* did not become an academic discipline until the beginning of this century. The sources used by English writers including Shakespeare, of all periods including the Renaissance, have long been known to derive from the widest area of foreign writing,[1] so we can accept as a basic premise that European thought was well-known in England, and that there is, therefore, the strong possibility that Sceptical thought was as accessible as any European thought to the English man of letters. The history of Scepticism in England has not been written, as far as I know, and this is not the place to attempt it in any detail, but a few general comments about the character of the period and some specific instances to show its definite presence in English thought during the 16th and early 17th centuries, may help to indicate a possible origin for the 'negative capability' so many have perceived in the Elizabethans and particularly in Shakespeare.

It has become fashionable to dismiss Tillyard's Elizabethan 'World Picture' as too simple and ordered a view of things; yet it is a picture which contains a highly perceptive evaluation of the general

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1. Albeit in translation. See Sir J.E. Sandys' chapters on Education and on Scholarship in Lee and Onions, *Shakespeare's England*.

intellectual attitudes of the period, an evaluation which has not been stressed, and which seems concordant with the complex kind of view suggested in European thought in the previous chapter. For example, Tillyard comments that medieval Christianity amalgamated Old and New Testament views with the Platonic view, and that the conflicting claims of this and another world 'coexisted in a state of high tension',[1] neither having its own way entirely. In view of the sceptical tendencies of the Neoplatonists, this seems an important perception with implications of a world-view more complex than Tillyard's critics might think. Moreover, the picture of an ordered and hierarchical universe is acknowledged to have been precarious:

> There had been Machiavelli, to whom the idea of a universe divinely ordered throughout was repugnant...(and) the educated Elizabethan had plenty of textbooks in the vernacular instructing him in the Copernican astronomy, yet he was loth to upset the old order by applying his knowledge...The greatness of the Elizabethan age was that it contained so much of new without bursting the noble form of the old order. (2)

This already suggests the awareness of different possibilities that characterises the enquiring spirit; and the peculiar state of balance between views that might indicate the presence of Pyrrhonist influence, is surely evident in Tillyard's view of the accommodating nature of Elizabethan attitudes to order and the disordering effects of sin:

> Its great strength is that it admits of sufficient optimism and sufficient pessimism to satisfy different tastes...and the genius for inconsistency and contradiction that distinguishes the single human mind...The possibilities of great range were the greater because there was no tyranny of general opinion one way or another. This is one of the things that most separates the Elizabethan from the Victorian world. In the latter there was a general pressure of opinion in favour of the doctrine of progress: the pessimists were in opposition. In the Elizabethan world there was an equal pressure on both sides, and the same person could be simultaneously aware of each. (3)

When, finally, towards the end of his book, Tillyard speaks of the Elizabethan ability to outface apparent contradictions, and of the faith that 'the Elizabethans *somehow*[4] maintained in their perilously poised world',[5]

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1. *The Elizabethan World Picture*, pp.12-13.
2. Ibid., pp.16-17.
3. Ibid., pp.33-4.
4. My emphasis.
5. Op. cit., p.129.

I wonder whether the vagueness of that "somehow" can't be clarified at least partly by remembering the dualistic epistemology of the Neoplatonists and Sceptics - who could and did express doubts about all things human, but who consistently maintained faith in revealed knowledge, be it Christian, Hermetic, or Cabalistic.

Another general assessment of the period seems to confirm the sense of a perilous state in the Elizabethan mind: 'the new world that they lived in bewildered them; the country had got loose from its moorings and was drifting none knew whither'.[1] If we accept Popkin's estimate that the intellectual world of 16th century Europe was in a state of collapse, Raleigh's parallel view suggests that the intellectual climate of England also offered fertile ground for the 'crise Pyrrhonienne' to flourish in.[2] In the same book, Ronald Bayne's chapter on religion provides a concordant insight into the period, suggesting the kind of peace the Sceptics strove to achieve by abjuring dogma:

> It was...an era of rest in comparison with the reigns of Edward VI and Mary before it and the Puritan epoch after it. Queen Elizabeth and her statesmen established a temporary equilibrium in church and state - a government which was essentially a compromise between the old and the new spirit. They called a halt in the process of revolutionary change and insisted that the nation should produce some fruits of peace...the fruits produced were the modern English church and the English drama. Neither of these would have come into being if Puritanism had run its course unchecked. The most striking feature of...the Elizabethan age is its free humanity, the energy and variety of its manhood. This activity was possible because the yoke of Rome was shaken off and the yoke of Geneva not yet bound on. Between the two dominations came the Elizabethan age - the age of the layman uncontrolled either by priest or presbyter. (3)

Still in a general vein, it is usual to see the change from Elizabeth's reign to that of James, in terms of a change of mood, from optimism to pessimism; this may be true enough if we think only of broad categories - those reflected for example by the contrast between early Elizabethan comedies and the Jacobean gloom of, say, Webster. But such a contrast is too broad to account for the kinds of attitudes involved,

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1. Walter Raleigh, 'The Age of Elizabeth', in Lee and Onions, op. cit., p.40.

2. Cf. p.44 above.

3. Op. cit., pp.48-9.

for example, in Shakespeare's problem plays. However, the view expressed in the following comments by Henri Fluchère seems to include the necessary subtleties of attitude between the extremes of optimism and pessimism, while supporting and expanding the views of Raleigh and Tillyard:

> Freed, or so he imagined, from religious dogma and the restrictions it imposed on his thought and actions, man became in some sort his own god, at the cost of making himself his own executioner. Nothing would any longer impede his bold curiosity, his vaulting ambition, his perverse pride. Let this world, his domain, at least make a perfect, coherent, unassailable universe. But it was not so, for how could the existence of evil be denied, or suffering, or death, or the contradictions of his nature? The exaltation of the first victories soon gave place...to an immense disillusionment.
>
> The Elizabethan realized that everything was going to be brought into question, that nothing was settled, that profound political and social changes were imminent, and that a period of instability, confusion and uncertainty was beginning.
>
> James I brought in his train a whole galaxy of grimacing demons to drive out the old Elizabethan fairies...Now, there was to be doubt and regret, distress and disillusionment, above all, anxious curiosity, irony, satire, and that grinning hyena, cynicism.
>
> The poets themselves would no longer be content to embroider upon Petrarchan and Platonic themes a sophisticated or mannered poetry: they were going to set themselves to solve in their own terms the insoluble contradictions presented by the simplest concepts and sentiments, in the light of the new experience which...implied the duality of the physical and spiritual worlds.
>
> One (theme of the Jacobeans was) political, the other metaphysical: how to succeed, and how to face death. The meaning given to life is determined by the way in which these themes are treated: a radiant optimism or an uneasy defeatism, a pragmatism...sure of itself, or an uncomfortable half-light where lurk doubt and despair. (1)

In making this important link between world-view and literary expression, Fluchère suggests that we need to turn to Seneca and Machiavelli to understand the plays between Marlowe's day and Webster's. This is demonstrably true of many of the dramatic portraits of 'men...(who) lived on lies and audacity, hurling defiance at fate, flouting both human and divine law, rising to great heights and then...knowing how to die stoically...(like) the Senecan hero who is the obverse side of their medal'.[2]

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1. *Shakespeare and the Elizabethans*, pp.38-41.

2. Ibid., p.49.

Such were the Richards and Macbeths, the Flamineos and Bosolas of the drama, but this does not take us very far towards understanding figures such as Hamlet, Angelo, or even Iago. Fluchère fails to apply his own subtle distinctions of general tone to such particular cases, seeing only a Shakespeare 'gliding gradually'[1] from pessimism to serenity. There is something other than pessimism or cynicism in the plays between *Hamlet* and *Lear*, and I suggest that, for a better understanding of the half-light of these, we need to turn to Montaigne and the Pyrrhonean crisis of the late 16th century rather than to Seneca and Machiavelli.[2]

The general climate of attitudes in England seems to have been favourable for Pyrrhonean ideas to grow in, but the crucial question is, were there any Pyrrhonist texts in English, or at least explicit references that suggest knowledge by English writers of Pyrrhonist texts in Latin? Some English names have already appeared in the previous chapter, names of men whose epistemological thought tends to place them in line with Neoplatonist dualism and therefore, I believe, with Scepticism. One who followed this trend of thought was Thomas More, who published a *Life of John Picus Earl of Mirandula* in 1510, and whose *Utopia* of 1516 has links with Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. Another was William Baldwin whose *Treatise of Moral Philosophy*, (1547), included translations of Diogenes Laertius, whose writings gave descriptions of both Classical and Pyrrhonist Scepticism.

A kindred area of thought is that of the occult sciences, which produced numerous works from Roger Bacon's time on. The relevance of the occult and mystical to Sceptical thought has been suggested, and can be briefly stated as a common view that revealed knowledge is the only true knowledge, but it may add to the picture if I cite Frances Yates's comment that the influence of the so-called Hermetic works of the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. - astrological, alchemical, magical, and mystical-religious writings - spread with that of Platonism; Marsilio Ficino, for example, was commissioned by Cosimo de Medici to translate the Hermetic works before going on to tackle Plato.[3] That the Neoplatonic writers were generally favourably disposed to the Hermetic writings, being themselves dualistic, mystically religious, and rationally enquiring (or sceptical), suggests the parallel links between Platonism, Hermetic views,

1. Ibid., p.64.

2. Or perhaps in addition to them.

3. *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Introduction, p.13.

and Scepticism. The 16th century English astrologer John Dee has the reputation not only of a celebrated figure in this tradition, but also of a mathematician; he was a respected academic who taught in England and on the Continent, and enjoyed the favour of Queen Elizabeth. Frances Yates regards his influence in England as 'profoundly important'[1] and, as his pupils included both the Queen and Sir Philip Sidney, she might be right. His works are not specifically Sceptical, but his syncretic attempt to merge the mystical with the mathematical suggests a kinship with the Neoplatonist position, and hence with the enquiring spirit that is the essence of Scepticism. Certainly England had its share of the astrological controversies that raged during the 16th and early 17th centuries: in addition to Dee, other names that occur on either side of the debate include those of Thomas More, Robert Recorde, Simon Forman, Gabriel, Richard, and John Harvey, Henry Howard, John Chamber (who cited evidence from Sextus to attack astrology), Sir Christopher Heydon (whose reply included a rejection of Pyrrhonism), John Melton, and Bishop George Carleton. More immediately evident to the literary student is the fact that literary figures used the astrological field as 'a storehouse of rhetorical ornament', for the frequency of such references in literature 'suggests that the Renaissance public was as familiar with the astrologer's theories and jargon as the modern public is with the methods and language of psychologists'.[2]

Probably the first specifically Sceptical text in English, however, was Agrippa's *De vanitate*, translated in 1569 by James Sandford under the title, *Of the vanitie of artes and sciences*. Whatever else one might say of its influence, Agrippa's name and astrological interests at least have a place in the mind of every student of Marlowe. Though not especially concerned with sceptical ideas, Roger Ascham's *Scholemaster*, (1570), contains a reference to the term used by Sextus to describe the enquiring spirit - 'zetetic': the zetetic person is he 'that is naturallie bold to aske any question, desirous to searche out any doute...until he be perfitelie taught, and fullie satisfiede'.[3] In addition, Ascham set Erasmus up as an example of learning, learning being a better teacher than experience - which might indicate an awareness of the Sceptical attitude to sense experience.

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1. Ibid., p.65.

2. D.C. Allen, op. cit., p.156.

3. Ed. W.A. Wright, p.197.

These, however, are all slight examples in comparison with the solidity of the later manifestations of Sceptical awareness in England. The first of these occurs in Thomas Nashe's preface to Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, dated 1591. It takes the shape of a short prose piece called 'Somewhat to reade for them that list'. Speaking of variations in style and the idea that taste is a personal matter, the following passage occurs:

> Our opinion (as Sextus Empiricus affirmeth) gives the name of good or ill to every thing. Out of whose works (latelie translated into English, for the benefit of unlearned writers) a man might collect a whole booke of this argument...much good worship have the Author. (1)

A later work by Nashe, a dramatic comedy called *Summer's Last Will and Testament* and dated 1600, contains a passage on dogs, which, as McKerrow points out, comes from Sextus's *Hypotyposes*. He concludes that this most probably indicates the existence of an English translation of Sextus, which the earlier passage refers to, but which has subsequently been lost.[2] McKerrow's thoroughly scholarly approach necessitates an open-ended conclusion; as far as I know, an English Sextus of this period has not reappeared, but for my purposes it is enough that he was known well enough by an English literary writer to be incorporated in a dramatic work in this direct fashion.

The impact of Montaigne on European thought has been suggested already; no doubt he would have exercised due influence in England even without John Florio's monumental undertaking to translate the 107 essays, but it is a largely unemphasized tribute to the Englishman's scholarship that his formulations of Montaigne's thoughts[3] became part of Shakespeare's dramatic language. As such, Florio's publication of his translation of Montaigne's *Essays* in 1603 must rank not only as the central expression of the Sceptical view in English, but also as one of the most significant achievements ever in the transmission of ideas. For the limited purpose of the present chapter, the major essay, 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond',

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1. Thomas Nashe, *Works*, ed. R.B. McKerrow, pp.332-3.

2. The passage, together with McKerrow's notes, is reproduced in Appendix 2, p. 220 below.

3. It is commonly acknowledged by editors that Florio is not always accurate as a translator, but at the same time his English carries the strength of conviction about the points he makes in Montaigne's name. As far as English literature is concerned with Montaigne, it is concerned with Florio's English.

contains a full expression (in English) of the history of Scepticism and of the Pyrrhonist view which Montaigne almost certainly learned from Sextus Empiricus.[1]

One could scarcely have asked for a more illustrious or better-known person to provide an example of the influence Montaigne had in England than the author of the next instance. Probably at some stage during his incarceration in the Tower, i.e. between 1603 and 1616, Sir Walter Raleigh produced an essay called *The Sceptick*. This is a work not easily accessible in modern editions, the last complete works of Raleigh having appeared in the 19th century. Therefore the text is reproduced, in a copy of the 1751 edition by Thomas Birch, in Appendix 3 at the end of this dissertation.

It is very much like an abbreviated sketch of some of Montaigne's illustrations in the 'Apologie of Raymond Sebond', and it also follows the order of argument in Sextus's work, though only as far as the second mode. Chrysippus's view of a dog's logical powers, for example, is common to all three writers;[2] Raleigh's example of honey reads: 'Honey seemeth to the Tongue sweet, but unpleasant to the Eye', and Florio's Montaigne reads: 'Honie is pleasing to the taste, but unpleasing to the sight', so the probability is that Raleigh had at least read Florio's Montaigne; and since Montaigne's order of argument is rather confused and not at all like that of Sextus, it is also possible that Raleigh had some direct knowledge of Sextus. Whatever the truth might be, the existence of such an essay in English at this time is what really concerns me here. Raleigh's *Sceptick* indicates the undeniable existence of this neglected element in the reading matter of Englishmen of the early 17th

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1. Popkin suggests that it was written in 1575-6 when Montaigne was studying Sextus and suffering a 'crise Pyrrhonienne'.

2. It is pertinent to speculate whether Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, written between 1603 and 1606 according to Kenneth Muir, might owe something to this recurrent reference to dogs by writers under the Sceptical influence. Macbeth's speech to the murderers, III.1.91-100, seems to be unusually concentrated on the comparison between dogs and men, and the likelihood of a debt is heightened by Muir's footnote to the passage in the Arden edition of the play, which suggests a debt to Erasmus, one of whose colloquies contains a passage somewhat like the Chrysippus passage.

century, apparently accessible even to those languishing in the Tower at his Majesty's pleasure.

I do not need to go into the 17th century to any extent, but it is worth remembering that this was the age of Descartes, who believed he had finally settled the question of Scepticism, but only because he submitted his thinking to the most radical doubt ever conceived, ending up in a thoroughly dualist positon over mind and matter; and worth remembering that one development of Descartes' work was British Empiricism[1] with its Lockean tolerance of views and an approach to human understanding that saw its limitations and dependence on sense experience - a position redolent of Pyrrhonism, though not Pyrrhonean in its conclusions. Much earlier than Locke though, was Francis Bacon. He is described by Popkin[2] as one of the first to pursue the quest for certainty which Montaigne's Sceptical views had precipitated. Yet in his preface to the *Novum Organum*, (1620), he wrote the following distinctly Pyrrhonean remarks:

> Those who have taken upon them to lay down the law of nature as a thing already searched out and understood... have therein done philosophy and the sciences great injury. For as they have been successful in inducing belief, so they have been effective in quenching and stopping inquiry; and have done more harm by spoiling and putting an end to other men's efforts than good by their own. Those on the other hand who have taken a contrary course, and asserted that absolutely nothing can be known...have certainly advanced reasons for it that are not to be despised; but yet they have neither started from true principles nor rested in the just conclusion, zeal and affectation having carried them much too far. The more ancient of the Greeks (whose writings are lost) took up with better judgement a position between these two extremes, - between the presumption of pronouncing on everything, and the despair of comprehending anything; and though...complaining of the difficulty of inquiry and the obscurity of things...they did not the less follow up their object and engage with nature; thinking (it seems) that this very question - viz, whether or no anything can be known - was to be settled not by arguing, but by trying.(3)

His conclusions are not Pyrrhonean, since he goes on to attempt to 'establish progressive stages of certainty', but the influence of Pyrrhonean thought is clearly evident in this important English writer. Even in expressing the hope of attaining true understanding, he speaks as

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1. Russell, op. cit., p.214.

2. *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th centuries*, Introduction.

3. Ibid., pp.88-9.

if his readers will misunderstand him to be a Pyrrhonist:

> It will...be thought that by forbidding men to pronounce and to set down principles as established until they have duly arrived through the intermediate steps at the highest generalities, I maintain a sort of suspension of the judgement, and bring it to what the Greeks call *Acatalepsia*, - a denial of the capacity of the mind to comprehend truth. But in reality that which I meditate and propound is not *Acatalepsia*, but *Eucatalepsia*; not denial of the capacity to understand, but provision for understanding truly; for I do not take away authority from the senses, but supply them with helps; I do not slight the understanding, but govern it. (1)

Such an assumption in early 17th century England surely implies a considerable spread of the Pyrrhonean view amongst literate Englishmen.

A few other names can be mentioned to round off this section: in connection with Platonic ideas, there is notably that of John Donne, who, according to Edgar Wind, assimilated the mystical tradition 'so completely to his own spirit that he created it afresh',[2] and who cites Cusanus, Ficino, Pico and others in his works. Donne was evidently thinking of the new astronomical and physical views when he wrote the following passage about 1611, but the essential spirit of enquiring doubt that is behind Bacon's attempt to gain some basis for knowledge is surely discernible in Donne's sweeping view of the world's decay:

> And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
> The element of fire is quite put out;
> The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to look for it.
> And freely men confess that this world's spent,
> When in the planets, and the firmament
> They seek so many new; they see that this
> Is crumbled out again to his atomies.
>
> (An Anatomy of the World, ll.205-212)

Popkin suggests that the little-known William Chillingworth, (1602-1644), is an important figure in English awareness of Scepticism. He was a Protestant controversialist who made use of Pyrrhonism in a dialectical fashion. Aubrey's *Brief Lives* reports that Chillingworth 'much delighted in Sextus Empeiricus'[3] and made a habit of disputation,

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1. Ibid., p.105.

2. Op. cit., p.216.

3. Cited by Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, p.67.

preparing himself beforehand by indulging his delight. The Pyrrhonean pattern of argumentation is reflected in his *Discourses*, and he is seen as providing in embryo the English tradition of common sense and practical solutions to matters of doubt, since he held the view that, in the absence of infallible or mathematical certainty, one does not need to suspend judgement; rather, one proceeds to judge 'according to the degree of assurance that can be obtained'.[1]

Finally, there is the brother of George Herbert, Edward Herbert of Cherbury, whose *De veritate*, (1624), proposed (in a rather similar spirit to that of Chillingworth) that something can be known, using his theory of Common Notions as a basis. This proposed that such notions were true because they were held in common by all normal persons and would be rejected only be madmen or idiots. Although this is patently absurd and was attacked mercilessly by Gassendi and Descartes, it was well received by his immediate contemporaries: perhaps a testimony to the effective penetration of Pyrrhonism into English thought, an invasion that might have been even more successful had it not been for the independent minds of English thinkers such as Bacon, who turned doubt into an instrument for the advancement of learning.

2. Shakespeare's learning

It is reasonable now to ask how Shakespeare fits into this picture of English involvement with European thought. There was the early warning from Ben Jonson about Shakespeare's Latin and Greek, reinforced in 1767 by Richard Farmer's view that most Classical allusions in the plays are from Elizabethan English translations.[2] Since then, scholars have been careful to trace these translations as the likeliest sources of such allusions. Thus Sir John Sandys, while suggesting that allusions in several places are derived from Lily's Latin Grammar, published in 1568, points out the availability in English of some of Shakespeare's favourite sources: Senecan Tragedies, paraphrased by Jasper Heywood, appeared between 1559 and 1566; Golding's version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appeared in 1567; North's Plutarch was available in 1579,

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1. Ibid., p.150.

2. 'An Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare', in D. Nichol Smith, *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*.

and Painter's *Pallace of Pleasure* in 1567.[1]

The more modern view has relented a little on this conservatism: G.K. Hunter suggests that Shakespeare's reading embraced a broad spectrum of works, and included both the ability 'to get sense out of (Latin) works not translated',[2] and a greater assiduousness than was common in the collection of variant sources. Tales existed in different versions, and it is now recognised that Shakespeare seldom limited himself to one source for a play. On the vital question of his reading of contemporary works - his "keeping up" with intellectual issues - Hunter also points to the availability of most works in English, and comments that 'the question of actual reading is difficult to prove, and seems less important than a general acquaintance with the kind of material involved'.[3] This acquaintance seems to be implied: otherwise 'we must suppose he reached the same point by a different and less probable route - by living inside the intellectual problems of his own age and working out possible attitudes to them in splendid isolation...'[4]

To see Shakespeare in the way that Hunter finally does, as a man who 'read widely, perhaps desultorily, but with a keen exploratory interest in the intellectual world in which he moved and to which he contributed',[5] is to see him in accordance with the modified view of the Renaissance spirit outlined above. This implies the dual aims of revitalising the world of Classical learning, and of exploration - the questing spirit that expressed itself in so many fields: in voyages of discovery, in the medical, mechanical, and artistic experiments of Leonardo, and in a hundred other attempts to expand the boundaries of knowledge, including the epistemological debate I have described. If this seems to put us in danger of over-intellectualising both Shakespeare and his plays,[6] I would reply that it was the peculiar strength of the

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1. Lee and Onions, op. cit, chs.8 and 9.

2. 'Shakespeare's Reading', in Muir and Schoenbaum, *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, p.57.

3. Ibid., p.65.

4. Loc. cit.

5. Ibid., p.66.

6. Cf. Hunter, op. cit., p.66.

Renaissance spirit that such theorising men were also great artists and craftsmen, producing tangible works from their experiments, and that Shakespeare's intellect is in this same mould. Its presence in the plays, and I think we must agree with Hunter that they do reflect intellectual concerns, does not detract from the plays as carefully wrought works of art, any more than Leonardo's theoretical writings and drawings detract from his finished paintings. To see him cast in this Renaissance mould is not now, as it once might have been, to restrict the direction of the implied intellectual curiosity. It is not possible, Hunter suggests, to prove his reading in any precise sense, but it does seem proper to 'suppose that Shakespeare read Montaigne and others because they dealt with matters that already fascinated him, because he took an active part in the intellectual life of his time, seeking challenge or confirmation.'[1]

I think we can accept that the material seen in the first part of this chapter to have been available to literate Englishmen, must have been available to Shakespeare; and from his known breadth of reading and intellectual interests, it seems probable that Sceptical material would have reached him too. As the next chapter will attempt to show, it is beyond doubt that Florio's Montaigne, at least, was at some stage in his hands. And I hope that the implications of this are by now clear.

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1. Ibid., p.66.

5. Montaigne and Shakespeare: an Uncommitting Commitment

For nearly two hundred years, from Capell in 1780 down to Robert Ellrodt in 1975, the *Essays* of Montaigne have been felt as an influence on Shakespeare and have consequently been toothcombed for parallels between the two writers. Hundreds have been suggested and elaborate claims made, but many, if not most, are probably due to commonplaces and proverbial sayings of the time - as J.M. Robertson pointed out in 1897.[1] My own reading of Montaigne - or at least of Florio's Montaigne, the translation Shakespeare most probably read[2] - suggests that Robertson was right, and that the only indubitable echo of Montaigne is the one given by Capell, which relates *The Tempest* to the essay *Of the Caniballes*:

> Gonzalo: I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
> Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
> Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
> Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
> And use of service, none; contract, succession,
> Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
> No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
> No occupation; all men idle, all;
> And women too, but innocent and pure:
> No sovereignty;
> (II.i.141)

> It is a nation, would I answer Plato, that hath no kinde of traffike, no knowledge of Letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politike superioritie; no use of service, of riches or of povertie; no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupation but idle; no respect of kindred, but common, no apparell but naturall, no manuring of lands, no use of wine, corne, or mettle. The very words that import lying, falshood, treason, dissimulations, covetousnes, envie, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them. How dissonant would hee finde his imaginarie commonwealth from this perfection!
> (I.XXX.p.220)[3]

Here, the coincidences of phrase and the closely parallel sequence of argument make it highly unlikely that Shakespeare could have written

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1. *Montaigne and Shakespeare*, Introduction.

2. J.M. Cohen, *Montaigne*, *Essays*, p.21, says that 'Florio is far from Montaigne in the spirit, and not too accurate in the word'. Those who have pursued the Shakespeare-Montaigne link, however, have not set out to give scholarly interpretations of Montaigne, only to suggest links between two minds that have struck common chords in their writings. Perhaps the implied disjunction can be restored if we agree that 'Montaigne' in this context stands for 'Florio-Montaigne'.

3. Montaigne references are to volume, chapter, and page in the Everyman's Library edition.

Gonzalo's speech as we have it without Montaigne's passage in front of him: it is too directly similar to suggest merely a memorial reconstruction or (even less likely) a coincidental parallelism of phrase. No other parallel is anything like as close as this one, but the sifting by various scholars has produced other verbal coincidences. Hamlet's 'beast that wants discourse of reason', has been compared with the following occurrences in Montaigne:

> Our religion hath had no surer humane foundation, than the contempt of life. Discourse of reason doth not only call and summon us unto it;
>
> (I.XIX.p.86)
>
> ...it is very hard, chiefely in humane action, to prescribe so exact rules by discourse of reason;
>
> (II.IV.p.44)
>
> ...he who by discourse of reason fore-saw, that this budding disease would easily turne to an execrable Atheisme.
>
> (II.XII.p.126)

This seems very slight as an example of influence: nowhere is there a likeness of context, and the phrase 'discourse of reason', though perhaps not recorded elsewhere before, is a likely enough construction from the Middle English use of 'discourse' to mean 'reasoning, ratiocination' (O.E.D.). The other examples seem more telling:

> 'Tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause.
>
> (*Hamlet*, III.i.63)
>
> If it be a consummation of one's being, it is also an amendment and entrance into a long and quiet night. Wee finde nothing so sweete in life, as a quiet rest and gentle sleepe, and without dreames.
>
> (III.XII.p.309)

This is better, since both writers are talking of death as a consummation. But even here they differ in that Shakespeare fears the dreams that may come, while Montaigne is sure of being dreamless.

> A certain convocation of worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots.
>
> (*Hamlet*, IV.iii.20)
>
> The heart and life of a mighty and triumphant Emperor, is but the breakfast of a seely little worm.
>
> (II.XII.p.155)

Here, the collocation of 'emperor' and 'worm' is convincing, the effect being enhanced by the exactness of the coincidence of thought, and by

the expanded visualisation Shakespeare gives of the same metaphor. The last of these cases of verbal likeness is again less persuasive, although the contexts are approximately like in considering fortune:

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will.
>
> (*Hamlet*, V.ii.10)
>
> My consultation doth somewhat roughly hew the matter, and by it's first shew, lightly consider the same: the maine and chiefe point of the worke, I am wont to resigne to heaven.
>
> (III.VIII.p.171)

I do not propose to sift any further; as Ellrodt has pointed out, there is little likelihood of uncovering any further or undetected close parallels. He turned instead to 'a broader consideration of the ways in which the minds of the French essayist and the English dramatist had worked in self-scrutiny'.[1] He concludes that a process of heightened self-awareness was a feature of the late 16th century, and asks, 'would Shakespeare have endowed Hamlet or Angelo with so vivid a self-consciousness if he had not read Montaigne?'[2] This question is clearly rhetorical, but the fact that he leaves us without a direct statement seems to imply that Ellrodt still regards the basic question of influence as open to discussion. On the evidence of Gonzalo's speech alone, I think that the simple answer must be affirmative[3], and assuming for Shakespeare at least some acquaintance with Montaigne's thought, my concern here is not to find further concrete parallels, but to examine some of those already noticed on the basis of this assumption.

Montaigne's *Essays*, 107 titles on diverse topics, (from 'Smels and odors' to the 'incommodity of greatnesse'), varying in length from one page to two hundred pages, constitute a long and exhaustive process of self-examination which gives us 'a doubt which rests upon itself and is endless,...religion, and...Stoicism', an 'ambiguous self...which he

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1. R. Ellrodt, 'Self-consciousness in Montaigne and Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Survey* 28, p.37.

2. Ibid., p.50.

3. Ellrodt also begins from this affirmation: 'the verbal borrowings from Florio...are beyond doubt', and 'certainty is afforded by the recurrence of (several) phrases'. Ibid., p.37, text and footnote 3.

never finished exploring'.[1] His own prefatory remarks to the reader issue an apparent warning:

> I have no respect or consideration at all, either to thy service, or to my glory: my forces are not capable of any such desseigne. I have vowed the same to the particular commodity of my kinsfolks and friends:...Had my intention beene to forestal and purchase the worlds opinion and favour, I would surely have adorned my selfe more quaintly, or kept a more grave and solemne march. I desire therein to be delineated in mine owne genuine, simple and ordinarie fashion, without contention, art or study; for it is my selfe I pourtray...if my fortune had beene to have lived among those nations, which yet are said to live under the sweet liberty of Natures first and uncorrupted lawes,...I would most willingly have pourtrayed my selfe fully and naked. Thus gentle Reader my selfe am the groundworke of my booke: It is then no reason thou shouldest employ thy time about so frivolous and vaine a Subject. (2)

This, taken together with his famous viewpoint, *Que scais-je?*, (What do I know?), inscribed on a medal, with *Je m'abstiens*, (I abstain)[3] on the reverse, seems to suggest a withdrawal from the world; yet Montaigne's topics range widely over the common interests of men, and his characteristic address is as much in the plural as in the singular of the first-person, while the second- and third-persons are also constantly used. He consistently considers all views. Surely then, an alternative to reading the passage as an egotistical withdrawal is that this concern with the self is meant to be a deferential gesture arising out of the common being of the one and the many, an impulse to stand aside and withhold judgement because he recognises the universal inheritance of human qualities, and is thus reluctant to criticise. An inclusive self, perhaps, is suggested: he is included in the human race and therefore unable to comment objectively on it, yet because of his inclusion, able to represent it as an object of analysis.

This reading is, I think, implicit in the Preface cited above, which rejects the interest of the reader and also self-promotion,

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1. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Collected Essays*, p.123.

2. Montaigne, *Essays*, translated by John Florio. Everyman's Library, vol.1, p.15.

3. This can be variably translated, the senses 'stand aside' and 'aloof' being given by Harrap's *New Shorter French and English Dictionary*, London, 1940. The expression, 'Dans le doute abstiens-toi' (when in doubt, don't) is relevant.

suggesting only a possible value as a record of himself for the 'commodity' - in Elizabethan usage, 'convenience' or 'advantage' - of his relatives and friends. These being necessarily of the same kind as other readers, Montaigne seems both to deny and assert a value for this record: it is a record of a man who is simply one of the many, and the many or the few can regard or disregard its value. In denying his desire to seek the world's favour, the pointed contrast between 'I would surely have adorned my selfe more quaintly', and 'I would most willingly have pourtrayed my selfe fully and naked', suggests the intended range of possibilities among mankind - from the civilised and sophisticated to the primal and 'uncorrupted'; he chooses to show his ordinary self, and would have done so, whatever condition he had been born to. He is one *of* the many and therefore representative. His self includes all selves. As a critic of man he speaks inclusively; self-knowledge becomes knowledge of the human condition.

Thus it is that he can include religion and Stoicism and Scepticism. As Merleau-Ponty says, 'It would be useless to pretend that he excludes any of these "positions", or that he ever makes anyone of them *his own*'.[1] Montaigne (and Shakespeare) inhabited the pre-Cartesian world in which 'I am' was not yet a consequence of 'I think', a world of paradoxical existence in which the self was both included and excluded by the phenomena of experience. Montaigne 'never tired of experiencing the paradox of a *conscious being*. At each instant, in love, in political life, in perception's silent life, we adhere to something, make it our own, and yet withdraw from it and hold it at a distance'.[2] His consciousness is 'tied down at the same time it is free, and in one sole ambiguous act it opens to external objects and experiences itself as alien to them. Montaigne does not know that resting place, that self-possession, which Cartesian understanding is to be...For Montaigne...we are interested in a world we do not have the key to. We are equally incapable of dwelling in ourselves and in things, and are referred from them to ourselves and from ourselves to them'.[3]

This process of reciprocal reference, of essential uncertainty about the self, has been analysed in some detail by Robert

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1. Op. cit., p.123.
2. Ibid., p.124.
3. Ibid., p.124.

Ellrodt[1] as the development from Platonic objectivity, the pragmatic view of self-knowledge as knowing what you are capable of, through the Christian view of 'know thy sins', to the Renaissance realisation of the elusiveness of identity, the self's diversity and propensity for change, witnessed by the age's common awareness of contradiction and inconstancy in human affairs. He further sees Elizabethan drama, especially Shakespeare's, as evidence of this development, especially in the way that 'characters move from sheer self-assertion or self-dramatization' - in Greene, and Marlowe, and early Shakespeare - 'to subtler forms of self-consciousness...genuine soliloquy, an image of the living mind'.[2] While a degree of self-analysis is evident in earlier plays - Gloucester in *Richard III*, Berowne in *Love's Labours Lost*, the Bastard in *King John* - and Brutus is introspective (but finally objective), it is in *Hamlet* that we first 'enter the stream of consciousness'[3] to any great extent. When we reach this play, 'the thought moves from the feeling to the cause or object of feeling'[4] a cognitive movement characteristic of self-analysis and typical of Montaigne. And as with Montaigne, there is no resolution to the questioning, only a constant quest. This is put well by Ellrodt: 'Hamlet's brooding introspection does not achieve, but defeats, self-knowledge. Like Montaigne he is uncertain about his own motives'.[5]

This introspective concern is indeed a distinct development in *Hamlet*, which has to be distinguished from the recurrent earlier concern to unmask folly. The truth-seeking or bubble-popping function of a Berowne, a Beatrice, or a Touchstone, is not at all the same sort of thing as the anguished wrestling with motive that we see in Hamlet; and the difference lies essentially in a shift from perceptive criticism of an external kind, largely exclusive of the self, to a more universally inclusive criticism in which the self also suffers. In Montaigne this position is, as suggested above of the Preface, constantly expressed; perhaps most directly at the end of the essay 'Of Vanitie'[6]:

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1. Op. cit., p.42ff.

2. Ibid., p.45.

3. Ibid., p.47, citing H. Levin.

4. Ibid., p.47.

5. Ibid., p.47.

6. BkIII, ch.IX; the last four sentences cited by Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., p.124.

> This common opinion and vulgar custome, to looke and marke elsewhere then on our selves, hath well provided for our affaires...To th' end we should not wholly be discomforted, Nature hath very fitly cast the action of our sight outward: *Wee goe forward according to the streame, but to turne our course backe to our selves, is a painefull motion*: the sea likewise is troubled, raging and disquieted, when't is turned and driven into it selfe(1)...It was a paradoxall commandement, which the God of Delphos laid heeretofoore upon us; saying: *View your selves within; know your selves; and keepe to your selves*: Your mind and your will, which elsewhere is consumed, bring it unto it selfe again: you scatter, you stragle, you stray, and you distract your selves: call your selves home again; rowze and uphold your selves: you are betrayed, you are spoiled and dissipated; your selves are stolen and taken from your selves. Seest thou not how all this universe holdeth all his sights compelled inward, and his eyes open to contemplate it selfe? Both inward and outward it is ever vanitie for thee; but so much lesse vanitie, by how much lesse it is extended. Except thyself, Oh man, (said that God) every thing doth first seeke and study it selfe, and according to it's neede hath limits to her travells, and bounds to her desires. There's not one so shallow, so empty, and so needy as *thou* art *who embracest the whole world*(2): Thou art the Scrutator without knowledge, the magistrate without jurisdiction: and when all is done, the vice of the play.

This passage seems to confirm what I said of Montaigne's Preface,[3] and if we accept that Shakespeare had at least some knowledge of the *Essays*, it may help us to understand the simultaneous existence in Hamlet of the desire to expose fault and the hesitancy to act against it. Realisation of the self's inclusion in all human qualities breeds a reluctance to judge, an awareness of being the 'magistrate without jurisdiction'. Of all characters, none is so aware as Hamlet is of being this.

He is a man caught on the horns of the dilemma Merleau-Ponty calls 'the paradox of a conscious being',[4] for the conjunction of being and consciousness is at the very heart of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy. Being, existing, living with consciousness, not only of evil but of the coextension of evil, the unavoidable coexistence with evil, the realisation that one's being is part of the universal being and therefore a sharer in

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1. A possible source for Hamlet's 'sea of troubles'?
2. My emphasis.
3. Cf. pp.62-3 above.
4. Op. cit., p.124, Cf. p.63 above.

evil,[1] is a burden that is debilitating, and Hamlet becomes less able to act the more conscious he becomes of the implications of his task. Ellrodt comments, 'self-consciousness so exercised is apt to dissolve character and motive',[2] and perhaps this will serve to explain why *Hamlet* is felt to be distinct from the other great tragedies - Schlegel called it a 'tragedy of thought', Boas placed it amongst the 'problem' plays, and even Bradley, grouping it with *Julius Caesar*, found 'an obvious difference' between them and the others, Brutus and Hamlet being 'intellectual by nature and reflective by habit'.[3] *Hamlet*, together with *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*, is 'more consonant with the spirit of Montaigne'[4] than are the later tragedies, where the question of being does not so directly lead to a problem of identity: 'The full tragic response calls for a heightened consciousness of identity - evident in Lear, Othello, or Macbeth - not for the kind of self-consciousness that may dissolve identity'.[5]

This process of self-analysis is the basic feature of Montaigne which makes us think also of Shakespeare, but it is not the only one. It directs us mainly to Hamlet, with Brutus, Angelo, and Troilus also nudging our attention. When great minds confront the world at roughly the same time, it seems likely that any affinity between them will show itself in more ways than one; and reading Montaigne, one is frequently reminded of Shakespeare - as the reverse case, the 200 years of Capellian scholarship in Shakespeare studies, more than amply demonstrates. I would not go as far as Chasles, who remarked: 'once on the track of the studies and tastes of Shakespeare, we find Montaigne at every corner',[6] but I do feel a sense of affinity, a sense of *déjà vu*, (coming to Montaigne after long reading of Shakespeare), in such randomly chosen statements as this:

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1. Cf. Conrad's tale, *The Secret Sharer*, which seems to involve a view something like this.
2. Op. cit., p.48.
3. *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p.63.
4. Ellrodt, op. cit., p.49.
5. Ibid., p.49.
6. *Journal des Dêbats*, Nov. 7, 1846, cited by Robertson.

> The Emperour perceiving the quaintnesse of their device, tooke so great pleasure at it, that hee wept for joy, and forthwith converted that former inexorable rage, and mortall hatred he bare the Duke, into so milde a relenting and gentle kindnesse, that thence forward he entreated both him and his with all favour and courtesie. Either of these wayes might easily persuade mee: for I am much inclined to mercie, and affected to mildnesse. So it is, that in mine opinion, I should more naturally stoope unto compassion, than bend to estimation.
>
> (I.I.p.18)

Or this:

> Surely man is a wonderfull, vaine, divers, and wavering subject: it is very hard to ground any directly-constant and uniforme judgement upon him.
>
> (I.I.p.19)

Or this:

> Feare, desire, and hope, draw us ever towards that which is to come...*A minde in suspense what is to come, is in a pittifull case.*
>
> (I.III.p.25)

Or this:

> There is no starting-hole will hide us from her (death), she will finde us wheresoever we are.
>
> (I.XIX.p.75)

Or this:

> We are all framed of flaps and patches and of so shapelesse and diverse a contexture, that every peece and every moment playeth his part.
>
> (II.I.p.14)

Or, to cut short an otherwise endless list of usable quotations, these verbal likenesses, all from the essay, *An Apologie of Raymond Sebond*:

> to see this coile and hurly-burly of so many Philosophical wits;
>
> (II.XII.p.220)
>
> to show how farre they had waded in seeking out the truth;
> (II.XII.p.209)
>
> because nothing is made of nothing; (II.XII.p.229)
>
> as the soules of the Gods, sanse tongues, sanse eyes, and sanse eares;
>
> (II.XII.p.236)
>
> as children will be afeard of their fellowes visage, which themselves have besmeared and blackt.
>
> (II.XII.p.236)

Clearly, there is more than self-analysis linking Montaigne and Shakespeare: there is a likeness of thought and expression about the world, and about man's qualities and actions. Now, as already conceded, some of this likeness can probably be attributed to a common reading

of writers such as Seneca, Catullus, and Ovid, (probably in English translation on Shakespeare's side);[1] and some, no doubt, are simply current views, to be found in the commonplace books and proverbial sayings of the age. But, as Robertson has pointed out, Montaigne's essays represent perhaps the most incisive crystallisation of the thought of the time - 'it is the living quintessence of all Latin criticism of life'.[2] That is to say, that the essential views of European thought at the Renaissance are to be seen at their most vital in Montaigne. It strikes me that a great affinity between Montaigne and Shakespeare should be apparent in this vitality: in both writers we have the capacity for quintessential grasp and expression of the currents of the world they knew, and consequently, the connection we should expect is of the kind Robertson describes as 'kindling by contact',[3] Shakespeare being a 'co-thinker' whose own vitality of expression may adopt (or adapt) some part of Montaigne (in Florio's English), but which then bursts into its own life, leaving us glimpses of the essayist's terminology, but a distinct sense of being able to explain one in terms of the other. This is quite accepted now as orthodoxy in his other debts, to Holinshed, to Plutarch, to Cinthio; perhaps Montaigne can be seen in this light too, and some degree of confirmation of influence be derived [4] by analysing some of these moments of coincident vitality and intermingling of thought.

