"NOTHING IS BUT WHAT IS NOT"
Performing constatives in Shakespeare's drama

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Abstract – Recent studies in historical pragmatics have focused on the performative language of the Renaissance, drawing on J. L. Austin's distinction between "constative" and "performative" utterances; the former refers to assertions that can be classified as true or false and the latter to the factual power of *doing* something rather than *describing* it. This model may prove particularly fruitful if applied to drama, and in particular to Shakespeare's plays, for it provides a critical frame to examine to what extent language is involved in changes concerning the axiology of truth and falsehood. In this paper, I will focus on three case-situations taken from *As you like it*, *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, in order to demonstrate how a certain rhetoric of mendacity derives from the exploration of an emergent new semiosis and is *performed* in Shakespeare's plays through the confusion and inversion of the two pragmatic categories.

Keywords: Truth, Falsehood, Renaissance, Shakespeare, Constatives, Performatives.

> *I pull in resolution and begin*
> *To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend*
> *That lies like truth.*
> (W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5. 5. 42-44)

1. "Lying like the Truth": a preliminary discussion

Defining the Truth has all along been a privileged object of speculation in Western thought from the ancient Greeks to postmodern times, since it is the crossroads of many related questions concerning the relationship between the inwardness of the human subject and the outward reality. If philosophy has quite obviously constituted the main arena in which thinkers have confronted themselves, language has been the 'matter' used for demonstration, intended as both an object of inquiry and as a means of representation, or, to put it differently, both as an instrument of expression and as an instrument of manipulation. The most relevant theories of the Truth, in fact, might be clustered around a basic opposition between an ontological/referential and a relativistic/self-referential view of truth and language:

> The first holds a Cartesian view – where ideas are between us and the world, and where appearance/reality, analytic/synthetic, scheme/content are relevant dualisms. It is, in other words, a "spectator theory of knowledge" one which posits that we can represent the world in a way that is independent of our perspective and peculiarities; [according to] [*a*]*nti-representationalist* theories, on the other hand, the truth-predicate does not designate a relationship between a knower (or a sentence used by the knower) and some language-independent fact […]. There would not (though this is disputed) be any independent truth or meaning. (Vincent 2004, p. 430)

The first vision, mostly known as Correspondence Theory of Truth, may be traced back to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in which he writes: "to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true"

(Aristotle, 350 b. C, Book 7 part 7). By positing a binary logic (what is true *vs.* what is false) as the very ground on which his metaphysics works, Aristotle creates, on the one hand, a correspondence between word and reality as the very condition for the truth to be recognized and, on the other, he identifies 'reality' (and consequently the truth) in terms of a 'metaphysics of presence', ontology, what *is*. On the other side of the axis, the negative pole is constituted by what is *not*, the opposite of truth – falseness, deception, mendacity – which resumes and modifies Plato's earlier conception of 'what is not' by defining it in terms of *difference* from 'what is' (which in turn refashions Parmenides's previous dismissal of it as an impossible and absurd object of inquiry, simply non-existent):

> When we speak of not-being, we speak, I suppose, not of something opposed to being, but only different. […] Whereas, we have not only proved that things which are not are, but we have shown what form of being not-being is; for we have shown that the nature of the other is, and is distributed over all things in their relations to one another, and whatever part of the other is contrasted with being, this is precisely what we have ventured to call not-being. […] Let not any one say, then, that while affirming the opposition of not-being to being, we still assert the being of not-being; for as to whether there is an opposite of being, to that enquiry we have long said good-bye--it may or may not be, and may or may not be capable of definition. (Plato 360 b.C.)

Classical philosophy, in brief, treats Truth in terms of an absolute Being – and consequently meaning as a semantic autonomous entity – while Not-Being is split into the absolute category of nothing, absurdity, the inexistent and the relativistic category of falsehood.