In an essay on 'Custom', of which the burden is that 'use brings the sight of our judgement asleepe' , and the contingent view that what is customary seems to us natural law, Montaigne writes the following passage:

> Those which attempt to shake an Estate, are commonly the first overthrowne by the fall of it: he that is first mover of the same, reapeth not alwayes the fruit of such troubles; he beats and troubleth the water for others to

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1. The question of Shakespeare's classical reading, since Farmer's essay of 1767, seems to have settled into this probability. G.K. Hunter recently suggests, however, that his "small Latin" 'included an ability to get sense out of works not translated' - v. Muir and Schoenbaum, *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, p.57.

2. Op. cit., p.166.

3. Op. cit., p.65. This is very much in the same vein as G.K. Hunter's view of Shakespeare's classicism, 'best regarded in...terms of creative affinity', Hunter, op. cit., p.58.

4. Cf. Hunter's statement, 'the classical author is still an influence... but his power is derived from his capacity to release Shakespeare's own faculties', Ibid., p.58.

> fish in. The contexture and combining of this monarchie, and great building, having bin dismist and disolved by it, namely in her old yeares, giveth as much overture and entrance as a man will to like injuries. Royall Majestie doth more hardly fall from the top to the middle, than it tumbleth downe from the middle to the bottom.
> (I.XXII.p.119)

This has been related to Rosencrantz's words:

> The cease of majesty
> Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
> What's near it with it. It is a massy wheel,
> Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
> To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
> Are mortis'd and adjoin'd; which when it falls,
> Each small annexment, petty consequence,
> Attends the boist'rous ruin. Never alone
> Did the king sigh, but with a general groan.[1]
> (III.iii.15)

Now the energy of the Montaigne passage, like that of the Shakespeare passage, has something to do with the metaphoric expression it uses: the initial image, shaking down fruit from a tree, conveys the necessary sense of danger to the shaker, who does not reap the fruit but is hurt by the fall; his function is further expressed by the parallel image of the fishermen's friend who chases the fish into their nets by disturbing the water, again with the sense of nothing being personally gained. This point metaphorically established, Montaigne turns back to the 'Estate', which he now pictures as a construction, an old building that collapses. This is forceful, but it is not at all like the imagery of Shakespeare's passage, which depends on the downward path of a wheel - clearly akin to Fortune's wheel - which carries all with it to destruction. Metaphoric strength, then, cannot be the main basis for comparison. Yet the passages are alike with a consonant energy of thought. I suggest that, in the Montaigne passage, greater liveliness arises from the way it impinges on the argument of the essay than from its metaphoric energy: the liveliness of complex thought, the complexity arising from a dialectical construction.

In spite of the evident conservatism of the focal passage, Montaigne is arguing *against* the tyranny of custom:

> But the chiefest effect of her power is to seize upon us, and so entangle us, that it shall hardly lie in us, to free our selves from her hold-fast, and come into our wits againe, to discourse and reason of her ordinances; verily, because wee sucke them with the milke of our

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1. My parallels are culled from Robertson, op. cit., compared with and brought up to date by Ellrodt, op. cit.

> birth, and forasmuch as the worlds visage presents it selfe in that estate unto our first view, it seemeth we are borne with a condition to follow that course. And the common imaginations we finde in credit about us, and by our fathers seed infused in our soule, seeme to be the generall and naturall. Whereupon it followeth, that whatsoever is beyond the compasse of custome, wee deeme likewise to bee beyond the compasse of reason; God knowes how for the most part, unreasonably.
>
> (I.XXII.p.114)

However, the argument begins to shift ground: the attempt to justify views as inherently right, rather than right simply on the grounds of custom, is difficult:

> Certes, chastitie is an excellent vertue, the commoditie whereof is very well knowne: but to use it, and according to nature to prevaile with it, is as hard as it is easie, to endeare it and to prevaile with it according to custome, to lawes and precepts. The first and universall reasons are of a hard perscrutation.
>
> (I.XXII.p.116)

In these circumstances, most 'cast themselves headlong into the... sanctuarie of custome'. Montaigne's position at this stage is still clear:

> Hee that will free himselfe from this violent prejudice of custome, shall find divers things received with an undoubted resolution, that have no other anker but the hoarie head and frowning wrimples of custome, which ever attends them: which maske being pulled off, and referring all matters to truth and reason, he shall perceive his judgement, as it were overturned, and placed in a much surer state.
>
> (I.XXII.p.116)

He goes so far as to 'commend fortune' that it was a countryman of his who 'first opposed himselfe against Charles the great, at what time he went about to establish the Latine and Imperiall lawes amongst us', which gave rise to a 'barbarous' and corrupt situation in which 'justice is lawfully denied him, that hath not wherewithall to pay for it'. We expect him to be consistent and be glad of those who 'attempt to shake (such) an Estate'; but what follows this argument is a new concern which leads to a compromise:

> These considerations do neverthelesse never distract a man of understanding from following the common guise. Rather on the contrary, me seemeth, that all severall, strange, and particular fashions proceed rather of follie, or ambitious affectation, than of true reason: and that a wise man ought inwardly to retire his minde from the common presse, and hold the same liberty and power to judge freely of all things, but for outward matters, he ought absolutely to follow the fashions and forme

> customarily received. Publike societie hath nought to do with our thoughts; but for other things, as our actions, our travel, our fortune, and our life, that must be accommodated and left to it's service and common opinions: as that good and great Socrates, who refused to save his life by disobeying the magistrate, yea a magistrate most wicked and unjust. For that is the rule of rules, and generall law of lawes, for every man to observe those of the place wherein he liveth.
>
> (I.XXII.pp.117-8)

This distinction between inward judgement and outward action seems to me to be the crucial factor in the argument, and perhaps a reason why Shakespeare might have adapted the focal passage for his own use in *Hamlet*. Montaigne goes on immediately to posit the dangers involved in allowing action to follow judgement without hesitation:

> There riseth a great doubt, whether any so evident profit may be found in the change of a received law, of what nature soever, as there is hurt in removing the same; forsomuch as a well settled policie may be compared to a frame or building of divers parts joyned together with such a ligament as it is impossible to stirre or displace one, but the whole body must needs be shaken, and shew a feeling of it. The Thurians Law-giver instituted that, whosoever would go about, either to abolish any one of the old Lawes, or attempt to establish a new, should present himself before the people with a roape about his necke, to the end, that if his invention were not approved of all men, he should presently bee strangled.
>
> (I.XXII.p.118)

The change in direction brings about a tension of indecision; if we read further, we find both praise and blame for the shaker of an estate:

> If there be any degree of honour, even in ill doing, these (who follow him) are indebted to others for the glory of the invention, and courage of the first attempt.
>
> (I.XXII.p.119)
>
> Yet me seemeth...that it argueth a great selfe-love and presumption, for a man to esteeme his opinions so far, that for to establish them, a man must be faine to subvert a publike peace, and introduce so many inevitable mischiefes, and so horrible a corruption of manners, as civill warres, and alterations of a state bring with them.
>
> (I.XXII.pp.119-20)

The issue is finally scrutinised in this way:

> There is much difference betweene the cause of him that followeth the formes and lawes of his countrie, and him that undertaketh to governe and change them. The first alleageth for his excuse, simplicitie, obedience, and example; whatsoever he doth cannot be malice, at the most it is but ill lucke.
>
> (I.XXII.p.120)

This person is subject to the original criticism of the essay, that to follow custom is to close the eyes to judgement. However, 'the other is in much worse case':

> for he that medleth with chusing and changing, usurpeth the authoritie of judging: and must resolve himselfe to see the fault of what he hunteth for, and the good of what he bringeth in.
>
> (I.XXII.p.121)

This usurpation of judgement flows from an arrogance that assumes the right to emulate divine judgement:

> If at any time divine providence hath gone beyond the rules, to which it hath necessary constrained us, it is not to give us a dispensation from them. They are blowes of her divine hand, which we ought not imitate, but admire: as extraordinarie examples, markes of an expresse and particular avowing of the severall kinds of wonders, which for a testimonie of her omnipotencie it offereth us, beyond our orders and forces, which it is follie and impietie to goe about to represent, and which we ought not follow but contemplate with admiration, and meditate with astonishment.
>
> (I.XXII.p.121)

Thus we have an argument that shows the folly, equally of bowing to custom and of attempting to change it. The passage suggested as having influenced Shakespeare, taken out of context, has a general sense of conservative caution about it, and a broadly similar point is made by it and by Rosencrantz. On a figurative level, the resemblance is limited to the picture of a fall or collapse. Nevertheless, the intuition of the original comparison may be well-founded in the light of the present analysis. For Shakespeare does not simply follow an apparent conservatism in Montaigne here, as one's preconceptions about his distaste for civil disorder might suggest; taken in its context, as part of the reasoning why the essayist cannot come to the logical conclusion of his original observations on custom, we have a more thoroughgoing parallel with *Hamlet* which, at this point, presents a similar view as a result of similar reasoning.

The immediate context of the Shakespeare passage, in terms of the play's action, is the play-scene which has precipitated the king's sense of physical danger. Before this he has given hints that he realises Hamlet judges him inwardly; welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he makes the Montaignean distinction between inward and outward man:

> Something have you heard
> Of Hamlet's transformation; so I call it,

> Sith nor th'exterior nor the inward man
> Resembles that it was.
>
> (II.ii.4)

Later, he speaks of Hamlet's 'turbulent and dangerous lunacy', and after his eavesdropping on the exchange between Hamlet and Ophelia, he is convinced that there is indeed a danger that proceeds from within:

> There's something in his soul
> O'er which his melancholy sits on brood;
> And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
> Will be some danger.
>
> (III.i.164)

Claudius is speaking to Polonius, and cannot openly state that he links this 'something in his soul' with his own 'heavy burden', but this inplication is inescapable in the realisation of personal danger resulting from the hatching of what Hamlet broods over. He is aware of being inwardly judged by Hamlet, and now, to avoid this judgement turning into outward action, he takes the obvious precaution of removing Hamlet from the country. The intention of doing this is revealed almost immediately before the play-scene; after it, his anxiety is very obvious, both in the report of Guildenstern to Hamlet that he is 'marvellous distempered', and in his abrupt decision to send Hamlet to England at once. His sense of personal danger is now stated openly:

> I like him not; nor stands it safe with us
> to let his madness range...
>
> The terms of our estate may not endure
> Hazard so near's as doth hourly grow
> Out of his brows.
>
> (III.iii.1)

The threat is in fact quite open, as Dover Wilson points out in his notes to the play: Hamlet has arranged two meanings for the play, 'one for the king (and Horatio), the other for the rest...who see a king being murdered by his nephew. In other words, Hamlet prepares the Court for the assassination of Claudius which was intended to follow'.[1] Thus, without destroying the distinction between inward judgement and outward action - the king's secret is still intact, between him and Hamlet and Horatio - Shakespeare contrives to make the outward action of Hamlet appear to all the court a real danger, not only to the king, but also to all who depend on him. Putting the focal speech in Rosencrantz's mouth adds the dimension of representative conservative interest to the formality it derives from the conventionality of the image.

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1. J. Dover Wilson, *Hamlet*, The New Shakespeare, pp.203-4.

In terms of Montaigne's essay then, the situation at this point in *Hamlet* is that Hamlet is clearly seen to intend to shake the estate - Claudius uses this very word - showing thus an apparent change from his former inwardness of judgement and hesitancy over action, to a determination to act at once against the king. But for Shakespeare, as for Montaigne, moral judgement, the condemnation of corruption, was one thing, direct physical revolt was another; and thus the play dramatises what the essay argues, the necessary course of folly that attends on the attempt to change the state by usurping the divine right of punishment, of assuming the right to deliver the 'blowes of her divine hand, which we ought not to imitate, but admire'. The action that follows is patently a chapter of accidents, from the mistaken killing of Polonius, Laertes' inappropriate revolt, and Hamlet's accidental escape from his fate at sea, to the confusion of the swordplay which finally achieves the execution of justice on Claudius. Hamlet becomes, (as Johnson long ago told us and as Goethe intimated), an instrument in the hands of Providence, as he acknowledges in the words already cited as a possible echo of Montaigne:

> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well,
> When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will.
>
> (V.ii.8)

And perhaps also in 'the readiness is all'. In its construction, the play shows the same tendency of thought as we find in Montaigne's essay, and the same vitality which springs from the complexity of qualified argument rather than the following of a simple linear path of morality.

There is perhaps a confirmation of this analysis to be found in the comparison between Claudius's words,

> There's such a divinity doth hedge a king
> That treason can but peep to what it would,
> Acts little of his will;
>
> (IV.v.120)

and this passage from Montaigne's essay 'Of the Incommoditie of Greatnesse':

> To be a King, is a matter of that consequence, that onely by it he is so. That strange glimmering and eye-dazeling light, which round about environeth, overcasteth and hideth from us: our weake sight is thereby bleared and dissipated, as being filled and obscured by that greater and further-spredding brightnesse.
>
> (III.VII.p.155)

Claudius is pacifying Gertrude in the face of Laertes' rebellion, confident that Hamlet's threat has been removed and thus no longer afraid

of the personal danger previously seen, largely because he is here indeed free of guilt, and therefore confident of the conventional heavenly protection of his office. Montaigne's context is the satisfaction he has in accepting the status of being inferior:

> I am enured to a meane calling; mediocrity best fitteth me, as well by my fortune, as by mine owne humour.
>
> (III.VII.p.152)

This rather flat, possibly grudging, statement is sparked by the humour of insight:

> Since we cannot attaine unto it, let us revenge ourselves with railing against it.
>
> (III.VII.p.151)

Hence, his critique of greatness is seen to be genuine, and not motivated by frustration. Coming nearer to the point, he expresses sympathy for the great:

> The sharpest and most dificile profession of the world, is ...worthily to act and play the King. I excuse more of their faults, then commonly other men doe: and that in consideration of the downe-bearing waight of their immense charge, which much astonisheth me: It is a very hard task to keep a due measure, in so unmeasurable a power.
>
> (III.VII.p.153)

The main disadvantage is that greatness removes the king from full participation in life, especially the competitive aspect, contests of honour in 'the exercise of the body or minde':

> What share have Princes in the throng, where all are for them?
>
> (III.VII.p.154)

and

> This quality suppresseth and consumeth all other true and essential qualities: they are even drowned in the Royalty.
>
> (III.VII.p.155)

Yet, once again Montaigne has a twist in his argument that might well have appealed to Shakespeare; the disadvantage of greatness seems to be outweighed by the power that demands flattery, indulgence, and even enforced respect such as the three examples that end the essay suggest:

> Adrian the Emperor debating with Favorinus the Philosopher about the interpretation of some word; Favorinus did soone yeeld the victory to him, his friends finding fault with him for it; you but jest, my masters (quoth he) would you not have him to be much wiser then I, who hath the absolute command over thirty legions? Augustus writ some verses against Asinius Pollio, which Pollio hearing,

> he said, I will hould my peace; for, it is no wisdome to contend in writing with him, who may proscribe. And they had reason: For Dionysius, because he could not equall Philoxenus in Poesie, nor match Plato in discourse, condemned the one to the stone-quarries, and sent the other to bee sold as a slave in the Ile of Aegina.
> (III.VII.p.156)

This surely suggests a position of some smugness, a security which enables him to bewail with impunity the disadvantages of greatness, which is not so very far from Claudius's mood of confidence.

Hamlet's agonised soliloquy provoked by the sight of Fortinbras's army going to do battle over 'a little patch of ground/That hath in it no profit but the name', has recalled several passages in Montaigne. Hamlet reasons as follows:

> Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
> Will not debate the question of this straw.
> This is th' imposthume of much wealth and peace,
> That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
> Why the man dies...
>
> How all occasions do inform against me,
> And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more!
> Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and godlike reason
> To fust in us unus'd. Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on th' event -
> A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward - I do not know
> Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do',
> Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
> To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me:
> Witness this army, of such mass and charge,
> Led by a delicate and tender prince,
> Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd,
> Makes mouths at the invisible event,
> Exposing what is mortal and unsure
> To all that fortune, death, and danger, dare,
> Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw,
> When honour's at the stake. How stand I, then,
> That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
> Excitements of my reason and my blood,
> And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
> The imminent death of twenty thousand men
> That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
> Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
> Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
> Which is not tomb enough and continent
> To hide the slain?
>
> (IV.iv.25)

Montaigne's most famous essay, 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond', is the context of one kindred passage:

> This horror-causing array of so many thousands of armed men, so great furie, earnest fervor, and undaunted courage, it would make one laugh to see by how many vaine occasions it is raised and set on fire, and by what light meanes it is againe suppressed and extinct.
> (II.XII.p.168)

The essay as a whole is Montaigne's basic statement of the Sceptical position, and the argument is long and complex. This passage comes near the beginning and forms part of his attack on the limitation of man's alleged superiority over the animals. They seem to have better sense than man does in the matter of war:

> As for warre, which is the greatest and most glorious of all humane actions, I would faine know, if we will use it for an argument of some prerogative, or otherwise for a testimonie of our imbecilitie and imperfection, as in truth, the science we use to defeat and kill one another, to spoile and utterly overthrow our owne kinde, it seemeth, it hath not much to make it selfe to be wished for in beasts, that have it not.
> (II.XII.pp.167-8)

While Hamlet is trying to admire the purposefulness of Fortinbras's army, to whip himself up to equally grim determination - 'O, from this time forth,/My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth' - what is surely more striking about his soliloquy, is the sense of fascinated horror at the sheer disproportion of the enterprise. It is an example 'gross as earth', which shows him 'the imminent death of twenty thousand men', for 'a fantasy and trick of fame'; the 'plot' for which they fight 'is not tomb enough...To hide the slain'. This is surely quite consonant with Montaigne's view, especially if we consider the examples he gives of the 'vaine occasions' that call men to arms:

> The hatred of one man, a spight, a pleasure, a familiar suspect, or a jealousie; causes, which ought not to move two scolding fish-wives to scratch one another, is the soule and motive of all this hurly-burly.
> (II.XII.p.169)

In both passages, amazement and horror at the enormous disproportion between cause and effect is at the root of the writer's expression, and each is expressed with its own commanding vitality adapted to its own purpose; nevertheless, the sense of affinity between them is strong enough to suggest at least an acquaintance with the Montaigne essay.

The brief essay, 'Of Bad Meanes Emploied to a Good End',

provides this second passage for comparison:

> Which I should deeme very strange and incredible; if we were not dayly accustomed to see in our wars many thousands of forraigne nations, for a very small some of mony to engage both their blood and life in quarrels wherein they are nothing interessed.
>
> (II.XXIII.p.412)

Here, the attitude is the same as before, an amazement at the extremity of human violence, the frequent occurrence of which accustoms him to what otherwise would seem 'strange and incredible'. What he might have found so incredible was the Roman game of gladiatorial battle, and other forms of submission to slaughter:

> The first Romans disposed thus of their criminals;
> But afterwards they did so with their innocent servants;
> yea, of their free men, which were sold to that purpose:
> yea of Senators; and Roman Knights, and women also.
>
> (II.XXIII.p.411)

Another context, that of the need to keep a little aloof from the common course of events, of being 'not wedded unto many things, and... not passionate of them', is provided by the essay, 'How One Ought to Governe His Will'. The call of public duty has to be answered - Montaigne cites his mayorship of Bourdeaux - since 'most of the worlds-rules and precepts hold this traine, to drive us out of our selves into the wide world, to the use of publike society', but it is wrong to neglect one's own interests:

> Who forsaketh to live healthy and merrily himself, therewith to serve another, in mine opinion taketh a bad and unnaturall course.
>
> (III.X.p.257)

One must, of course, undertake actions in life:

> I will not, that in any charge one shall take in hand,
> he refuse or thinke much of his attention,
> of his labour, of his steps, of his speech, of his sweat,
> and if need be of his blood.
>
> (III.X.pp.257-8)

But such selflessness of action is a by-product of emotional uninvolvement, an accident of the quiet mind, which 'must have it's motion with discretion. For the body receiveth the charges imposed him, justly as they are: But the spirit extendeth them, and often to his hinderance makes them heavy'. This seems to provide a *Hamlet*-like context for this suggestive passage:

> For, how many men doe dayly hazard themselves in warre which they regard not, and presse into the danger of the battels, the losse wherof shall no whit breake their next sleep? Whereas some man in his own house, free from

> this danger, which he durst not so much as have look't towards it, is for the wars issue more passionate, and therewith hath his minde more perplexed, than the souldier, that therin employeth both his blood and life.
>
> (III.X.p.258)[1]

If there is a link with Shakespeare here, it is again not simply in the direct usage of Montaigne's words, or even, in any exact way, of his thoughts; it is more a case of similar responses to similar contexts, reflecting perhaps an acquaintance with Montaignean thought and a partial recollection of details. Montaigne's basic view, which elicits this passage, is most clearly put immediately after it:

> This sharpnesse and violence of desires hindreth more, then steade the conduct of what we undertake, filling us with impatience to the events, either contrary or slow: and with bitternesse and jealousie toward those with whom we negotiate. Wee never governe that thing well, wherewith we are possessed and directed.
>
> (III.X.p.258)

Hamlet's protracted delay in acting out his 'dull revenge' does proceed from 'thinking too precisely' - of the 'event', with its implication of cowardice;[2] of justification; of how Claudius's 'audit stands' with heaven - although, as he says, he does not really know why 'this thing's to do' yet. He is, however, 'possessed and directed' by the ghost's command: all his thoughts and actions revolve around his projected action. In other words, he is passionately involved in his undertaking, and shows the effect Montaigne suggests such a man will show, more hindered than helped by his devotion, and unable to govern it well. Such a man will indeed be amazed and shamed by the example of men going about the same task with apparent (and real) unconcern. Again, a later passage makes a relevant point:

> Philosophie wills us to banish choller in the punishment of offences; not to the end revenge should be more moderate, but contrary, more weighty and surely set on: whereunto this violence seemeth to be a let. Choller doth not onely trouble, but wearieth the executioners armes. This passionate heat dulleth and consumes their force.
>
> (III.X.p.259)

The rather unlikely context of diverting people's attention from

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1. This passage has not, as far as I know, been suggested previously as a parallel.

2. A point not to be scorned; Hamlet frequently charges himself with simple cowardice.

their suffering is the occasion of the last comparison with this speech by Hamlet. The argument has to do with the combating of sorrow by diversion, the way in which men confronting death manage to accept it by focusing their attention on other things. Montaigne is led to the view that this is so because imagination is the great source of much of our suffering: 'they are...small and superficiall images that moove and touch us...(that are) the foundations of our mourning'.[1] In relation to experience of his own suffering, this essay, 'Of Diverting and Diversions', tells us, he

> considered by how slight causes and frivolous objects, imagination nourished in me the griefe to lose my life: with what Atomes the consequence and difficulty...was contrived in my minde: to what idle conceits and frivolous cogitations we give place in so waighty a case or important affaire.
>
> (III.IV.p.59)

In other words, bodily functions are dictated largely by mental factors. He cites the case of the orator who is moved by his own voice and 'fained agitations', and the practice of hiring mourners who 'make sale of their teares by measure, and of their sorrow by waight'. This already suggests Hamlet's observation of the players, and the impression of linked thought is confirmed by the rest of the example:

> For although they strive to act it in a borrowed forme, yet by habituating and ordering their countenance, it is certaine they are often wholly transported into it, and entertaine the impression of a true and unfained melancholly.
>
> (III.IV.p.60)

And again by this:

> Quintilian reporteth, to have seene Comedians so farre ingaged in a sorrowfull part, that they wept after being come to their lodgings: and of himselfe, that having undertaken to move a certaine passion in another: he had founde himselfe surprised not only with shedding of teares, but with a palenesse of countenance, and behaviour of a man truly dejected with griefe.
>
> (III.IV.p.60)

Thus the disinterested soldier fights passionately, affected by his imagination's entrance into the heat of the battle:

> If one demand that fellow, what interest he hath in such a siege; The interest of example (will he say) and common obedience of the Prince; I nor looke, nor pretend any benefit thereby; and of glory I know how small a portion commeth to the share of a private man, such as I am. I

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1. This is consonant with more than Fortinbras's speech: the player's ability to shed tears for Hecuba is another instance.

> have neither passion nor quarrell in the matter; yet the next day shall you see him all changed, and chafing, boiling and blushing with rage, in his ranke of battaile, ready for the assault. It is the glaring reflecting of so much steele, the flashing thundering of the Canon, the clang of trumpets, and the ratling of Drummes, that have infused this new fury, and rankor in his swelling vaines. A frivolous cause, will you say. How a cause? There needeth none to excite our minde. A doating humour without body, without substance overswayeth and tosseth it up and downe.
>
> (III.IV.pp.60-1)

This is practically at the other extreme of what we saw in the argument of 'How One Ought to Governe His Will', where passionate involvement prevents one from acting properly; here, imaginative involvement brings about action, or perhaps more accurately, necessary participation in action arouses imaginative involvement. These are not merely contradictory views, the second being a corollary of the first, and a possible explanation of the admiration Hamlet shows for the 'tender Prince/Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd/Makes mouths at the invisible event'.[1] At least Shakespeare seems able to work material from apparently opposed arguments into a coherent dramatic whole.

The last of the comparisons between *Hamlet* and the *Essays* concerns the prince's apparent disillusionment with the world:

> indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire - why, it appeareth no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me...(2)
>
> (II.ii.295)

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1. This detail might possibly owe something to an earlier passage in this essay: 'To divert of late a young prince from it (revenge), I told him not, he was to offer the one side of his cheeke, to him, who had strooke him on the other, in regard of charity; nor displaid I unto him the tragicall events Poesie bestoweth upon that passion. There I left him, and strove to make him taste the beautie of a contrary image: the honour, the favour and the good-will he should acquire by gentlenesse and goodnesse: I diverted him to ambition'.
   (III.IV.p.56)

2. Dover Wilson's use of the Q2 punctuation makes this passage less declamatory and is perhaps a preferable reading, but does not sufficiently change the sense to affect the comparison made here.

This takes us back to 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond', which yields the following similar passage:

> Let us now but consider man alone without other help, armed but with his owne weapons, and unprovided of the grace and knowledge of God, which is all his honour, all his strength, and all the ground of his being. Let us see what hold-fast, or freehold he hath in this gorgeous, and goodly equipage. Let him with the utmost power of his discourse make me understand, upon what foundation, he hath built those great advantages and ods, he supposeth to have over other creatures. Who hath perswaded him, that this admirable moving of heavens vaults; that the eternal light of these lampes so fiercely rowling over his head; that the horror-moving and continuall motion of this infinite vaste Ocean, were established, and continue so many ages for his commoditie and service? Is it possible to imagine any thing so ridiculous, as this miserable and wretched creature, which is not so much as master of himselfe, exposed and subject to offences of all things, and yet dareth call himselfe Master and Emperour of this Universe?
> (II.XII.p.139)

Hamlet considers here two aspects of experience: the physical universe, and man. Of the first he concludes that both earth and sky are sterile and foul. About man he is actually inconclusive, but expresses scorn. In both cases he argues inconsequentially, from the obviously good attributes of the earth and heavens and man, to his distaste for them notwithstanding. Montaigne also considers man and the heavens, but of the physical world he remains admiring, reserving his scorn for man. In contrast to Hamlet, he has nothing good to say about man. At first glance then, the parallel seems to offer little more than a general contiguity of subject and phrase; but let us take a closer look.

The context for Hamlet's words grows out of his sense, at the end of the first Act, of a need for caution - which includes the possibility of having to feign madness - in the mission he has of setting the time right. The first we see of him after this decision is 'reading on a book', and verbally taunting Polonius by citing, (or pretending to cite), insults about old men like Polonius - an action surely intended to suggest the strangeness of disposition he has spoken of. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, he exchanges banter with them, tries a direct approach to find out why they have been summoned by Claudius, sees they are prepared to lie, and extracts an admission of the fact. This is the immediate and very concrete matter leading up to the abstract generalisation of the focal speech. It is followed immediately by the equally concrete discussion of the visiting players, and Hamlet's evident pleasure in the prospect. This context, a kind of frame or

setting for the speech, surely suggests that the speech, in its abstractness, is not simply true to Hamlet's feelings, but is also part of his pose as strangely disposed.[1] Its abstractness echoes the abstraction he displays to Polonius, which is emphasized by the framework of chaffing familiarity it is set in. In effect, he draws a portrait of himself and presents it as a gift to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to save them some trouble:

> I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation
> prevent your discovery, and your secrecy to the
> King and Queen moult no feather.
>
> (II.ii.292)

But this is surely double-edged, suggesting his assistance in their task, and also a move literally to 'prevent (their) discovery' of his real secret. The portrait is presented, and the frame closed around it at the end by means of an abrupt transition from the general to the particular of jokingly familiar bawdy:

> Man delights not me - no, nor woman neither, though
> by your smiling you seem to say so.
>
> (II.ii.308)

In fact, even the internal construction of the speech suggests that Hamlet is presenting a portrait, or more precisely, three portraits, all of which are valid: one of himself as having lost his mirth, given up customary practices, and being heavily disposed towards the world and man; one of the physical universe, with the earth as a 'goodly frame', and the heavens 'excellent', 'brave', and 'majestical'; and one of man, who is 'noble', 'express and admirable', the 'paragon of animals', and the 'quintessence of dust'. Surely the juxtaposition of these two admiring pictures with the disenchanted picture of himself, and the inconsequential nature of his conclusions, suggest that Hamlet intends a display of the strangely disposed man he has deliberately become?

If this is so, it implies that we don't know what Hamlet finally thinks of man - and this seems reasonably consistent with his bearing in the play, which ranges from the suggested disillusionment, to his real pleasure in the company of the players and his respect for Horatio, whom he wears 'In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart'. He shows in other words, both here and throughout the play, an

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1. The dialectical nature of the play's construction, discussed at length in chapter 6 below, allows the co-existence of such opposed possibilities.

inconclusiveness about the nature of man that would seem to contradict the likelihood of a link between these passages.[1]

However, let us consider the context of Montaigne's apparently implacable disillusion. The essay is essentially epistemological in its concerns, by one who accepts that knowledge is 'a most profitable and chiefe ornament', yet who does not 'value it at so excessive a rate as some have done'; whose house has 'ever stood open to men of understanding', but for whom the value of 'letters' is limited: 'I love them indeed, but yet I worship them not'. His love and greatness of learning are very clear from the essay as a whole - indeed, from the *Essays* as a whole - and seem hardly consistent with a thoroughgoing contempt for man. Yet man is clearly under attack, and it is characteristic of this paradoxical situation that the framework of the essay is 'an apologie' - a defence of a particular stance. This is a point we must not lose sight of, as is easily done in following the many sidetracks of Montaigne's argument. It is, in fact, an attack, in the true Sceptical tradition, on man's powers of reason and the assumptions he makes about these powers; epistemological, not an assertion of real disenchantment.

Sebond's book, *Theologica Naturalis*, attacked atheism on grounds of human reason:

> he undertaketh by humane and naturall reasons, to establish and verifie all the articles of Christian religion against Atheists.
>
> (II.XII.p.127)

To this, objection had been made on two grounds: that faith is the only proper ground for accepting the truth of Christianity; and that his arguments were too weak to prove the point. Now Montaigne goes on to write a long attack on human reason, ending in an affirmation of man's need of divine aid in transcending his limitation, thus largely conceding the first objection to Sebond's book. But it is, he says, an objection containing 'some zeale of pietie', and needs therefore 'mildnes and regard' in satisfying them that propose it. He attempts to satisfy them by qualifying Sebond's position, presenting it as man's need of divine help in grasping God's verity:

> I suppose that meanes meerely humane can no way be capable of it; which if they were, so many rare and excellent mindes, and so plenteously stored with

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1. The link lies rather in the complexity of dialectical thought which both writers display.

> naturall faculties, as have beene in times past, would never by their discourse, have mist the attayning of this knowledge.
>
> (II.XII.p.128)

Human faculties are best used in the service of God, and this implies mind as well as body:

> It is not enough for us to serve God in spirit and soule, we owe him besides, and we yeeld unto him a corporall worshipping; we applie our limbs, our motions, and all externall things, to honour him. The like ought to be done, and we should accompany our faith with all the reason we possesse.
>
> (II.XII.p.129)

Reason is thus to be added to faith, not replace it, as this added proviso more clearly indicates:

> Yet alwayes...that we thinke it doth not depend of us, and that all our strength and arguments can never attaine to so supernaturall and divine a knowledge.
>
> (II.XII.p.129)

Thus we have a qualified defence because Montaigne clearly believes in the weakness of human faculties, (as the bulk of the essay shows), which includes weakness of faith, and thus he partly agrees with the first objection to Sebond's position, but arrives at last at the view, 'Faith, giving as it were a tincture and lustre unto Sebond's arguments, make(s) them the more firme and solid', (p.136). His true zeal is aroused, however, by the second criticism. Some dispute the strength of Sebond's arguments and 'undertake to front him easily'. (p.137) Montaigne seems to take strong exception to this view:

> Such fellowes must somewhat more roughly be handled: for they are more dangerous, and more malicious than the first. Man doth willingly apply other mens sayings to the advantage of the opinions he hath fore-judged in himselfe. To an Atheist all writings make for Atheisme. He with his owne Venome infecteth the innocent matter.
>
> (II.XII.p.137)

One can feel in this a sense of anger at the arrogant atheist in particular, twisting arguments to suit his opinion; but it is initially in general terms, and from this we can deduce his sense of scorn for a universal tendency of the mind to take its powers as all-sufficient to establish whatever it fancies. This is seen in terms of a 'frenzy' that he wants to 'crush'; to

> trample this humane pride and fiercenesse under foot, to make them feele the emptinesse, vacuitie, and no worth of man: and violently to pull out of their hands, the silly weapons of their reason.
>
> (II.XII.p.137)

Here is the root of his antagonism to man in the essay: not absolutely a distaste for the species, but an anger at man's abuse of his powers, which leads to the question that is at once the pivotal point of the essay - the point at which he focuses both its particular and its general concerns, with Sebond and with epistemological truth - and the fundamental Sceptical question:

> Let us then see whether man hath any other stronger reasons in his power, then Sebondes, and whether it lie in him, by argument or discourse, to come to any certainty.
> (II.XII.p.138)

The almost universal assumption of the possibility of gaining knowledge through the powers of reason, or other human faculties - without divine aid - forces him to confront the human situation in terms of the nakedness that we see in the focal passage, which occurs at this point in the essay. It is the opening gambit in a long exposition of the fallibility of human faculties, including reason.

Montaigne's argument is anything but linear, tending constantly to be repetitive, with many overlapping points, and frequently anecdotal in the interests of illustration.[1] Nevertheless, it is possible to see a broad pattern and distinguish several stages in his demonstration of this fallibility. The first stage is concerned largely with man's anomalous position and inappropriate ambitions - his animal nature and inflated view of knowledge:

> Presumption is our naturall and originall infirmitie. Of all creatures man is the most miserable and fraile, and therewithall the proudest and disdainfullest.
> (II.XII.p.142)

Many examples are given of the parallels between man and the beasts, leading to this view:

> And what qualities of our corporall constitution... cannot fit and serve a thousand beasts? Such as most resemble man are the vilest and filthiest of all the rout: As for outward appearance and true shape of the visage, it is the Munkie or Ape:...as for inward or vitall parts, it is the Hog. Truely, when I consider man all naked (yea, be it in that sex, which seemeth to have and challenge the greatest share of eye-pleasing beautie) and view his defects, his naturall subjection, and manifold imperfections; I finde we have had much more reason to hide and cover our nakedness than any creature else.
> (II.XII.p.181)

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1. Cf. p.159, Montaigne's parenthetic remark: 'as for any order or method, I know very well I doe but confound it, which I observe no more in ranging these examples than I doe in all the rest of my businesse'.

Far from having received a proudly superior facility for knowledge, man's only proper gift is opinion:

> The opinion of wisdom is the plague of man. That is the occasion why ignorance is by our Religion recommended unto us, as an instrument fitting beleefe, and obedience... man hath nothing that is properly his owne, but the use of his opinions. Our hereditarie portion is nothing but smoke and wind.
>
> (II.XII.pp.186-7)

In any case, his greatest good is served by ignorance, rather than by knowledge:

> Beasts doe manifestly declare unto us, how many infirmities our mindes agitation bring us. That which is told us of those that inhabit Bresill, who die onely through age, which some impute to the clearenesse and calmnesse of their aire, I rather ascribe to the calmnesse and clearenesse of their minds, void and free from all passions, cares, toiling, and unpleasant labours, as a people that passe their life in a wonderfull kind of simplicitie and ignorance, without letters, or lawes, and without Kings, or any Religion.
>
> (II.XII.pp.190-1)

> Incivility, ignorance, simplicity, and rudenesse, are commonly joyned with innocency: Curiosity, subtilty, and knowledge, are ever followed with malice: Humility, feare, obedience, and honesty (which are the principall instruments for the preservation of humane society) require a single docile soule and which presumeth little of her selfe: Christians have a peculiar knowledge, how curiosity is in a man a naturall, and originall infirmity. The care to encrease in wisdome and knowledge was the first overthrow of man-kinde.
>
> (II.XII.p.199)

The second stage examines philosophy to show that this view is not only his, but also that of the best minds:

> That ignorance which in us was naturall, we have with long study confirmed and averred.
>
> (II.XII.p.201)

Philosophy, whose purpose is

> to seeke out the truth, the knowledge and the certainty,
> (II.XII.p.203)

yields three possibilities: truth can be found, or it cannot be found, or it can only be perpetually sought. In other words, the philosopher can be dogmatically certain of his knowledge, or dogmatically certain of the impossibility of knowledge, or he can remain uncertain. This is, of course, the beginning of the essay's epistemological concern, and while it is difficult to be sure of Montaigne's own position as he describes philosophers' views, his feeling for the Sceptical suspension of

judgement is perhaps evident in this:

> What shall I chuse? Mary, what you list, so you chuse. A very foolish answer: to which it seemeth neverthelesse, that all Dogmatisme arriveth; by which it is not lawfull for you to bee ignorant of that we know not. Take the best and strongest side, it shall never be so sure, but you shall have occasion to defend the same, to close and combat a hundred and a hundred sides? Is it not better to keepe out of this confusion?
>
> (II.XII.p.206)

And the association of pleasure with the pursuit of knowledge, (rather than with finding it), is perhaps appropriate to the essayist who spends so much time in reading and writing.

The description of philosophical possibilities gradually merges into a third stage of the attack on man's faculties, the example of the essentially unknowable nature of God and the widely differing opinions such inaccessible knowledge provokes:

> What greater vanitie can there be, than to goe about by our proportions and conjectures to guesse at God? And to governe both him and the world according to our capacitie and lawes?
>
> (II.XII.p.216)

This endeavour to make God in man's image is an abomination:

> But to have made Gods of our condition, whose imperfections we should know, and to have attributed desire, choler, revenge, marriages, generation, alliances, love and jealousie, our limbes and our bones, our infirmities, our pleasures, our deathes, and our Sepulchres unto them, hath of necessity proceeded from a meere and egregious sottishnesse, or drunkennesse of man's wit.
>
> (II.XII.p.220)

A similar position exists in man's view of his soul; we have a 'rable of opinions' in which

> The most constant Dogmatists...are inforced to cast themselves under the shelter of the Academikes wings. No man knows what Aristotle hath established upon this subject, no more than all the ancients in Generall, who handle the same with a very wavering beliefe...He hath hidden himselfe under the clouds of intricat and ambiguous words, and unintelligible senses, and hath left his Sectaries as much cause to dispute upon his judgement, as upon the matter.
>
> (II.XII.pp.263-4)

This stage overlaps with the next, which considers the equally limited knowledge of man's physical being and other matters of accessible knowledge:

> And of so many things as are in the world, at least one

> should be found, that by an universall consent should be beleeved of all. But that no proposition is seene, which is not controversied and debated amongst us, or that may not be, declareth plainly, that our judgement doth not absolutly and clearly seize on that which it seizeth: for my judgement cannot make my fellowes judgement to receive the same: which is a signe, that I have seized upon it by some other meane then by a naturall power in me or other men. Leave we apart this infinite confusion of opinions, which is seene amongst Philosophers themselves, and this universall and perpetually disputation, in and concerning the knowledge of things.
>
> (II.XII.p.276)

The argument is now constantly epistemological, directed towards showing the unreliability of human powers in gaining knowledge. The disagreement on every conceivable issue leads him to the fifth stage of the attack, the

> consideration of the senses, wherein consisteth the greatest foundation and triall of our ignorance.
>
> (II.XII.p.306)

Here, Montaigne is following the long-standing pattern of Sceptical writers, and this is perhaps another indication of where he stands in relation to the views he reflects through the essay.

> Behold here the platforme of all the frame, and the principles of the building of all our knowledge. And according to some, science is nothing else, but what is knowne by the senses. Whosoever can force me to contradict my senses, hath me fast by the throate, and cannot make me recoyle one foote backward. The senses are the beginning and end of humane knowledge.
>
> (II.XII.pp.306-7)

This is a committed statement and places Montaigne firmly in the Pyrrhonist line of argument. Since all knowledge of the physical world must reach us through the senses, man is, in this area of knowledge, totally vulnerable to weaknesses or failures in the senses:

> Those sects which combate mans science, doe principally combate the same by the uncertainety and feeblenesse of our senses: For, since by their meane and intermission all knowledge comes unto us, if they chaunce to misse in the report they make unto us, if either they corrupt or alter that, which from abroad they bring unto us, if the light which by them is transported into our soule be obscured in the passage, we have nothing else to hold by.
>
> (II.XII.p.310)

He gives examples of the many ways in which the senses do deceive us, thus effectively barring essential truth about the physical world from human knowledge:

> Now our condition appropriating things unto it selfe, and transforming them to its owne humour: wee know no more how things are in sooth and truth; For: nothing comes unto us but falsified and altered by our senses. Where

> the compasse, the quadrant, or the ruler are crooked: all proportions drawne by them, and all the buildings erected by their measure, are also necessarily defective and imperfect. The uncertaintie of our senses yeelds what ever they produce, also uncertaine.
>
> (II.XII.p.321)

In addition, the problem is complicated by the continuous state of flux of the world:

> In few, there is no constant existence, neither of our being, nor of the objects. And we, and our judgement, and all mortall things else do uncessantly rowle, turne, and passe away. Thus can nothing be certainely established, nor of the one, nor of the other; both the judgeing and the judged being in continuall alteration and motion. We have no communication with being; for every humane nature is ever in the middle between being borne and dying; giving nothing of it selfe but an obscure apparence and shadow, and an uncertaine and weake opinion.
>
> (II.XII.p.323)

He defines the essential being or truth behind appearances in terms of timelessness:

> That which is eternall, that is to say, that which never had birth, nor ever shall have end; and to which no time can bring change or cause alteration.
>
> (II.XII.p.325)

Both our senses and the objects of our senses, nature itself, are time-bound and excluded from this eternal being. He concludes therefore,

> that only God is, not according to any measure of time, but according to an immoveable and immutable eternity, not measured by time, nor subject to any declination, before whom nothing is, nor nothing shall be after, nor more new or more recent, but one really being: which by one onely Now or Present, filleth the Ever, and there is nothing that truly is, but he alone.
>
> (II.XII.p.325)

Man finally cannot

> hope to straddle more then our legs length; (it) is impossible and monstrous: nor that man should mount over and above himselfe or humanity; for, he cannot see but with his owne eyes, nor take hold but with his owne armes.
>
> (II.XII.pp.325-6)

As far as his own, unaided means of knowledge are concerned then, man is seen as totally unable to come at essential knowledge. This seems a dogmatic conclusion, and unlike the inconclusiveness suggested about Hamlet's position. But it is reached by an enquiry that is close to the Pyrrhonist spirit. It attacks reason and learning, yet is conducted by means of both. In spite of the vigorous attack on man, there is the

sense of a possibility beyond man's limitations, the possibility of faith to aspire to a 'divine Metamorphosis':

> He shall raise himselfe up, if it please God extraordinarily to lend him his helping hand. He may elevate himselfe by forsaking and renouncing his owne meanes, and suffering himselfe to be elevated and raised by meere heavenly meanes. It is for our Christian faith, not for his Stoicke vertue to pretend or aspire to this divine Metamorphosis, or miraculous transmutation.
> (II.XII.p.326)

Merleau-Ponty speaks of this movement away from dogmatic doubt:[1]

> It is from doubt that certainty will come...after all the doubts, there remains to be explained - precisely because we know that every attempt to know multiplies questions and obscures what it wants to clarify...why there are opinions, why we believed to begin with that we held truths, and why doubt needs to be learned.

While the *Apologie of Raymond Sebond* does not articulate the full extent of the reversal Merleau-Ponty sees in the essays as a whole, it does move constantly towards a view of man that is at least ambivalent, at least restitutional about man in spite of his demonstrable failings. It is assumption and arrogance that must be trampled underfoot, and this is consistent with Montaigne's constant quest for self-knowledge; such assumptions about human faculties that lead man to pride in his knowledge and powers stand in the way of self-understanding. To shed these assumptions is a first step to the 'divine Metamorphosis'. In this sense, Montaigne is also inconclusive about man; his doubts lead inward, always enquiring, never arriving at certainty, yet with a faith in the direction of enquiry. Hamlet's inconclusiveness in the focal speech (II.ii.295, cited on page 81 above) and throughout the play is likewise a mixture of enquiry and faith in his rightness. This is not the same as faith in his Jurisdiction;[2] Hamlet adds to the conventional hesitancy of the revenge hero constant doubts about the right of man to do the work of heaven, yet he pursues quite relentlessly the business of proving, (if only to himself and Horatio), Claudius's guilt. He is sure he is going in the right direction of enquiry, but unsure of the extent of his responsibility for revenge.

In this roundabout way then, there is, I think, a case for the link between Shakespeare and Montaigne that goes beyond coincidence of image or phrase, and even beyond obviously similar thought. All these

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1. Op. cit., pp.130-1.

2. Cf. p.65 above.

are suggested by the examples considered here, but more compelling, to my mind, is a paradox both authors seem to reveal: Hamlet's ability to be unsure of his right but sure of his rightness; Montaigne's ability to make many judgements (throughout the *Essays*), yet to suspend ultimate judgement of man. This is a state of commitment that is yet uncommitting. Montaigne is committed to the problem of man's existence, but uncommitted to solving the problem.[1] Shakespeare's infinite variety in the presentation of man, what Robertson calls his 'self-witholding' quality[2] - his elusiveness as a philosopher - suggest a commitment to exploring man's nature, but no clear commitment to a firm view of human nature.

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1. Cf. Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., p.127.

2. Op. cit., p.185.

6. The Drama of Doubt: Shakespeare's Dialectical Plays

If we accept what I have tried to suggest in the foregoing chapters, that the Pyrrhonean attitude to knowledge was an established part of both European thought in the Renaissance period, and English thought at the beginning of the 17th century, then it seems more than likely that Shakespeare, the professional and avant-garde dramatist at the peak of his career, especially under the influence of Montaigne, but also aware of the tradition behind Montaigne, might want to experiment with this essentially dialectical approach to knowledge. And what better vehicle for the conduct of debate than drama with its multiple voices?[1] Surely there was an obvious analogy between drama and debate in the prototype of all European philosophies, the Dialogues of Plato? The least disputable characteristic of drama is its use of actors who perform dialogue, so the dramatist who wanted to explore any area of thought or experience in a philosophical way, did not need to change his medium: he had merely to adapt his rhetoric to the new intention.

Florio translates Montaigne thus on Plato's philosophy:

> Plato hath (in my seeming) loved this manner of Philosophying, Dialogue wise in good earnest, that therby he might more decently place in sundry mouthes the diversity and variation of his own conceits. Diversly to treat of matters is as good and better as to treat them conformably; that is to say, more copiously and more profitably. (2)

This description, which could equally apply to the dramatic practice of the time, is surely a pointer to the natural affinity between drama and the philosophic aim of enquiry, which Montaigne saw as basic to both sceptical and dogmatic philosophers. Plato is an example of the former:

> never was instruction wavering and nothing avouching, if his be not. (3)

To be a dramatist was, in effect, to be in possession of the tools of the philosopher, and a dramatist with a keenly enquiring intellect would inevitably come to the need to treat diversely the complexities of the intellectual approach to experience.

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1. Cf. H. Levin's remark, 'every drama is perforce dialectical', *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times*, p.269.

2. 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond', p.212.

3. Loc. cit.

Let me put it another way: if we consider the concept of dramatic conflict, on which my generation of students of literature was nurtured, we have the implicit view that drama exists as an effect of conflict. The drama arises from the conflict within a character or between different characters, and it is the resolution of the conflict, either by catastrophe or by consummation, that constitutes the action of the play. This is sound as far as it goes; it provides a paradigm for the design of many plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Henry IV*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, but it does not fully describe the romances or the 'problem' plays, and there is a sense in which some plays, especially *King Lear*, disdain paradigms.

So our sense of drama as conflict needs to be broadened if we are to see it as embracing debate. The term 'conflict' needs to be seen as open-ended. It cannot be restricted to character but must also concern issues, which brings us back to philosophy.[1] And it should also expand to include the idea of irresolution. It is a suggestive exercise to consider the 'issues' or essential matters of Shakespeare's plays written before *Hamlet* and other 'problem' plays; for convenience of thought, they can be divided into comic and non-comic plays. The latter group gives us the faction fights of the *Henry VI* plays, and their close involvement with revenge as a never-ending chain of blood; the power-lust of *Richard III*, with its bloody pursuit of the kingship; the vicious revenges associated with the power-struggle in *Titus Andronicus*; the divided houses and blood-feud of *Romeo and Juliet*; the deposition of *Richard II* and assertion of power by Bolingbroke, and the consequent disturbances in *Henry IV*; the assertion of power and glory in *Henry V*; and in *Julius Caesar*, the assertion of right by one political faction followed by counter-assertion and defeat by an opposed faction. In the comic plays we have the suppression of an opinionated woman in *The Taming of the Shrew*; the apparent falsities, but real fidelities, of love in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; the conflict between ideals of purity and the actuality of love in *Love's Labours Lost*; the conflict between the

1. Cf. T. Spencer's remark that, because of the ambivalent views of man, the world, and the state current when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, 'drama could not be merely the conflict between romantic love and external forces, as in *Romeo and Juliet*; it could represent a conflict far more complicated and far more profound'. '*Hamlet* and the nature of reality', *E.L.H.* V, Dec. 1938. Cited by Cyrus Hoy, Norton Critical Text, p.208.

values of imagination and reason in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the conflict of justice and mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*; the opposition between austere puritanical views of love and the enjoyment of celebratory love in *Twelfth Night*; and in *As You Like It*, the testing of love's adversities. This is a catalogue of oppositions and situations that involve a struggle; Shakespeare's choice of matter seems always to settle on areas of conflict - whence, of course, the view of drama as conflict. But the point is, that a writer with such an area of interest, who did not merely work to a formula, would surely come eventually to consider that not all conflicts can be resolved; coming upon the Pyrrhonist view of opposing attitudes, he would surely find it a fascinating challenge to adopt the dialectical position, to see what might be done with it dramatically.

That the plays in which Shakespeare seems to have attempted such a dramatic experiment have come down to us with the reputation of 'problem' plays, is surely witness to more than the inability of generations of intelligent critics to reach agreement, and it is time to consider these plays as having been deliberately constructed to preclude the possibility of simple or clear-cut judgements being made about the issues they embrace.[1] Critics have differed, and will probably always differ, in their readings, not only of Shakespeare's works but of all works of literature. But this seems to be especially true of the 'problem' plays, and Frank Kermode tells us that *Hamlet* has outstripped all other plays in providing 'diverse metaphysical and psychological speculation'.[2] While it is probably inevitable that such differences will always to some extent reflect merely individual predispositions - views - it seems unlikely that they could have persisted for so long without there being a substantial textual reason for the existence of opposing views.[3] In other words, I am suggesting that, in these plays at least, Shakespeare has employed his dramaturgy in a dialectical exercise, probably in response to the intellectual climate described above.

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1. When a critic of the order of T.S. Eliot decides that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure, it seems to be indicated that inappropriate standards and expectations are being applied in the judgement of the play.

2. Introduction to the text, Riverside Shakespeare, p.1153.

3. H. Felperin, *Shakespearean Representation*, p.87, makes the same point, though on different grounds, that different possibilities of response 'are implicit in the tragedies themselves, are actually inscribed into them'.

I am, indeed, not the first to think this way:[1] several modern critics provide approximately concordant views that tend in this direction, although none of them depends to the same extent on the material I have used in arriving at this position. The first is Terence Hawkes, who traces, from Aristotle's *Nous* and *Logos*, a distinction in the Renaissance between intuition and reason.[2] The transmission of this dualistic view of mind, via Aquinas and Ficino, to 16th and 17th century England, is described as 'a cultural event of significance',[3] which accords well with my suggestions about the Sceptical tradition, but Dr Hawkes does not pursue the line of Sceptical thought as such, commenting only that writers such as Hooker, Sir John Davies, Fulke Greville, Montaigne, and Donne, who questioned the value of reason, often had 'the charge of Fideism or Scepticism... levelled' at them.[4] This seems to indicate that he understands Scepticism mainly in the negative sense. Applying his approach to *Hamlet*, Dr Hawkes emphasizes the conflict between the apparent rationality and wisdom of Claudius's court, (the quality Wilson Knight found attractive), and the 'unreason', which Hamlet uses as a weapon. Thus 'reason is Hamlet's greatest enemy'.[5] Dr Hawkes makes the connection between Shakespeare and Scepticism, but again in a limited sense that excludes the essential spirit of enquiry which I have described above as vital to Scepticism: Hamlet's words have 'the tone of the sceptic; they catch the world-weariness of Montaigne and Ficino.'[6] This comment seems to miss the vitality of Montaigne's introspective enquiries, but it does provide a valuable sense of the metaphysical complexity of the play.

Dr Hawkes extends his approach to unifying analyses of the other 'problem' plays, seeing in them 'the same issues undergo(ing) statement and restatement in different forms';[7] he comes to a conclusion

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1. H.W. Lever, 'Shakespeare and the ideas of his time', in *Shakespeare Survey* 29, gives a full outline of the growth of the dialectical approach to Shakespearean studies.

2. *Shakespeare and the Reason.*

3. Ibid., p.24.

4. Loc. cit.

5. Ibid., p.50.

6. Ibid., p.51.

7. Ibid., p.72.

that recalls again the Sceptical position without specifically naming it: 'it seems that the major difficulty surrounding such questions lies in the effective framing of them. Indeed, their answers seem not to depend on choosing the "right" alternative...so much as on the recognition that such alternatives exist'.[1] In his summing up of the general position, he speaks of the dichotomy faced by each of the protagonists of these plays. This dichotomy 'has no "right" side':

> Essentially, the fact that a choice exists seems to be The tragic element...The choice of one side or the other does not seem to make much difference; either side is vulnerable without the other's support. Those characters who escape tragedy...are those who manage to combine both sides of the dichotomy, and who thereby avoid making the choice. (2)

Dr Hawkes thus presents Shakespeare as a dramatist who exploits the dialectical position of the Pyrrhonists, but he does not make this explicit.

The second critic who seems to offer me a supporting view, is Norman Rabkin. He presents what he calls a theory of 'complementarity', derived from modern theories of physics, as a way of explaining what he finds in Shakespeare.[3] This is a view that allows the simultaneous validity of opposed views, because reality is 'more complicated than any simple, logical, and coherent reading of it'.[4] Applied to literature, the complementary vision is 'the basis of a mimesis which appeals to the common understanding because it recalls the unresolvable tensions that are the fundamental conditions of human life. It is a mode of awareness, an option for a certain and essential kind of openness to human experience. It is not a final dogma'.[5] Applied to Shakespeare in particular, this approach sees the plays as essentially problematic - raising questions that are not ultimately resolvable. Shakespeare's 'dialectical dramaturgy'[6] is suggested as the most notable constant in his work: thus he constructs his plays 'in terms of a pair of polar opposites' and this

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1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., pp.98-99.

3. *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding.*

4. Ibid., p.24.

5. Ibid., p.27.

6. Ibid., p.11.

dramatic structure 'sets up the opposed elements as equally valid...so that the choice that the play forces the reader to make becomes impossible'.[1] In *Hamlet*, the virtue of reasonableness, seen in Hamlet's contemplativeness and his admiration of Horatio, is subverted by the reasonableness of Claudius's court; destructive impulsiveness becomes increasingly 'the only possible basis for the action...(Hamlet has) to perform'.[2] Shakespeare sets his protagonist to choose between opposed ethical systems, and thus 'poised between irreconcilable ideals, Hamlet finds himself in a predicament which we...call tragic'.[3]

Shakespeare knew nothing of 20th century physics of course, but there was a similar view of things ready-made for his use in the Pyrrhonist approach to the problematic nature of experience. Prof. Rabkin's view offers a paradigm for analysis that suits my argument admirably, even though he makes no use of the Sceptical background. I shall therefore use his approach and some of his terms in my analyses as if the Sceptical view and the Complementary vision were the same, albeit separated by four centuries.

R.A. Foakes too, writing about *Measure for Measure*, speaks of an 'uneasy balance of sympathies' which suggests, at least for a while, that 'no solution is possible, and the harsh polarities...reflect...the oppositions which form the basis of the dramatic shaping of the play'.[4] This statement, and his remarks about the ending of the play, that it 'leaves us to determine in just what "measure" any of these (possibilities) applies',[5] clearly share the tendency of modern criticism seen in Rabkin and Hawkes, while his view of the satiric detachment of the dark comedies is at least concordant, though not identical, with a dialectical approach. His view of *Hamlet*, however, is more traditional: he sees the play as basically an heroic tragedy, the tragic effect arising

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1. Ibid., p.12.

2. Ibid., p.6.

3. Ibid., pp.6-7.

4. *Shakespeare, the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, p.23.

5. Ibid., p.27.

from 'the human dilemma registered in the clash of ethics and politics',[1] Hamlet being 'almost old-fashioned...the moral man, the Christian man of principle'.[2]

Finally, F.W. Brownlow has this quite specific sense of Shakespeare's scepticism:

> His plays are experimental in the true sense of the word and, in their general atmosphere, sceptical...Enactment on the stage tests material and theory alike, and the great theme of the Shakespearean drama emerges as the dramatisation of truth and falsehood, the attempt to distinguish between what seems to be, what is said to be and what is. (3)

This shows a strong sense of the enquiring spirit which, I also believe, Shakespeare reveals in his plays, and is therefore perhaps the nearest a critic comes to making the specific link with Pyrrhonism that I am attempting in this dissertation. However, Brownlow works in an entirely empirical way, drawing his conclusions purely from direct observation of the plays rather than by deriving them from probable contemporary influences. Another point which differentiates his view from mine is his inclination towards the negative or pessimistic meaning of scepticism. In his chapter on *Richard II*, for example, he cites T.S. Eliot's sense of 'Shakespearean pessimism'[4] and suggests that 'the fall of Shakespearean man is not, like the theological fall, from knowledge into ignorance, but from protective ignorance into bleak and appalling knowledge'.[5] I feel that this is to understand the Sceptic in a far too definite sense, and to suggest that Shakespeare's scepticism is bleakly pessimistic.

My approach in the analyses that follow is essentially neutral, and is an attempt to trace the dialectical patterning that I believe to be the structural principle of these plays. It is an attempt to perceive and suggest the ambiguities and ambivalences that constantly undercut dogmatic, and even merely positive, positions and attitudes; an attempt

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1. Ibid., p.84.

2. Loc. cit.

3. *Two Shakespearean Sequences*, pp.58-9.

4. Eliot's phrase is 'the deep surge of Shakespeare's general cynicism and disillusionment'. *Selected Essays*, p.137.

5. Brownlow, p.110.

therefore to show that Shakespeare's text reveals the problematic nature of experience and the difficulty of judgement, and the consequent wisdom of suspending judgement. In a word, they demonstrate the Pyrrhonean spirit of enquiry which fosters a recurring doubt and the need to continue the enquiry. I have felt it necessary to write the first and last analyses below at considerably greater length than the middle two; the first because *Hamlet* is often treated as if it were not a problem play, and therefore needs a detailed commentary; and the last because it has almost never been considered problematic. A.P. Rossiter reminds us[1] that the original user of the phrase 'Problem Plays', F.S. Boas, included *Hamlet* in his group of four plays, the others being *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*. I have arbitrarily chosen to consider the first three of these, and to conclude with *Othello*, which Rossiter has described as possibly 'the last Problem Play'.[2] The two acknowledged as 'problem plays' seem to need comparatively little argument to support my position in this study.

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1. Op. cit. p.109.

2. Ibid., p.205.

7. The Structure of Doubt in *Hamlet*.

I want to begin my analysis of *Hamlet* by briefly giving the gist of two unpublished essays on the play, for reasons that will appear immediately after this has been done. They are diametrically opposed in approach: one sees *Hamlet* in a structurally positive way, as 'a very highly crafted play' that 'carefully...dramatises the...relationship between macrocosm and microcosm',[1] while the other rejects an architectonic approach as discordant with the experience of the play, suggesting rather that 'Shakespeare...was led through the play...by the voice of the character Hamlet...and not by his voice only, but by the surprising and sometimes inexplicable things that Hamlet finds himself doing or not doing'.[2] Prof. Brimer's essay gives us a reading that emphasizes the *Hamlet* world as a vision of the meaninglessness or absurdity of life. He sees the play's significance as lying in 'the relationship between a world of shadows, here and now, and a world beyond, a world of darkness and horror, a negative ideal'; thus 'darkness lies at the heart of the play, not light'. Ways in which Shakespeare reveals this include the manifest demonstration that both words and action in the play fail to impose meaningful order in the *Hamlet* world: there is a 'general collapse of order...(as) all the plots...come to nothing', and verbally, the play progresses from a state of great verbosity and concern with words - consider Claudius and Polonius, as well as Hamlet, the greatest of Shakespeare's soliloquisers - to a state where 'the rest is silence'. A satisfactory meaning is never articulated by the characters, thus Prof. Brimer concludes that the significance of the play is that it represents, as 'an artifact in words and actions', 'the absurdity of words and actions in a world that is essentially absurd'.

Dr Strauss is less sure of such a clear intention in Shakespeare's rationale, and suggests rather that the play is as it is because of something that was 'inchoate' for Shakespeare: 'perhaps the feeling of a situation, an existential moment pressing on him from outside and from within'. Its seriousness could have been produced only by the historical forces which move man as a social being, 'intuitively if darkly aware of the shifts taking place in the communal experience'. In terms of one's reading experience of the play, this view involves us in

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1. A. Brimer, 'Reading Shakespeare', an unpublished Conference paper.

2. P.E. Strauss, 'Hamlet', an unpublished University Extension lecture.

the contrast between the Hamlet most people dislike - epitomised in D.H. Lawrence's comment about 'his nasty poking and sniffing at his mother, his setting of traps for the King, his conceited perversion with Ophelia' - and the Hamlet whose death is felt as 'something immeasurably valuable passing out of the world': as Dr Strauss puts it, Horatio's two lines of valediction to Hamlet, (V.ii.351), can't be enough to bring this feeling about; rather, they 'call up an unconscious part of one's experience of the rest of the play: something has been going on without one's noticing it'. He finds this 'something' in the 'principle of Hamlet's behaviour', which is akin to Montaigne's 'different concept of man': a picture of man which is a 'straight copy', 'the botched reality of the actual', rather than a construction based on the medieval view in which man recognized his place 'within a web of relationships'.

Montaigne's view is called to mind, since it involves arbitrary changes which make identity difficult to grasp. Indeed, 'his identity lies just in the process of change', so that he says (in Florio's words), 'I describe not the essence, but the passage'. Dr Strauss comments that this describes a major element of Shakespeare's method in *Hamlet*, which Shakespearean criticism has failed to notice. To characterise Hamlet's identity in terms of an *essence*, is to miss the point that Shakespeare presents Hamlet on Montaigne's 'principle of fluidity': witness, for example, his inability to 'put a label to himself', or to know how to play his proper role. Montaigne's use of himself as a typical specimen is based on his view, that 'every man beareth the whole stampe of humane condition',[1] a coin-image which reflects the change from feudal relationships to 'market' relationships, the change from bonds of natural allegiance, to the separation and self-sufficiency of a society whose contracts are based on equality and freedom. Thus 'the human world becomes an aggregation of individuals', in which the individual has a place, but which isolates him from society as a whole; the social world, in which individuals live, 'is no longer felt as flesh of their flesh, but as detachable from their own nature...(and) confronts them not only as hostile but as alien'.

For Hamlet, the implication of this view is that he can find no answers to questions he poses, for example, in 'To be or not to be'. The alternatives he considers all present him as 'a partial being

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1. Cf. my point about Montaigne's inclusive self, pp. 62-3 above.

overwhelmed by what he can't contain': to become Stoic 'must turn the world outside into meaningless process, into mere fortune'; should he take action, 'his opponent becomes "a sea of troubles" - infinite, shapeless, informed with everything that renders the force of arms useless'. He is essentially caught between these alternatives, living at a moment when he can't return to the clear-cut loyalties of his father's day. He exists as the isolated individual, without the medieval simplicity of clear loyalties, but also as the individual 'stamped with the whole of the human condition', whose consequent receptivity prevents him from seeing the simple. This suggests an integrity, a self-possession that remains potential rather than actual which accounts for the sense of loss we feel at his death. The 'something' that has been going on is the exploration of this potential in Hamlet's being, and the play 'seems to be a dramatization of a human possibility...as a failure, a moment of lucidity doomed never to fulfil its promise'.

These two essays are completely divergent in approach, and largely in conclusion, yet both are attractively validifiable in the details they discuss. Dr Strauss's is an intensely probing analysis of something evasive in the make-up of Hamlet, while Prof. Brimer looks at Shakespeare's design of a meaningless world; both seem to reflect a sense of the failure that the play enacts. Following the rationale outlined in the previous chapter, I would suggest that these two approaches illustrate not only two individual points of view, but also two equally valid readings of what is in Shakespeare's text. I cite them here because they both seem - in spite of their obvious differences - germane to my analysis of *Hamlet*. Dr Strauss seems to be moving towards the position of Norman Rabkin, but is still very closely involved with character, while Prof. Brimer offers the perspective of construction; the two seem to need to merge, and my analysis attempts this. I have the constructional bias, and it seems to be compatible with recognition of the Montaignean influence. Yet the result of such merging will not be the satisfactory whole that comes from the bridging of a gap, for the gap between them is not the result of error or short-coming: they differ because Shakespeare gives them cause to differ. Neither view is more 'correct' than the other, and it is implied that no single view can ultimately be the correct view;[1]

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1. One can of course prefer one view to another. Cf. Leavis's essay on the opposed values of Eliot and Lawrence reflected in their criticisms of *Hamlet*, in *English Literature in our time and the University*, ch.V.

the dialectical structure which I think is the root of different critical views, perpetuates debate, the Sceptical view which underlies this structure, precludes judgement in a state of perpetual suspension.

This means that even an essay as controversial and disliked as Wilson Knight's *The Embassy of Death*, which presents Hamlet's task as diabolical, and Hamlet as the ambassador of death, cannot be dismissed finally as wrong-headed, since Shakespeare clearly presents his hero with this possibility as one of the problems he must face. It is only a moral reflex that causes us instinctively to shudder at the view of Claudius as even faintly respectable, and to side with the moral rectitude of Hamlet's sensibility. Nor is Wilson Knight the only critic to have felt negatively towards Hamlet: both D.A. Traversi and L.C. Knights, to some extent, share the sense of Hamlet as 'a destructive force'[1] and as a neurotic. I think that the point to be taken is that a wide range of emphases is always possible in any critical reaction, and that insofar as every critical view is presumably an honest response by a careful reader to the impact of the play, the play must be seen to contain the potential for such responses. L.C. Knights began his *Approach to Hamlet* by confiding that he might have called the essay 'Through the Looking-Glass', since critics, especially of *Hamlet*, are 'in danger of finding reflected what they bring with them to the task of interpretation'.[2] I would suggest that the variety they find results not so much from their own individual reflections, as from what is indeed behind the mirror's surface - that mirror which Shakespeare held up to nature, giving us glimpses of her infinite variety and endless complexity.

Much of the criticism of *Hamlet* that invokes Montaigne, or which, more simply, holds the view that the Prince is presented as a sceptic or doubter, uses that limited sense of scepticism mentioned before, a negativity or cynicism which misses the essential nature of Sceptical enquiry. Thus the views of *Hamlet* of Terence Hawkes and F.W. Brownlow, outlined in the previous chapter are not pre-emptive of the view I shall offer here, while that of Norman Rabkin is sufficiently close to demand an acknowledgement of intention to use it, (which I have made on page 98 above).

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1. Cf. R.T. Jones, 'The Time is Out of Joint', *Theoria* 17, 1961.

2. Op. cit., p.161.

Two older views of Hamlet's scepticism are recalled by L.C. Knights's essay, and these should be briefly considered here to distinguish further my approach. They are D.G. James's *The Dream of Learning*, and Turgenev's *Hamlet and Don Quixote*. James speaks of the play as a tragedy of 'defeated thought', and of the Prince as a man 'caught in ethical and metaphysical uncertainties'.[1] The second statement does indeed relate to my position, since it emphasizes 'the element of scepticism in Hamlet's make-up', which Knights very properly characterises as 'the weighing of alternative possibilities in such a way as to make choice between them virtually impossible'.[2] Obviously this description relates to the presentation of Hamlet as a character, which, I do not dispute, plays a vital part in the play's overall effect of eliciting doubt in the reader or audience. But, to hold the general view, that 'defeated thought' is the play's tragedy, is to diverge sharply from the sense of Sceptical enquiry I want to pursue: it is, in effect, to think of Scepticism as ultimately negative. If the Montaigne influence is of any weight, then this is too limited a position.

Turgenev's view is that Hamlet is 'scepticism personified'. By this he means that he is 'an egoist', one who has no faith in himself or in anything outside himself: 'a sceptic, Hamlet is preoccupied with his own personality'.[3] This description tends towards the introspective aspect of the Montaignean attitude, but again it is a one-sided approach. For Montaigne, like the Fideists and the sceptically-inclined Neoplatonists, adhered to the open-ended Pyrrhonist view, which regarded doubt as the cause of further enquiry, not as the pessimistic abandonment of hope.

I have also invoked Montaigne; but, as has already been suggested by chapter 5, my sense of Montaigne's influence goes beyond the figure of Hamlet himself. Certainly he is an egoist and a doubter - an intellectual from Wittenberg could scarcely be less. In addition, he shares Montaigne's characteristic introspection or self-analysis. But there is also a common awareness of the complexity of the perceived

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1. Cited by Knights, ibid., p.193.

2. Loc. cit.

3. Turgenev's views are cited by Knights, op. cit., p.194. I have not been able to consult the original essay.

world. In the chapter on Montaigne and Shakespeare, I have tried to show that both writers tended to adopt complex rather than linear modes of argument. In Shakespeare's case, this was argued on the basis of certain examples - the treatment of Hamlet's threat to Claudius; the variety of Montaignean contexts, some contradictory, that might be seen to contribute to what Shakespeare shows us of Hamlet's sense of the disproportion between cause and effect; and the essentially inconclusive nature of Hamlet's view of man. Thus, where several critics have seen in *Hamlet* a sceptical tendency, an element of doubt that affects the Prince's ability to act, or a negative quality in his character, I wish to offer not another reading or interpretation of Hamlet's behaviour, but a description of some of Shakespeare's carefully provided complexities: equivocations, ambiguities, equipollences, that necessarily lead to divergent possibilities which neither Hamlet nor his audience can satisfactorily and finally resolve.

There is, I believe, a substratum of epistemological questioning that runs right through the play, on which the play is founded and on which its complexity rests. The effects of this foundational structure have been felt often enough as an atmosphere - of fear, suspicion, edginess, even of doubt - but it has not been given the attention it deserves as a structural base. True to the nature of foundations, it is unobtrusive. Thus, in the opening scene of the play, critical attention has been given to rhythmic effects, to the wrong procedure of the sentries, and to the obvious surface cause of their fearful expectation of the ghost's reappearance. But a more basic cause can be traced to the essentially epistemological question which arises in line 23:

> Marcellus: Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
> And will not let belief take hold of him
> Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us;
> Therefore I have entreated him along
> With us to watch the minutes of this night,
> That, if again this apparition come,
> He may approve our eyes and speak to it.
> Horatio: Tush, tush, 'twill not appear.
>
> (I.i.23)

This procedure is completely appropriate to the situation, Horatio being introduced as the rational man, who doesn't believe in ghosts - one side of an utterly conventional division of views, which natural quality tends to obscure the underlying construction. It is put in the form of a test-case: disbelief is to be tested against the evidence of perception, the man of reason is to act as a touchstone of truth in a traditionally divided area of experience. In a sense, reason is being challenged by

the irrational, and Shakespeare is consequently juggling with the counters of the epistemological debate we have seen to be current in the Renaissance. The issue is continued in Bernado's question to Horatio:

> Is not this something more than fantasy?
> What think you on't? (I.i.54)

and in Horatio's reply which clearly reflects his shaken faith in reason:

> Before my God, I might not this believe
> Without the sensible and true avouch
> Of mine own eyes. (I.i.56)

His shock exposure to the apparent truth of the senses - having seen the ghost, he cannot choose but believe in its existence - disrupts his ability to rationalise clearly, so that Marcellus's question, 'what think you on't?' arouses the delayed response,

> In what particular thought to work I know not;
> (I.i.67)

and the best he can offer is

> the gross and scope of mine opinion.
> (I.i.67)

This exercise in epistemology operates as a basic structure for the rest of the scene, and helps to explain why Shakespeare's next step is to make Marcellus ask about the country's apparently hasty preparation for war - a question which is otherwise only slightly related to the opening matter of the scene by the hint of 'some strange eruption to our state'. He asks for information about what is happening in the land:

> Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,
> (I.i.70)

and since Horatio has just shown the limits of his rational judgement, the question is put generally to the other three characters on stage:

> Who is't that can inform me? (I.i.79)

Again it is Horatio who offers knowledge, but now he is less sure of the solidity of his knowledge. Thus he answers Marcellus:

> That can I;
> At least, the whisper goes so.
> (I.i.79)

And at the end of his speech:

> and this, I take it,
> Is the main motive of our preparations.
> (I.i.104)

The tale Horatio tells offers an apparent explanation of the ghost's appearance in armour. Provided that one accepts the belief that

such an appearance is an omen of events to come, the information that Horatio gives provides a good explanation of the ghost's appearance. Bernado's nodding affirmation suggests that this is how it is understood:

> I think it be no other but e'en so. (I.i.108)

And although Horatio has his doubts -

> A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye, (I.i.112)

- he goes on to recall the celebrated precedent of Caesar's death and the portentous natural disturbances associated with it.

After the ghost's second appearance, Horatio and Marcellus both offer interpretations of its hasty departure upon the crowing of the cock, both different from the previous speculations, both suggesting a new sense of evil in the appearance, and both still couched in epistemological terms which suggest very tentative grounds for knowledge. Horatio begins his speculation from the imputative simile, 'it started like a guilty thing', which sets the tone of both speeches; he prefixes his supposed information with the phrase 'I have heard', making the further imputation that the spirit is 'extravagant and erring'. This purely speculative description is then taken to be demonstrated by their observation of the ghost:

> and of the truth herein
> This present object made probation. (I.i.155)

Marcellus is much less direct in making such imputations, but his picture of the hallowed season when no spirits dare stir abroad, implies that this ghost had cause to fade when the cock crowed. In epistemological terms, this scene presents us with an instance of how knowledge is imparted and how ill-founded it can be; and Shakespeare places it in the dramatically powerful position of the opening scene. In this initial analysis, which I offer as an example of the kind of structural description intended, I have largely ignored the finer details of the poetry because such analyses have been made many times over, and I doubt whether I can add anything to them. The underlying framework has not been emphasized before, as far as I know, and therefore my focus has been particularly narrow. I shall try to keep it like this in order to avoid lapsing into interpretation of the more customary pattern, and to prevent my commentary from becoming too long.

Emphasis on a theme or pattern of imagery at the beginning of a play, usually suggests that that theme or image will continue to be

important throughout the play: so in Hamlet it seems predictable that the initial emphasis, on a problem of knowledge as a basic structure, will persist. And taking a very broad view of the whole play, this seems immediately valid, for the play deals quite largely with Hamlet's attempt to confirm or at least come to terms with the knowledge he gains from the ghost; or, to put it another way, much of the play's action has to do with exposing covert knowledge. Hamlet seeks to prove what he knows about Claudius; Claudius tries to determine the cause of Hamlet's madness, in order to find out how much the Prince knows of his crime; and these two basic attempts to gain knowledge involve nearly all the other characters in the play. Gertrude and Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildernstern, all have a part in the King's probe; Hamlet confides only in Horatio, but he uses the players and the Queen to gain knowledge.

This dual quest for knowledge is, I believe, the basis on which the dialectical complexities of the play rest. While Hamlet goes about setting his 'mouse-trap', Claudius is doing the same for him; and the audience too is involved in problems of certainty. In the second scene, for example, we have the apparent goodness and openness of Claudius contrasted with the apparent surly sadness of Hamlet. At this point in the play we cannot yet say that the reality behind the appearance is what causes Hamlet's sense of unease - or ours for that matter - in relation to Claudius. Neither Hamlet nor we *know* that anything is wrong with Claudius's reign, because the ghost's tale has yet to be told. While careful attention to the tone might suggest some falsity reflected in the King's choice of words, it is really only knowledge of his crime that can reveal the evil nature behind his speeches. Hamlet's attitude to him has no more basis in knowledge than ours, but of course he has emotive reasons for disliking his uncle. By sympathetic feeling for Hamlet's expressions of his dislike, we can also begin to react to Claudius after line 65, but before this, (and justifiably to the end of the scene), there is nothing to found a real sense of unease on except the epistemologically evoked basis of doubt given us by the first scene.

The fundamental doubt is again very subtly suggested; we have no more than a hint of similarity between the two scenes - which depends on the formality of the King's management of his announcements to the assembled court. He is essentially disbursing information, and it is

his attitude to the knowledge imparted that arouses some resistance in us. In flagrant contrast to the attitude evolved in the first scene, he treats it with great authority, as something previously weighed and apportioned, and hands it out parcel-fashion. The first parcel deals with his marriage to Gertrude, as a carefully considered action calculated to show both sorrow and joy:

> Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
> That we with wisest sorrow think on him,
> Together with remembrance of ourselves.
> (I.ii.5)

Or, as he puts it even more succinctly:

> In equal scale weighing delight and dole.
> (I.ii.13)

The next parcel is signalled by a distinctive formulation:

> Now follows what you know. (I.ii.17)

This statement announces the trouble that Fortinbras is causing, (confirming Horatio's phrase 'as you know' used in the same connection at I.i.82), and again we have the sense of a pre-digested hand-out in the neatness with which he has already handled the matter, prefixed again by the formula,

> Now for ourself, and for this time of meeting,
> Thus much the business is.
> (I.ii.26)

When he turns to Laertes, it is:

> And now, Laertes, what's the news with you?
> (I.ii.42)

Likewise with Hamlet:

> But now, my cousin Hamlet... (I.ii.64)

The formula is irritatingly neat because the first scene has suggested the difficulty of knowledge, while Claudius seems to have no difficulty in dealing with it, even to the extent of telling Hamlet how to deal with the loss of his father.

But irritation is only one possible response, and it is partly the result of emotive siding. If we think purely in terms of the knowledge available to us at this point in the play, the same foundation of doubt must equally allow the possibility, (as the case of Wilson Knight suggests it does), of a favourable reaction to Claudius's treatment of knowledge. We have to remember that Shakespeare's rhetoric has always to cater to two audiences: to the characters who receive and judge a given speech, and to us who do the same. The criteria for judgement differ for these two audiences, and so do the judgements, but the dramatist has to

ensure plausibility for both sets of auditors. This is done, I suggest, by means of an equivocation that differentiates on complex grounds of knowledge, intuition, feelings, and attitudes.[1] At this moment in *Hamlet*, the Prince is the only character who reacts with antipathy to Claudius's speeches, and his reasons are private and emotive. His feelings do not nullify the criteria used by the other characters, nor is it obligatory that we should adopt the attitudes or share the emotions expressed by Hamlet - certainly not at this stage, since knowledge is lacking, and possibly not at any stage in the play, since we are not presented with simple or clear oppositions between good and evil in the two opposing main characters. Claudius may be vicious, but Hamlet is not a paragon of virtue, as critical opinion from Goethe to D.H. Lawrence has acknowledged.

We have, thus, the first dialectical opposition built into the play. That it is intended as such is suggested by the first of Hamlet's soliloquies, which closes what might be called the first movement of the scene. Of its 30 lines, some 20 are devoted to the comparison between the old king and the new, from which we gather clearly that Hamlet is appalled by the apparent inability of his mother to distinguish the 'Hyperion' from the 'satyr'. It is precisely because he lacks knowledge, that he sees her inability as he does: as archetypal irrationality, a denial of the feelings which rational beings were supposed to be supremely capable of. Therefore we get the peculiar force of

> O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason
> Would have mourn'd longer.
>
> (I.ii.150)

And therefore, too, the sense of heavy futility in existence:

> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't! Ah, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely.
>
> (I.ii.133)

Man seems to have lost the distinguishing powers of rationality, and the world is overrun by grossness.

With all this we will probably sympathise; yet we are faced with the fact that Hamlet's response to irrationality is equally irrational - he desires to 'melt', or to be otherwise capable of giving the world up;

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1. This technique is considered more fully in relation to *Othello*. Cf. p.164 below.

or perhaps he is simply confused, since the argument against self-slaughter is that it is against God's laws, which is a rational argument. Add to this far from clear response the probability that his understanding of his mother's action is inaccurate, and we have the kind of dialectical complexity that makes moral decisions anything but simple.