Over the centuries, the Correspondence Theory, from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas, from Descartes to Russell, has proved functional to a 'realist' vision of the world, surviving along with a series of explorations in the direction pointed to by *The Sophist*, and developed into the *anti-representationalist* tendency recalled in Vincent's quotation as the second and last important branch of speculations about the truth.

Several theories have developed in the wake of the possibility that language may not have a direct reference to 'reality', a vision that complicates and even thwarts definitions of truth and falseness by disengaging them from Aristotle's 'Being/Not-being' binary structure. Among them, one of the most influential is undeniably the Coherence Theory, whereby "truth can no longer be defined as the correspondence to the facts of the world, but has to be defined as the correspondence with the facts of the mind. The 'coherence theory of truth' defines truth as coherence with the system of beliefs in one's mind" (Scaruffi, in Vincent 2004, p. 410). This line of thought evolves through the intuitions of philosophers such as Spinoza, Kant, and Wittgenstein despite their only partial interest in dismantling the 'defaultness' of the Correspondence Theory (see Young 2013). Further steps may be connected directly or indirectly to the twentieth-century acknowledgement that language is self-referential and that there is no unique and definitive truth. This position, which has been brought to its full development by the poststructuralists, is also indebted to the philosophical 'school' of Pragmatism (which originated at the end of the nineteenth century) and to the linguistic discipline known as Pragmatics (from about the 1960s on). These approaches have given various contributions to the dismantlement of meaning as an essentialist entity, making it dependent on an inferential network of signs, no longer defined in virtue of an assumed *correspondence* between word and object, but recognizable by *difference* between signs (Saussure) or *differance* (the Derridian difference plus deferral) in relation to a more extended sign-system expressing what Foucault defines 'discourse'. In post-structuralist terms, meaning "is" and "is not" at the same time, always here and yet to come, deferring *ad libitum* because of its difference/*differance*, which implies ever-new negotiations between subjects and cultural practices. In this interval lies the unstable distinction between truthfulness and falsehood, no longer definable in adherence with absolutes/universals but

conferred and conceptualized from time to time in relation to cultural norms. More importantly, the role of language is significantly modified, as it is no longer just an instrument of neutral description of the world, but reveals itself to be an active means of construction of reality.

2. "Nothing is but what is not": self-referential language and the Renaissance

What have all these speculations on truth and language to do with the Renaissance? What I have been discussing so far has emphasized a dual way of approaching the history of truth in Western thought. On the one hand, it is possible to see how rooted the two main trends – the Correspondence and the anti-representationalist theories – are in Western thought, trends that both survive in current philosophy and linguistics; on the other, we can trace a chronology of development of the way they have evolved since Plato and Aristotle until the twentieth century. In this chronology the Renaissance occupies a very special place: as Foucault points out in his celebrated *Les Mots et Les Choses* (1966), the early modern period in Europe is marked by an epistemic fracture signaling a change in the way of conceiving the world, which in England is distinctly tied to the transition from the so-called Elizabethan World Picture to Modernity. The old medieval system, still evoked by the Tudors' rhetoric of power, is questioned by changes in the economical organization of the country as well as by the spreading of a new knowledge, and of a series of cultural issues raised by social mobility and by the questioning of the dominant ideologies of the period. This turmoil may be basically conceptualized – as Dollimore does – as a conflict between old and new, dominant and non-dominant, residual and emergent:

> …in some respects a dominant ideology, in others a residual one, with one or both of these being confronted and displaced by new, emergent cultural forms. […] Non-dominant elements interact with the dominant forms, sometimes coexisting with, or being absorbed or even destroyed by them, but also challenging modifying or even displacing them. Culture is not by any stretch of the imagination – not even the literary imagination – a unity. (Dollimore 1985, p. 6)

In this unstable climate, it is possible to perceive a mutation in the conception of language that considerably opens the door to relativism and linguistic self-reference. The Medieval realist/nominalist contest now comes to its full evolution and subsumes the change of English society: in the realist position, imbued with a Neoplatonic conception (and it is important to recall here that Renaissance Neoplatonism is also influenced by Aristotle's philosophy) believing in an intrinsic link between things and their names, we can detect the old symbolic system at its demise; in the nominalist position, deriving from William of Ockham and doubting the presence of such a relationship between name and thing, we may see the premises for the emergence of a new semiotic imaginary. In keeping with Foucault, the transition would consist in the gradual substitution of a ternary structure, made up of significant, signified and the intrinsic conjunction between the two, with a binary one, made up of signifier and signified (1966, p. 57).