The change in pace and mood of the second 'movement' of the scene, after the entry of Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernado, obviously has something to do with Hamlet's pleasure in meeting old friends and the opportunity to jest with kindred spirits, after the claustrophobic experience with his kin; but the real sense of alertness in Hamlet arises when Horatio mentions the appearance of the ghost. It is not merely the conventional excitement of such an appearance that accounts for the change in Hamlet, however: it is surely also, and mainly, his sense of knowledge to be pursued and gained, which lifts him out of the mood of the first soliloquy. Thus, while the eagerness of

> For God's love, let me hear, (I.ii.195)

does not obtrude on Horatio's tale, when this is told we get the more rapid question-and-answer exchanges as Hamlet probes for information. Compacted, his probing looks like this:

> But where was this?
> Did you not speak to it?
> Hold you the watch tonight?
> Arm'd, say you?
> From top to toe?
> Then saw you not his face?
> What, look'd he frowningly?
> Pale or red?
> And fix'd his eyes upon you?
> I would I had been there.
> (I.ii.212-234)

This is the directed questioning of a man bent on gaining knowledge, and it takes us back to the mood of the first scene, especially as Horatio is again in the role of informer, speaking in terms of epistemological testing:

> Season your admiration for a while
> With an attent ear, till I may deliver,
> Upon the witness of these gentlemen,
> This marvel to you.
> (I.ii.192)

And again:

> And I with them the third night kept the watch;
> Where, as they had delivered, both in time,
> Form of the thing, each word made true and good,
> The apparition comes. I knew your father;
> These hands are not more like.
> (I.ii.208)

And finally:

> As I do live, my honour'd lord, 'tis true.
> (I.ii.221)

To sum up, again in epistemological terms, we are given a second scene based on the quest for knowledge in a world of conflicting views; the first part of this scene poses a conflict between surface feeling and fundamental notions of the complexity of knowledge, and the second part stresses the eagerness of the quest. This quest will drive Hamlet on ultimately to his tragic end, and this is perhaps half-felt by him in the ominous and prophetic Macbeth-like ending of the scene:

> All is not well.
> I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come!
> Till then sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,
> Though all the earth oe'rwhelm them to men's eyes.
> (I.ii.254)

Any sensitive reading of the third scene of *Hamlet* will notice the excessively cosseting tone of both Laertes and his father towards Ophelia, and her naive malleability; together with the cloying pedantry and worldly-wisdom of Polonius, this tone makes it clear that Shakespeare is consolidating the already perceived atmosphere of Claudius's court, an atmosphere we can feel as antagonistic to Hamlet. What is less obvious, is that he is also building on his epistemological foundation, for the scene deals basically with the criteria of belief. This is evident in Laertes' advice to Ophelia not to hope too much for Hamlet's continued love, on the essentially rational grounds that his position precludes such a match:

> Then if he says he loves you,
> It fits your wisdom so far to believe it
> As he in his particular act and place
> May give his saying deed; which is no further
> Than the main voice of Denmark goes withal.
> (I.iii.24)

Ophelia is advised not to have a 'too credent ear', because Hamlet's words (or 'songs') are seen as invalid criteria to base belief on. His deeds alone can provide these, and Laertes, one of Claudius's loyal and unsuspecting subjects, has evidently no reason to think well of the Hamlet who, in the eyes of Claudius's court, has withdrawn himself under 'clouds' and adopted a 'nighted' colour. Such 'deeds' do not encourage trust, and therefore Ophelia's 'best safety lies in fear'. In terms of the knowledge available to Laertes and his sister, this is the rational proceeding, and even we can respond differently only by virtue of emotive bias.

Polonius's 'few precepts' are of the same kind: a cautionary tale against easy trust or credulity. It is not surprising that his words have found favour with many generations of headmasters, warning their departing scholars against the dangers of a corrupt world, for he speaks eminently good worldly sense:

> Give thy thoughts no tongue,
> Nor any unproportion'd thought his act.
> Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
> Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
> Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;
> But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
> Of each new-hatch'd, unfledg'd courage. Beware
> Of entrance to a quarrel; but, being in,
> Bear't that th'opposed may beware of thee.
> Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;
> Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement.
> Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
> But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
> For the apparel oft proclaims the man;
> And they in France of the best rank and station
> Are of a most select and generous choice in that.
> Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
> For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
> And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
> This above all - to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.
>
> (I.iii.59)

Gentlemen in Shakespeare's audience would have held the man who followed Polonous's advice in high esteem, particularly if they were familiar with Castiglione's Courtier:

> 'Therefore', Count Lodovico went on, 'the man we are seeking should be fierce, rough and always to the fore in the presence of the enemy; but anywhere else he should be kind, modest, reticent and anxious above all to avoid ostentation or the kind of outrageous self-glorification by which a man always arouses loathing and disgust among those who have to listen to him. (1)

The pertinent question is why this description of the perfect gentleman is placed here. The plot of course gives a straightforward answer, or at least affords an occasion, in Laertes' departure for France, mentioned in I.ii.; but this does not require a 'double blessing' or a 'second leave'. Shakespeare is surely again busy about his foundations, emphasizing the qualities most acceptable to society and which establish a man's worth and credibility. Polonius's last statement cited above, 'Thou canst not then be false to any man', makes Laertes false in a passive sense as readily as in the active, since, if he acts on

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1. *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. G. Bull, Penguin Classics, pp.58-9.

Polonius's advice, he will neither act falsely towards any man, nor be seen as false by any man. Beneath the surface of blustering sententiousness, Polonius functions as an indicator of the criteria people generally use in assessing one another. He wants his son to be liked, and therefore gives him this advice to behave like a gentleman.

This picture is in direct contrast with that of Hamlet in the last part of the scene, when Polonius speaks of him as one whose credibility is low. Ophelia tells him of Hamlet's 'many tenders/Of his affection', and Polonius scoffs at her credulity:

> Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?
>
> (I.iii.103)

Her confession that she does not know what to think, gives him a chance to carry on the lesson in belief and its criteria:

> Marry, I will teach you: think yourself a baby
> That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay
> Which are not sterling.
>
> (I.iii.105)

Here is one of the coin-images to which Dr Strauss refers,[1] and it confirms that Polonius is concerned with the solid values of the model citizen. Hamlet, in this scale of values, does not weigh much. Thus, his 'holy vows of heaven', which have 'given countenance' to his speech, are merely 'springes to catch woodcocks', and Ophelia is enjoined, with absolute bluntness, to discredit him:

> Do not believe his vows; for they are brokers,
> Not of that dye which their investments show,
> But mere implorators of unholy suits,
> Breathing like sanctified and pious bonds,
> The better to beguile.
>
> (I.iii.127)

This is a clever mixture of metaphors using puns which effect a transition from a legal-monetary sense to a sartorial one, and both convey a strong awareness - though subtly, perhaps below the audience's level of conscious analysis - of the criteria used by respectable courtiers, such as Polonius, in granting credit to such as Hamlet.[2]

Again, in response to this harsh judgement, we must sympathise

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1. Cf. p.102 above.

2. It is no accident that 'credit' has carried the dual senses of belief and monetary trust since the 16th century, for they are closely associated in the common view.

with Hamlet, but to do so does not make the moral direction clear, for we can't even say that Polonius is wrong. Hamlet after all, for whatever reasons, does reject Ophelia, thereby giving substance to Polonius's warning to her not to believe him. We are pulled in different directions by sympathy and by judgement, and it seems most likely that this is an intended effect of the play's dialecticism.

The concern with credibility has brought reputation into question, thus it is natural for Shakespeare to give Hamlet a turn to analyse this abstract notion which is closely associated with the expression of belief and the criteria of judgement. The custom of noisy toasting that Claudius indulges off-stage gives him the occasion to return the compliment of judgement - unconsciously, of course, because we are the only auditors common to both occasions. His concern is with the dishonour the practice brings on all Danes:

> it is a custom
> More honour'd in the breach than the observance.
> This heavy-handed revel east and west
> Makes us traduc'd and tax'd of other nations;
> They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
> Soil our addition.
>
> (I.iv.15)

He has here a sense of the general disgrace which affects the individual, arising from this bad custom. It is like the one 'vicious mole of nature' which, exaggerated by 'the general censure', destroys a man's reputation. But that such a fault can be innocent, a mere 'defect', suggests that it is not only the fault that is being criticised here, but also the mental habit of generalisation. In other words, the kind of generalised view proposed by Polonius in the previous scene, is challenged here, and we are again involved in a dialectical issue. Its implications are profound, for this is where the play begins to develop its moral concerns, significantly at the point where Hamlet meets the ghost for the first time.

This meeting is one of many moments in the play which suggest the balance of indecision, and it is especially effective, (since it is the first), in conveying Hamlet's peculiar mixture of determination to get to the bottom of things, and hesitation to act. Conditioned by the beliefs of the time, he must confront the ghost with a sense of ambivalence:

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,

> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable;
>
> (I.iv.40)

but he must also find the answer, and therefore 'will speak to' the ghost. Were he not to do so, he must 'burst in ignorance', an expression which conveys that lack of knowledge is the specific cause of his frustration. His companions are also afraid - not of the appearance as such, for they have seen it before - but of the strong possibility that it is a demon that will tempt Hamlet to destruction or madness. Horatio, the man of reason, speaks words which evoke the spirit of irrationally induced fear in an attempt to prevent Hamlet from following the ghost:

> Think of it:
> The very place puts toys of desperation,
> Without more motive into every brain
> That looks so many fathoms to the sea
> And hears it roar beneath.
>
> (I.iv.74)

But Hamlet is already committed to his quest for knowledge, and thrusts his companions aside.

In a sense, the action of the 5th scene is also a thrusting aside, as Hamlet takes the quest entirely upon himself; a view that is confirmed by the closing lines of the scene:

> The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right!
>
> (I.v.189)

But this conveys a burden of action rather than of knowledge: what we see in the scene is the transfer of emphasis from the pursuit of knowledge to the urge to act. Hamlet's abrupt gaining of the answer to the puzzle of the ghost's appearance, means that the quest for knowledge loses its urgency, and the need for action takes its place. As the ghost speaks the word 'murder', Hamlet's determination to have knowledge carries him into an expression of equal determination to act upon it:

> Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
> As meditation or the thoughts of love,
> May sweep to my revenge.
>
> (I.v.29)

The ghost's tale wrings from him a similar vow, to wipe from 'the table' of his memory

> all fond trivial records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
> That youth and observation copied there,
>
> (I.v.99)

and to replace them with the ghost's 'commandment' to take revenge. The irony that will prove tragic (which Goethe saw clearly), is that Hamlet

is essentially unsuited to his task, a scholar whose natural bent is precisely the pursuit of knowledge. To emphasize this is surely the point of the reification of the metaphoric table of his memory, in his sudden act of writing as he sets down in his 'tables', 'that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain'. His habitual response is suggested in this gesture: experience, which includes knowledge, is material for recording, and the purpose of recording is to recall and to consider, to provide the pabulum of ratiocination. He can not wipe away his 'trivial fond records', for these are the things nearest to him, to which, instead of acting, he will return.

The root of the tragedy, then, lies in Hamlet's intimate involvement with knowledge, and can be felt as developing naturally from the foundation of attitudes to knowledge laid in the first three scenes. The knowledge given by the ghost seems to be accepted and the dedication to action made; yet the bulk of the play goes on to show Hamlet constantly teasing at his knowledge, and verbally lashing himself for his inaction. It is, however, not enough to reason that this is simply because Hamlet is the contemplative man, or the scholar: as Dr Strauss suggests, we should not try to describe him in terms of essence, as I have above, but rather in terms of Montaigne's 'principle of fluidity', the arbitrary changes that make man such a complex being. Hamlet's credibility has already been shown to be low in Claudius's court; indeed, it is difficult even for us to believe in him - a reticent, anti-social, ineffectual procrastinator, who is also deeply moral, concerned, finely attuned to the proper presentation of man by the actors, a swashbuckling swordsman at sea, and an impulsive killer. We can surely not think of him in simple mimetic terms, for no such person ever existed in one being at one time. I suggest rather that he is the kind of composite, representative man that Montaigne saw in himself - not an existing being, but a potential of the being who is constantly changing. Shakespeare uses him as the focus of an essay, (in Montaigne's sense, though dramatised), on the possibilities of man in the important existential aspect of his knowledge.

The danger of this view is that we can lose sight of the constancies of the Prince of Denmark, and I do not intend this. He is presented as a moral man (even 'old-fashioned' as Foakes suggests), and as a contemplative man; but if we can rid ourselves of the need to see him as fixed in this mould, and invest him with a range of possible

responses - even real men are like this, after all - then we lose the need to explain things in terms of consistency of character, and gain the ability to account for the arbitrary and apparently inexplicable contrasts and contradictions that have made him such an enigmatic figure for so long.

To return to the scene; at this very moment in the play, consistency demands a purposeful use of the knowledge gained. But Hamlet changes mood, pace, and tone in a thoroughly arbitrary manner once the ghost has gone and his companions return. The 'antic disposition' he puts on is not the cause, but an effect of this change, one possible response to knowledge of this kind and gained in this way. What he does is to play with his knowledge:

> Hor. What news, my lord?
> Ham. O, wonderful!
> Hor. Good my lord, tell it.
> Ham. No; you will reveal it.
> Hor. Not I, my lord, by heaven!
> Mar. Nor I, my lord!
> Ham. How say you, then; would heart of man once think it?
> But you'll be secret?
> Both. Ay, by heaven, my lord!
> Ham. There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark
> But he's an arrant knave.
> (I.v.117)

As Horatio very properly says, 'There needs no ghost...come from the grave' to tell them this! There is more in the same vein, and much elaborate injunction to swear an oath of secrecy, accompanied by a game of dodge-the-ghost, yet in fact he divulges nothing at all to his friends by way of knowledge, and the oath they swear is to keep secret what they have seen - an apparition, something conventionally dubious, as has already been stressed, and in which few would believe in any case.[1]

To see Hamlet in this way, is to affirm the dialectical view, which I believe the first act establishes firmly, as a substructure of the plot. We have a debate on the nature and uses of knowledge, and we have seen its difficulty, the apparent mastery that some have over it,

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1. It is tempting and probably true to say that no-one in the audience ever doubts the ghost's story, but I think Shakespeare is being philosophically rigorous in presenting the scene with all the elements of possible doubt. It is not until Claudius takes us into his confidence in his first aside (III.i.) that we have any confirmatory word of his 'deed' and 'burden'; and not until after the play-scene is there definite confirmation that the deed is 'A brother's murder'.

its advantages for those who would prosper in society, the eagerness to gain it, the frustration caused by its lack, the agony it brings when it demands rigorous action, and finally the need for secrecy it can impose when it is evil. In terms of the equivocal rhetoric mentioned before,[1] this picture is compounded by the possibility (which his secretive response also suggests), that the knowledge Hamlet has gained is subject to different interpretations, and may not be knowledge at all. Although his problem seems now to be mainly one of action, he returns to the quest for knowledge because it is his nature to do so, and because it is the nature of knowledge to be questionable.

So begins the cat-and-mouse pattern of the play, the dual pursuit of knowledge[2] by Hamlet and by Claudius and his several helpers, which characterises much of the succeeding action. Act 2 introduces fresh characters who take part in this game: Reynaldo, who must pry into Laertes' affairs in Paris, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who will pry into Hamlet's strange behaviour. In the first scene, Polonius gives Reynaldo a lesson on the means of eliciting information, with the 'bait of falsehood' which takes the 'carp of truth', essentially an abuse of knowledge; and then immediately undermines whatever sense of his worldly-wisdom we might have gained from this shrewdness, by making an oversimplified interpretation of the information Ophelia brings him about Hamlet's behaviour to her - even while berating himself for misjudging the Prince's attentions to Ophelia. In the second scene, the King makes no bones about his need to use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as informants:

> by your companies
> To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather,
> So much as from occasion you may glean,
> Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus
> That, open'd, lies within our remedy.
>
> (II.ii.14)

If we accept the ghost's tale, as most members of the audience probably do, then in this scene Claudius is telling plain lies in denying knowledge of any possible further cause for Hamlet's 'transformation' than his father's death. But as is pointed out above, (footnote 1, page 119), that tale is surrounded by doubt, and at this stage Shakespeare is careful to provide plausible grounds for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,

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1. Cf. pp.110-111 above.

2. As in *Othello*, this is largely a pursuit of confirmatory evidence for suspicion or uncertain knowledge.

as well as for us, to believe his reason for summoning their aid. It is to discover how much Hamlet knows, and the line already cited, 'Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus', is nicely calculated to state a real need without directly falsifying the underlying fact. We are, in other words, given a dialectical text which we can choose to read either in terms of the validated knowledge we have, or with a sense of the irony underlying his speech, a bias that is emotively founded and not yet established as a valid response to true knowledge. From such moral judgements flow such phenomena as critical impatience with Hamlet's procrastination. It is not wrong to read this way, since the text provides a basis for such feelings. It is equally not wrong to refrain from judging Claudius yet, since the text provides no finite knowledge of his crime while giving his actions a plausible basis.

Fortinbras fits into this epistemological substructure too. His role is usually seen to be to provide a model of the man of action against whom Hamlet can measure his own inaction, and to restore some sense of orderly authority when chaos seems to take over at the end of the play. Remembering, however, his position in the opening scene as the cause of Denmark's warlike preparations, we are now given the report of Claudius's ambassadors sent to Norway to reveal Fortinbras's intentions to his 'bed-rid' uncle, the King. They reveal that Fortinbras has deliberately deceived his uncle:

> whereat griev'd,
> That so his sickness, age, and impotence,
> Was falsely borne in hand, sends out arrests
> On Fortinbras.
>
> (II.ii.65)

In this, in terms of the substructure, he has acted falsely, abusing truth and therefore knowledge; but the tale told by Voltemand is a complete one, of abuse and restitution: Fortinbras is presented as one who distorts truth, is rebuked, and repents, vowing honesty and plain dealing for the future. From being a threat, he becomes thus an example to Denmark - obviously, in one sense, to Hamlet, but also to be contrasted with Claudius, who cannot bring himself to repent. This tale is essentially a miniature reflection of the possible uses and abuses of knowledge, and therefore part of the substructure of the play.

Polonius has preached against credulity and shown his estimation of the social virtues, and also given a hint of his own credulous inability to judge a situation; in the present scene he firmly establishes

his foolishly assuming nature, firstly by his nonsensical definition of madness -

> What is't but to be nothing else but mad?
> (II.ii.94)

- which he assumes to be Hamlet's problem:

> Mad let us grant him, then;
> (II.ii.100)

and then by his derivation of 'the cause of this effect', which is couched in quasi-philosophical language, and has the appearance of a well-reasoned process, but is clearly a personal derivation of cause from effect that flatters his preceptor's sense of his own judgement. This is perhaps most readily visible in his offence at the King's expression of doubt:

> Hath there been such a time - I would fain know that -
> That I have positively said ''Tis so',
> When it prov'd otherwise?
> (II.ii.152)

Claudius's question,

> How may we try it further?
> (II.ii.158)

seems to be both an indication that he does not accept Polonius's analysis, which is also an indication of its worth, and an expression of his desire to find some other cause than suspicion of his deed, for Hamlet's 'transformation'.[1] Both readings add to the scene's involvement with information-gathering.

The double-edged nature of this game is first intimated by Polonius's encounter with Hamlet: his questioning is turned aside so that we get a commentary on Polonius rather than on Hamlet. Then, more directly, Hamlet sees right through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, so that their task is laid bare before them:

> I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation
> prevent your discovery, and your secrecy to the
> King and Queen moult no feather.
> (II.ii.292)

The reading I have already given of the speech that follows this,[2] that Hamlet presents a composite portrait of himself to his former friends, without committing himself to an ultimate view of man, fits the picture of a Hamlet turning the tables on the information gatherers, because both

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1. I have suggested that his opening speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hints that he realises Hamlet judges him. Cf. p.72 above.

2. Cf. pp. 81-4 above.

are consistent with the uncommitted nature of his 'antic disposition'. Playing mad makes his dialogue necessarily irrational, in spite of the pregnancy of some of his replies. Again the differential rhetoric comes into consideration, as Polonius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, understand Hamlet in their different ways - Polonius seeing his view confirmed, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seeing only a 'crafty madness' which keeps him 'aloof' from their probing - while we are left with our choice between validated knowledge and sympathetic feelings, but also with an enjoyment of the surface ironies. The result is a slow movement of mutual testing which contributes quite largely to the sense of a gathering climax to which the game must lead. The climax will come with the dramatisation of Claudius's deed, thus the announcement of the players at this point seems to confirm the structural movement I have described in this scene.

The players are essentially functional: they visibly inspire Hamlet with pleasure and enthusiasm, and the example of the individual player strikes the fire of the second soliloquy out of the Prince. But their value is even more basic than this: it lies in their relationship to knowledge, which Hamlet understands and enjoys as a breath of fresh air in the corrupted atmosphere of the scene. What he salutes in them is not knowledge itself, but honesty, the workmanlike attempt at faithful mimesis, which is in strong contrast with the preceding matter of the scene. Hamlet is not simplifying or being sentimental about their appearance of honesty, for he knows the nature of playing and players: Polonius's promise, to 'use them according to their desert', is met with the rebuke:

> God's bodykins, man, much better. Use every man
> after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?
> (II.ii.522)

He recognises, in the integrity of the player's performance, an instrument of truth which stems from his art rather than from his being. His own recourse to playing, the adoption of an 'antic disposition', suggests a link between him and the players that goes beyond camaraderie; I suggest that this link depends on their common use of playing to deal with experience - and this has to do with the approach to knowledge. The players in their professional undertaking enter into the reality of what they imitate:

> Look whe'er he has not turn'd his colour, and has
> tears in 's eyes.
> (II.ii.514)

Or, as Hamlet says of them:

> they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time.
> (II.ii.516)

Hamlet himself takes shelter in playing, that is, he treats it as a defence against the probing of Claudius; but he also sees it as a means of getting at the truth. The entire movement of the second act is towards just this aim, and has its culmination in the soliloquy that ends the act. The attempts to gather information have led to no solid knowledge, but the player shows an ability to reach into the depths of reality and release men's feelings. In him, as later in Fortinbras and his army, Hamlet recognises the power that turns motive into action; he creates something real out of an appearance, and it is the shock of this realisation that sparks Hamlet's self-vituperation:

> What would he do
> Had he the motive and the cue for passion
> That I have?
> (II.ii.553)

Under the persuasion of this force, he sees himself as 'coward', 'villain', and 'pigeon-liver'd'; Claudius is seen by the same light as

> bloody, bawdy villain!
> Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
> (II.ii.575)

Were Shakespeare presenting a play less dialectical in its structure, with motive and action more easily linked, this should lead Hamlet to resolute action; instead, we are given what the act's structure requires, a culminating attempt to reach the truth:

> I'll have these players
> Play something like the murder of my father
> Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
> I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench,
> I know my course.
> (II.ii.590)

This desire for conclusive proof is a reflex of the mind that dwells on possibilities; one such possibility therefore is left us in a state of inconclusion as Hamlet leaves the stage:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a devil; and the devil hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me.
> (II.ii.594)

The 'grounds more relative' than the ghost's tale will be 'The Murder of Gonzago'. But Hamlet is under the influence of a force, the honesty of the mimetic illusion. The reality of what the player presents is, after

all, a matter of doubt. It is his faith for the moment, but Shakespeare's juxtaposition, at the end of the scene, of the two fundamental elements in Hamlet's knowledge of the truth, both characterised by a dependence on illusion, is a sure indication that we are not intended to accept this faith with any confidence.

To gain knowledge is to become aware of something: discovery and learning entail a process of becoming conscious of something. When Hamlet debates the 'question of being',[1] he is also concerned with consciousness and therefore with knowledge. Knights uses the phrase 'the activated consciousness' as a direct equivalent for 'the question of being', and cites Coleridge's view of the oneness of all human faculties, especially the link between thought and feeling. He gives this extract from a letter by Coleridge:

> The first step to knowledge, or rather the first condition of all insight into truth, is to dare commune with our very and permanent self; (2)

and comments that knowledge is thus seen to be 'a function of being'.[3] If we accept the fundamental position of knowledge in the play which I have suggested, then Knights's comments are even more significant than they seemed twenty years ago. At the 'heart' of the play, we have not simply a sudden realisation of the epistemological implications of Hamlet's task or of the need to show his failure to achieve an integrated personality, but also the dramatically right moment to bring the epistemological substructure to the surface. The first two acts have been based on a knowledge debate conducted without any great success in terms of gaining knowledge or resolving its problems; now Hamlet, at a watershed moment, a 'still point of the turning world' of the play's action, gives an analysis of why this debate is unresolvable. Knights, by no means a sceptical thinker, states very clearly and more than once, that the play tends towards irresolution:

> The problem (of being, or the activated consciousness) is insoluble in the state of unresolved emotion in which he delivers himself of his thoughts. (4)

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1. This is Knights's phrase, op. cit., p.203.

2. Knights, op. cit., p.204.

3. Loc. cit.

4. Op. cit., p.203.

> For Hamlet...no solution is possible...What the soliloquy does in short is to bring to a head our recognition of the dependence of thought on deeper levels of consciousness, and to make plain...that the set of Hamlet's consciousness is towards a region where no resolution is possible at all. (1)

The present study provides, I believe, a further basis for Knights's perceptions about this soliloquy and about the play. What Knights described as a preoccupation with 'distortions in men's way of looking at the world...(and) the problem of the relation of "knowledge" to the knower',[2] can be seen as a quite deliberate dramatic exploitation of what the Sceptics had long been saying about the dialectical nature of knowledge; as a dramatic statement of the implications this state of knowledge has for judgements and decisions, and therefore for action. And, since these are central elements of existence, also for being.

The very generality of the terms Hamlet uses in this soliloquy, is an indication that he speaks of far more than his particular problem. Being itself is stated in the infinitive, necessarily involving the universal state rather than a merely personal continuance; the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' can hardly stand simply for his burden in making a dubious promise to the ghost, but suggest rather the universal opposition of the world to enterprise. The phrase, 'a sea of troubles', also underlines this generality: we need to remind ourselves that Hamlet's troubles are finite at least in number, while the image used conveys an amorphous and infinite world of difficulty.[3] What we see Hamlet doing here is indulging in a process of generalisation from his particular problem to the problematic nature of being. As such, the speech expands the foundational debate on knowledge. As Knights points out, Hamlet's thoughts are various here - action, suicide, life after death, and so on - but 'the transitions are not clear',[4] which makes a paraphrase impossible. Knights explained this as the result of the speech's ideas being 'held loosely in relation to a current of feeling which is the main determinant of meaning'.[5] I am not sure that Knights

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1. Ibid., p.211.

2. Ibid., p.162.

3. Cf. Dr Strauss's description, op. cit: 'When he turns towards the idea of action, his opponent becomes "a sea of troubles" - infinite, shapeless, informed with everything that renders the force of arms useless'.

4. Op. cit., p.207.

5. Loc. cit.

explains this adequately, since, after invoking Johnson and Boethius, he simply comes back to the statement, that Hamlet's deep concern is with 'essential being', and then goes on to the later parts of the speech. But perhaps the discontinuity is not explainable in terms of a current of feeling at all, while it does follow as a consequence of the large generalisations Hamlet makes from his experience. He is, in essence, dramatising a process of dealing with knowledge that can lead only to a further sense of complexity; the inductive process which Polonius has already demonstrated to be easily productive of false knowledge, and which in Hamlet's hands, at this point, is futile as an instrument, either to increase his knowledge or to turn it into action.

What Hamlet's use of the inductive process produces here is that sense of frustration and consequent desire to 'evade, (and) shuffle off, the complexities of consciousness'[1] which have often enough been recognised in the speech. The talk of death as a desirable 'consummation' of sleep spoilt only by dreams unspecified, but which must 'give us pause', suggests unmistakably a wish to put down his burden. Here, perhaps, is the current of feeling Knights suggests, but I don't think it is the true determinant of meaning in the speech. As I have suggested, in looking at previous scenes, the emotive current is one possible signification of the play at any given point, but it is usual that other responses are possible on grounds other than acceptance of the emotional pattern. It is the ending of Hamlet's speech that most readily shows us what he has been concerned with:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pitch and moment,
> With this regard, their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action.
>
> (III.i.83)

This is the picture we all have of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark in his particular circumstances; it is a return from the general speculation to the particular,(even though still in the language of generality), and it is stated as a logically derived conclusion: 'Thus.../And thus...'. He has demonstrated the effects of treating knowledge as grounds for infinite speculation, and in these lines states the case in plain terms which form a comment on the pursuit of knowledge still firmly in motion in the play. Placed where it is, between the King's attempts to gain information about

1. Ibid., p.210.

Hamlet, and the play-scene, which is Hamlet's attempt to prove Claudius's guilt, this soliloquy is an ironic comment not only on the Prince's own state of mind, but also on the mechanism of the plot in which he is involved. His search for knowledge cannot help him in practical terms of solution or resolution, for the whole process is productive *merely* of knowledge.

It is attractive to think positively, as Dover Wilson does in his notes[1] to the exchange that follows, and to take Hamlet as purposefully aware of what is going on in this scene and therefore addressing the King and Polonius in their coverture.[2] But in view of the theoretical and irresolute nature of what precedes the exchange, I think that he is caught between the sense of self-criticism which he shows in the soliloquy, and the antic mask which is raised as a defensive reflex. Whatever lines seem appropriate to his eavesdroppers are the norm of stage rhetoric, which assumes more than one audience. Evidence of this confusion is the way he moves from a sense of his own guilt to a moralising role: his first reaction on seeing Ophelia is,

> Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins rememb'red.
> (III.i.89)

To her wish that he take back his 'remembrances', he is defensive, and even lies:

> No, not I;
> I never gave you aught.
> (III.i.95)

This compounds his sense of guilt, which is perhaps why he moves on to an aphoristic parody of the moralist - parody because the moralising is clearly cynical and mixed with comments on his own failings:

> Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.
> (III.i.121)

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1. New Cambridge edition, 1934, reprinted 1969, p.193.

2. Dover Wilson does this by means of a conjectural emendation to a stage direction, which allows Hamlet to overhear the eavesdropping plot being laid.

That the dialogue with Ophelia is (like the soliloquy), not logically paraphrasable, is surely clear from the conflicting interpretations given by Ophelia, Claudius, and Polonius. To Ophelia, his mind is 'o'erthrown', his reason 'like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh'. To the King, what he spoke,

> though it lack'd form a little,
> Was not like madness.
>
> (III.i.164)

And Polonius, though he accepts the King's plan,[1] holds on to his view:

> But yet I do believe
> The origin and commencement of his grief
> Sprung from neglected love.
>
> (III.i.176)

This means that once again the play provides textual support for varying interpretations, and in view of the lack of finite knowledge about the truth that still obtains at this point in the play, it would seem that Shakespeare's dramaturgy is aimed at maintaining a state of doubt in the audience as well as at revealing the problems that his protagonist has to face.

This might well give us a justification besides plot for the dramaturgical focus of the opening speech of the following scene. Here is the conscious dramatist drawing attention to his art in a manner entirely relevant to his plot.[2] The point Hamlet makes about the 'purpose of playing' being to 'hold...the mirror up to nature', is a just description of both his intention to reveal Claudius's true image, and Shakespeare's epistemological intention in the play to 'let your own discretion be your tutor'. What he demands in this speech to the players, is gentleness, temperance, the modesty of nature, the proper imitation of humanity. What he condemns and abhors, is excessive passion, but also excessive tameness, excessive declamation, inappropriate laughter. In a phrase, the *via media* is advocated in dramatic terms. He is, in fact, talking about quality of performance, hence about standards of judgement, and therefore we should not be surprised that Horatio is brought on to be praised as

> e'en as just a man
> As e'er my conversation cop'd withal.
>
> (III.ii.52)

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1. A final irony of the scene is that Hamlet's irresolute juggling produces a firm plan - in *Claudius's* mind.

2. Shakespeare uses here the technique that has come to be known as 'metafictive' or, in this case, 'metadramatic'.

Horatio takes 'Fortune's buffets and rewards' with 'equal thanks', and his 'blood and judgement' are 'well comeddled'; his ability to judge matters without the subjectivity of passionate attachment is what Hamlet admires, and the test Hamlet has set up by means of the Gonzago play is to be assessed by 'both (their) judgements'. It is clearly an attempt to attain truth by means of balanced judgement; but what we have already seen of Horatio in this role is not likely to give us any greater confidence than the end of the second act inspired, so, in spite of a sense of direction and enthusiasm which are visible in Hamlet at this moment, our faith in the successful pursuit of knowledge is scarcely stronger now than at any stage of the play so far.

It is worth noticing that the objective of this pursuit, certainty about Claudius's murder, is given double emphasis in the dumb show and its verbal expansion in the Gonzago play; presumably this is a suggestion of strong visual evidence (the action is performed twice on stage), to support the verbal evidence, heard once from the ghost and once here. Its effect as evidence is beyond doubt, as far as Hamlet is concerned:

> O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound.
> (III.ii.280)

But our judgement as audience is surely clouded by the constantly interjected reminders which his eagerness throws up, that the play has been modified by Hamlet to test the King:

> 'Tis a knavish piece of work;
> but what of that? Your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not.
> (III.ii.235)
>
> Begin, murderer; pox, leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come; the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge.
> (III.ii.247)

And his positive joy at Claudius's discomfiture is expressed as a triumph of dramatic skill which, we know, depends on an illusion:

> Would not this...get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?
> (III.ii.269)

That the reliability of evidence is in question here, is perhaps confirmed by the brief reappearance of the information gatherers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Polonius. The former come to summon him to his mother, but the recorder episode is clearly a graphic demonstration of the incompetence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for their task. Guildenstern, pushed to play the recorder, confesses, 'I have not the skill', and

Hamlet angrily points out the application of this to their undertaking:

> 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to
> be played on than a pipe? (III.ii.360)

Yet, as far as Hamlet knows, their 'evidence' will be used by Claudius as if it were reliable.

Likewise, Polonius's little exchange with Hamlet, about the shape of a cloud, seems to be a demonstration of suggestibility in relation to a given sense-perception. So it is with a slight sense of paradox that the Prince seems to cling to his confidence in the evidence he has gained in support of his knowledge, as he talks of drinking hot blood, and doing 'such bitter business as the day/Would quake to look on'.

I have already argued that the play-scene reveals Hamlet as a man prepared to 'shake the estate' of Denmark;[1] this is just what Claudius perceives at the beginning of the third scene, hence his abrupt putting into action the plan to get Hamlet out of the country. However, the previous argument also suggested an indirectness of thought here which tends to work against any clear or simple line of action being taken by Hamlet to avenge the crime he now seems to believe quite firmly established. It is surely an act of dialectical obstruction that gives us in this scene a speech, in conventional terms, that reminds the audience of the disorder consequent upon regicide, the King's own guilt and wish to repent of his crime, and Hamlet's avoidance of an opportune moment to carry out the 'bitter business' mentioned only minutes before.

Nevertheless, this is also a moment of confirmation of knowledge. Claudius at last corroborates what we have learnt of his guilt:

> O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
> It hath the primal eldest curse upon't -
> A brother's murder. (III.iii.36)

Arguably, it is the point at which the dialectical substructure could disappear, for now Hamlet knows, and we know, the truth. But this is not quite valid; we know, but Hamlet is still only aware of his evidence, even though he seems to be convinced by it. Shakespeare's equivocal rhetoric again separates us from his characters, and never more clearly than in the irony which allows *us* to realise that Claudius cannot pray, while Hamlet spares him because he believes him to be praying. Rather than

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1. Cf. pp. 72-4 above.

being rendered unnecessary, the dialectical basis of the play is merely given a new emphasis by the knowledge achieved at this stage.[1] Hamlet's choice is not so confused now by doubt about consciousness and being, but becomes much more concentrated on modes of action and the associated difficulties - as is witnessed by the increased pace of action that follows the play-scene.

Openness and confrontation now take the place of secret probing: within 25 lines of the beginning of III.iv, Hamlet has not only openly challenged and begun to chastise Gertrude, but he has impulsively killed Polonius - an action suggestive of much of his behaviour after this. But just as knowledge had a way of being challenged before, so open, impulsive action seems to find its thwarting contradictions in this new mode. He has barely missed the chance to kill Claudius, when he succeeds in killing the wrong person; we seem to have a dialectical principle ordering the action now, for there is something almost symbolic in the killing, 'with a pass through the arras': his decisive action is directed blindly, recalling the amorphous nature of the enemy, the 'sea of troubles' against which he now takes arms, and suggesting now the difficulty, not of knowing the enemy, but of bringing him into the open, unmuffled, unprotected; to be seen, recognised, and killed. Such practical difficulties bring doubts - or at least suspensions - of their own.

I have also argued previously that Shakespeare shares Montaigne's distaste for direct physical revolt, even in a morally justifiable cause.[2] The killing of Polonius is the first example of the many accidents and blunders that characterise the action of the rest of the play, a feature which surely suggests some principle such as I have indicated. While Hamlet himself seems to have shaken off the hold of doubt, and has begun to speak and act with resolution, he continues to arouse doubts in other characters and in us. Thus, his powers of persuasion have great effect on Gertrude at first:

> O Hamlet, speak no more!
> Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul. (III.iv.88)

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1. This is where the suggested change of emphasis at the end of the first act becomes actual, having been lost while Hamlet tests his knowledge. Cf. p.117 above.

2. Cf. p.74 above.

And

> These words like daggers enter into my ears;
> (III.iv.95)

- a line that verbally alludes to both the original crime and Hamlet's intended revenge weapon, suggesting thereby his success with Gertrude. But when the ghost appears, the effect is completely counteracted, and Gertrude's response is reduced to, 'Alas, he's mad!' His most earnest application of the ghost's suggestion to speak to her, is met with compassion, but no belief:

> Alas, how is't with you,
> That you do bend your eye on vacancy,
> And with th' incorporal air do hold discourse?
> (III.iv.116)

That the ghost is visible to Hamlet and to us, may suggest that Gertrude, like Claudius, is incommunicado with heaven and is the odd one out in this communication between herself, Hamlet, the ghost and us.[1] But this does not invalidate her response, since we have shared Hamlet's communications with the ghost all the time without any real advantage of knowledge; and in any case, we may still cherish our own personal doubts about ghosts, even when they have a place in the *Dramatis Personae*. Hamlet at least seems to feel the need to win back Gertrude's confidence in himself after the evident destruction of belief by the ghost's visit:

> Ecstasy!
> My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time,
> And makes as healthful music. It is not madness
> That I have uttered. Bring me to the test,
> And I the matter will re-word which madness
> Would gambol from.
> (III.iv.139)

He seems to succeed, if her passiveness in the rest of the scene is any criterion:

> O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
> (III.iv.156)

But the ambiguity of the speech beginning 'Not this, by no means', (line 181) is such that it is purely a matter of interpretative preference whether we think of Gertrude as keeping or betraying her promise to Hamlet. And there is more than enough similarity between this scene and the last scene of Act 1 to suggest that this promise of secrecy about the ghost is scarcely more meaningful than the oath sworn then.

In terms of the new dialectic of action, Hamlet's confrontative

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1. The view held by Furness and accepted by Dover Wilson, op. cit., notes pp.214-5.

approach or attack is met by the tactics of avoidance or defence. Claudius has already arranged to 'ship him hence'; now the responsibility for Polonius's death must be broadcast to forestall the blame's being 'laid to' Claudius:

> so haply slander -
> Whose whisper o'er the world's diameter,
> As level as the cannon to his blank,
> Transports his pois'ned shot - may miss our name,
> And hit the woundless air. (IV.i.40)

This is a splendidly conceived ironic fulfilment of Hamlet's fear that 'arms' would find an amorphous enemy - metaphorically the sea or the air; the point is that Claudius will not offer himself as an easy target for Hamlet's action. Even the execution of the Prince is to be carried out indirectly, at a remove, and not by a hired killer but, (verbally at least), by an abstract nation:

> Do it England:
> For like the hectic in my blood he rages,
> And thou must cure me. (IV.iii.65)

Hamlet's last soliloquy, which precedes his absence from the stage for three scenes, has been characterised above as emphasizing the disproportion between cause and effect in Fortinbras's enterprise.[1] In the context of the present depiction of the evasiveness and strong defensive tactics used by Claudius, this emphasis seems appropriate to the parting resolve that Hamlet makes, for it places a stress on obligation, and this is an important element in the decisive actions that follow: he will finally penetrate Claudius's defences by feeling obliged to challenge Laertes in the graveyard, and by accepting Laertes' challenge to fight a duel. What he sees in the action of Fortinbras is the obscure nature of the springs of action:

> This is th' imposthume of much wealth and peace,
> That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
> Why the man dies. (IV.iv.27)

The effect does not reveal the cause in Hamlet's essentially metaphoric reflection and analysis of the situation. His line of reasoning seems to be that great effects follow even from apparently obscure causes, therefore *obviously* great causes *demand* great effects. He therefore returns to the self-chastisement that he is a coward since he has 'cause, and will, and strength, and means' for his revenge. The whole tenour of the

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1. Cf. p.77 above.

speech is comparative, so the honour that makes Fortinbras 'find quarrel in a straw' obliges him to 'stir' since his 'argument' is so much greater. There is consequently a subtle shift of emphasis between

> O, from this time forth,
> My thoughts be bloody, or be *nothing worth!*
>
> (IV.iv.65)

and his previous statement of resolve,

> Now could I drink hot blood,
> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on.
>
> (III.ii.380)

The present resolve is far more purposeful because it is directed by an enhanced sense of obligation, vital to maintaining the confrontative bearing he has adopted, especially since Claudius's defences are so strong.

It is to the analysis of these defences that the three following scenes are largely given. Ophelia's speech which is described as 'half sense', is feared by Gertrude because it might arouse 'dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds', and Claudius himself gives us a catalogue of the dangers accumulating about him:

> First, her father slain;
> Next, your son gone, and he most violent author
> Of his own just remove; the people muddied,
> Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers
> For good Polonius' death; and we have done but greenly
> In hugger-mugger to inter him; poor Ophelia
> Divided from herself and her fair judgement,
> Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts;
> Last, and as much containing as all these,
> Her brother is in secret come from France;
> Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
> And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
> With pestilent speeches of his father's death;
> Wherein necessity, of matter beggar'd,
> Will nothing stick our person to arraign
> In ear and ear. O my dear Gertrude, this,
> Like to a murd'ring piece, in many places
> Gives me superfluous death.
>
> (IV.v.76)

The last image in this, that of the murderous cannon with its 'overkill' effect, ensures that we do not miss his sense of being embattled, while the noise of Laertes' riotous mob elicits a call on his 'Switzers', a clear reminder of his defences. That they are overborne by Laertes and his followers, indicates that they are penetrable; but Claudius shows remarkable calm and control, suggesting that his guards are not his last line of defence. This is even more evident when Laertes, obviously

suggestive of one possible Hamlet, confronts him, with revenge of a dead father in his heart. Claudius's equalness to the situation is quite evident:

> Let him go, Gertrude; do not fear our person:
> There's such divinity doth hedge a king
> That treason can but peep to what it would,
> Acts little of his will.
> (IV.v.119)

I have suggested that this apparent strength in Claudius arises from a smugness based on his confidence that Hamlet is safely despatched, and that, as he is here free of guilt, he is confident of the divine protection.[1] The irony of this, *vis-a-vis* his own treasonable acting of his 'will', does not bother him, but operates strongly to remind us of the dubious nature of such confidence. In other words, the dialectical basis of action asserts its controlling force over Claudius too, enabling us to recognise his ultimate weakness in spite of the brave new front he puts up.

The fact that Laertes is presented here in terms that invite a direct comparison between his and Hamlet's responses to the revenge of a murdered father, must surely be taken as a hypothetical testing of the direct action initially contemplated by Hamlet, and towards which he seems to be moving:

> To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!
> Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
> I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
> That both the worlds I give to negligence,
> Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
> Most throughly for my father.
> (IV.v.128)

It is strong stuff, of the kind Hamlet utters, but different in that it is backed by an unquestioning nature, and its confrontation is supported by a crowd. That this threatened action is so easily parried by Claudius must then be taken as an indication that even direct action is subject to the dialectical nature of experience: our doubts about Hamlet's procrastination are given new substance by the realisation that direct action is equally doubtful of successful or easy resolution of problems. In this, Shakespeare seems indeed to have intended a relativistic view of experience like the theory of complementarity of Norman Rabkin, mentioned above.[2]

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1. Cf. pp.74-6 above.

2. Cf. p.97 above.

Claudius's defences involve more than a group of Swiss guards. Indeed, his eagerness to give Laertes' soul 'due content' (line 208), the confidence with which he offers his kingdom, crown, and life to satisfy the vengeful young man, all suggest the opportunistic exploitation of circumstances characteristic of the wise villain. So Ophelia's rubbing of salt into Laertes' wound is taken not as a threat to Claudius, but as additional matter to enrage Laertes against Hamlet - who may be well despatched, but about whom Claudius is presumably unwilling to take any chances. The wise villain keeps his defences strong.

Perfectly placed in the dialectic of attack and defence, Hamlet's letter to Horatio keeps us informed of the Prince's ability to perform deeds - even if it was 'a compelled valour'. In addition, this brief scene tells of letters from Hamlet to the King, the importance of which lies in the fact that they alert Claudius to the need for continued defence, and for a new offensive against Hamlet. Thus his new-found ally, Laertes, becomes the frontline of Claudius's defence, fully motivated and eager to attack:

> My lord, I will be rul'd
> The rather, if you could devise it so
> That I might be the organ.
>
> (IV.vii.68)

Notwithstanding this eagerness in Laertes, Claudius carefully works around to the 'exploit now ripe in (his) device', using flattery - repeating the praises, (real or invented *ad hoc*), of an admired French soldier regarding Laertes' swordsmanship - and the revenge motive, to bring him to a position where he will be unable to avoid fighting Hamlet. By this mixture of the conventions of revenge and honour, he makes doubly sure that Laertes will undertake the challenge. To ensure that Hamlet will not foil his plans a second time, he has 'a back or second' plan, that of the poisoned drink. In the dialectic of action, defence and attack have thus gradually moved together, and Claudius has changed from the hunted to the hunter.

At this point the action is not yet completed; yet in a sense the play has reached a moment for pause and consideration. Both knowledge and action have been presented in a dialectical way, and Hamlet's task is really no nearer resolution than it was when he first had it from the ghost. On the contrary, it would seem that the tables are about to be turned on him. And at this moment Shakespeare gives us the strange scene

in the churchyard. A.P. Rossiter speaks of the importance, for *Hamlet*, of Montaigne's scepticism, which, 'by probing into the unsteadiness and varyingness of purely human standards, set men's minds to the discovery of what in this mutable world *was* enduring and stable';[1] in this scene Hamlet is clearly approaching the question of durability, but while the play is concerned with a dialectical exploration of the unstable world, Hamlet's own enquiry gives us a picture of permanence that reflects just the kind of negativity that has given Scepticism a bad name. For this reason I believe it is not accurate to think of Hamlet himself as a doubter or Sceptic, at least not in the Pyrrhonean sense. The sense of doubt that critics have responded to in the play, is only partly due to his procrastination and questioning, for the Prince does not truly suspend judgement. On the contrary, he is, as Foakes says, old-fashioned and a moralist. He makes many judgements, condemns others roundly, trusting only Horatio; and the actions we do see him perform are decisive, even rash, and clearly not the result of undogmatic views. The true source of doubt in the play is, rather, the dialectical construction Shakespeare has used for the play, so he is not to be seen as confounding Scepticism with pessimism or fatalism or any other -ism that Hamlet might be thought to display in the last act. The emphasis on action has helped us to place Hamlet better than did the earlier context of knowing and being. Measured in terms of action, he is, as Rossiter also says, 'an utter failure'.[2] His actions have already demonstrated this, and so will the remaining actions - again Rossiter's point: 'In *action* Hamlet is first to last the creature of circumstance'.[3] But the importance here does not lie in what the scene tells us about Hamlet as a pessimistic (or otherwise) being; as Dr Strauss points out,[4] it is the 'passage' rather than the essence that should concern us. The scene has rather to do with what his failure, in spite of his nobility and morality and justification, tells us about permanence in the mutable world. Trite as it may sound, permanence seems to be available only in terms of perseverance, endurance, the determination to go on trying in spite of mischance and seemingly insurmountable difficulty. Perhaps permanence exists only in the continuing attempt and not in the performance.

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1. Op. cit., p.187.
2. Ibid., p.181.
3. Loc. cit.
4. Cf. p.102 above.

Several things suggest this: it is an implied necessity of the Sceptical spirit of enquiry and suspension; Hamlet may seem to lag in enthusiasm near the end, but he cannot be accused of abandoning his quest; and, perhaps most important, the dialogue of the graveyard scene is focussed on the idea of durability. This is helped by the comic tone: the 'two clowns' who have no feeling for their business and sing in their grave-making, establish at once that death, in more than one way the central pursuit and subject of the play,[1] is just like all other aspects of experience in that it can be discussed with humour and in varied terms. Its legal status begins the scene:

> 2 Clown. The crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial.
> 1 Clo. How can that be, unless she drown'd herself in her own defence?
> 2 Clo. Why, 'tis found so.
> 1 Clo. It must be 'se offendendo'; it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act; and an act hath three branches - it is to act, to do, to perform; argal, she drown'd herself wittingly.
> 2 Clo. Nay, but hear you, Goodman Delver.
> 1 Clo. Give me leave. Here lies the water; good. Here stands the man; good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes - mark you that; but if the water comes to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.
> 2 Clo. But is this law?
> 1 Clo. Ay, marry, is't; crowner's quest law.
> (V.i.4)

This involves the question of action also in humorous terms. The focus shifts to a sniping moral judgement:

> 2 Clo. Will you ha the truth on't? If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out a Christian burial.
> (V.i.23)

And then it becomes a riddling game on the question, 'who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter?' The significant and considerably extended answer to which emphasizes the endurance or lastingness of the grave. Hamlet, in his excessive dwelling on the *memento mori* theme that is unavoidably part of the situation, is also largely concerned with durability in the form of the changed state of the beings who might have filled out the skulls and bones he now sees tossed and knocked about. He is fundamentally serious about the degradation involved by this levity:

1. Many critics have felt this, including Wilson Knight and C.S. Lewis.

> Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggats with them? Mine ache to think on't.
> (V.i.88)

But he is made to enter into the spirit of the prevailing wit:

> Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery?
> (V.i.95)

The dialogue between Hamlet and the sexton makes this involvement unavoidable while still stressing the question of durability:

> Ham. How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?
> 1 Clo. Faith, if 'a be not rotten before 'a die - as we have many pocky corses now-a-days that will scarce hold the laying in - 'a will last you some eight year or nine year. A tanner will last you nine year.
> (V.i.158)

Finally, the comic end of existence is suggested in direct conjunction with endurance, an imaginary tracing of the ancient lineage of a barrel stopper:

> Ham. Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?
> Hor. 'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.
> Ham. No, faith, not a jot; ...Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?
> Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
> Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
> O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
> Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw.
> (V.i.198)

Rossiter is not happy about the morality revealed by Hamlet in this scene: in describing the Prince as an 'utter failure' when measured in terms of action, he comments thus:

> This failure is most evident in the *triviality* of his witty part in the graveyard with Osric. In both scenes he is no better than a clever chatterer: highly intelligent, amusing, critical - except of the self that talks. (1)

This seems to me to be too closely involved with character in a moralistic way. There is surely little point in criticising Hamlet for lack of feeling in a scene which does not set out primarily to examine character. The play's construction has shown by means of the dialectical presentation

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1. Op. cit., p.181.

of opposing forces, that a simply moralistic course of action has little or no chance of success in the given dramatic situation. What the *play* needs at this stage is precisely what Shakespeare gives it - an assessment, in a different tonality, of the action constantly intended by the protagonist, and of its obvious consequences and implications.

The scene gives us the same reflective Hamlet we already know, but concerned less with his own problematic task than with an almost theoretical interest in the scene he fortuitously enters. In other words, there is a new spirit of detachment evident here, in the emphasis of the dialogue, in the comic tone, and even in the way the returned Prince is presented as an outsider, an observer 'afar off' of the sexton's action, and of the burial of Ophelia. It is only Laertes' hyperbolic 'rant' that draws him into the action by provoking him to compete, both in terms of action - leaping into the grave - and in words. His hysterical-sounding challenge to Laertes, to show greater love for Ophelia than he, is surely what Dover Wilson calls it, 'a crescendo of sarcasm',[1] directed as a criticism of an excessive show of feeling from a position of contained, deliberately controlled feeling:

> Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
> I'll rant as well as thou.
>
> (V.i.277)

I think it needs reiteration that Hamlet, in spite of his detachment and slowness to follow up the hot words with which he departed from the stage several scenes previously, does not relinquish his sense of a pressing task. While he takes time to recount to Horatio, in almost leisurely fashion, the exchange of commissions, there is a fierceness of spirit which stems directly from his sense of justice done:

> Why, man, they did make love to this employment;
> They are not near my conscience; their defeat
> Does by their own insinuation grow:
> 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
> Between the pass and fell incensed points
> Of mighty opposites.
>
> (V.ii.57)

And his feeling towards Claudius is still equally intent on revenge:

> He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother;
> ...is't not perfect conscience
> To quit him with this arm?
>
> (V.ii.64)

Nevertheless, there is a new detachment, a confidence almost, which

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1. Op. cit., notes p.240.

enables us to assess what the emphasis on action has done for Hamlet. Where the preoccupation with knowledge and being led him to irresolution and self-condemnation, the changed emphasis after the play-scene has put him at the disposal of fortune. Although he blunders in action, he has learnt an acceptance which is of a kind with the spirit of endurance intimated in the graveyard scene, and of the essence of the Sceptical view. This acceptance has its first direct expression at the beginning of the final scene:

> Rashly,
> And prais'd be rashness for it - let us know,
> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well,
> When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will.
>
> (V.ii.6)

And it is restated just before the duel begins:

> If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come - the readiness is all. Since no man owes of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.
>
> (V.ii.212)

If these lines owe anything to the Sceptical influence, they do not reflect a simple resignation and blind faith in fate. The Sceptical faith is in the continuing possibility of resolution rather than in its achievement, and it is active rather than passive. Hamlet is, and will be, active right to the end, but his acceptance of fortune's role in his task has given him a patience that these lines express most strongly. This is not Christian patience: it is reminiscent, rather, of the Neoplatonist surrender to a state of unknowing in order to avoid dogmatic commitment. 'Let be' is essentially the resolution of the problem expressed in 'To be or not be', but it is a delicately balanced resolve, a resolve to wait and see - or more precisely, to carry on in the hope of vindictive finality. He will 'defy augury', he will accept the challenge as honour requires, and, as chance allows, he will finally accomplish his task by killing Claudius.

By successively pursuing knowledge and action, Hamlet has revealed the dubious nature of experience, the arbitrariness governing events, and consequently both the difficulty and futility of making choices on moral grounds. It is indeed a dark picture, and therefore a reading such as that of Prof. Brimer is valid. It is so dark that Horatio, the man of reason and judgement, tries to play the 'antique Roman', and to seek 'felicity' by leaving 'this harsh world'. Yet Hamlet gives his last

energy not to his revenge on Claudius, but to saving Horatio: to ensure that he and his cause are reported properly 'to the unsatisfied'. This is enigmatic, and it seems to create a ripple of obscure statements which end the play: Hamlet's final speech asks Horatio to inform Fortinbras of his support - 'he has my dying voice' - and of 'th' occurrents, more and less', and ends with the mysterious words, 'the rest is silence'. There are also Horatio's terms, the 'yet unknowing world', and 'accidental judgements'. It would seem that the last concern is again with knowledge - the basic and original concern in the play: what is known must be told, therefore Hamlet's request to Horatio. What is unknown will make his 'wounded name' live after him, and therefore the quest for knowledge must continue. From this point of view, 'the rest is silence' is either a helpless sigh of surrender to fate, or a hint of the ultimate unknowability of the whole truth. Perhaps this is the final choice offered to us in the play. And silence, we may recall, is also a kind of suspension.[1]

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1. Cf. p.33 above.

8. The Structure of Doubt in *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*

A.P. Rossiter points out that F.S. Boas, in his original use of the phrase 'Problem Plays', had Ibsenite and Shavian criteria in mind, and that the 'label' retains some of its 'Ibsenite smell'.[1] Its use since then has implied an element of psychological darkness or negativity in Shakespeare during the period of their composition, despondency, pessimism, cynicism, or some such term being most frequently used. This critical interpretation was recognised by R.W. Chambers as imputing to Shakespeare a negative dogma; his answer was to substitute a positive dogma, which led to 'the official (British Academy) Christian Shakespeare'.[2] Rossiter proposes a view that avoids these two extremes, using such terms as 'versatility' and 'uncertainty of interpretation', and suggests 'tragi-comic' as a label for these plays, because they reflect 'something equivocal', an 'art of inversion, deflation and paradox'.[3] Thus by mid-century, Rossiter was pointing the way to a dialectical view of the Problem Plays.

Yet there is still some confusion between negative and positive views, which I believe can be cleared up by stressing the dialectical structure underlying these two plays. Anne Barton tells us, in 1974, that *Troilus and Cressida* 'is the discovery of the twentieth century'[4] because its negative qualities - 'intellectualism, savagery, and disillusion' - 'speak forcefully to contemporary audiences naturally sceptical about ideas of honor, nobility, and military glory'.[5] She consolidates this picture of negativity by agreeing with the apparent consensus of modern producers, that 'the play is a brilliant but scarifying vision of a world in pieces, all value and coherence gone... (and that) the picture of man which it presents is pessimistic almost to the point of nihilism'.[6] This seems to me unduly hard on both the

1. Op. cit., p.109.
2. Cf. Rossiter, pp.112-114.
3. Ibid., p.117.
4. Introduction to the text, *Riverside Shakespeare*, p.443.
5. Loc. cit.
6. Loc. cit.

twentieth century and the play, but it is perhaps simply a statement of judgement exercised by the critic in response to the choices offered by the play's essentially dialectical structure.

Paradoxically, Dr Barton acknowledges this structure in the following passage:

> The prologue, with its abrupt shifts of tone and style, its dizzying blend of celebration and mockery, the grandiloquent and the deliberately off-hand, is a microcosm of the play it serves to introduce: a finely judged preparation for the mixed and unclassifiable experience to come. (1)

And, as she points out, in order to present the play as 'an unmistakable tragedy, a dignified lament for Troy',[2] Dryden had to rewrite the whole play; it would seem that even holders of the dialectical view do not fully grasp its implications for interpretation. John Wilders too, summarising the state of critical opinion about *Troilus and Cressida* in 1973, draws attention to the general agreement on its argumentative, intellectual qualities, and the clear hiatus it shows between ideals and practice; but he also points to the extreme opposition between critics such as O.J. Campbell and G. Wilson Knight.[3] He concludes:

> the uncertainty about the genre of the play is therefore not simply a disagreement about its structure or the irresolution about its ending. It arises from the effect on the reader of a highly complex and ambiguous work. (4)

Norman Rabkin is a thoroughgoing exponent of the dialectical position, as I have already indicated.[5] Applying his theory of complementarity to *Troilus and Cressida*, he sees the confusion among critics as 'the result of Shakespeare's strategy',[6] and the meaning of the play as 'more an area of turbulence than a sententious moral...a complex question about the nature of value and an interrelated group of

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1. Ibid., p.444.
2. Loc. cit.
3. In *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. S. Wells, pp.97-101.
4. Ibid., p.100.
5. Cf. pp.97-8.
6. Op. cit., p.54.

incompatible answers'.[1]

Terence Hawkes, too, sees Troilus as having to make a choice between two equally valid but irreconcilable perceptions of Cressida; his is a dichotomy of values which he shares with other characters in the Problem Plays, and which 'has no "right" side', since 'either side is vulnerable without the other's support'.[2]

The dialectical view is thus quite strongly represented in criticism of *Troilus and Cressida*. However, the confusion mentioned above is still evident, and there are still modern critics who hold this view with some degree of misunderstanding. Dr Barton for example, apparently feels a need to make a stance on the play, and so do other recent critics. In spite of some of her remarks already cited, she also makes statements of commitment such as:

> The systematic undercutting and diminution of every principal character leaves one...to face Thersites as the one man who assesses the situation correctly... By the end, although one scarcely rejoices as he does over his discoveries, it is hard to challenge his sweeping indictment of both sides. (3)

This is to affirm the negative position with which she began, and I think this has to do with her understanding of the scepticism which she perceives in the play:

> Argumentative and intensely verbal, almost self-consciously intellectual, *Troilus and Cressida* moves towards a position of profound scepticism. (4)

My task here seems, therefore, to be less to argue the case for a dialectical reading of the play, than to show that the dialectical construction implies the Sceptical suspension rather than a negative intention.

Scepticism is most likely to be regarded as 'profound' if it is understood as a negative concept; the true Sceptic, who suspends judgement, does not invite this kind of response because he avoids

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1. Ibid., p.55.

2. Op. cit., pp.98-99.

3. Op. cit., pp.446-7.

4. Ibid., p.447.

embroilment. Profound doubt - which seems to be what Dr Barton means - would most properly mean a strong sense of the hopelessness of the human situation, a negative attitude which is, as I have indicated in this study, not characteristic of Pyrrhonean Scepticism. Thus, for Dr Barton, the relativism of the play reflects also 'a world of chaos', from which she seeks comfort in the 'artistic order of the play itself... (which) contradicts the nihilism of the action', so that the play 'dismisses its audience fundamentally reassured'.[1] This is clearly a retreat from the dialectical view she reveals elsewhere in the essay.

R.A. Foakes, pursuing *Troilus and Cressida* as an offshoot of Jonsonian and Marstonian satire, adopts a similarly committed stance on the play, which 'carries an element of general parody in relation to the grand Homeric legend'.[2] While he sees that Shakespeare maintains an air of satiric detachment in the play, and that 'the whole action is built up by ironic juxtapositioning and comic counterpointing',[3] Professor Foakes holds that Thersites' 'satiric commentary', together with the contradictions between word and action, seeming and being, gives us 'a predominant sense of the limitations of the human situation',[4] and serves to 'expose comically and hence criticize human failings, while leaving ideals unscathed'.[5] The latter part of this presents, indeed, a balanced view; yet I feel the weight of a moral stance in the first part, especially in the terms 'limitations', 'expose', and 'criticize'.

It is, I think, this felt need to make such moral stances that confuses issues in criticism of the Problem Plays, because critics like to believe that the morality they perceive is the intended morality of the dramatist; this is the failure Rossiter calls 'one-eyed' criticism, which is referred to in my Introduction. Rossiter shows the confusion to arise from an expectation: the lecturer (or writer) who undertakes to talk about the Problem Plays,

> is not a free man. His audience has certain expectations; ...you will be deeply disappointed if I do not contrive

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1. Loc. Cit.

2. Op. cit., p.44.

3. Ibid., p.45.

4. Ibid., p.59.

5. Ibid., p.60.

> to send you away with heads full of glooms, disillusions, moral dilemmas and artistic perplexities, vexed questions of human psychology and behaviour; and, above all, if I fail to leave these plays as 'problematical' as either you or I found them, or more so. (1)

What this reflects as a critical malady, is, in Keats's terms, an 'irritable reaching after fact and reason' that cannot be gratified by Shakespeare's text. Keats perceived the essence of Scepticism in Shakespeare, (even though he did not describe it as such), and the sense of confusion and perplexity that some critics feel about these plays, results from an ingrained habit of reaching after explanations and reasons. Such, after all, is the nature of analysis. But surely the conscious artist does not go to the elaborate lengths that Shakespeare does, to construct the opposing sides of his dramatic worlds, simply to show the superiority of one side? Scepticism grew out of the endless oppositions of the philosophers; given the oppositions presented in Shakespeare's dramatic conscructions, I suggest that he saw the possibilities for dramatic representation in the Sceptical position, and we have to grasp the Sceptical nettle in its full discomfort if we are to understand the vision involved.

What I have already tried to do, but what can be done more directly and briefly in connection with *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*, is to focus analysis on the constructional grounds of the irresolution so clearly visible in these plays, rather than on psychological explanations for the actions of the characters. This approach seems to offer a better description of the plays as they function, than the retreat into psychological darkness can; psychological analysis inevitably embroils the critic, leading him to moral siding, and therefore judgements about characters and action, which may or may not be right, but tell us very little about the plays as works of dramatic art (or, for that matter, about Shakespeare's view of human nature), since there is no way of knowing whether one's judgement is right or wrong - every critic thinks *he* is right.

More obviously than *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida* is based on oppositions - in a dialectical sense of equipollence: this *and* that, not *this rather than* that. Even at the basic level of plot, the play's three

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1. Op. cit., p.108.

areas of development, (or perhaps two if we regard the Greek and Trojan elements as subdivisions of a unitary plot about war), are carefully held in a state of balance, none outweighing the others. Obviously there is a great deal of overlapping, but it is clear that the 24 scenes are shared evenly by the love and war plots, shifting constantly from one to the other; I doubt whether we leave any other of Shakespeare's plays with less sense of a straightforward plot, or of a clear-cut and indisputable moral. Nor are we, in Dr Barton's phrase, 'fundamentally reassured'.

Everything in the play is presented so as to be contradicted, in words, or in action, or in essence - and since this usually involves the negation of high ideals, deeds, or reputations, it is not surprising that terms such as 'nihilistic', 'cynical', 'disillusioned', and 'chaotic' are used to suggest its character. But surely such a response is not necessary? Certainly, if we become involved in the questions of fidelity and honour that are the subject matter of the plots, we are likely to feel the anguish of Troilus, or the self-righteousness of Ajax and his contempt for Achilles; yet in this play, even more than in *Hamlet*, there is that in the writing which tends to distance us from such involvement. The play is still unpopular on the stage, (as Rossiter points out at the beginning of his essay on the play),[1] perhaps because of the often remarked intellectual or philosophical content, designed for an élite original audience, or perhaps because we are given no centrally engaging character, such as Hamlet. This last tends to diminish the level of identification and sympathy an audience seems to need to ensure the popularity of a play. But it is surely just this that enables the reading audience, (and perhaps the very attentive select audience suggested by Rossiter and others), to accept more easily the movements from argument to refutation, from expressed ideal to paradoxical action, or from reputation to reality, which are characteristic of the play's construction.

As in *Hamlet*, the structure of doubt is fundamental and epistemological in nature, questioning the very grounds of knowledge, and, as is the case with criticism of *Hamlet*, critical opinion has seen this doubt as evidence of pessimism in Shakespeare. But this is a typically 'one-eyed' response: *Troilus and Cressida* exploits the oppositions

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1. Op. cit., p.129.

natural to the love and war themes even more systematically than *Hamlet* does the opposition between the Prince and Claudius. Its conscious dialectical patterning is correspondingly greater, and is evident in all three plots. In the love plot we have primarily a well-known tale of false love - certainly the best-known of all love tales used by Shakespeare. There was surely nothing to be gained in a moral sense from dramatising this tale merely to express cynicism about the course of true love. The nature and course of the love were well-known, therefore its interest in the play must derive from something other than its analysis as a love story. I suggest that this interest arises from the dialectic of truth itself - the opposition between equally-held faiths - and that the play's quest is for credibility, rather than knowledge. The question continually posed by the play is, 'who and what are to be believed?'

This is textually demonstrable; it is evident in the opening wrangle between Troilus and Pandarus, which is a clear indication of differing beliefs and expectations:

> Pan. I speak no more than truth.
> Tro. Thou dost not speak so much.
> Pan. Faith, I'll not meddle in it. Let her be as she is: if she be fair, 'tis the better for her; an she be not, she has the mends in her own hands.
> (I.i.63)

The opposition here is much like that in the extended dialogue in the second scene, about the qualities of men, which surely needs more justification for its inclusion than Cressida's admission, at the end of the scene, that conventional reluctance to admit attraction makes her hold off:

> Pan. Troilus is the better man of the two.
> Cres. O Jupiter! There's no comparison.
> Pan. What, not between Troilus and Hector? Do you know a man if you see him?
> Cres. Ay, if I ever saw him before and knew him.
> Pan. Well, I say Troilus is Troilus.
> Cres. Then you say as I say, for I am sure he is not Hector.
> Pan. No, nor Hector is not Troilus in some degrees.
> (I.ii.58)

Apart from its wit and contextual humour, the essential tenour of such an argument, especially as it is conducted at such length and with such elaborateness, is its pointlessness: neither case can be made strongly enough to resolve the difference of opinion. It is in fact not an

argument at all, merely an opposition of views. Since Cressida concludes by acknowledging that she admires Troilus, the interest stems from the rhetoric itself rather than from its outcome. We are led to question the credibility of the disputants, just as they deny each other belief, and this is microcosmic of the construction of the whole play.

When the lovers are brought together in the third act, there is no celebration of confirmed love but, instead, expressions of fear and doubt that performance will fall short of expectation :

> This is the monstruosity in love, lady, that the will
> is infinite, and the execution confin'd.
>
> (III.ii.78)

This again suggests a crisis of belief; confessing her love for Troilus, Cressida sees fidelity as dependent on secrecy:

> Why have I blabb'd? Who shall be true to us,
> When we are so unsecret to ourselves?
>
> (III.ii.121)

Knowledge, gained from the confessed love, is destructive of faith, which here means being true to, or belief in, each other; she seems to want belief in spite of her fear of confession. The whole strange love scene, which moves towards vows of love, culminates in a formally balanced and mutually cancelling pair of mottoes - 'As true as Troilus' and 'As false as Cressid' - which are the opposed statements in a dialectic of belief, of which the impossibility of resolving is perhaps epitomised in Troilus's words,

> O virtuous fight,
> When right with right wars who shall be most right!
>
> (III.ii.167)

And when they are forced to part, the dialogue is shot through with the fear of what is meant by the exhortation to be true:

> Tro. Be thou but true of heart -
> Cres. I true! how now! What wicked deem is this?
>
> (IV.iv.57)

Cressida's fear is again that she will not be believed, for the misgiving is repeated several times in this exchange, culminating in Troilus's words, a plain plea for belief:

> Fear not my truth; the moral of my wit
> Is 'plain and true'.
>
> (IV.iv.106)

Cressida's personal struggle in the famous scene with Diomedes is presented in terms that strongly suggest opposed motives. Diomedes

requires a token as surety of her word; she gives him Troilus's sleeve, takes it back, and finally gives it up to him. She gives expression to a sense of abandoning the struggle, and then immediately denies it:

> Well, well, 'tis done, 'tis past; and yet it is not;
> I will not keep my word.
> (V.ii.96)

And in bidding her last verbal farewell to Troilus, she is still the soul of equivocation:

> Troilus, farewell! One eye yet looks on thee;
> But with my heart the other eye doth see.
> (V.ii.105)

What, ultimately, can we believe of her? Both Ulysses and Thersites have no doubt, but I think *we* share Troilus's difficulty of belief:

> Ulys. All's done, my lord.
> Tro. It is.
> Ulys. Why stay we, then?
> Tro. To make a recordation to my soul
> Of every syllable that here was spoke.
> But if I tell how these two did coact,
> Shall I not lie in publishing a truth?
> Sith yet there is a credence in my heart,
> An esperance so obstinately strong,
> That doth invert th'attest of eyes and ears.
> (V.ii.113)

It is not simply Troilus's loyalty or pride that causes him to argue this way: Shakespeare is surely also stressing the way he has presented Cressida's falsity, emphasizing the doubleness of things, the lack of simplicity in experience. We must, I think, say with Troilus that

> this is, and is not, Cressid. (V.ii.143)

The dialectical pattern also dominates the war plot. War is, after all, the ultimate opposition, and the choice of the Greek-Trojan war, with its long siege, must predispose us to see the near-stalemate position of the conflict which Shakespeare depicts. On both sides we are given wrangling and dispute, rather than the adherence to hierarchical command characteristic of the discipline visible in victorious armies. This conflict is most obvious in the Greek camp, where Ulysses' famous speech on order makes it immediately plain; and the situation is paralleled by the Trojan dispute over the keeping of Helen. But it is not the analysis of situation alone that raises the issue of credibility: it is, rather, the hiatus between expression and actuality, between what is said and the actual state of affairs, or what happens. In spite of

Ulysses' description of the chaos that attends on the shaken ladder of degree, Agamemnon is still addressed as 'great commander, nerve and bone of Greece', whose 'godlike seat' is approached with respectful address by Aeneas. And in spite of the great wisdom and perception Ulysses shows in making his analysis, with its inescapable attribution of honour and worthiness to the hierarchical ordering of things, and of evil to the chaotic state, he shows sly reasoning and total scorn of morality in proposing that Ajax rather than Achilles should meet Hector's challenge:

> Let us, like merchants, show our foulest wares
> And think perchance they'll sell.
>
> (I.iii.359)

If the wise analyst Ulysses can preach both respect and contempt for the hierarchically greater, expediency being the deciding factor, then there is no reason to believe in his judgement at all; and this is surely typically the problem that the dialectical play puts in our way as soon as we try to take a positive line in judging the moralities of the characters and action. We can neither believe and admire Ulysses for his analysis, nor yet condemn him for his advice regarding Achilles, because he is both right and wrong. We are left contemplating an irresolvable crux which will always attract attention because that is what it is designed to do.

The same is true of the Trojan dispute: Hector contends, on grounds of reason, that Helen is not worth the enormous consequences of her keeping, he rejects Troilus's argument, that honour outweighs reason, as superficial in relation to the 'moral laws/Of nature and of nations', and then lamely concludes,

> yet ne'er the less,
> My spritely brethren, I propend to you
> In resolution to keep Helen still;
> For 'tis a cause that hath no mean dependence
> Upon our joint and several dignities.
>
> (II.ii.189)

Honour, it seems, outweighs reason after all, and we can hardly be expected to believe Hector's word after this. But once again this does not imply that everything should be disbelieved, for Hector is, like Ulysses, both right and wrong, since Troilus's case is not to be merely dismissed as false. If we support Hector's view, that is because we value reason more than honour; if we value honour more, then we will support Troilus. It is our bias rather than the conviction of any one argument that will sway us. However, I do not wish or need to argue the merits of the Trojan dispute, for the point is precisely that it

is a dispute, and is presented as such by Shakespeare. The fact that it ends as it does in irresolution (for the *status quo* is maintained in spite of the argument), is surely an indication of how we are meant to respond to it: with a sense of the endless opposition of things, what Rossiter calls 'shiftingness', and the need to carry on both the argument and the action that circumstances oblige us to take. Indeed, this might seem the only possible response to the world as Ulysses describes it in answer to Achilles' bitter question, 'are my deeds forgot?': that Time, like a fashionable host, 'grasps in the comer' with outstretched arms and only 'slightly shakes his parting guest by th' hand'. There can be no fixed and reliable values, and therefore no absolute judgements, in the face of transience, in a world in which 'the present eye praises the present object', and 'things in motion sooner catch the eye/Than what stirs not'.

Measure for Measure is, of course, very different from *Troilus and Cressida* in genre, setting, and its use of Christian ideas and imagery. But it has, for different reasons, a similar reputation as a problematic play which has provoked extreme critical stances, ranging from negative views akin to those remarked above in relation to *Troilus and Cressida*, to positive views such as that which sees the play as a Christian allegory.

However, the middle road is unusually well represented in this case, in the sense that Shakespeare is seen by many as the deliberate manipulator of characters in an experimental situation.[1] Rossiter again provides a keynote for this approach, seeing the play as a 'subtle inquisition into man's nature',[2] involving a reliance on empirical observation of human behaviour, which he calls 'sceptical', in 'highly improbable circumstances'.[3] This is a description which fits the play's extremely contrived nature and, more properly, makes Shakespeare, rather

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1. My point about Shakespeare's built-in dialecticism which causes opposed views (p.104 above), finds support in J.W. Lever's Introduction to the Arden text of *Measure for Measure*. He calls it 'a distinctive quality of the play' which allows each differing interpretation a 'limited validity'.

2. Op. cit., p.170.

3. Ibid., p.153.

than Duke Vincentio, the setter-up of a 'controlled experiment'.[1]

The term 'experiment' is also used by J.W. Lever (in the introduction mentioned in footnote 1, p.154), but he sees the play as an experiment in tragi-comedy on the lines of Guarini's dramatic theory expounded in his *Compendio della Poesia Tragicomica* of 1601. Lever lists, particularly, the promotion of 'a balanced condition of mind' and 'the explicit stress on the virtues of moderation as upheld by the Duke', as evidence of Shakespeare's concern here with 'the importance of the *via media* (which) may have seemed paramount in real life and likewise in dramas concerned with contemporary issues'.[2]

Lever's argument for Shakespeare's acquaintance with Guarini is no better than mine for his acquaintance with Pyrrhonean writing - he says simply that the treatise's ideas were 'in the air after 1602'[3]- so I make bold to suggest another possibility. The experimental nature of the dramaturgy, which throws together the extremes of society in a dispute over the nature of justice, seems to me to be accounted for, perhaps best of all the plays considered in this study, by the spirit of Sceptical enquiry. In the first place, the enigmatical withdrawal of the Duke from his office (which has led to views of him such as that of Dr Leavis, who sees him as a peripatetic Providence, or of the directly allegorical kind which makes him a Jesus figure), is not what initiates the experiment. Vincentio is not the designer of the situation in the play, and he is consequently unable to offer a satisfactory reason for his abdication. It is surely untenable that he elevates Angelo to a position of authority in order to precipitate the situation which arises subsequently, which is the only sense in which we could regard him as its designer? But if we regard him simply as one of the actors in the experiment, then his role makes considerable sense: like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, he is part of the situation, and a judge of it. He is both committed *and* uncommitted in the way it was postulated in chapter 5, that Shakespeare is as a playwright, a position learned from Montaigne, and suggestive of the attempt to put Scepticism into practice.

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1. That the morally solid Dr Leavis should be driven to use this phrase, seems to indicate a preponderant sense of the unusual in the play.

2. Op. cit., pp.lx-lxiii.

3. Ibid., p.lxii.

The Duke, in a very real sense, suspends his judgement by taking the drastic step of delegating his authority and powers to Angelo; but the experiment is still Shakespeare's, for he uses Vincentio to effect a dramatic realisation of the theory of suspension. In the practical situation which he creates around Vincentio, he shows the extreme difficulty of maintaining the Sceptical position. Experience of conflict invites the attempt to withdraw, while injustice imposes the need to take sides; the Duke's changeability is often seen as inconsistency in Shakespeare's art, but the difficulty we experience in judging the moral stances of Isabella, Claudio, and Lucio, sharpens our sense of Vincentio's difficulty of choice in the given situation. We see him as just or harsh in accordance with our own responses to their actions; faced with the harsh hypocrisy of an Angelo, Vincentio cannot long maintain his attempt to be a neutral observer, and this finds its echo in our disapproval of the Deputy. But when assessing Claudio, Isabella, and Lucio, we begin to diverge in our views, some agreeing with the Duke's actions, some unable to accept his advice to Claudio, for example. And the difficulty of Isabella's response to Claudio's reluctance to die, calls forth Vincentio's very dubious plan involving the jilted Mariana as the only way to save Claudio's life, Isabella's chastity, and to 'scale' Angelo. It is a desperate measure required by desperately opposed values, to which there is no ready moral solution.

If the Sceptical position can be called one of compromise, (which I am not quite happy to call it, since a compromise tends to be a resolution of difficulties rather than a suspension of judgement), then both Professor Lever and Anne Barton, who argue for the play's concern with moderation between extremes, the rejection of absolutes, and the knowledge of 'a world of compromise and imperfection'[1] that has to be accepted, can be read as supporting my contention that the play is a testing of the practicability of the Sceptical view. Dr Barton remarks pertinently, 'there is in this play an unresolved conflict between religious and secular law, between absolutes and anarchy, between a necessary but sterile order and a vigorous but suspect world of self-gratification and individualism'.[2] Our sense of strangeness and dis-orientation as the play moves from the near-tragic to the conventional

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1. Introduction to the text, *Riverside Shakespeare*, p.546.

2. Ibid., p.548.

comedy ending, with marriages all round, again reflects the confusion which emanates from the Duke's plans. As Claudio refuses to die at Vincentio's bidding, as Barnardine does the same, the possibility of a consequential resolution of the situation recedes, and we are left with coincidence and the inexplicable. Ragozine supplies the Duke with a head - being happily

> A man of Claudio's years; his beard and head
> Just of his colour. (IV.iii.71)

And Isabella, for whom the vows of the votarists of St. Clare were not strict enough, tacitly accepts the Duke's offer of marriage.

In constructional terms then, we seem to have in *Measure for Measure* a dialectic of unmitigating dogmas, which gives us a picture of a world in which the oppositions are so strong that there is no possibility of rational or planned choosing between them. The world is as it is, and situations arise because men are as they are; plans go wrong, and others, increasingly complicated and unlikely, have to be made, until reality turns into the unreality of a conventional ending as the only possible resolution of difficulties, but a resolution that does not convince us that anything relating to reality - the unanswered metaphysical difficulties of Claudio's fear of death, Angelo's hypocrisy and lust, Isabella's rigorous chastity, Lucio's harsh treatment - has been satisfactorily explained. In such a world, the Sceptic is tempted to withdraw, to avoid embroilment in dogma, to suspend judgement; but he is also, because he is a man after all, drawn back into the real world where he must make decisions and judgements. These will be like the commitments that originally made him withdraw, and so the temptation is repeated. Resolution in real life is never possible, and so man turns to the conventions of art, to fiction which permits the resolution of problems.[1] In Shakespeare's experiment to see how Scepticism might work in practice, the Duke, attempting a suspension of judgement, both precipitates, and is compelled to make plans to resolve, the desperate situation resulting from the dogmatic imposition of the law on the one side, and the dogmatic refusal on religious grounds to sacrifice chastity on the other. These plans, like the situation itself, are chaotic and basically incapable of resolving the situation in real terms because they

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1. Anne Barton is again suggestive here: 'As a comic dramatist, re-making reality in the arbitrary image of art, conducting events towards the happy ending required by this particular form, the Duke suggests an obvious parallel with Shakespeare himself. There is something... blatantly fictional about the Duke's ultimate disposition of people and events...'. Ibid., p.547.

too are dogmatically based, and require sacrifices which no real person can be expected to make: Claudio's fear of death prohibits one possible resolution, Isabella's refusal to satisfy Angelo's demands prevents another, as does Barnardine's magnificent rejection of Vincentio's plan for him: 'I will not consent to die this day, that's certain'. The play's dénouement, which is so like the endings of the conventional comedies, but also like the fairy-tale endings of the late romances, resolves the problems it has raised only by means of another withdrawal, a retreat from reality into fantasy where odds are made even, lost loves are found and wrongs redeemed in marriage, dead brothers are restored to life, and the novice marries her Friar-Prince.

The Sceptical view is seen to be difficult, perhaps impossible, to maintain in the face of life: problems force man into commitments, but these commitments raise further problems which invite the view that there is no ultimate resolution, only the continuing enquiry that is the essence of Scepticism. But drama - at least that which sets out to be comedy - requires a resolution, and the only possible kind is the fairy-tale ending; the mere fact that we recognise it as such ensures that we go on doubting it as a resolution of problems.

9. The Structure of Doubt in *Othello*

No, to be once in doubt,
Is once to be resolv'd. (III.iii.179)

Regarded often as Shakespeare's most theatrical and gripping play, *Othello* has, in Ridley's words, 'neither the variety nor the depth of *Hamlet*, none of the overwhelming power of *Lear*, none of the "atmosphere" which in *Macbeth* keeps us awfully hovering on the confines of a world outside that of our normal experience'.[1] Bradley saw it as suppressing the mystical and philosophical element in Shakespeare, while Leavis commented on its effect of 'firm, clear outlines, unblurred and undistracted by cloudy recessions, metaphysical aura, or richly symbolical ambiguities'.[2] Ambiguity, however, need not be symbolical: even this unlikely-seeming play suggests the ambivalence I am concerned with - presents its values in ways that force us into doubt about right and wrong, and invites consideration as an experiment in terms of the dialectical construction seen in the foregoing analyses; as such, it is perhaps the play that explores the danger of the determination to find a resolution.