It is not difficult to identify in this passage an opposition between systems resembling the representational *vs* the relativistic perspectives analyzed in the first section. The Aristotelian correspondence between word and world, foundational of the Truth but also of the linguistic referentiality implied in the ternary structure described by Foucault, becomes in the Middle Ages and until the Renaissance, along with a markedly Neoplatonic legacy, a regulative principle of the cosmos. At the top of the chain stands God, the Original of all Copies, the source of meaning, represented on Earth by the monarchical and ecclesiastical

centers of power and discursively supported by theology as well as by the rhetoric of the divine right of the king/queen. The counter-discourses relativizing and corroding this system of belief start within the Protestant exegetical practices and within the development of a new scientific knowledge offering the possibility of different and subjective interpretations of Scriptures and of facts of the world (see Del Villano 2012, pp. 10-20).The multifarious implications of such a deconstruction result in the loss of conceptual referents – as Serpieri points out, "Having lost the Original of all the copies, the world became a drift of rootless images without any reference"(Serpieri 1994, p. 50, my translation) – and produce a climate in which the problem of separating truth from falsehood, substance from shadow, original from reflection, becomes obsessive and existentially appalling, because of the growing awareness that everything is potentially falsifiable. The ideological jeopardy of not being able to recognize the truth, or that a unique Truth no longer exists, does not go unnoticed by the most conservative literati of the time and is aggravated by the issues raised by religious conflicts and casuistry, and by witchcraft and treason trials. Puttenham, for instance, writes that:

> As figures be the instruments of ornament in every language, so be they also in a sort abuses or rather trespasses in speach, because they passe the ordinary limits of common utterance, and be occupied of purpose to deceive the eare and also the minde, drawing it from plainnesse and simplicitie to a certaine doubleness, whereby our talk is the more guilefull & abusing. (Puttenham 1968, p.128)

Figurative language, thus, can double meaning and so deceive and confuse the hearer. At the same time, language ambiguity can be used as a self-defensive weapon as cases of casuistry show. Emblematic, in this respect, is the behavior of Catholics trying to escape religious persecutions and, in particular, the cases of Friar Forrest and of the Jesuit Father Garnet, who spread a rhetoric of mendacity, well-known as equivocation, which justified lies if lying was the only way to preserve one's faith: "the essence or whole truth of every preposition is in the mind ... the altering of the signs which do express our mind... alter not the verity of the proposition" (Garnet 1598, pp. 9-12). Despite the general condemnation of equivocation as treason towards the established authority, and as the gap between word and meaning spreads, language is invested with positive as well as negative connotations, configuring itself as a weapon to attack, persuade, defend and, above all, represent the jungle of contrasting social and cultural instances: "It is precisely in the tension springing from a safe semiotics of the world (safe because divinely ordained) and the relativistic, alternative forces to the model, that an important metalinguistic and metadiscursive reflection emerges" (Bigliazzi 2005, p. 14, my translation). The reflection hinted at by Bigliazzi is, not by chance, the main focus of the theatre of this period, and in particular, of Shakespeare's dramaturgy. An analysis of his plays from a linguistic/pragmatic perspective combined with literary criticism may help to reveal how he manages to aestheticize an embryonic modern vision of language (and the possible social and political uses connected to it) by problematizing the relation between truth and falsehood.