In adopting this position, I take courage from A.P. Rossiter's essay delivered as a lecture at the Shakespeare Summer School at Stratford in 1956.[3] He speaks of the ambivalence of Iago, whose 'wit,...cynical insights, ...daring, ...gusto in plotting, ...(and) gambler's sang-froid', align him with other ambivalent malcontents 'from Marston, through Vendice, to Bosola'. Such qualities are 'emblems of the Jacobean moral confusion which I find in Shakespeare's Problem plays'. Iago 'reiterates ...the tough...cheerful aspects of...the seamier sides of *Measure for Measure*. And that is where, both by date and theme....I place *The Tragedy of Othello*: next to that play, *Troilus and Cressida* and *All's Well*; in a sense, the last Problem Play'.[4] Rossiter's sense of ambivalence arises from this moral confusion: 'a hollowness at the centre ...a mixedness of feelings, an instability of apparently accepted values, an absence of stable ground underfoot...on love (its ostensible theme),

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1. *Othello*, ed. M.R. Ridley, p.xlv.
2. F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*, p.136.
3. Published in *Angel With Horns*.
4. Ibid., p.205.

it leaves me as much just nowhere as *Measure for Measure* does'.[1] He feels this as a 'distressing effect' and bases his argument on modern psychological descriptions of the nature of love and jealousy, which seems to me to ask rather more of Shakespeare than one should ask of the dramatist. I share with Rossiter the sense of ambivalence and I accept the analysis that it arises from moral confusion; but I differ in suggesting that this confusion is better described as 'diversity', reflecting the ambivalences of the time - ambivalences evident in a philosophical climate which encouraged thinking men to question established ideas, moral codes, and accepted values. Whatever moral position was finally adopted by their creators, the malcontents or rebellious characters in English literature, from Marlowe's Faustus to Milton's Satan, all show this questioning nature, and, even in the morally clear-cut case of Satan, readers have consistently reacted to them with mixed feelings. Shakespeare explores the diversity of possible moral positions, and this entails a dialectical structure that balances them against one another; it is this structure - an artistic counterpart of Sceptical debate - that perhaps leaves readers feeling 'an absence of stable ground underfoot', leaves them 'just nowhere'.[2]

Another essay which lends me some support, is R.B. Heilman's *Magic in the Web*. In this extraordinary analysis of the play's multiple structural patterns, Heilman speaks of Iago in the broadest terms as both symbolic and a very real character: 'The magic in the web produces a character so full and flexible that it can accommodate itself to the psychological habits of different generations: Iago may be understood as Invidia or as the Machiavel or as the Jealous Man or as the False Friend; he can be sensed at his narrowest as the villain of melodrama or at his widest as Satan...Yet he is so far from any stereotype that there is always something of the enigmatic about him'.[3] This amounts to a recognition of the relative limitation of more simply moral approaches to the play: to take a limited view of Iago - or of Othello - is to limit the rich ambivalence manifest in the play's ambiguities. Heilman's position

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1. Ibid., p.206.

2. M. Long attributes this feeling in Rossiter to his neglect of Shakespeare's treatment of the Venetian people and their culture: 'the hollowness of these people and their culture is what the play is about'. *The Unnatural Scene*, p.54.

3. Op. cit., p.44.

is clearly akin to Rossiter's advocacy of a 'two-eyed' criticism.

Heilman elaborates later on in a passage which suggests clearly the ambivalence of Shakespeare's text, recalling the positions of Terence Hawkes and Norman Rabkin indicated above[1]: 'I began my study holding the orthodox view of Othello's "nobility" but found the impression gradually modified by repeated reading...There is something in Othello's rhetoric...which can simultaneously support conflicting impressions of his personality... There is no master-term for Othello - "nobility" or "simplicity"....or "pride" or "romantic idealism". In following his role one needs a number of different terms...some... plurality of terms cannot be avoided'.[2]

There is an initial structural ambiguity: as Ridley points out, *Othello* belongs to a different 'order' of play from the other major tragedies - it has a plot in the sense of a 'scheme, proceeding by a series of linked moves towards a designed end', whereas the other tragedies show events that are linked, 'if at all, by mere succession in time';[3] and it deals with figures of noticeably lower rank than do the other tragedies. This feature brings about the difference suggested by Ridley: 'In his other tragedies we are spectators... We watch the action; but in *Othello* we are involved in it'.[4] Yet, in spite of this involvement and economy of design, Shakespeare has built into the play elements which, because of their ambiguity, tend to generate uncertainty in the reader's mind, elements which distance us from the play and slow it down - in the reading, if not in the acting. Ridley points to one such element, in the vagueness and anonymity with which Othello is introduced to the audience: Roderigo and Iago come onto the stage, 'discussing something which is vaguely alluded to as "this" and "such a matter" and is never further defined. They pass to the discussion of an equally indeterminate person alluded to as "he" and "him". We can infer...that "he" is an officer of high rank, and we are told later that he is a "Moor"'.[5] Now

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1. Cf. pp. 96-7.

2. Ibid., p.137.

3. Op. cit., p.xlv.

4. Ibid., p.xlviii.

5. Ibid., p.xlix.

even though this vagueness, and the unflattering picture Iago draws of Othello in the opening scene, are dispelled as soon as we meet the hero, an aura of doubt persists by virtue of the forceful use of it in the opening scene - much as the tension of the opening scene in *Hamlet* lingers even through the frustrations of plot. The initial impression does not easily vanish. And in *Othello*, doubt is the structural foundation of the play,[1] for on it Iago builds suspicions in Othello's mind, and through it, Othello allows himself to undermine the edifice of his love for Desdemona, and to be swept away by the tide of jealousy.

Another element which contributes to this opposition between involvement and detachment, is, I suggest, perhaps the so-called "double time scheme", first described by John Wilson in 1849 and 1850.[2] This is the evident conflict between the rapidity of the play's action, and the time reflection suggests would be needed to accomplish all the reported events of the play, and the theory is that Shakespeare's skill is such that he, in fact, tricks his audience, presenting 'an unbroken series of events happening in "short time", but...against a background, of events not presented but implied, which gives the needed impression of "long time"'.[3] I suggest that this distortion of time is one of Shakespeare's distancing and slowing elements, introduced deliberately to control our responses to the play.

These are both matters of technique, ways in which Shakespeare uses his dramatic and linguistic skills to exercise control over his audience's response, particularly our judgement of character and our clarity of perception about the time elapsed in the play. The confusion between actual time on stage, a matter of so many hours, and time suggested by the unfolding events, generates in the auditor's mind a sense of uncertainty which is congenial to the more fundamental doubt which is central to the play's plot.[4] This basic doubt which, I suggest, is the foundation on which both Iago and Othello build, is not Shakespeare's

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1. Heilman comments that Iago plays on Othello's particular personality 'in terms of his liability to doubt and unsureness'. Op. cit., p.145.

2. In Blackwoods Magazine. See Ridley, p.lxvii.

3. Ibid., p.lxx.

4. Cf. J.I.M. Stewart, *Character and Motive in Shakespeare*, p.107.

invention, for it is quite clear in Cinthio's tale. Raymond Shaw's translation, made for the 1958 Arden edition, to remedy the inaccuracies of the then existing translations, gives several clear indications of such doubt.[1] The Moor complains to the ensign that Disdemona worries him so much about having degraded the captain that he feels compelled to recall him. The tale continues:

> "Perhaps Disdemona has reason to look favourably on him." "And why?" asked the Moor. "I do not wish," replied the lieutenant, "to come between man and wife, but if you would open your eyes you would see for yourself." .... these words had left such a thorn in the soul of the Moor that he gave himself up completely to thinking of what they could mean, and he became quite melancholy.

On another occasion, Disdemona pleads on behalf of the captain:

> The Moor became angry and said to her, "It is extraordinary, Disdemona, that you should be so concerned over this man, but he is neither a brother nor a relative, that you should have him so much at heart."

Disdemona attempts to explain:

> "...he has not committed such a serious crime that you should bear him hatred. But you are a Moor, and so hot-blooded by nature, that the slightest thing moves you to anger and revenge."

The ensign echoes this insult:

> "You must know then that it is a serious matter for your lady to see the captain in disfavour with you, because of the pleasure which she gets with him when he comes to your home, for your blackness already displeases her."

The Moor's demand for visible proof of Disdemona's alleged adultery is a clear indication that the several seeds of doubt seen in these passages have taken firm root in his mind, and we hardly need Cinthio's paranthetic statement, 'he already believed all that the ensign had said on account of the suspicions which had already been born in his mind'. Shakespeare does not follow Cinthio in many of these details, but he certainly follows him in the basic quality of the tale: the careful and deliberate sowing of suspicion in the Moor's mind by the ensign, and the Moor's grim pursuit of certainty, even though knowledge can give him no ease from doubt, only positive grounds for revenge. We might say that Cinthio's explanatory narrative provides not so much a prose original for Shakespeare's poetry, as a psychological guide to his dramatic construction.

There is another aspect to the provocation of doubt that Cinthio

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1. Ridley, p.239ff. Ridley suggests that Shakespeare probably read a contemporary translation, now lost. The earliest known English version of the *Hecatommithi* was published in 1753.

also suggests, and which Shakespeare has also used: this is the equivocal rhetoric already seen in relation to *Hamlet*.[1] In *Othello* Shakespeare seems to have made even greater use of it because of the aptness of the dramatic situation, and it is explored more fully here for that reason. For the same reason, it is more meaningful to use the term 'equivocation' to describe the mechanism of doubt here than to refer constantly to the play's dialectical construction. It is evident in Disdemona's embarrassment when the Moor asks her for the handkerchief:

> The unhappy lady, who had so much feared such a request, became red in the face, and to hide her blushes, which the moor had very well observed, she ran to her chest and pretended to look for it. After having searched for it a long while, "I do not know," she said, "how it comes that I cannot find it just now - perhaps you have had it yourself."

Apart from the obvious confirmation that her behaviour gives to the Moor's suspicion, there is a secondary level of doubt in Cinthio's words, which arises from the ambivalence of certain statements, and which amounts to a subtle form of equivocation. For example, the clause, 'who had so much feared such a request', is not specific since it does not refer to the reason for Disdemona's fear. There is therefore, however slight, a suggestion of possible validity in the Moor's suspicion. Now I am *not* suggesting that he might be right, or that Disdemona is at all guilty; I am trying to formulate the complex effect on my response which the writer's language seems to have. At this point in Cinthio's text, *we* are aware of Disdemona's embarrassment, and of the real cause of her blushes, and also of the condemnatory aspect this and her pretence, of looking for the handkerchief, present to the Moor's suspicion. We are, at the same time, aware of the Moor's motive in asking her for the handkerchief, and of the fact that he sees the apparently confirmatory blushes, taking them as proof additional to the fact that she cannot produce the handkerchief. All this Cinthio intends the reader to see and understand. By contrast, Disdemona is aware only of fear that the loss will be discovered and that this will anger her husband; she pretends to look for it, presumably from fear of saying she has lost it, the Moor being as she has already said, 'hot blooded by nature' and liable to be angry, even vengeful. He, indeed, is on a totally different plane of understanding at this point, seeing her embarrassment entirely as guilt, and his suspicion as validated. This is why it is possible to speak of a

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1. Cf. p.111 above.

deliberate equivocation in the text. The words used, and actions described, convey, quite intentionally, different things to the three essential participants, Disdemona, the Moor, and the reader. Because she does not declare her loss and specify her fear, there is a gap in communication between the two characters, a gap which *we* fill with the knowledge we have of both sides of the story, but which the Moor can take to mean only one thing. That gap is therefore equivocal, and Cinthio meant it to be so. Moreover, I believe that Shakespeare follows him in this technique. The relevant part of his version of this passage is as follows:

> Oth. ...look to't well.
> Des. Then would to God that I had never seen it!
> Oth. Ha, wherefore?
> Des. Why do you speak so startingly and rash?
> Oth. Is't lost? is't gone? speak, is it out o' the way?
> Des. Heaven bless us!
> Oth. Say you?
> Des. It is not lost, but what an if it were?
> Oth. Ha!
> Des. I say it is not lost.
> Oth. Fetch't, let me see it.
> Des. Why, so I can sir, but I will not now,
> This is a trick, to put me from my suit,
> I pray let Cassio be receiv'd again.
> Oth. Fetch me that handkerchief, my mind misgives.
> Des. Come, come,
> You'll never meet a more sufficient man.
> Oth. The handkerchief!
> Des. I pray, talk me of Cassio.
> Oth. The handkerchief!
> Des. A man that all his time
> Has founded his good fortunes on your love,
> Shar'd dangers with you, -
> Oth. The handkerchief!
> Des. I'faith, you are to blame.
> Oth. Zounds! (Exit)
> (III.iv.74)

It would be difficult to imagine a piece of writing better designed to reveal dramatically the gap in communication between these two characters. What I have said about Cinthio's equivocation applies here as well, perhaps even better. Desdemona not only doesn't declare her loss, she tries desperately to change the subject, to steer Othello away from her embarrassment, harping on the one topic that is best calculated to drive Othello into a rage. Again, I am not trying to convey Othello's justice or Desdemona's guilt, but to suggest that the language and situation force on us an awareness of different meanings, a sense of crossed purposes and fiercely held opposing convictions. In a word, we are given an equivocal scene as part of Shakespeare's dialectical technique of

generating uncertainty in the audience, and presenting values in a framework of doubt. Criticising as concentrated mis-statement E. E. Stoll's statement that 'Othello believes a person whom he does not love or really know and has no right reason to trust, to the point of disbelieving persons whom he loves and has every reason to trust',[1] Ridley says that we are often led into error

> because we do not allow for the fact that we know the characters so much better than they know each other. We know that Desdemona is true, and are exasperated with Othello for not being equally sure of it; we know that Iago is a villain...and consider Othello a blind gull to think him an honest man. But unless we keep this danger in mind, and continuously in mind, we seriously diminish for ourselves the greatness of the play, since a tragedy in which the main figure is, in plain terms, a credulous ass, is a bad tragedy. (2)

Precisely aware of the development of each character at every moment in the play, Shakespeare has to write dialogue which will affect the different characters differently, and this he does quite frequently by means of the equivocation described above. He has, in other words, to write for the characters as well as for the audience, and it is up to us to bear this in mind, reading not only what is meant for us, but also what is intended for the listening characters.

Before trying to show in detail the doubt on which the play is built, I must clarify my position in relation to other views. One of the abiding questions has been the nature of Othello's jealousy. It is to me sufficiently clear that he is not a jealous man in an absolute sense - the sense of Emilia's

> not ever jealous for the cause,
> But jealous for they are jealous. (III.iv.158)

In spite of Leavis's celebrated view of his culpability, Othello's jealousy is clearly not a monster 'Begot upon itself, born on itself', for that would make nonsense of Iago's role in the play. This view is related to Bradley's, a view dubbed by Leavis, 'the sentimentalist's *Othello*';[3]

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1. E.E. Stoll, *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*, cited by Ridley, p.lvi.

2. Ibid., p.lviii.

3. F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*, p.136ff; M. Long op. cit., thinks it is not possible to deny the force of Leavis's and Rossiter's readings: 'any attempt to return to the Coleridgean-Bradleyan sentimentality of the "noble hero" is unlikely to bear much fruit'. He extends the Leavis-Rossiter position rather by considering the 'social dimension'...seeing the hero in his social setting rather than in isolation. I think he goes too

but I reject the label, accepting that the centre of the play *is* Othello's fall and that he is not 'merely a victim' of Iago's diabolic intellect. But I reject equally the notion that Iago is 'merely ancillary...not much more than a necessary piece of dramatic mechanism'. Othello's 'readiness to respond' to Iago's temptation does not simply mean that 'the essential traitor is within the gates'. This is not to deny Othello's own shortcomings - what Leavis calls his 'noble egotism' and 'self-pride' which, under Iago's provocation become 'ferocious stupidity, an insane and self-deceiving passion'. Othello, without doubt, degenerates into 'brutal, resolute' and vengeful jealousy, but I don't think Iago can be played down as Leavis does, to the level of 'a rather clumsy mechanism', 'unfit to carry' the necessary emotional regard to make a devil sufficient to tempt Othello. Indeed, Leavis's closing paragraph seems to me to concede implicitly that Iago is the *sine qua non* of Othello's fall:

> The dilemma that professors Stoll and Bradley resolve in their different...ways - the dilemma represented by a "not easily jealous" Othello who succumbs at once to Iago's suggestions - needn't be allowed to bother us. Both critics seem to think that, if Othello hasn't exhibited himself in the past as prone to sexual jealousy...that establishes him as "not easily jealous", so that his plunge into jealousy would, if we had to justify it psychologically.., pose us an insoluble problem. Yet surely, as Shakespeare presents him, it is not so very elusive a datum about Othello...that his past history hasn't been such as to test his proneness to sexual jealousy - has, in fact, thereby been such as to increase his potentialities in just that respect.

Exactly. Othello's new experience is what precipitates his fall: his experience, as Shakespeare gives it to us in painstaking detail, of Iago and his contrivance. The emphasis should indeed fall on Othello's own self-deception - as this new situation brings it about, but this does not relieve us of the dilemma of a "not easily jealous" Othello. From the fact that he has not shown a tendency to sexual jealousy in the past, we can no more claim his true nature to have included a latent sexual jealousy triggered by Iago's plot, than we can infer his purely noble innocence. Where Bradley and Stoll have assumed that Othello's past experience tells us one thing, Leavis assumes that it tells us the opposite. Both views, I contend, are equally dogmatic and equally undemonstrable, and, moreover, equally irrelevant. Shakespeare gives us Othello in the present, not the past, and his present experience is that of the scheming practice of Iago, which produces in him the violent jealousy which destroys him. To delve into the psychological possibilities of motivation relevant to either Iago or Othello is of course fascinating, but it is

surely not what Shakespeare intended his audience to do. What he has given us is an equally fascinating, enormously detailed and carefully planned play that deals largely with the process of Othello's fall, and involves Iago for much the greater part of this process; if he was meant to be a mechanism, he is certainly the most over-exposed piece of machinery ever devised by a playwright. It is the process that we must attend to, for to diminish or close our eyes to one element of the process is to distort the play into a quasi-psychological treatise. *Othello* without Iago is scarcely more meaningful than *Hamlet* without the prince.

Othello is, I believe with Bradley, presented as a noble man who - for whatever reason - allows himself to be wrought from that quality, and 'perplex'd in the extreme', which phrase is perhaps illuminated by the comparison Ridley draws with the phrase used by the host of the Garter Inn, in describing himself to be 'in perplexity and doubtful dilemma'.[1] The essence of Othello's situation is that he is thrown into doubt by Iago's suggestion and seeks to clear himself of this uncertainty by obtaining visible proof. This determination to prove Desdemona's infidelity is central to his downfall, and it is significant for my argument that he chooses his own perception - specifically sight - as the arbiter of this proof:

> Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!
> Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof. (III.iii.365)

As Heilman points out, 'Othello not only sees badly, he thinks badly about seeing...he comes up with an inadequate theory of evidence'. The fallacy of the philosophy that "seeing is believing" is that 'it puts you at the mercy of anyone whose hand is quicker than your eye. But its more serious difficulty is metaphysical, and it is hardly surprising that Othello, one of the most unphilosophical of Shakespeare's heroes, should choose to apply a doctrine of limited validity exactly where it can have least relevance...he wants a quality of life...to be established by a laboratory demonstration before his eyes'.[2]

Ridley suggests that Othello is susceptible to Iago's scheme not because he is innately jealous, but because he is credulous, by which

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1. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV.v.80.

2. R.B. Heilman, op. cit., p.60.

he means no more than that Othello accepts men at face value.[1] This must be taken to indicate his honesty rather than to make him a 'credulous ass'. Credulity being by common acceptance a negative quality, Ridley is at pains to rescue his description from this almost unavoidable conclusion. What he clearly intends to convey is Othello's honesty and lack of cunning, which prevent the Moor from seeing Iago's deception.[2] This lack of suspicion, lack even of the sort of mind that might imagine an Iago's arbitrary malice, suggests an innocent, unsophisticated nature: even when all is revealed his honest mind can form no ready conception of it, and he asks with a sense of injury,

> Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
> Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body? (V.ii.302)

This is the question that has provoked so many psychological analyses from Coleridge's on. Coleridge couldn't answer it, but the modern trend is to invoke the several possible explanations in the play. I do not think it is necessary to answer it: Shakespeare displays here his 'negative capability' again and merely gives a selection of possibilities, because his interest lay in the given situation and what the characters make of it. Othello can see no reason for Iago's malignity, and this is concordant with his open innocence, the quality that persists in him and makes his violent anger pitiable rather than contemptible - the quality which makes him a tragic hero rather than a despicable fool. This credulity in Othello suggests a different aspect of the concern, in *Troilus and Cressida*, with credibility: there the difficulty of belief was stressed, while here we seem to have a special interest in the problems that arise from too great a readiness to believe.

Innocence, then, is a quality I think stands out in Othello, a lack of sophistication in relation to his setting. Consider these points:

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1. Ridley, p.lvi. Heilman (p.38) regards Othello's jealousy as 'secondary...it is induced, not spontaneous', and he contrasts it with Iago's 'primary jealousy' which is spontaneous.

2. I realise that Iago deceives everyone, even his wife; but Emilia has some doubts which she raises and then suppresses as a loyal wife, while Roderigo begins to suspect some deception in Iago more than once. Othello has to have it spelled out to him.

he is a foreigner to Venice;[1] moreover, he is a foreigner to Europe. He has 'done the state some service', and is honoured as a valiant general and defender of the Venetian state, but is constantly thought of and referred to as 'the Moor', which emphasizes his foreignness. He is termed 'the thicklips' and 'an extravagant and wheeling stranger' by Roderigo, an 'old black ram' and 'a barbary horse' by Iago. To Brabantio, a Venetian Senator as well as Desdemona's father, his daughter's marriage to Othello is a 'treason of the blood', and he immediately associates him with 'arts inhibited, and out of warrant', magical charms that have lured Desdemona away from 'the wealthy curled darlings of our nation' to his 'sooty bosom'. All of this is expressive of prejudice, but still an indication of how Othello is regarded by the Venetians.[2] And his exotic qualities and experience are at least part of his attraction for Desdemona, who, to hear his tales, would 'with haste dispatch' her 'house-affairs' and 'come again, and with a greedy ear,/Devour up' Othello's discourse. Finally, when she has 'gone', it is, he surmises,

> Haply, for I am black,
> And have not those soft parts of conversation
> That chamberers have.
> (III.iii.267)

I have laboured this point a little to suggest more reason for Ridley's view that, contrary to Stoll's claim that Othello disbelieves Desdemona whom he has every reason to trust, he has in fact no real knowledge of her, and 'therefore has no *reason* at all to trust her - only

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1. Heilman gives some weight to this, op. cit., pp.138-9. M. Long too, although he sees Othello as sharing 'the narcissism of this exquisite Venetian culture', recognises his extra vulnerability: 'Othello is not native to this culture; and its modes have been learned and are practised by him with something of the outsider's difficulty'. Op. cit., p.53. H. Felperin, op. cit., p.78, stresses the structural importance of the 'marginality' of both Othello and Iago to the play's Venetian society.

2. I agree with Heilman that Othello's Moorishness is not a reflection of racial psychology, but 'a symbol of characteristic human problems ...as "insecurity" and "rejection"...one of the ills that flesh is heir to'. Cf. also Rossiter, op. cit., p.202.

instinct.'[1] As Ridley goes on to say, 'his ignorance of her is precisely one of those chinks in his armour which Iago's poisoned stiletto so unerringly finds'. I don't think Ridley had this foreignness directly in view, but his phrase 'Iago's poisoned stiletto' supports my point - it is the Italian weapon *par excellence*, and precisely suggests the way in which Iago's native cleverness undermines Othello's foreign ignorance - or innocence, as I have called it. Othello's 'credulity' then, is that of an unsophistical mind, inexperienced in the finer possibilities of corruption in its setting. What has interested Shakespeare in this Italian tale, is the way in which a noble and innocent man, of proven valiancy, succumbs tragically to the mean, contriving, and unscrupulous malice of a corrupt member of the society in which he is an outsider. The moral point has perhaps to do with the threshold of corruptibility: Othello's noble innocence is not proof against such circumstances, is not universally unassailable.[2]

My attempt to demonstrate the fundamental doubt in the play must focus on all three main figures in their interrelated dealings - on Othello, Iago, and Desdemona, because the doubt in the play is both structural, based on the dialectic between involvement and detachment indicated above,[3] and expressed through the equivocal rhetoric already described. This double means of creating doubt affects the characters in their relationships to each other and to us: on the one level there is a communication gap, while on the other we are able to see the hiatus

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1. Ridley, pp.lvii-lviii. Heilman, op. cit., pp.225-6, suggests Iago's statement, 'thou knowest we work by wit, and not by witchcraft', as an antithesis in which lies 'the symbolic structure of *Othello*'. 'Witchcraft' becomes a metaphor for love - 'love is a magic bringer of harmony', and lies outside the realm of 'wit' - 'the reason, cunning, and wisdom on which Iago rests'. Heilman cites W.M.T. Nowottny's *Justice and Love in Othello* to the effect that Othello 'essays to reason when reason is not relevant'. He could reject Iago by 'an affirmation of faith which is beyond reason, by the act of choosing to believe in Desdemona'.

2. Heilman, op. cit., p.51, emphasizes Iago's 'manipulation of appearances' in the play: 'It is almost as if Shakespeare took off consciously from the tradition of the disguise to elaborate a myth of the human being's normal incapacity to deal with the issue of surface and substance...the tragic protagonist struggles with appearance and reality when another agent is deliberately confusing them.'

3. Cf. p. 161.

between intention and effect of action and dialogue amongst the characters themselves.[1] It is also a deliberately laid foundation of words and actions: the effect we see clearly in Othello, of suspicion and sexual jealousy, is the fruit of Iago's labours, which in turn depend on potentially ambivalent matter in the action and dialogue.

The initial scene gives an example of what becomes Iago's method of sowing doubt. The rousing of Brabantio by Roderigo and Iago, is couched in terms that make it clearly a deliberate disruption of peace and contentment:

Iago. Call up her father,
Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight,
Proclaim him in the street, incense her kinsmen,
And though he in a fertile climate dwell,
Plague him with flies: though that his joy be joy,
Yet throw such changes of vexation on't,
As it may lose some colour.
Rod. Here is her father's house, I'll call aloud.
Iago. Do, with like timorous accent, and dire yell,
As when, by night and negligence, the fire
Is spied in populous cities. (I.i.67)

Delight is to be poisoned; kinship is to be made a cause for discomfort; the abundance[2] of fertility is to be destroyed by a plague of flies;[3] joy is to be vexed. In other words, what *is*, is to be destroyed, challenged, opposed. Iago is talking simultaneously of several people and of their peace of mind; it is this peace that he sets out to disrupt, and he does it by sowing doubt in the contented mind: Brabantio accuses Roderigo of coming to 'start my quiet'; Iago himself says Othello will love and reward him for 'practising upon his peace and quiet', (II.i.305); and Othello's anguish is expressed in 'Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content', (III.iii.354). In the quoted passage the confusion of pronouns suggests that, although his main objective is to vex *Othello*'s joy, Iago has a general desire to disrupt the peace of Brabantio's family - which his action succeeds thoroughly in doing. Nothing could be better calculated to send dreadful fears and doubts racing through the mind of Brabantio than this first action of Iago's, from the setting - the clamorous disturbance of a household at night - to the technique of

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1. Cf. Anne Barton's introduction to *Troilus and Cressida*, op. cit., p.445.

2. Cf. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*.

3. '...in all the land of Egypt the land was ruined by reason of the flies', Exodus 8.24

question and suggestion:

Rod. Signior, is all your family within?
Iag. Are all doors lock'd?
Brab. Why, wherefore ask you this?
Iag. Zounds, Sir, you are robb'd, for shame put on your gown,
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul.
(I.i.84)

Even before he checks the allegation, the measure of Iago's success is in 'Belief of it oppresses me already'. And when he has checked his house, and found the planted doubt confirmed, his reaction gives us the other half of the pattern:

It is too true an evil, gone she is,
And what's to come, of my despised time,
Is nought but bitterness. (I.i.160)

We witness his disturbed mind's bitterness in the ensuing confrontation with Desdemona, Othello, and the Duke, and the final effect of his shattered peace of mind is the report of his death made by Gratiano in Act 5:

Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief
Shore his old thread atwain. (V.ii.206)

Now this may well suggest 'the disintegration of Brabantio's culture... that Courtesy-culture...(whose) values...buckle and collapse frighteningly as Brabantio is brought face to face with an experience with which his culture does not equip him to deal'.[1] But it also conveys, in clear outline, a deliberate attack on the *status quo* - a disruption of peace engineered by a character who is a self-interested malcontent:

In following him, I follow but myself.
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my peculiar end. (I.i.58)

And I believe that this is nearer to the centre of concern in the play, Shakespeare being a playwright before he is a social psychologist. Therefore Iago urges Roderigo to use 'like timorous accent, and dire yell', taking for his image the fearful sight of fire in the city at night, certainly a great raiser of doubts - about one's personal safety of shelter, even of life.

Long rightly sees that Brabantio's reaction of 'collapse'

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1. M. Long, op. cit., p.41.

'prefigures what we will get in Othello himself',[1] but I doubt whether Shakespeare's primary purpose in making their reactions parallel is a 'profound social-psychological scrutiny', or that 'we are witnessing the disintegration of Brabantio's culture'[2] only. The obvious parallel between Othello and Brabantio in this matter, is that they both react in the same way to basically similar attacks; that they are not of the same culture or experience seems to indicate the universally destructive force of Iago's weapon - the disruption of peace by implanted doubt.

This is, I suggest, the pattern of Iago's attacks. But as the objects of his attack are different, so he has to modify his approach slightly. If Brabantio is successfully assailed by doubt in the first scene, Othello is superbly able to handle the direct accusations made against him in the second, because he is sure of himself - his service to the state, his proud lineage and 'perfect soul', enable him to swallow Brabantio's insults without any sign of doubt or dismay. He is proof against this attack because of its openness which accords well with his own honest and unsuspecting nature. I have not seen much comment on the first thirty lines of scene three, but if we look at the play's construction as a sequence of attacks on peace, the matter of the conflicting reports about the Turkish fleet has a considerable relevance to what both precedes and succeeds it.[3] It is sandwiched between two halves of the open attack on Othello, and is put in language that enforces an awareness of the deceptiveness of circumstances and the need for clear thought to avoid such pitfalls as the play will throw in Othello's way. What the First Senator says is pointedly ambivalent:

> This cannot be
> By no assay of reason....'tis a pageant,
> To keep us in false gaze. (I.iii.17)

Apart from its direct meaning, this echoes Iago's admissions in the first scene, about 'visages of duty' and 'shows of service', thus linking him

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1. Ibid., p.40.

2. Ibid., p.41.

3. Ephim Fogel implies a link in seeing the scene as developing 'the judgement motif'. The Duke's decision about the Turkish fleet gives a 'model of a proper relation between thought and action' which is 'duplicated as...Brabantio repeats...his charges of...witchcraft'. *Teaching Shakespeare*, ed. A. Mizener.

with the kind of manoeuvre carried out by the Turkish fleet in the conflicting reports. By ignoring the 'pageant' and thinking of the probabilities of the case, the First Senator is able to judge the situation correctly, and what he says at the end of his speech is also relevant to Othello's dilemma:

> We must not think the Turk is so unskilful
> To leave that latest, which concerns him first.
>
> (I.iii.27)

This could well serve as a credo that might have profited Othello: to assay by reason the false pageant Iago performs, and to attend to that which 'concerns him first', Desdemona's love, rather than to be dominated by gazing at the false show.[1] Be that as it may, this small passage is a neatly encapsuled reminder and warning that Othello, who has just shown, and will immediately show himself superior to attack on his integrity, has yet to undergo a more subtle attack with weapons he has no experience of. Conflict of arms is not the most difficult trial of mettle a man can undergo, and if this is Shakespeare's point in choosing a great soldier for his hero, then there is some point to the otherwise redundant parts of Othello's reply to the Duke and Senators - the details he gives about his lack of skill with 'the set phrase of peace', the use of his arms 'in the tented field', and the limitation of his experience to 'feats of broil, and battle', (I.iii.82ff).

The insidious nature of the attack that is to come begins to appear as soon as Iago returns with Desdemona. The honest statement of 'divided duty', which Desdemona makes in reply to Brabantio's demand to show where her 'obedience' lies, is one of the grounds of appeal which Iago will later make when 'tempting' Othello - indeed, the very fact that she loves Othello, will be used by him:

> She did deceive her father, marrying you;
> And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,
> She lov'd them most.
>
> (III.iii.210)

This abuse of word and action by Iago modifies the apparently straight-

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1. To the same end is the Duke's mildly reproving retort to Brabantio's repeated accusation that Othello has used magic to lure Desdemona: 'To vouch this is no proof,/Without more certain and more overt test' (I.iii.106). In both cases, there is irony in the fact that Othello does try to assay and test Iago's evidence; his theory of evidence is wrong - cf. Heilman's point, p. 168 above.

The exchange certainly has irritant value, for it tends to go against the grain of our predisposition to think well of Desdemona. Yet modern editors do not regard it as suspect enough to question its right to be included in the text. We must assume, therefore, that it was intended by Shakespeare, and must either rest unsatisfied by it - Ridley sees it as clumsily leading to Iago's Leontes-like speech at line 167, but perhaps 'just a sop to the groundlings' to make up for the thinness of humour in the play - or we must question our understanding of its relation to the play's structure. I suggest that its significance lies partly in the stimulation of suspense by comic distraction, suggested by Granville Barker,[1] but, more to my purpose, also in laying another stone in the foundation of doubt. If we may judge from its effect, I think this view is validated by the implied shaking of faith in Desdemona shown by Rymer - 'the Venetian Donna is hard put to't for a pastime' - and by Ridley - 'so adept at it that one wonders how much time on the voyage was spent in the same way'.

It seems to me to operate on both levels of doubt that I have described. Firstly, in terms of the play's uncertain time scheme, the actual stage time could represent in Othello's mind, (retrospectively, of course, and judged from his distorted and jealous point of view), time enough for liaison between Desdemona and Cassio. More directly it illustrates well the hiatus between intention and effect among the characters. Even if it is not very convincingly placed, Desdemona's intention is probably what she claims it to be at the outset of the exchange:

> I am not merry, but I do beguile
> The thing I am, by seeming otherwise.
> (II.i.122)

Yet the effect on Iago is to give him further material for his developing scheme. His interest is mainly centred on Cassio, as his speech aside at the end of the exchange makes clear:

> ...as little a web as this will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio...If such tricks as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kiss'd your three fingers so oft.
> (II.i.167)

But the fact that Cassio takes Desdemona's hand - and this is all that Iago describes here - becomes eighty lines later:

> Dids't thou not see her paddle with the palm of his

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1. *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, cited by Ridley, p.54 n.

> hand...(and) they met so near with their lips, that
> their breaths embrac'd together. (II.i.251)

To Iago's kind of mind, even the most ordinary details of social contact have an ambivalence that allows them to be used for whatever purpose it likes. Desdemona's indulgence in this exchange, an attempt, probably, to distract her mind from fear of Othello's fate at the hands of the storm - his ship sailed a week before hers - must also be seen as bearing this potential ambivalence. She is as much involved in the physical contact as Cassio is, and Iago certainly bears the fact in mind, seeing perhaps a confirmation of his musing at the end of Act 1:

> Cassio's a proper man, let me see now...
> After some time, to abuse Othello's ear, that
> he is too familiar with his wife. (I.iii.390)

Nor is this primary ambivalence all; on another level, we are involved in some doubt too, as the critical reaction given above surely witnesses. There is no stage-direction, and we have only Iago's words as evidence, but presumably we are meant to see Cassio take Desdemona's hand. Our knowledge of - or rather our faith in - her, assures us that the action is entirely innocent of illicit feelings, but the action is nevertheless there as a fact for Iago's abuse. We know it is abuse, but the perceived hiatus between intention and effect of the action cannot be unperceived, and we are, whether we will or not, involved in the doubt Iago throws on her. As for the 'cheap backchat', this too is functional in shaking our faith, perhaps more than the physical contact with Cassio, because it is not material used by Iago, but presents a view we have of Desdemona that arouses distaste because it seems so uncharacteristic of her. Yet we don't *know* this as a matter of experience; at this point in the play we know only that she professes love to Othello, and a divided duty to her father. What this scene gives us is the fact that she takes part in a play of verbal wit such as she does not, probably would not, and possibly could not take part in with Othello. In other words it is a private view of Desdemona which excludes Othello, thereby emphasizing his foreignness and the gap in understanding between them to which we are unavoidably witness. It is perhaps to gain this emphasis that Shakespeare gives Desdemona the lead in turning the conversation between

Cassio and Iago into a general dispute,[1] playfully asking,

> What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst
> praise me? (II.i.117)

And when Iago warns her off, she pursues it with

> Come on, assay... (II.i.120)

The statement of her true concern for Othello, coming at this point inevitably rings a little false; perhaps it is intended to, for Shakespeare could have placed it before her commitment to the dispute, where it might have expressed a more urgently felt concern. Coming where it does, it seems to me equivocal, adding to the basis of doubt. If nothing else, her persistence here, (she repeats the challenge again at line 124), is a foretaste of her pursuit of Cassio's cause, which has a clearly equivocal design.

There is also an element that operates in Desdemona's favour in this exchange. It arises from Iago's slanderous view of women in lines 109 to 115, which leads to Emilia's remark, 'You shall not write my praise'. The conversation then focuses on eliciting Iago's praises, which is strange, considering his admitted self-interest. Although he plays along with 'old paradoxes, to make fools laugh i' the alehouse', he is led to the question of how to praise a deserving woman,

> one that in the authority of her merits did
> justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?
> (II.i.145)

This is a challenge that goes to the heart of her and Iago's roles in the play, and he cannot encompass it in an old paradox. The picture he conjures up of a woman 'never proud,...never loud' etc., tails off into the sneering, 'she was a wight, if ever such wight were - '. It is a picture he cannot believe in, and his tone becomes accordingly bitter and scornful:

> To suckle fools, and chronicle small beer. (II.i.160)

Its lameness is Desdemona's measure of Iago's poverty of good counsel, and she sums him up well in

> is he not a most profane and liberal counsellor?
> (II.i.163)

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1. I suspect that lines 131 to 133 also help this emphasis. In this play, to gloss 'black' simply as the Elizabethan conventional preference for blondes as Ridley does, is to ignore the obvious emphasis Shakespeare gives at many points to the Venetian awareness of Othello's blackness. Desdemona is not blind to it and it seems likely that in playful exchange with her white countrymen, she might taunt their prejudice with the idea of a black-white love.

This is to her credit, a case in which equivocation works positively rather than negatively. While speaking apparently frivolously, she anatomizes Iago and unwittingly shows her own position as 'put on the vouch of very malice itself'. Nevertheless, this beginning of the second Act adds considerably to the fundamental doubt on which Iago builds. As Ridley suggests, Iago's second soliloquy shows a change of emphasis: 'Iago is now plotting for revenge, and the motive advanced is no longer anger at missed promotion, but plain sexual jealousy'.[1] If we agree with Ridley that Iago is an opportunistic planner, this new emphasis comes from the exchange analysed above, with its sexually suggestive nature and undertone, and a further heavy irony is added to the play in that it is Desdemona who encouraged him into the discussion. Equivocation could hardly do more.

Iago's modified approach to the attack on Othello begins to be visible in II.iii. Having brought this new emphasis to his plan, and resolved (at least) to 'put the Moor/...into a jealousy so strong/That judgement cannot cure', in some way 'yet confus'd' but involving Cassio and Desdemona, and having engineered Cassio's dishonour, he begins the process of disrupting Othello's peace. Not by shouted assertions as before, but by affected shock and amazement - 'Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving'. In expressing his amazement at the quarrel, his choice of image gives us a taste of his powers of suggestion:

> even now,
> In quarter, and in terms, like bride and groom,
> Devesting them to bed, and then but now,
> As if some planet had unwitted men,
> Swords out, and tilting one at other's breast.
> (II.iii.170)

This catches the whole compass of Othello's relationship with Desdemona, and even though Othello cannot possibly perceive it, it seems equivocal enough to communicate the treacherous direction of Iago's thoughts to the audience. Had he chosen any comparison but 'bride and groom', not even the audience would perceive the bearing of his explanation on Othello and Desdemona. What Othello will take from it - perhaps unwittingly, as he says nothing to show it - is the sense of almost inconceivable disruption that would make a bride and groom turn from the consummation of their love, to 'opposition bloody'. In other words, the description plays upon Othello's emotional focus, the fact that the

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1. Ridley, op. cit., p.65 n.

consummation of his marriage has already been delayed through the exigencies of the soldier's duty.[1] This is a very subtle weapon indeed, calculated to inflame Othello's anger at this further disturbance, yet completely concealing from him the suggestion that the bride and groom are, in the grammar of the image, also the combatants, 'tilting one at other's breast'. As far as he is concerned,

> 'tis the soldier's life,
> To have their balmy slumbers wak'd with strife.
> (II.iii.249)

He has no sense of any design in the disturbance, yet Iago has, in the space of 250 lines, achieved the first part of the modified plan, having caught Cassio quite squarely 'on the hip' while earning Othello's thanks, if not yet 'for making him egregiously an ass', at least for putting one across him.

To bring Desdemona into the picture, he has only to exploit her goodness, and his perception that

> she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do
> more than she is requested,
> (II.iii.312)

is an important element in his assessment of how she will unwittingly co-operate with his plan to plant doubt in Othello's mind. As he sees it unfolding to his mind's eye, so will it work:

> While this honest fool
> Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes,
> And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
> I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,
> That she repeals him for her body's lust;
> And by how much she strives to do him good,
> She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
> (II.iii.344)

This scheme is true to Cinthio's carefully explained motives and responses, showing how Shakespeare has built into Iago the knowledge of Othello that Cinthio explains by way of narration. In this soliloquy he is only partly concerned to disclose his plan; there is also a concern with its rhetoric - or perhaps with its credibility. The following is surely not simply a posture:

> And what's he then, that says I play the villain,
> When this advice is free I give, and honest,
> Probal to thinking, and indeed the course
> To win the Moor again?
> (II.iii.327)

The point of this direct question to the audience is, surely, to make us

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1. Cf. II.iii.15: 'he hath not yet made wanton the night with her'.

consider the nature of the evidence and the probability of its being accepted. I have mentioned Heilman's view that Othello has a false 'theory of evidence'; Iago's question here is squarely aimed at suggesting that not only Othello, but perhaps anyone, must accept his advice to Cassio as valid and just. For it is so - which is exactly what makes Iago's scheme so diabolically clever and gives him that ambivalent quality felt by Rossiter, Heilman and others. This scheme represents in dramatic form the essence of equivocation: by making Iago everybody's friend and confidant from one point of view, and simultaneously their deadly enemy, Shakespeare far surpasses the limits of irony and creates an equivocator who is the nonpareil.[1] He can be believed almost implicitly if we ignore his avowed villainy, (in other words, if we put ourselves in the characters' shoes), and he can also be believed in his stated intentions. This gives us an equivocation that is central to the play's construction, for by means of his credibility he is able to affect the lives of at least seven of the play's other eleven named characters, and to bring about the deaths of five of them.

If equivocation in the Jesuitic sense was regarded as damnable by most Englishmen, then Iago can be seen here as taunting the audience, by deliberately espousing the 'divinity of hell' in declaring his dual credibility - that is, in showing his equivocation and challenging the audience to condemn him. This view affects the reading of line 340, of which Ridley makes little sense. Iago may be a soldier, but I doubt that there is any military interest in

> How am I then a villain,
> To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,
> Directly to his good?
> (II.iii.339)

In the construction of the soliloquy, this is obviously a reiteration of his opening challenge, and implies therefore some explanation of the

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1. Iago as equivocator is defensible in view of the importance of the Jesuit doctrine of equivocation in contemporary affairs. The idea of damnation for equivocation is evident in both *Hamlet* (V.i) and *Macbeth* (II.iii.), and Iago specifically relates himself to devils putting on their 'blackest sins'. See Muir's introduction to the Arden *Macbeth*, pp.xv - xviii. Cf. Felperin's view that Iago should not be compared with Edmund because, unlike Edmund who is a plain villain, Iago's alienation 'goes deeper and carries no badge. (He) is at some level a mystery to himself,...whose cultivation of a Vice-like evil can be neither fully explained nor fully demystified.' Op. cit., p.94.

opening question, which leads him to the repetition; the word 'then' especially suggests that there has been an intervening argument to nullify the accusation. And this explanation or argument can only be derived from what he says about Desdemona:

> For 'tis most easy
> The inclining Desdemona to subdue,
> In any honest suit; she's fram'd as fruitful
> As the free elements: and then for her
> To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism,
> All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,
> His soul is so infetter'd to her love,
> That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
> Even as her appetite shall play the god
> With his weak function.
>
> (II.iii.330)

This, I believe, is not as charitable a view of Desdemona as it seems to be, and represents a further equivocation by Iago. From what we have already seen of his attitude to her, it seems sensible to expect some calumny in his comments, and if we take the possible ambivalences here, the 'parallel course' is explainable as a course parallel to the one which, he forsees, will damn Othello and Desdemona - one which will damn Cassio too. On one level of credibility, the level we accept most readily of Desdemona, he says that she is easily won to support a good cause and, having Othello's complete devotion, she can win Cassio's reprieve. Remembering his intention to put on 'blackest sins', and 'enmesh 'em all' in a net made of 'her own goodness', surely we can also regard as scurrilous such expressions as, ''tis most easy/The inclining Desdemona to subdue'? The word 'honest' in Iago's mouth is simply not to be taken at face value, so its presence need not prohibit the ambivalence. Then consider the possible suggestion of her winning the Moor 'to renounce his baptism,/All seals and symbols of redeemed sin'; this makes a devil of her since that is an exact description of the Satanic mission in the Christian world. To say then that she can 'play the god' with him, is nearer to the black arts in Iago's derivation than a comparison with divine power. His soul is not merely in her keeping, but is 'infetter'd to her love'; and while I am prepared to believe Ridley's explanation of 'her appetite' as 'objective, not possessive - his desire for her', I think it can as sensibly be taken to mean that her own sexual passion can command him 'do what she list', especially if we accept the reading of her feelings in I.iii., analysed above.

Seen in this light, the superficial credibility of Iago's reasoning is undershot with a remarkable equivocation which allows him

the challenge 'How am I then a villain' because of Desdemona's goodness and the validity of his advice to Cassio, but at the same time allows him to enjoy the revelation of how he can and will abuse this goodness by exploiting its latent ambivalence.

Iago makes his first direct bid to make Othello suspect Desdemona's fidelity in III.iii, the great 'temptation' scene, as it is called. But there are a few touches in the first sixty lines of the act, which can be taken as suggestively ambiguous - preparatory to the storm of doubt which will follow. In the dismissal of the musicians by the clown, there is a probable hint of discord, as tends to be suggested by the numerous references in Shakespeare to the unfavourable nature of those who dislike, or have no music in their souls. Then in the choice of phrase by both Cassio and Iago, there is enough latitude to allow scurrilous interpretations to co-exist with the more direct meanings: Cassio wants Emilia to 'procure me some access' to Desdemona; Iago replies that he will 'devise a mean to draw the Moor/Out of the way, that your converse and business/May be more free'; and in III.iii itself, Cassio tells Desdemona that he is 'never anything but your true servant'; the term 'servant' still had the sense of 'a professed lover' as late as 1700. Finally, Desdemona's undertaking for Cassio goes beyond the call of necessity, just as Iago predicted it would:

> My lord shall never rest,
> I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience;
> His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift.
> (III.iii.22)

This even has an echo of Iago's jesting words to Emilia at the beginning of the second Act.

The first real thrust comes, however, at line 35, Iago's 'Ha, I like not that', and follow-up of deliberate evasion, clearly intended to egg Othello on, saying just enough to confirm Othello's own observation, and suggest an explanation, while appearing to cover up for Cassio:

> Oth. What dost thou say?
> Iag. Nothing, my lord, or if - I know not what.
> Oth. Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?
> Iag. Cassio, my lord?...no, sure, I cannot think it,
> That he would sneak away so guilty-like,
> Seeing you coming.
> (III.iii.36)

This is the technique he has used in explaining the brawl to Othello, and he clearly knows the effect it will have on Othello's temper. When we add to this Desdemona's unwittingly co-operative enthusiasm for Cassio's

cause, we have a development which Othello can hardly grasp yet, but which clearly gives him an air of distraction. Where Cinthio clearly describes the Moor's anger at and direct reprimand for her concern for Cassio,[1] Shakespeare is more concerned to show what Cinthio calls 'a thorn in the soul' of Othello. In terms of my argument, Othello begins to show the irritation that the planted doubt has germinated, and Iago could scarcely have planned it better than to have the innocent but equivocal help of Desdemona's importunity:

Des. I suffer with him; good love, call him back.
Oth. Not now, sweet Desdemona, some other time.
Des. But shall't be shortly?
Oth. The sooner, sweet, for you.
Des. Shall't be to-night at supper?
Oth. No, not to-night.
Des. To-morrow dinner then?
Oth. I shall not dine at home.
I meet the captains, at the citadel.
Des. Why then to-morrow night, or Tuesday morn,
On Tuesday noon, or night, or Wednesday morn.
(III.iii.55)

Not only is she importunate, she also chides Othello:

I wonder in my soul
What you could ask me, that I should deny?
Or stand so mammering on? What? Michael Cassio,
That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time
When I have spoke of you dispraisingly,
Hath ta'en your part, to have so much to do
To bring him in?
(III.iii.69)

To a man just exposed to Iago's suggestion, this can only act - at best - equivocally; at worst, it will give him a sense of illicit interest, such as Cinthio makes clear in the parallel passage on the Moor's anger. Shakespeare gives Othello a considerable degree of restraint and patience in the reply he makes to Desdemona:

Prithee no more, let him come when he will,
I will deny thee nothing.
(III.iii.76)

And when she still persists:

I will deny thee nothing,
Whereon I do beseech thee grant me this,
To leave me but a little to myself.
(III.iii.84)

These words strike me as proper to a man who has received a shock and needs some time to adjust - hence the essentially delaying intention of both, 'let him come when he will', and the repeated, 'I will deny thee nothing'. In fact, every one of the four distinct elements of these

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1. Cf. p.163 above.

two short speeches to Desdemona, is expressive of a need to suspend matters for a while.

But the first clear sign of doubt in Othello, an equivocation in which the language used can be taken to signify equally affirmation of or fear for his love of Desdemona, is the brief speech following her exit:

> Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul,
> But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,
> Chaos is come again.
> (III.iii.91)

He is on a knife-edge here, aware of both his deep love, (in the affectionate use of 'wretch' in the potentially paradoxical 'excellent wretch'), and the consequences of losing this love. Iago recognises it as a delicate balance and strikes again immediately:

> Iag. Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,
> Know of your love?
> Oth. He did, from first to last:...why dost thou ask?
> Iag. But for a satisfaction of my thought.
> No further harm.
> Oth. Why of thy thought, Iago?
> Iag. I did not think he had been acquainted with her.
> Oth. O yes, and went between us very often.
> Iag. Indeed?
> Oth. Indeed? Indeed: discern'st thou aught in that?
> Is he not honest?
> Iag. Honest, my lord?
> Oth. Honest? ay, honest.
> Iag. My lord, for aught I know.
> (III.iii.95)

Again Iago dangles the bait in front of Othello's nose, hinting constantly at hidden knowledge without yet suggesting anything directly condemnatory - a technique that might be called equivocal musing. His angling iteration is sufficiently barbed to stick in Othello's throat:

> By heaven, he echoes me,
> As if there were some monster in his thought,
> Too hideous to be shown: thou didst mean something
> ....
> As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
> Some horrible conceit: if thou dost love me,
> Show me thy thought.
> (III.iii.110)

It is perhaps the quality seen here in Othello which led Leavis to regard Iago as 'merely ancillary' to Othello's own culpable jealousy: his desire to know the worst, rather than to be left in the dark, taunted by the 'horrible conceit' shut up in Iago's brain. Rather than this, he pursues the 'monster in his thought' even though it might be 'too hideous to be shown'. It is the quality seen before in his resolute pursuit of the

truth when accused of witchcraft by Brabantio, and when the brawl had to be explained; but now the pursuit of truth is seen in a different light. Yet not simply as a contorted or perverted quest, as it is tempting to say, for Othello is not yet corrupted by the formal vow of revenge that will follow. The eighty lines following this first plea to see the monster in Iago's thought, show why Othello's quest is not simply perverted.

These lines are punctuated by repetitions of the desire for Iago to 'give the worst of thought/The worst of word'. At line 145, Iago conspires against Othello if he 'but thinkest him wrong'd, and makest his ear/A stranger to thy thoughts'; at line 166 Othello swears 'By heaven I'll know thy thought'; and from line 180 to line 196 he climaxes his determination by stating emphatically that he will not live in a state of doubt. It takes all this time to convince Iago that his hook is firmly embedded in Othello's throat, and that his own footing is sure enough to take the strain. Therefore his technique is to give Othello plenty of line, with an occasional jerk to test the hook. His talk is all of love, duty, and credibility, and is full of ironies of being and seeming. His first assay is of Othello's friendly disposition towards him, and the Moor shows how firmly grounded Iago is on this point, through the irony of his trust:

> I know thou art full of love and honesty
> And weighest thy words, before thou give 'em breath.
> (III.iii.122)

Equally ironic is Othello's reading of Iago's 'stops' : he takes the hesitation and suggestive remarks, (which stop before the suggestion becomes plain), to be a sign of Iago's true heart, even though they are the 'tricks of custom' in the false heart. In other words, he judges the action from the character instead of vice versa; not only is his theory of evidence false, but he is inconsistent in holding that seeing is believing. Here he allows what he believes to dictate what he sees. Iago can safely leave the point, and so he proceeds, suggesting that Cassio seems to be honest, in order to test Othello's perception of appearance and judgement of reality:

> Men should be that they seem,
> Or those that be not, would they might seem none!
> (III.iii.130)

This is perhaps cryptic as Ridley says, but it is fairly obviously said to see how Othello responds to the heavy irony it conveys. He is quite unflustered by it, and simply reiterates the desire to have Iago's thoughts laid before him.

Iago's next check is so close to self-confession that Othello's failure to see the truth must give him a sense of absolute security:

> Good my lord, pardon me;
> Though I am bound to every act of duty,
> I am not bound to that all slaves are free to;
> Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false:
> As where's that palace, whereinto foul things
> Sometimes intrude not? (III.iii.137)

Even this does no more than keep Othello guessing why Iago is apparently unwilling to confide in him, and he chides him for conspiring to keep him ignorant. Iago knows, probably from past experience, but certainly from the experience we share of Othello's temper when he cannot get a straight answer, that the worst thing he can now do is to refuse directly to disclose his thoughts, and he does so probably to see how manageable the Moor will prove, but also to cover himself by disclaiming anything more than suspicion of Desdemona and Cassio. Therefore he begs Othello to

> take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble
> Out of my scattering and unsure observance; (III.iii.154)

and quite roundly denigrates his own powers of judgement:

> I confess it is my nature's plague
> To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy
> Shapes faults that are not. (III.iii.150)

But if Iago is concerned to protect himself, he does not lose sight of his objective; even in protesting the value of reputation - his, Othello's, Cassio's, Desdemona's, are probably all involved in his mind - the process of fixing doubt in Othello's mind is taken care of by the careful inclusion of 'woman' in, 'Good name in man and woman 's dear, my lord', and by the notion of being robbed of something precious, the 'jewel' of his soul, with its latent suggestion of figurative application to a precious person, and possibly deliberate assonantal echo of Othello's phrase, 'O my soul's joy' spoken in Iago's presence at the reunion in Cyprus. And even as he bluntly says that Othello shall not know his thought, he ensures that its direction is still readily detectable:

> O, beware jealousy;
> It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
> That meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss,
> Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger:
> But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
> Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!
> (III.iii.169)

Othello can hardly miss this since it practically abandons the equivocal

and gives him the closest statement yet of what Iago wants him to think - and his response confirms that it has struck home:

O misery! (III.iii.175)

Now that he has a clear idea of what Iago will disclose to him, Othello can show his mettle, which he does by bringing his soldierly resolution - doggedness - into play. From the bleating demands to let him off the hook, and the half-choked imprecations - 'Zounds', 'O misery' - he once again speaks boldly[1] from the stance of reason:

Think'st thou I'ld make a life of jealousy?
To follow still the changes of the moon
With fresh suspicions? No, to be once in doubt,
Is once to be resolv'd: exchange me for a goat,
When I shall turn the business of my soul
To such exsufflicate and blown surmises,
Matching thy inference. (III.iii.181)

This would be a noble resolve in different circumstances; essentially, he is resolved to know rather than to suspect and 'make a life of' jealousy, which here clearly means suspicion rather than hatred of a rival. His rationale is sound because it is based on his own sense of Desdemona's qualities:

'tis not to make me jealous,
To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well;
Where virtue is, these are more virtuous:
Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw
The smallest fear, or doubt of her revolt,
For she had eyes, and chose me. (III.iii.187)

All this suggests that his better judgement will prevail, but the essential weakness of his position lies in the determination that 'to be once in doubt/Is once to be resolv'd'. One might say that *Othello* is the tragedy of a man who cannot bear to be in doubt and therefore puts his faith in an inappropriate philosophy. It is the quest for certainty[2] that leads him to his fateful and prophetic words,

No, Iago,
I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove,
And on the proof, there is no more but this:
Away at once with love or jealousy! (III.iii.193)

The pursuit of truth, as I have said above, is modified by the circumstances

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1. Though not quite with the precise ring that Knight calls 'the Othello music'.

2. Stated thus, the play's kinship with *Hamlet* and the epistemological concerns of Scepticism is evident. See also p.195 below.

of the play, so that Othello's apparent corruption is the effect of his determination to follow dictates inappropriate to his situation. His very decision to pursue the truth is equivocal because of the play's circumstances; ordinarily this decision would be the right one, here it is what leads him into tragedy because it is inappropriate to the needs of the situation. This forms one of the play's structural patterns, the quasi-legal situation that develops between the characters. As Heilman says, Othello 'aspires...to the judicial', his fault is to rely on legalism rather than belief: 'though he is incurably irrational, he wants the reassuring illusion of acting only in terms of rational formulations'.[1] He determines, in other words, to be scrupulous about Iago's 'inference', and this is where his later follies about the handkerchief and other visual proofs have their root.

But the charm is not yet quite wound up. Iago comes at last to the point, albeit cautiously:

> I speak not yet of proof;
> Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio;
> Wear your eye thus, not jealous, nor secure.
> (III.iii.200)

Yet he still works at getting Othello ever more firmly hooked. He plays what Ridley calls 'his most devilishly effective card, using Othello's sense of social inexperience'[2] in

> I know our country disposition well;
> In Venice they do let God see the pranks
> They dare not show their husbands.
> (III.iii.205)

This agrees with my point about his foreignness,[3] and here Othello's innocence is seen in his almost mesmerised responses to Iago's frank revelation:

> Oth. Dost thou say so?
> Iag. She did deceive her father, marrying you;
> And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,
> She lov'd them most.
> Oth. And so she did.
> (III.iii.209)

Typically, Iago uses his technique of exploiting the ambivalence in Brabantio's warning to Othello in I.iii.[4] This must have the effect of

1. Op. cit., pp.131-32.

2. Op. cit., p.105 n.

3. Cf. pp. 169-70 above.

4. Cf. pp. 175-6 above. Brabantio's words are equivocal in that they can be taken equally as true or false, depending on your point of view

making her love seem equivocal, so that Othello's 'And so she did' becomes a dumbfounded realisation of an apparent truth which he has just seen.

From here to the end of the scene is a matter of going with the tide for Iago, as Othello struggles against the quickly-rising flood of jealous anger. Clearly, doubt is well established, but he is still inspecting it, trying to see if there is any flaw in its appalling probability:

> Oth. I do not think but Desdemona's honest.
> Iag. Long live she so, and long live you to think so!
> Oth. And yet how nature erring from itself -
>
> (III.iii.229)

- an opening which Iago's quick eye catches to confirm the already suggested wilfulness of Desdemona, but now with the added ambivalence of 'will', openly suggesting lust. That he also rubs Othello's nose in the prejudice seen to exist against his exotic nature, is typical of his abusive skill, and further indicates how deeply Othello is under his power:

> to be bold with you,
> Not to affect many proposed matches,
> Of her own clime, complexion, and degree
> Whereto we see in all things nature tends;
> Fie, we may smell in such a will most rank,
> Foul disproportion; thoughts unnatural.
>
> (III.iii.232)

Ridley takes Iago's next speech as deliberately ironic:

> My lord, I would I might entreat your honour
> To scan this thing no further, leave it to time:
> Though it be fit that Cassio have his place,
> For sure he fills it up with great ability,
> Yet if you please to hold him off awhile,
> You shall by that perceive him and his means;
> Note if your lady strain her entertainment
> With any strong or vehement importunity,
> Much will be seen in that.
>
> (III.iii.248)

He comments on the words 'leave it to time', 'the one thing that Othello ...is least likely to do, and the last thing that Iago in fact wants him to do'. This seems basically right, but there is something to be said for his really wanting a little more time for Othello to confirm all for himself. Also, his constant cautionary pleas before this seem to imply a real concern for his own safety in the undertaking. He knows Othello's volatile nature, and perhaps feels that his task is sufficiently done for the moment. His presence during the exchange between Othello and

Desdemona, earlier in the scene, is surely what leads him to suggest that Othello take note of her 'vehement importunity' as a sign of confirmation; and he possibly feels that more such examples will appear, making his further personal endangerment unnecessary. As he says a little later when warned by Othello to give him proof of her disloyalty, 'I do not like the office'. I think he is honest about this at least.

But Othello does continue to 'scan' it, and the text suggests that he is still wrestling with probability; following the generalised dictates of the suspicion that is now within him:

> She's gone, I am abus'd, and my relief
> Must be to loathe her:
> (III.iii.271)

and

> 'Tis destiny, unshunnable, like death:
> Even then this forked plague is fated to us,
> When we do quicken;
> (III.iii.279)

yet having brief moments of faith in his own, untainted, perception:

> Desdemona comes,
> If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself,
> I'll not believe it.
> (III.iii.281)

But Desdemona's concern at his faint speech is testimony to his immediate relapse into doubt, as is his answer:

> I have a pain upon my forehead, here. (III.iii.288)

Succeeding this half-dazed stage in Othello's collapse, is the onset of his anger, with its anguished desire to un-know or reject knowledge:

> thou hast set me on the rack,
> I swear, 'tis better to be much abus'd
> Than but to know't a little....
> What sense had I of her stol'n hours of lust?
> I saw't not, thought it not, it harm'd not me,
> I slept the next night well, was free and merry;
> I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips;
> He that is robb'd, not wanting what is stol'n,
> Let him not know't, and he's not robb'd at all.
> (III.iii.341)

Although he will shortly turn to revenge, this stage reflects nothing short of a desire to return to acceptance of the world as it was and regret for the burden of knowledge - surely invoking the story of the Fall, and, surely, also casting a glance at the *docta ignorantia*, hence introducing at least a rudimentary metaphysical interest that relates to Iago's

role as disturber of the peace, giving him a diabolic depth that many critics have tried to deny. That Othello goes on actively - passionately - to pursue certainty, blinded as he is by Iago's machinations, perhaps suggests that the metaphysics of the play need to be more carefully considered, for the Christian implications here are complicated by the collocation with a strong suggestion of the epistemological concerns of Scepticism.[1]

When he bids farewell to 'the tranquil mind' and 'content', he is mourning the loss of the innocence, or blessed ignorance, which his military life's sensory clarity had given him; this, I think, accounts for the careful particularisation of his catalogue of losses in a passage that rings with the 'Othello music':

> Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
> That makes ambition virtue: O farewell,
> Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
> The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife;
> The royal banner, and all quality,
> Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
> And, O ye mortal engines, whose wide throats
> The immortal Jove's great clamour counterfeit;
> Farewell, Othello's occupation's gone!
> (III.iii.355)

There is no need to think of Othello as Knight does, 'serving in the temple of war'[2] here: his 'occupation' is represented by all the details he mentions, and he names them as he would dead favourites, for the comfort of recalling them. Their simple clarity and defined qualities are in stark contrast to the knowledge he has gained, and he has the perspicacity to realise it. As is the case in Genesis, his eyes are opened, as he mistakenly thinks, and he now goes on to demand 'the ocular proof'; the difference is that he is not aroused to shame of his nakedness, but to wrath, much as Blake was later to show the change from Innocence to Experience:

> Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,
> Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof,
> Or by the worth of man's eternal soul,
> Thou hadst been better have been born a dog,
> Than answer my wak'd wrath.
> (III.iii.365)

With this anger goes a determination to regain, if not his lost paradise, at least the condition he has known before, and this is best

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1. Cf. p.191 above, footnote 2 .

2. J. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, p.107.

seen in the clarity of mind and life which his military occupation had given him. Doubt is inimical to this state, thus his only comfort can be in the dispelling of doubt, in the quest for certainty:

> Make me to see't, or at least so prove it,
> That the probation bear no hinge, nor loop,
> To hang a doubt on. (III.iii.370)

And in the circumstances of the play, this quest can only issue tragically.

The use of 'doubt' in the passage just cited shows clearly that Shakespeare uses the word in the sense of 'uncertainty', as well as in the more usual contemporary senses, 'suspicion' or 'fear'. Ironically, perhaps inevitably, Iago's plan to put Othello into a jealousy beyond judgement's ability to cure, has succeeded better than he could have hoped. Othello is not merely suspicious and jealous, he is in a state of doubt, moved in different directions by feelings and reason based on past experience:

> By the world,
> I think my wife be honest, and think she is not,
> I think that thou art just, and think thou art not;
> I'll have some proof. (III.iii.389)

His uncertainty is what oppresses him, and he sees it in terms of a tarnishing of what was clear, the blackening of his reputation:

> my name, that was as fresh
> As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd, and black
> As mine own face. (III.iii.392)

To get rid of this muddying doubt becomes an imperative that could involve death - his own or that of others, is not specified:

> if there be cords, or knives,
> Poison or fire, or suffocating streams,
> I'll not endure it: would I were satisfied! (III.iii.394)

The scene is now set for the final stage of Othello's collapse. This mood and need lead directly to the idea of revenge, for the assumption is that evidence must be found to prove Desdemona's guilt rather than her innocence. Hence, after his rejection of the tantalising, taunting possibility of seeing her 'topp'd', Iago holds out the inscrutable suggestion of proof in 'imputation and strong circumstances,/Which lead directly to the door of truth'. And Othello demands,

> Give me a living reason, that she's disloyal.
> (III.iii.415)

After this comes the absurd account of Cassio's dream, which Othello swallows entirely, and the mention of Cassio's possession of the handkerchief which Iago has received from Emilia during the scene's brief interruption. On the basis of these two assertions by Iago, Othello commits himself to revenge:

> O that the slave had forty thousand lives!
> One is too poor, too weak for my revenge:
> Now do I see 'tis true; look here, Iago,
> All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven,...
> 'Tis gone.
> Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell,
> Yield up, O love, thy crown, and hearted throne,
> To tyrannous hate, swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
> For 'tis of aspic's tongues! (III.iii.449)

His thoughts are now of blood - 'O blood, Iago, blood!' - and his returned clarity of image reflects a returned sense of direction, the relief of no longer doubting, the stability of a certain course and objective. Now his mind will not change:

> Like to the Pontic sea,
> Whose icy current, and compulsive course,
> Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
> To the Propontic, and the Hellespont:
> Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace
> Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
> Till that a capable and wide revenge
> Swallow them up. (III.iii.460)

He is once again the general, issuing commands:

> Within these three days, let me hear thee say
> That Cassio's not alive. (III.iii.479)

Thus his closing remark to Iago, 'now art thou my lieutenant', does not merely signify a belated fulfilment of one of Iago's early ambitions, but also shows a revitalisation of his sense of purpose. There is work to be done and Iago is his second-in-command.[1] Thus deluded, he achieves at least some sense of his former clarity of life by pushing doubt aside.[2]

With Othello set upon his destructive course, the play's concern with doubt undergoes a change of emphasis, recalling to some extent the

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1. Cf. W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, p.249.

2. I mean this as a broad structural point. It does not preclude some looking for evidence and confirmation in the scenes that follow. Othello is not simple-minded, still showing a complex mixture of feelings and thoughts, but his behaviour is clearly changed sharply enough to be remarked on by both Desdemona and Emilia.

change that occurs in *Hamlet*. The next scene is largely concerned with the effect Othello's altered bearing has on Desdemona and others of the household. It is essentially the 'handkerchief scene', and I have already commented on the central exchange between Desdemona and Othello.[1] The equivocal nature of this exchange is indeed effective in conveying a sense of crossed purposes, but what I could not stress previously is the importance of this equivocal writing to the play at this point; it is precisely this that keeps Othello from appearing to be simply a blind fool. If we were not given at least a sense that there is a plausible cause for his anger - which depends on the whole structure of doubt that Iago has raised in him - his stature as a tragic figure would collapse. It is essential that Desdemona should provide him with apparent grounds for his monomaniacal iteration and subsidence into curses; otherwise he would be merely laughable. This is Ridley's point,[2] but he does not identify it as a matter of technique, simply blaming the reader for not thinking clearly enough. What seems to happen in this scene as a whole is that Desdemona is shown equivocally by means of the different effects she has here, on the audience and on Othello.

Perhaps this is why Shakespeare chose to begin the scene with the apparently pointless quibbling of the clown. We are reminded of the quibbling exchange at the beginning of the second act which introduced an ambivalence into our response to Desdemona.[3] Her bearing here by no means gives grounds to support any real doubt about her, but the mere juxtaposition of this reminder with her confidence in Othello's integrity of judgement, is enough to enrich the irony of these lines with a sense of deliberately equivocal intent by Shakespeare:

> Des. but my noble Moor
> Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness
> As jealous creatures are, it were enough
> To put him to ill thinking.
> Emil. Is he not jealous?
> Des. Who, he? I think the sun where he was born
> Drew all such humours from him.
> (III.iv.22)

We not only know that her faith is groundless and about to be shattered, we are also aware that her renewed enthusiasm for Cassio's cause will be

1. Cf. pp. 164-5 above.

2. Cf. p.166 above.

3. Cf. pp. 178-182 above.

abused, almost as if we had been taught by Iago. Willy-nilly, we are involved in the equivocating power he has cast over the play, and when she begins her pleading on Cassio's behalf, we have a sense of the inevitable, of effect flowing from cause. The more she insists on a hearing for Cassio, the greater she makes her apparent guilt in Othello's eyes. Both of them are trapped in a carefully designed opposition; she can as little avoid confirming her apparent guilt as he can avoid pursuing what is now a preoccupation:

> Des. How is it with you, my lord?
> Oth. Well, my good lady: (aside) O, hardness to dissemble!
> How do you do, Desdemona?
> Des. Well, my good lord.
> Oth. Give me your hand; this hand is moist, my lady.
> Des. It yet has felt no age, nor known no sorrow.
> Oth. This argues fruitfulness, and liberal heart;
> Hot, hot, and moist, this hand of yours requires
> A sequester from liberty; fasting and praying,
> Much castigation, exercise devout;
> For here's a young and sweating devil here,
> That commonly rebels: 'tis a good hand,
> A frank one.
> (III.iv.29)

This preoccupation with the physical signs of Desdemona's guilt - her lusty nature seen in her moist palm - confirms that the search for evidence has become more than a desire to test Iago's assertions: Othello has adopted the role of diagnostician here, become a fortune-teller, one who believes he has a key to knowledge and therefore a control over fate that is not unlike his earlier 'occupation' and control over men.[1]

This is also apparent in the probably premeditated demand for the handkerchief. In the tale of the Egyptian charmer is much more than a mere sense of a lost token of love: the handkerchief is clearly talismanic, able to exert control over love, and Othello's emphasis here, on the 'magic in the web', is no mere 'bombast circumstance',[2] or repetition of the tales which caused Desdemona originally to 'devour up (his) discourse' with a 'greedy ear'. It is an assertion of power, a command, even a threat:

> take heed on't,
> Make it a darling, like your precious eye,
> To lose, or giv't away, were such perdition

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1. Cf. Auden, op. cit., p.270: 'to-know in the scientific sense means, ultimately, to-have-power-over.'

2. Cf. I.i.14.

As nothing else could match. (III.iv.63)

Desdemona is now caught up in the reality of those tales she had once been enthralled by, and cannot relate it to her own sense of reality. She asks, 'Is't possible?', and 'is't true?', and then vigorously rejects her new understanding:

Then would to God that I had never seen it! (III.iv.75)

This is a very different picture of Desdemona to that seen only fifty lines before, and if we consider also the plain lie and challenge of

It is not lost, but what an if it were? (III.iv.81)

it is clear that we must be involved in the equivocal effect that shows Othello a guilt-ridden wife and shows us a Desdemona who is at once an innocent victim of and an unwitting help to Iago's machinations.[1] It is little wonder then that Othello should find her evasive speech damning, that his mind should 'misgive' , and that he should be reduced to an expletive and later to his near-barbaric behaviour in the fourth Act.[2] Emilia's 'Is not this man jealous?', (line 96), reflects a confirmative observation of what was merely a question of rhetorical curiosity seventy lines before.

The other side of this ambivalent picture is the state of doubt and confusion that Desdemona is thrown into by Othello's unprecedented behaviour. When Cassio appeals again for her intercession, she is in very much the same position as Brutus's Portia:[3]

My lord is not my lord, nor should I know him,
Were he in favour as in humour alter'd. (III.iv.121)

She can only grope after a sensible explanation in the strained attempt she makes to apologise for him and to blame herself for not seeing how his mind is 'puddled' by some 'practice', which Emilia takes to mean 'state-matters':

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1. Cf. Auden, op. cit., pp.268-69.

2. Cf. F. Kermode, Introduction to *Othello*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, pp.1198 and 1201.

3. Cf. *Julius Caesar*, II.i.253; 'And could it work so much upon your shape/As it hath much prevail'd on your condition,/I should not know you Brutus.'

'Tis even so; for let our finger ache,
And it indues our other healthful members
Even to that sense of pain; nay, we must think
Men are not gods;
Nor of them look for such observances
As fits the bridal: beshrew me much, Emilia,
I was (unhandsome warrior as I am)
Arraigning his unkindness with my soul;
But now I find I had suborn'd the witness,
And he's indicted falsely.
(III.iv.143)

This is sufficiently remotely phrased to suggest her real innocence, yet it is palpably lacking in perspicacity if we recall that she has seen and heard Othello becoming agitated over matters clearly personal - her moist hand, her loss of the handkerchief - while Emilia keeps suggesting the possibility of a directly personal cause for his displeasure:

Pray heaven it be state-matters, as you think,
And no conception, nor no jealous toy
Concerning you.
(III.iv.153)

That she can exclaim, 'Alas the day, I never gave him cause!', is not necessarily a vindication of her sound thinking in the matter, and it is at least possible to follow Auden's perverse reading[1] and suggest an obtuseness here as part of the ambivalence communicated by Shakespeare's equivocal intent. Such a reading would at least partly explain Emilia's answer to her:

But jealous souls will not be answer'd so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster,
Begot upon itself, born on itself.
(III.iv.157)

This is redundant as a statement to the audience, since we already know the extent and manner of Othello's falling into jealousy: it does not describe Othello's jealousy at all, (Leavis notwithstanding), and must therefore be understood as a simple answer to Desdemona's naive complaint, that she 'never gave him cause'. In essence, Emilia is pointing out that not all things can be explained by sound reasons,[2] and she probably intends no more than homely advice.

The final touch in showing the plausibility of Othello's jealousy and anger is the introduction of Cassio's mistress, Bianca.

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1. So called by F. Kermode, op. cit., p.1201. Cf. Auden, passim, but especially pp.268-9.

2. Cf. Auden's emphasis on Iago's lack of serious reasons or rational motivation. Op. cit., p.254 especially.

Cassio is, as Auden says, 'a ladies' man', though not 'a seducer'.[1] The mere fact of Bianca's existence as a real source for Cassio's dialogue with Iago in IV.i, is another barb in Iago's hook. This reveals an ambivalence about Cassio's own nature which Othello does not see, and therefore he can understand Cassio's words and actions only in the way he does. We are given the scene with Bianca to prepare us with this new insight into Cassio. His response to her accusation that the handkerchief is 'some token from a newer friend', is revealing:

> Go to, woman,
> Throw your vile guesses in the devil's teeth,
> From whence you have them; you are jealous now
> That this is from some mistress, some remembrance.
> (III.iv.181)

This shows in him the same quick defiance that liquor provoked in him before. Although he speaks the truth in all innocence about the handkerchief's appearance in his room, the over-quick and vehement rejection of Bianca's suspicion suggests at least the possibility of a sensitivity on the subject. That he thinks it

> no addition, nor my wish
> To have him see me woman'd,
> (III.iv.192)

is likewise an innocent enough wish for a man in his position, suffering from a lost reputation, but it includes unavoidably a sense of Cassio's desire to cover up the fact that he *is* 'woman'd', and the irony of its forward reference to the following scene in which Othello does see him enacting and discoursing on his sexual exploits, is intense. Indeed, the whole business from line 98 to line 161 of IV.i reflects very badly on Cassio, showing him to be not only 'woman'd', but callous to, and contemptuous of, his whore. Although Othello may misconstrue his 'smiles, gestures, and light behaviour', as Iago predicts, the fact is that he enacts a piece of villainy which is real enough to provide a plausible ground for Othello's reaction. It could not be otherwise: without such a character as Bianca, and such a relationship for Cassio, Iago would not have the basis for this scene played for Othello's benefit. He could not, in other words, make Cassio show himself in such a light if Cassio did not in fact have some grounds for behaving as he does. What Othello sees he construes wrongly only in the matter of identity.

However, the effect of the burden of knowledge on Othello himself now becomes the focus. Iago's work may be done, but he is not

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1. Op. cit., p.260-2.

averse to prodding his victim, perhaps simply for the satisfaction of seeing him squirm. Thus the nearly incoherent raving arising out of the ambiguities of 'lie' - 'with her, on her, what you will' - which culminates in his falling down, clearly in a trance (as both Q2 and F specified), evokes from Iago the patent satisfaction of,

> Work on,
> My medicine, work: thus credulous fools are caught,
> And many worthy and chaste dames, even thus
> All guiltless, meet reproach. (IV.i.44)

So too, his cynical diminution of Othello's ill fortune, the assertion that 'every bearded fellow that's but yok'd/May draw with you', that Othello's fate is shared by 'millions', provokes a cowed, 'O, thou art wise, 'tis certain', from the suffering Moor.

Othello's reading of the dumb-show - this is what it is to him - nicely demonstrates the operation of his 'knowledge', for now he can interpret for himself from visible evidence. Iago's tutorship is complete, and the successful pupil shows that he can draw the conclusions he has been taught to draw by the 'wise' Iago. But his knowledge is burdensome, and, since he perceives that it can't be pushed aside,[1] his vow of revenge becomes obsessive:

> I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I
> shall throw it to. (IV.i.140)
>
> How shall I murder him, Iago? (IV.i.166)
>
> I would have him nine years a-killing. (IV.i.174)

His original driving force, the pursuit of knowledge, is seen to have been satisfied; the originally innocent Othello has fallen,[2] and the experience is painful, as his sense of having lost Desdemona shows:

> a fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet
> woman! (IV.i.174)

Vengeful injury and remorseful pity, even admiration, constantly mingle as he shows his feelings:

> Oth. And let her rot, and perish, and be damned to-night,
> for she shall not live; no, my heart is turn'd to
> stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand: O, the
> world has not a sweeter creature, she might lie by
> an emperor's side, and command him tasks.
> Iag. Nay,that's not your way.

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1. Cf. p.194 above.

2. Cf. Kermode, op. cit., p.1202: 'Obscurely, it is. ..an enactment of the Fall...we can momentarily see the play as a psychomachia.'

Oth. Hang her, I do but say what she is: so delicate with her needle, an admirable musician, O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear; of so high and plenteous wit and invention!
Iag. She's the worse for all this.
Oth. A thousand thousand times: and then of so gentle a condition!
Iag. Ay, too gentle.
Oth. Ay, that's certain, but yet the pity of it Iago; O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!
....
I will chop her into messes...cuckold me!
(IV.i.177)

The logical next step is that Othello should make this new knowledge public, that it should issue in action, and both of these demands are met as Lodovico arrives, and witnesses the blow Desdemona suffers at line 235. His amazement is clear testimony to the change we are meant to realise:

Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate
Call all in all sufficient? This the noble nature,
Whom passion could not shake? (IV. i.260)

Iago has no further private advisory dialogue with Othello, and, in effect, he formally consigns his erstwhile pupil to the public gaze at the end of this scene, denying helpful knowledge to Lodovico:

you shall observe him,
And his own courses will denote him so,
That I may save my speech: do but go after,
And mark how he continues. (IV.i.274)

The equivocator's task done, damnation must follow.[1] In a sense, Othello is damned for believing false witness; a sure sign that he has accepted the equivocator's values and abandoned truth, is the prefatory matter to the so-called 'brothel scene'. Questioning Emilia, he is given as directly as is possible, plain assurance that Desdemona is innocent of any falsity, yet he dismisses Emilia as a 'subtle whore,/A closet, lock and key, of villainous secrets', and goes on to exercise his tendency to see himself as a judge,[2] preaching damnation to Desdemona:

Oth. Why, what art thou?
Des. Your wife, my lord, your true and loyal wife.
Oth. Come, swear it, damn thyself,
Lest, being like one of heaven, the devils themselves
Should fear to seize thee, therefore be double-damn'd,

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1. Cf. p.184 above.

2. Cf. p.192 above.

Swear thou art honest. (IV.ii.34)

But this attitude is mingled with the self-pity that is evident in the tears Desdemona sees:

Alas the heavy day, why do you weep?
Am I the occasion of those tears, my lord? (IV.ii.43)

The apparent contradiction is accounted for by the conflict Iago's teaching must cause by being superimposed on his original innocent and forbearing nature. This interpretative resolution is rather difficult to maintain in looking at the speech that follows, however, since the pronoun variants that exist in this speech's different states make it impossible to decide who is being referred to:

Had it pleas'd heaven
To try me with affliction, had he rain'd
All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head,
Steep'd me in poverty, to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my hopes,
I should have found in some part of my soul
A drop of patience; but, alas, to make me
A fixed figure, for the time of scorn
To point his slow unmoving fingers at...oh, oh.
(IV.ii.48)

If we take the Folio reading, 'had *they* rain'd', the speech has the air of a set piece, since Othello then appears simply to ignore Desdemona's questions and pity for his tears, and carries on as if she were an uninvolved auditor, and he were making a public declaration of his ability to withstand the trials of heaven. This would be consistent with the notion of self-pity in its lack of feeling for her, but it tends to conflict with the inquisitorial tone of the scene as a whole - in which he argues closely with her, rejecting and condemning her words in the manner of a judge spurning false evidence. If, on the other hand, we take the reading of both Quartos, 'had *he* rain'd', (which Ridley accepts), it is possible to read the speech as a reply to Desdemona's supposition about her father's responsibility for his anguish - that Othello could have withstood the utmost of Brabantio's threatened action. This reading suits the accusatory framework of the scene well, but diminishes the self-pitying quality which the tears seem inescapably to indicate. Textual uncertainty, which might be simply compositorial in origin, thus clouds the interpretative issue here. Thus, while it is tempting to see my interpretative account as offering a resolution to the textual difficulty here - the coexistent states of judicial anger and self-pity perhaps favouring the Quarto reading - this is an unacceptable procedure, and I must leave the speech as not satisfactorily supporting any argument of

intentional ambiguity.

What clearly *is* intended, is what Ridley calls 'Desdemona's unhappily chosen word',[1] 'committed', which Othello understands in its grammatically absolute Elizabethan sense, as invoking adultery:

Des. Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?
Oth. Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
Made to write 'whore' on?...What, committed?
Committed! O thou public commoner! (IV.ii.72)

Here the contrast between innocence and experience is clearly involved, since Desdemona uses the term in all simplicity,[2] while Othello pounces on the special sense as the one uppermost in his mind corrupted by the experience he has gained at Iago's hands. And if this were not sufficient indication of his new state, the "witty", role-playing exchange he has with Desdemona and Emilia before his exit - the sarcastic enactment of the patron leaving the brothel - surely argues a totally different Othello from the straightforward, plain-dealing commander with a 'free and open nature' we know in the early acts:

What, not a whore?...
I cry you mercy,
I took you for that cunning whore of Venice,
That married with Othello: you mistress,
That have the office opposite to Saint Peter,
And keeps the gates in hell, ay, you, you, you!
We ha'done our course; there's money for your pains,
I pray you turn the key, and keep our counsel.
(IV.ii.88)

Conversely, Desdemona's former sophistical ambiguities, intended and unintended, seem to fall from her at this point:

Des. Am I that name, Iago?
Iag. What name, fair lady?
Des. Such as she says my lord did say I was.
(IV.ii.120)

This is not mere prudery in Desdemona: it is almost as if she has been shocked into a fear of using potentially harmful words. 'Committed' brought a storm about her ears, 'whore' might do worse. She has in

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1. Op. cit., p.154 n.

2. This is in marked contrast with the earlier examples of unwitting equivocation suggested above. Obviously, the difference is in the context here; Desdemona is pleading for herself only and there is thus no possible reference to Cassio involved in her mind. This question marks the point of realisation of the possibly equivocal in her past words and actions, hence she changes noticeably from here on.

effect been made conscious of the possibility of equivocal speech, and is shocked by its implications for herself. Ironically, she addresses the very man who taught Othello the trick, the arch-exploiter of potential ambivalence himself, who has the gall to ask,

> How comes this trick upon him? (IV.ii.131)

and for his pains has to endure some delightfully justified railing against himself, (unwitting, of course), by Emilia. Desdemona is stunned not only by the accusation, but by the fact that it is possible - in other words, by the existence of some incredible process of communication which gave Othello reason to accuse her of adultery:

> by this light of heaven,
> I know not how I lost him. (IV.ii.152)

To her own knowledge, she never

> did trespass 'gainst his love
> Either in discourse of thought or actual deed,
> (IV.ii.154)

which testifies to her innocent intentions throughout, but does not diminish the tragic circumstances which allowed her words and actions to be construed as they were. Once again, we are made aware of the play's epistemological concerns. And thus, in addition to its functions as plot continuance and moral indicator of poetic justice to come, (confirming Emilia's precise guesses), the closing of the scene with Roderigo's disillusionment deals also with the gap between word and deed, essentially a problem in the transmission of knowledge such as those seen in *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*:

> Faith, I have heard too much, for your words and
> performance are no kin together.
> (IV.ii.184)

This accusation is maintained in varying formulations from line 175 to line 210, even forcing Iago to admit 'your suspicion is not without wit and judgement'. Having dealt so long in doubts and suspicions, Iago begins to experience their effects.

That Desdemona's mind now lingers on the equivocal, toying with ambiguities and the need to speak and act cautiously, is evident as she prepares for bed, carefully obeying to the letter Othello's instructions:

> Emil. Dismiss me?
> Des. It was his bidding, therefore, good Emilia,
> Give me my nightly wearing, and adieu,
> We must not now displease him. (IV.iii.14)

What seemed important to her a short while before, the laying out of her wedding sheets, now appears to be of little concern - or possibly of

different use:

> All's one, good faith: how foolish are our minds!
> If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me
> In one of those same sheets. (IV.iii.23)

The willow song that follows has the clear function of denoting her premonition of death, since she quite specifically recalls it together with the maid who 'died singing it', and can herself barely resist the temptation to 'sing it like poor Barbary'; but it is set in a very strange context which recalls nothing so much as the sophistical exchange at the beginning of the second Act. The strangeness is witnessed by Ridley in a footnote, (to Desdemona's abrupt comment on Lodovico), that asks 'what did Shakespeare intend by this sudden transition to Lodovico?'[1] He conjectures that the comment might more properly belong to Emilia, and this is, of course, a possibility. But is it not also possible that such a transition is appropriate to a mind which has been wrenched from assumptions about intention and effect? If 'all's one' and our minds 'foolish', there is no logic or reason to prevent our thoughts straying randomly: thus Desdemona recalls the maid Barabary and thinks of death; so too, perhaps, she thinks of Lodovico's very recent visit and speaks with the innocence of her past conversational habits, possibly confused with the new awareness of ambiguity. She is perhaps experimenting, trying such an innocent comment to see how it is received; if so, Emilia's specifically sexual response confirms her probable hypothesis and fear that the innocent intention will be taken as if guiltily motivated:

> I know a lady in Venice would have walk'd barefoot
> to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip. (IV.iii.38)

Perhaps it is this confirmation of her new view of the lack of innocence in the world that makes her yield to the temptation of lines 30-32, to actually sing the song of lament, with its equally ambivalent suggestion of pastoral comfort for sustained injury -

> The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans, (IV.iii.44)

- and self-accusation:

> Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve. (IV.iii.51)

The song's attempt to establish truth,

> I call'd my love false love, (IV.iii.54)

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1. Op. cit., p.166.

leads only to a stalemate, the nearly classical equivocation of

> If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men, (IV.iii.56)

which patently gives each partner an equal share of guilt.

The final indication of her fascination with this new view of the world, is the dialogue that closes the scene, which shows her that even her trusted Emilia easily admits corruption under the protection of the simplest of sophisms:

> Des. Wouldst thou do such a thing for all the world?
> Emil. The world is a huge thing, it is a great price,
> For a small vice. (IV.iii.67)

Against Desdemona's persistent disbelief, Emilia can only offer a jaded view of men's guilt as the cause of adultery, seeing it as revenge:

> Then let them use us well: else let them know,
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (IV.iii.102)

Desdemona's closing statement,

> God me such usage send,
> Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend! (IV.iii.104)

is not obscure in its general sense, but the difficulty over 'usage/uses' may be a little clarified by this reading of the scene. If we take the word to derive from her question in lines 60-61, 'Dost thou...think.../ That there be women do abuse their husbands...?', then it is possible to see her desire to 'mend' by such usage as alluding to the abuse which distorts men's perceptions, and hence as an expression of gratitude that she has seen into the source of her offence to Othello, the ambivalence of her words and actions, and the hope that she will be able to avoid such duplicity in future.

But it is an ill-founded hope, as the opening of Act 5 makes clear. Even at this late stage in the play, with his main task accomplished, Iago's role of equivocator is emphasized as he first stabs Cassio and then offers to bind the wound with his shirt. Bianca's defence against Iago's vilification and attempt to blame all on her,

> I am no strumpet, but of life as honest
> As you, that thus abuse me, (V.i.121)

adds to the sense we have of his consistent abuse, of people, of perception, and of meaning.

Othello too, remains fixed in his intention of revenge in spite

of the mixture of compassion in his distorted view of Desdemona, and in spite of his sense of an ultimate destruction:

> I know not where is that Promethean heat
> That can thy light relume: when I have pluck'd the rose,
> I cannot give it vital growth again,
> It must needs wither. (V.ii.12)

This intransigence ensures the crushing of Desdemona's hope sensed at the end of Act 4, and is the solid fruit of Iago's planting (or the wall raised on his foundation of doubt), showing itself here to be true to its originator: Othello sees only what he looks for - signs of her guilt. Therefore her denial that she gave the handkerchief to Cassio only provokes the warning,

> Sweet soul, take heed, take heed of perjury; (V.ii.51)

her plea that Cassio be called to testify results only in an allusion to Iago's description of Cassio's 'dream', an alleged confession

> That he hath...us'd thee. (V.ii.71)

And her vain hope that consciousness of equivocation might help her to avoid it collapses under the strain of the assertion that Cassio is dead. What she says can only be taken in the worst sense of its patent ambivalence:

> Des. Alas, he is betray'd, and I undone.
> Oth. O strumpet,...weepest thou for him to my face?
> (V.ii.77)

The brief pleadings that follow mark a crescendo of passion that ends, as it must, with his stifling her, and we are left only with the relatively long revelation of truth and Othello's expiation, which, in terms of my argument, serve as a fitting end to the quest for knowledge so falsely based on Iago's 'practice'.

This analysis may seem to have diverged considerably from the emphasis that was laid on dialectical patterning in *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure for Measure*; but this is really only a matter of emphasis. As I suggested near the beginning of this analysis,[1] the particular dramatic situation in *Othello* seems to lend itself to the term 'equivocation' because of the nature and function of Iago. Shakespeare seems to have been interested here in the equivocator as the agent of dialecticism; the play is dialectically based in that it creates a

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1. Cf. p.164 above.

situation of dreadful conflict between love and jealousy in its protagonist, and also in its epistemological interest which involves us in the difficulty of really knowing Desdemona. But this seems to be secondary to the conscious exploitation of the equivocal by Iago. The tragedy arises from Othello's refusal to accept irresolution as a response to the dialectic of experience.

The play is none the less in the Sceptical mould despite this different emphasis. Othello's false theory of evidence, the view that 'seeing is believing',[1] is exactly the fallacy that Sextus Empiricus, in common with pre- and succeeding Sceptical thinkers, used to demonstrate the insupportability of dogmatic views of the world. Whether or not he was conscious of this traditional use of the fallacy, Shakespeare was clearly well aware of the tragic consequences of basing moral judgements on sense-perception in a world where evil practice such as Iago's exists. Against such a world, being a Sceptic would seem to be the only defence. Rymer may have drawn wrong conclusions from rigid premises, but his ability to characterise a weakness is evident in his remark that 'this may be a lesson to Husbands, that before their Jealousie be Tragical, the proofs may be Mathematical'.[2] This recognises the fallacy at the heart of Othello's 'theory of evidence' and the folly of dogmatic assumptions about knowledge. I doubt that it is entirely fortuitous that the true knowledge is, in a sense, revealed to Othello *in spite of* evidence and reason; such knowledge being the only kind conceded by the tradition of Sceptical thought.

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1. Cf. p.168 above.

2. Thomas Rymer, 'A Short View of Tragedy', 1693. Cited by F.E. Halliday in *Shakespeare and His Critics*, p.244.

10. Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to provide a new theoretical and historical basis for the understanding of some of Shakespeare's acknowledged 'problem' plays. I have tried to justify the modern tendency to see the difficulties of these plays as due to Shakespeare's dialectical approach to problems, and to suggest the derivation of his approach.

Working from the best-known and established contact between Shakespeare and such dialectical views, the Essays of Montaigne, renowned for their scepticism, I have traced this approach as a Sceptical tradition, from its origins in the teaching of Pyrrho of Elis, as recorded in the *locus classicus*, Sextus Empiricus's *Pyrrhonean Hypotyposes*, to the epistemological dualism of Renaissance Humanist and Neoplatonist philosophers, and culminating in Montaigne. It is not suggested that Shakespeare knew intimately or read widely in this tradition, but that its influence was considerable both in Europe and in England. Shakespeare's apparent wide reading would almost certainly have led him to sufficient acquaintance with sceptical ideas to have sparked his naturally enquiring mind to recognise doubt as a thoroughgoing system of thought, and it is further suggested that drama is especially well-suited to the exploration of sceptical thought because of its use of dialogue.

The four analyses, in chapters 7 to 9, attempt to maintain a neutrality of view. Rather than give detailed interpretations of character, I have tried to describe dialectical patterning as a structural principle of the plays. The analysis of *Hamlet* reveals an underlying construction of epistemological questioning which makes it difficult to respond dogmatically to the moral issues of the play. This difficulty affects both the characters and the audience, since it constitutes a dialectical structure which operates internally, between the characters, and externally, between the text and the audience. This structure, it is suggested, accounts for the wide variety of critical responses the play has always evoked.

Both *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure* have already convinced critics of their dialectical structures, thus my brief analysis of them has tried to show that this structure indicates the influence of Scepticism properly understood, as suspensive and anti-dogmatic, rather

than as a negative or cynical view arising from some psychological darkness in Shakespeare's mind.

The choice of *Othello* as the last play for analysis was partly determined by Rossiter's description of it, as possibly 'the last Problem Play', and partly by its challenge to me to clarify a long-standing sense of doubt it aroused in me, which seemed to have something to do with equivocal dialogue. My analysis of the play seems to vindicate that sense of doubt, and its problematic quality seems to be of the same kind as that seen in the other plays studied, thus confirming Rossiter's description.

This perspective on the Problem Plays may not be entirely new, but it has been presented before as a largely unexplained phenomenon. I believe that by considering these plays in this way and with emphasis on the proper meaning of Scepticism, we gain a new basis for understanding them and at least part of their continuing greatness.

Appendix 1

An extract from chapters 35 and 36 of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Francois Rabelais.

That word was scarcely sooner uttered, than that Gargantua with his royal presence graced that banqueting and stately hall. Each of the guests arose to do their king that reverence and duty which became them. After that Gargantua had most affably saluted all the gentlemen there present, he said, Good friends, I beg this favour of you, and therein you will very much oblige me, that you leave not the places where you sate, nor quit the discourse you were upon. Let a chair be brought hither unto this end of the table, and reach me a cup full of the strongest and best wine you have, that I may drink to all the company. You are, in faith, all welcome, gentlemen. Now let me know, what talk you were about. To this Pantagruel answered, that at the beginning of the second service Panurge had proposed a problematic theme, to wit, Whether he should marry, or not marry? that Father Hippothadeus and Doctor Rondibilis had already dispatched their resolutions thereupon; and that, just as his majesty was coming in, the faithful Trouillogan in the delivery of his opinion hath thus far proceeded, that when Panurge asked, - whether he ought to marry, yea, or no? - at first he made this answer, Both together. When this same question was again propounded, his second answer was, Neither the one, nor the other. Panurge exclaimeth, that those answers are full of repugnancies and contradictions, protesting that he understands them not, nor what it is that can be meant by them. If I be not mistaken, quoth Gargantua, I understand it very well. The answer is not unlike to that which was once made by a philosopher in ancient time, who being interrogated, if he had a woman, whom they named him, to his wife? I have her, quoth he, but she hath not me, - possessing her, by her I am not possest. Such another answer, quoth Pantagruel, was once made by a certain bouncing wench of Sparta who being asked, if at any time she had had to do with a man? No, quoth she, but sometimes men have had to do with me. Well, then, quoth Rondibilis, let it be a neuter in physic, - as when we say a body is neuter, when it is neither sick nor healthful, - and a mean in philosophy; that, by an abnegation of both extremes, and this, by the participation of the one and of the other. Even as when lukewarm water is said to be both hot and cold; or rather, as when time makes the partition, and equally divides betwixt the two, a while in the one,

another while as long in the other opposite extremity. The holy apostle, quoth Hippothadeus, seemeth, as I conceive, to have more clearly explained this point, when he said, Those that are married, let them be as if they were not married; and those that have wives let them be as if they had no wives at all. I thus interpret, quoth Pantagruel, the having and not having of a wife. To have a wife, is to have the use of her in such a way as nature hath ordained, which is for the aid, society, and solace of man, and propagating of his race. To have no wife is not to be uxorious, play the coward, and be lazy about her, and not for her sake to distain the lustre of that affection which man owes to God; or yet for her to leave those offices and duties which he owes unto his country, unto his friends and kindred; or for her to abandon and forsake his precious studies, and other businesses of account, to wait still on her will, her beck, and her buttocks. If we be pleased in this sense to take having and not having of a wife, we shall indeed find no repugnancy nor contradiction in the terms at all.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A continuation of the answers of the Ephectic and Pyrrhonian philosopher Trouillogan

You speak wisely, quoth Panurge, if the moon were green cheese. Such a tale once pissed my goose. I do not think but that I am let down into that dark pit, in the lowermost bottom where the truth was hid, according to the saying of Heraclitus. I see no whit at all, I hear nothing, understand as little, my senses are altogether dulled and blunted; truly I do very shrewdly suspect that I am enchanted. I will now alter the former style of my discourse, and talk to him in another strain. Our trusty friend, stir not, nor imburse any; but let us vary the chance, and speak without disjunctives. I see already, that these loose and ill-joined members of an enunciation do vex, trouble and perplex you.

Now go on, in the name of God! Should I marry?
Trouillogan. There is some likelihood therein.
Panurge. But if I do not marry?
Trouil. I see in that no inconvenience.
Pan. You do not?
Trouil. None, truly, if my eyes deceive me not.
Pan. Yea, but I find more than five hundred.

Trouil. Reckon them.

Pan. This is an impropriety of speech, I confess; for I do no more thereby, but take a certain for an uncertain number, and posit the determinate term for what is indeterminate. When I say therefore five hundred, my meaning is, many.

Trouil. I hear you.

Pan. Is it possible for me to live without a wife, in the name of all the subterranean devils?

Trouil. Away with these filthy beasts.

Pan. Let it be then in the name of God; for my Salmigondinish people used to say, To lie alone, without a wife, is certainly a brutish life. And such a life also was it assevered to be by Dido, in her lamentations.

Trouil. At your command.

Pan. By the pody cody, I have fished fair; where are we now? But will you tell me? Shall I marry?

Trouil. Perhaps.

Pan. Shall I thrive or speed well withal?

Trouil. According to the encounter.

Pan. But if in my adventure I encounter aright, as I hope I will, shall be I fortunate?

Trouil. Enough.

Pan. Let us turn the clean contrary way, and brush our former words against the wool: what if I encounter ill?

Trouil. Then blame not me.

Pan. But, of courtesy, be pleased to give me some advice. I heartily beseech you, what must I do?

Trouil. Even what thou wilt.

Pan. Wishy, washy; trolly, lolly.

Trouil. Do not invocate the name of any thing, I pray you.

Pan. In the name of God, let it be so! My actions shall be regulated by the rule and square of your counsel. What is it that you advise and counsel me to do?

Trouil. Nothing.

Pan. Shall I marry?

Trouil. I have no hand in it.

Pan. Then shall I not marry?

Trouil. I cannot help it.

Pan. If I never marry, I shall never be a cuckold.

Trouil I thought so.

Pan. But put the case that I be married.

Trouil. Where shall we put it?

Pan. Admit it be so then, and take my meaning, in that sense.

Touil. I am otherwise employed.

Pan. By the death of a hog, and mother of a toad, O Lord, if I durst hazard upon a little fling at the swearing game, though privily and under thumb, it would lighten the burden of my heart, and ease my lights and reins exceedingly. A little patience, nevertheless, is requisite. Well then, if I marry, I shall be a cuckold.

Trouil. One would say so.

Pan. Yet if my wife prove a virtuous, wise, discreet, and chaste woman, I shall never be cuckolded.

Trouil. I think you speak congruously.

Pan. Hearken.

Trouil. As much as you will.

Pan. Will she be discreet and chaste? This is the only point I would be resolved in.

Trouil. I question it.

Pan. You never saw her?

Trouil. Not that I know of.

Pan. Why do you then doubt of that which you know not?

Trouil. For a cause.

Pan. And if you should know her?

Trouil. Yet more.

Pan. Page, my little pretty darling, take here my cap, - I give it to thee. Have a care you do not break the spectacles that are in it. Go down to the lower court. Swear there half an hour for me, and I shall in compensation of that favour swear hereafter for thee as much as thou wilt. But who shall cuckold me?

Trouil. Somebody.

Pan. By the belly of the wooden horse at Troy, Master Somebody, I shall bang, belam thee, and claw thee well for thy labour.

Trouil. You say so.

Pan. Nay, nay, that Nick in the dark cellar, who hath no white in his eye, carry me quite away with him, if, in that case, whensoever I go abroad from the palace of my domestic residence, I do not, with as much circumspection as they use to ring mares in our country to keep them from being sallied by stoned horses, clap a Bergamasco lock upon my wife.

Trouil. Talk better.

Pan. It is *bien chien, chié chanté*, well cacked, and cackled, shitten, and sung in matter of talk. Let us resolve on somewhat.

Trouil. I do not gainsay it.

Pan. Have a little patience. Seeing I cannot on this side draw any blood of you, I will try, if with the lancet of my judgement I be able to bleed you in another vein. Are you married, or are you not?

Trouil. Neither the one nor the other, and both together.

Pan. O the good God help us! By the death of a buffle-ox, I sweat with the toil and travail that I am put to, and find my digestion broke off, disturbed, and interrupted; for all my phrenes, metaphrenes, and diaphragms, back, belly, midrib, muscles, veins, and sinews, are held in a suspense, and for a while discharged from their proper offices, to stretch forth their several powers and abilities, for incornifistibulating, and laying up into the hamper of my understanding your various sayings and answers.

Trouil. I shall be no hinderer thereof.

Pan. Tush, for shame! Our faithful friend, speak, are you married?

Trouil. I think so.

Pan. You were also married before you had this wife.

Trouil. It is possible.

Pan. Had you good luck in your first marriage?

Trouil. It is not impossible.

Pan. How thrive you with this second wife of yours?

Trouil. Even as it pleaseth my fatal destiny.

Pan. But what in good earnest? Tell me - do you prosper well with her?

Trouil. It is likely.

Pan. Come on, in the name of God. I vow, by the burden of Saint Christopher, that I had rather undertake the fetching of a fart forth of the belly of a dead ass, than to draw out of you a positive and determinate resolution. Yet shall I be sure at this time to have a snatch at you, and get my claws over you. Our trusty friend, let us shame the devil of hell, and confess the verity. Were you ever a cuckold? I say you who are here, and not that other you, who playeth below in the tennis-court?

Trouil. No, if it was not predestinated.

Pan. By the flesh, blood, and body, I swear, reswear, forswear, abjure, and renounce: he evades and avoids, shifts and escapes me, and quite slips and winds himself out of my gripes and clutches.

At these words Gargantua arose, and said, Praised be the good God in all things, but especially for bringing the world into the height of refinedness beyond what it was when I first became acquainted therewith, that now the most learned and most prudent philosophers are not ashamed to

be seen entering in at the porches and frontispieces of the schools of the Pyrrhonian, Aporrhetic, Sceptic, and Ephectic sects. Blessed be the holy name of God! Veritably, it is like henceforth to be found an enterprise of much more easy undertaking, to catch lions by the neck, horses by the mane, oxen by the horns, bulls by the muzzle, wolves by the tail, goats by the beard, and flying birds by the feet, than to entrap such philosophers in their words. Farewell, my worthy, dear, and honest friends.

Appendix 2

An extract from Thomas Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament.*

670 That creature's best that comes most neere to men;
That dogs of all come neerest, thus I proue:
First, they excell us in all outward sence,
Which no one of experience will deny;
They heare, they smell, they see better then we.
675 To come to speech, they haue it questionlesse,
Although we vnderstand them not so well:
They barke as good old Saxon as may be,
And that in more varietie then we:
For they haue one voice when they are in chase,
680 Another, when they wrangle for their meate,
Another, when we beate them out of dores.
That they haue reason, this I will alleadge,
They choose those things that are most fit for them,
And shunne the contrarie all that they may;
685 They know what is for their owne diet best,
And seeke about for't very carefully;
At sight of any whip they runne away,
As runs a thiefe from noise of hue and crie:
Nor liue they on the sweat of others browes,
690 But haue their trades to get their liuing with,
Hunting and conie-catching, two fine artes:
Yea, there be of them, as there be of men,
Of euerie occupation more or lesse:
Some cariers, and they fetch: some watermen,
695 And they will diue and swimme when you bid them:
Some butchers, and they worrie sheep by night:
Some cookes, and they do nothing but turne spits.
Chrisippus holds dogs are Logicians,
In that, by studie and by canuasing,
700 They can distinguish twixt three seuerall things:
As when he commeth where three broad waies meet,
And of those three hath staid at two of them,
By which he gesseth that the game went not,
Without more pause he runneth on the third;

705 Which, as *Chrisippus* saith, insinuates
As if he reason'd thus within himselfe:
Eyther he went this, that, or yonder way,
But neyther that, nor yonder, therefore this.
But whether they Logicians be or no,
710 Cinicks they are, for they will snarle and bite;
Right courtiers to flatter and to fawne;
Valiant to set vpon the enemies,
Most faithfull and most constant to their friends;
Nay, they are wise, as *Homer* witnesseth,
715 Who, talking of *Vlisses* comming home,
Saith all his household but *Argus*, his Dogge,
Had quite forgot him; I, and his deepe insight,
Nor *Pallas* Art in altering of his shape,
Nor his base weeds, nor absence twenty yeares,
720 Could go beyond, or any way delude.
That Dogges Phisicians are, thus I inferre;
They are ne're sicke, but they know their disease,
And finde out meanes to ease them of their griefe;
Speciall good Surgions to cure dangerous wounds;
725 For strucken with a stake into the flesh,
This policie they vse to get it out:
They traile one of their feet vpon the ground,
And gnaw the flesh about, where the wound is,
Till it be cleane crawne out: and then, because
730 Vlcers and sores kept fowle are hardly cur'de,
They licke and purifie it with their tongue:
And well obserue Hipocrates old rule,
The onely medicine for the foote is rest,
For if they haue the least hurt in their feet,
735 They beare them vp, and looke they be not stird:

The significance of this passage is made clear in McKerrow's notes, which are very illuminating, and I reproduce them here too:

The whole of this comes ultimately from the *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes* of Sextus Empiricus, though not, of course, directly from the Greek, nor even, I believe, from the Latin translation of Henri Etienne. In 1591 Nashe spoke of the works of Sextus having been 'latelie translated into English for the benefit of vnlearned writers' (iii.332.31-4), and in

i.174.4 and 185.8, where, quoting from him, he wrongly substitutes 'ashes' for 'asses' and 'bones' for 'beans', we seem to have evidence that he was himself using such a translation, and an incorrect print or copy of it. I have, however, failed to discover any early Englishing of the work.

The present discourse about dogs gives us still stronger evidence of the existence of an English version, but at the same time brings us face to face with a problem which only the discovery of the translation itself can completely solve. In the tract - one might almost call it a compilation - by S. Rowlands, entitled *Greene's Ghost Haunting Conycatchers*, 1602, $D3^v$-4^v, we again meet with the whole of this passage from Sextus, under the heading 'A notable Scholerlike discourse vpon the nature of Dogges'. Now comparing Rowlands' prose with Nashe's verse, we are struck by the extraordinary similarity of phrasing; for example Nashe's 1.677, 'They barke as good old Saxon as may be,' occurs in precisely the same words in Rowlands - while naturally there is nothing corresponding in the Greek. So too 'hunting and conie-catching' (1.691) are mentioned also by Rowlands, while the Greek only refers to hunting; and there is nothing in Sextus to correspond to 11.692-7, though this is found in Rowlands (see end of extract below). Again, the 'outward' speech of dogs is dealt with by both the English writers before the 'inward'. The original discusses it at the end of the whole description. A comparison of the extract given from Rowlands below will show several other points of resemblance. A natural inference would of course be that Rowlands simply turned the passage of *Summer's Last Will* into prose, but this is at once shown to be impossible by a further comparison with the original, for Rowlands translates many passages which Nashe omits; and in that corresponding to 11.698-720 follows Sextus in giving the example of Argus before the reference to Chrysippus, while Nashe reverses the order. Hence it seems that either

(1) There existed a translation of Sextus into English, or rather a free paraphrase - as many Elizabethan translations were - and both authors used this, Nashe following the language closely in such passages as he selected, Rowlands perhaps simply copying the whole word for word - as indeed he often did when borrowing from other authors. Or

(2) Rowlands had before him a different text of *Summer's Last Will*. A third possibility, that he used Nashe's work, but knew and referred to its source, is not worth discussing, for one can hardly imagine Rowlands doing any such thing. There can, I think, be little doubt that the first explanation is the correct one, but we must for the present be content to leave the matter open.

Appendix 3

Sir Walter Raleigh's SCEPTICK, from *The Works of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. Tho. Birch, 1751. This text follows original spelling, but modern typescript is necessarily used.

The SCEPTICK doth neither affirm, neither deny any Position; but doubteth of it, and opposeth his Reasons against that which is affirmed, or denied, to justify his not consenting.

His first Reason ariseth, from the Consideration of the great Difference amongst living Creatures, both in the Matter and Manner of their Generations, and the several Constitutions of their Bodies.

Some living Creatures are by Copulation and some without it: and that either by Fire, as Crickets in Furnaces; or corrupt Water, as Gnats; or Slime, as Frogs; or Dirt, as Worms; or Herbs, as Cankerworms; some of Ashes, as Beetles; some of Trees, as the Worm Psenas bred in the wild Fig-tree; some of living Creatures putrified, as Bees of Bulls, and Wasps of Horses. By Copulation many Creatures are brought forth alive, as Man; some in the Egg, as Birds; some in an unshapen Piece of Flesh, as Bears. These great Differences cannot but cause a divers and contrary Temperament, and Quality in those Creatures; and consequently, a great Diversity in their Fancy and Conceit; so that tho' they apprehend one and the same Object, yet they must do it after a diverse Manner: for is it not absurd to affirm, that Creatures differ so much in Temperature, and yet agree in Conceit concerning one and the same Object?

But this will more plainly appear, if the Instruments of Sense in the Body be observed: for we shall find, that as these Instruments are affected and disposed, so doth the Imagination conceit that which by them is connexed unto it. That very Object which seemeth unto us white, unto them which have the Jaundice seemeth pale, and red unto those whose Eyes are Bloodshot. Forasmuch then as living Creatures have some white, some pale, some red Eyes, why should not one and the same Object seem to some white, to some red, to some pale? If a Man rub his Eye, the figure of that which he beholdeth seemeth long or narrow; is it then not likely, that those Creatures which have a long and slanting Pupil of the Eye, as Goats, Foxes, Cats, etc. do convey the Fashion of that which they behold under

another Form to the Imagination, than those that have round Pupils do?

Who knoweth not, that a Glass presenteth the outward Object smoother, or greater, according to the making of the Glass? If it be hollow, the Object seemeth smaller than it is; if the Glass be crooked, then the Object seemeth long and narrow. And Glasses there be, which present the Head of him that looketh in them, downwards, and the Heels upwards. Now then seeing the Eye, which is the Instrument of Sight, in some living Creatures is more outward, in some more hollow, in some plain, in some greater, in some less; it is very probable that Fishes, Men, Lions and Dogs, whose Eyes so much differ, do not conceive the self-same Object after the same Manner, but diversly, according to the Diversity of the Eye, which offereth it unto the Fancy.

The same Reason holdeth in Touching; for seemeth it not absurd to think, that those Creatures which are covered with Shells, those which are covered with Scales, and which are covered with Hairs, and those which are smooth, should all be alike sensible in Touching; and every one of them convey the Image or Quality of the same Object which they touch, in the very same Degree of Heat or Cold, of Dryness or Moisture, Roughness or Smoothness, unto the Imagination?

So might it be shewed in Hearing: for how can we think that the Ear which hath a narrow Passage, and the Ear which hath an open and wide Passage, do receive the same Sound in the same Degree? or that the Ear whose Inside is full of Hair, doth hear in the same just Measure, that the Ear doth whose Inside is smooth? Since Experience sheweth, that if we stop, or half stop our Ears, the Sound cometh not to us in the same Manner and Degree that it doth if our Ears be open.

The like may be thought of Smelling: for Man himself abounding with Flegm, is otherwise affected in Smelling, than he is, if the Parts about the Head be full of Blood; and many Things afford a delightful Smell to some living Creatures, which Smell to other living Creatures seemeth not to be so.

In the Taste the same Reason appeareth, for to a rough and dry Tongue, that very Thing seemeth bitter (as in an Ague) which to the moister Tongue seemeth not to be so. Divers Creatures then having Tongues drier, or moister, according to their several Temperatures, when they taste the

same Thing, must needs conceit it to be according as the Instrument of their Taste is affected, either bitter, or sweet, etc. For even as the Hand in the striking of the Harp, tho' the Stroke be one, yet causeth a Sound sometimes high, sometimes base, according to the Quality of the String that is strucken; even so one and same outward Object is diversly judged of, and conceited, according to the several and divers Qualities of the Instrument of Sense, which conveyeth it to the Imagination. Ointment is pleasing to Man; but Beetles and Bees cannot abide it. Oil to Man is profitable, but it killeth Bees and Wasps. Cicuta feedeth Quails, and Henbane Sows; but both of these hurt Man. If a Man eat Ants, he is sick; but the Bear being sick, recovereth by eating them.

If then one and the very same thing to the red Eye seem red, to another pale, and white to another: if one and the same thing, seem not hot or cold, dry or moist, in the same Degree, to the several Creatures which touch it; if one and self same Sound seem more shrill to that Creature which hath a narrow Ear, and more base to him that hath an open Ear: if the same thing, at the same Time, seem to afford a pleasant and displeasant Smell to divers and several Creatures: if that seem bitter in Taste to one, which to another seemeth sweet; that to one hurtful, which to another seemeth healthful: I may report how these Things appear divers to several Creatures, and seem to produce divers Effects.

But what they are in their own Nature, whether red or white, bitter or sweet, healthful or hurtful, I cannot tell. For why should I presume to prefer my Conceit and Imagination, in affirming that a Thing is thus or thus, in its own Nature, because it seemeth to me to be so, before the Conceit of other living Creatures, who may as well think it to be otherwise in its own Nature, because it appeareth otherwise to them than it doth to me?

They are living Creatures as well as I: why then should I condemn their Conceit and Fantasy, concerning any Thing more than they may mine? they may be in the Truth and I in Error, as well as I in Truth, and they err. If my Conceit must be believed before theirs, great Reason that it be proved to be truer than theirs. And this Proof must be either by Demonstration, or without it. Without it none will believe. Certainly, if by Demonstration, then this Demonstration must seem to be true, or not seem to be true. If it seem to be true, then will it be a Question, whether it be so indeed as it seemeth to be; and to alledge that for a

certain Proof, which is uncertain and questionable, seemeth absurd.

If it be said, that the Imagination of Man judgeth truer of the outward Object, than the Imagination of other living Creatures doth, and therefore to be credited above others, (besides that which is already said) this is easily refuted by comparing of Man with other Creatures.

It is confessed the Dog excelleth Man in Smell, and in hearing: and whereas there is said to be a two-fold Discourse, one of the Mind, another of the Tongue, and that of the Mind is said to be exercised in chusing that which is convenient, and refusing that which is hurtful in Knowledge, Justice, and Thankfulness: this Creature chuseth his Food, refuseth the Whip, fawneth on his Master, defendeth his House, revengeth himself of those Strangers that hurt him. And *Homer* mentioneth *Argus* the Dog of *Ulysses*, who knew his Master, having been from Home so many Years, that at his Return all the People of his House had forgot him. This Creature, saith *Chrysippus*, is not void of Logick: for when in following any Beast he cometh to three several Ways, he smelleth to the one, and then to the second; and if he find that the Beast which he pursueth be not fled one of these two Ways, he presently without smelling any further to it, taketh the third Way: which, saith the same Philosopher, is as if he reasoned thus, the Beast must be gone either this, or this, or the other Way; but neither this, nor this; *Ergo*, the third: and so away he runneth.

If we consider his Skill in Physick, it is sufficient to help himself; if he be wounded with a Dart, he useth the Help of his Teeth to take it out, of his Tongue to cleanse the Wound from Corruption: he seemeth to be well acquainted with the Precept of *Hippocrates*, who saith, 'That the Rest of the Foot is the Physick of the Foot;' and therefore if his Foot be hurt, he holdeth it up that it may rest: if he be sick, he giveth himself a Vomit by eating of Grass, and recovereth himself. The Dog then we see is plentifully furnished with inward Discourse.

Now outward Speech is not needful to make a Creature reasonable, else a dumb Man were an unreasonable Creature.

And do not Philosophers themselves reject this as an Enemy to Knowledge? and therefore they are silent when they are instructed. And yet even as barbarous and strange People have speech, but we understand

it not, neither do we perceive any great Difference in their Words; but a Difference there seemeth to be, and they do express their Thoughts and Meanings one to another by those Words: even so those Creatures, which are commonly called unreasonable, do seem to parly one with another, and by their Speech do understand one the other. Do not Birds by one Kind of Speech call their young ones, and by another cause them to hide themselves? do they not by their several Voices express their several Passions of Joy, of Grief, of Fear, in such Manner, that their Fellows understand them? do they not by their Voice foreshew Things to come? But we will return to that Creature we first did instance in. The Dog delivereth one Kind of Voice when he hunteth, another when he howleth, another when he is beaten, and another when he is angry. These Creatures then are not void of outward Speech.

If then these Creatures excel Man in Sense, and are equal to him in inward and outward Discourse, why should not their Conceits and Imaginations convey the outward Object in as true a Manner as ours? and if so, then seeing their Imaginations are divers, and they conceit it diversly according to their divers Temperaments, I may tell what the outward Object seemeth to me; but what it seemeth to other Creatures, or whether it be indeed that which it seemeth to me, or any other of them, I know not.

But be it granted, that the Judgement of Man in this Case, is to be preferred before the Judgement of Beasts; yet in Men there is great Difference, both in respect of the outward Shape, and also of the Temperature of their Bodies: for the Body of the *Scythian* differeth in Shape from the Body of the *Indian*: the Reason of it ariseth (say the Dogmatists) from a Predominancy of Humours in the one more than in the other; and as several Humours are predominant, so are the Phantasies and Conceits severally framed and affected. So that our Countrymen delight in one Thing, the *Indian* not in that, but in another, which we regard not. This would not be if their Conceits and ours were both alike; for then we should like that which they do, and they would dislike that which we would dislike. It is evident also, that Men differ very much in the Temperature of their Bodies, else why should some more easily digest Beef than Shell-fish? and others be mad for the Time, if they drink Wine? There was an old Woman about *Arbeus*, which drank three Drams of *Cicula* (every Dram weighing sixty Barley-corns, and eight Drams to an Ounce) without Hurt. *Lysis*, without Hurt, took four Drams of Poppy; and

Demothon, which was Gentleman-Sewer to *Alexander*, was very cold when he stood in the Sun, or in a hot Bath, but very hot when he stood in the Shade. *Athenagoras* felt no Pain if a Scorpion stung him. And the *Psilli* (a People in *Lybia*, whose Bodies are Venom to Serpents) if they be stung by Serpents, or Asps, receive no Hurt at all.

The *Aethiopians*, which inhabit the River *Hydaspis*, do eat Serpents and Scorpions without Danger. *Lothericus*, a Surgeon, at the Smell of a Sturgion, would be for the Time mad. *Andron* of *Argos* was so little thirsty, that without Want of Drink, he travelled through the hot and dry Country of *Lybia*. *Tiberius Caesar* would see very well in the Dark. *Aristotle* mentioneth of *Thratius*, who said, that the Image of a Man went always before him.

If then it be so, that there be such Differences in Men, this must be by reason of the divers Temperatures they have, and divers Dispositions of their Conceit and Imagination; for if one hate, and another love the very same Thing, it must be that their Fantasies differ, else all would love it, or all would hate it. These Men then, may tell how these Things seem to them good, or bad; but what they are in their own Nature they cannot tell.

If we will hearken to Men's Opinions, concerning one and the same Matter, thinking thereby to come to the Knowledge of it, we shall find this to be impossible; for either we must believe what all Men say of it, or what some Men only say of it. To believe what all Men say of one and the same Thing is not possible; for then we shall believe Contrarieties; for some Men say, that that very Thing is pleasant, which others say is displeasant. If it be said we must believe only some Men, then let it be shewed who those Men are; for the *Platonists* will believe *Plato*, but the *Epicures Epicurus*, the *Pythagoreans Pythagoras*, and other Philosophers the Masters of their own Sects: So that it is doubtful, to which of all these we shall give credit. If it be said we must credit the greatest Number; this seemeth childish; for there may be amongst other Nations a greater Number which deny that very Point, which the greatest Number with us do affirm; so that hereof nothing can certainly be affirmed.

This Argument seemeth to be further confirmed, if the Differences of the Senses of Hearing, Seeing, Smelling, Touching and Tasting be considered; for that the Senses differ it seemeth plain.

Painted Tables (in which the Art of Slanting is used) appear to the Eye, as if the Parts of them were some higher, and some lower than the other, but to the Touch they seem not so.

Honey seemeth to the Tongue sweet, but unpleasant to the Eye; so Ointment doth recreate the Smell, but it offendeth the Taste. Rain-water is profitable to the Eyes, but it hurteth the Lungs. We may tell then, how these Things seem to our several Senses, but what they are in their own Nature we cannot tell; for why should not a Man credit any one of his Senses as well as the other?

Every Object seemeth to be presented diversly unto the several Instruments of Sense. An Apple to the Touch seemeth smooth, sweet to the Smell, and to the Eye yellow; but whether the Apple have one of these Qualities only, or more than these Qualities, who can tell? The Organ hath many Pipes, all which are filled with the same Blast of Wind, varied according to the Capacity of the several Pipes which receive it; even so the Quality of the Apple may be but one, and this one Quality may be varied, and seem yellow to the Eye, to the Touch smooth, and sweet to the Smell, by reason of the divers Instruments of the Sense, which apprehend this one Quality diversly.

It may be also, that an Apple hath many Qualities besides; but we are not able to conceive them all, because we want fit Means and Instruments to apprehend them. For suppose that some Man is born blind and deaf, and yet can touch, smell, and taste; this Man will not think that there is any Thing which may be seen or heard, because he wanteth the Senses of hearing and seeing; he will only think there are those Qualities in the Object, which by reason of his three Senses he conceiveth: even so the Apple may have many more Qualities; but we cannot come to know them, because we want fit Instruments for that Purpose.

If it be replied, that Nature hath ordained as many Instruments of Sense, as there are sensible Objects; I demand, what Nature? for there is a confused Controversy about the very Essence of Nature. Some affirming it to be one Thing, others another, few agreeing: so that what the Quality of an Apple is, or whether it hath one Quality or many, I know not.

Let a Man also consider how many Things that are separated, and by themselves, appear to differ from that which they seem to be, when they

are in a Mass or Lump; the Scrapings of the Goat's Horn seems white, but in the Horn they seem black. The Stone *Taenarus*, being polished, seemeth white, but unpolished and rough, it seemeth yellow. Sands being separated, appear rough to the Touch, but in a great Heap, soft. I may then report, how these Things appear, but whether they are so indeed, I know not.

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