3. Shakespeare's semiosis: *As you like it* and *Macbeth*

In *As you like it*, Touchstone, the fool entrusted with the task of amusing young Celia and Rosalind (and the audience too), stages a paradoxical language game by proposing a rhetoric of falsehood:

TOUCHSTONE	Mistress, you must come away to your father.
CELIA	Were you made the messenger?
TOUCHSTONE	No, by mine honour, but I was bid to come for you.
ROSALIND	Where learned you that oath, fool?
TOUCHSTONE	Of a certain knight that swore by his honour they were good pancakes and swore by his honour the mustard was naught: now I'll stand to it, the pancakes were naught and the mustard was good, and yet was not the knight forsworn.
CELIA	How prove you that, in the great heap of your knowledge?
ROSALIND	Ay, marry, now unmuzzle your wisdom.
TOUCHSTONE	Stand you both forth now: stroke your chins, and swear by your beards that I am a knave.
CELIA	By our beards, if we had them, thou art.
TOUCHSTONE	By my knavery, if I had it, then I were; but if you swear by that that is not, you are not forsworn: no more was this knight swearing by his honour, for he never had any; or if he had, he had sworn it away before ever he saw those pancakes or that mustard.

(1. 2. 55-76)[1]

Touchstone conjectures that it is possible to swear by "that is not" (the false) without committing perjury and manages to demonstrate his 'theory' by making the two women swear by their beards, a jest that neatly separates words from referents: "to swear or to lie have nothing to do with the *truth* but with the nature itself of the *speech*, which can *appear* to be true if just grammatically correct" (Bigliazzi 2005, pp. 92-93, my translation). Taking a step further, we may also say that Touchstone subverts logical, Aristotelian categories by connecting truth (what is) to what is not, an act that is made possible by the illocutionary force of his assertion "I swear". 'What is not' becomes conceivable and extant despite its absurdity (the two ladies do not have beards) because it has been sanctioned by a simple phrase; the oath is in turn valid (not perjury) because of the non-existence of the beards.

Though aimed at arousing laughter and demonstrating the character's wit, this exchange introduces – albeit comically – the central linguistic issue of the time: language has lost its capacity of linking words to referents; its power lies, in the force of its performativity. An oath remains an oath, despite its value and degree of truthfulness and, more importantly, it can be exploited for any possible strategic purpose, such as, for example, to swear without committing perjury or to persuade others of the veridical nature of one's statements even when they are totally false. Shakespeare's dramaturgical treatment of words and their referents shows how the correspondence between speech and world can be 'interrupted', an operation that if, on the one hand, testifies to moral decay and to the disorder of the world, on the other, results in the empowerment of linguistic expressiveness. The rhetoric of mendacity creates a space of performativity in which the conflicts generated by social and political turmoil can be staged but, above all, sanctions the primacy of self-referential language: words create the world.

On the other hand, the nature of theatricality itself – evoked through references, plays within the play, disguises and so on – seems to suggest a great potential of the fictitious against a truth that no longer exists in the singular. There are numerous examples in this respect, from *Hamlet* to *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*, to mention but a few. At the same time, falsehood can assume the ominous contour of mystification and deceit, or of psychological abuse, as in *Othello* or *Richard III*. The examples I have selected, *Macbeth*

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[1] All the references to Shakespeare's plays are taken from S. Wells – G. Taylor (eds), *William Shakespeare. The Complete Works,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989.

and *The Taming of the Shrew*, present a combination of all these motives offering – respectively tragically and comically – what could be defined a 'study' of how language works between description and creation of reality and of how truth-telling and lying become strategies to resist cultural norms or to realize one's intentions.

To better scrutinize the level of complexity of the plays, I would like to apply a pragmatic model introduced by J. L. Austin in 1955 in his Harvard lectures, which distinguishes two kinds of 'speech acts', "constatives" and "performatives". The former consist in classical assertions which can be judged true or false, while the latter are utterances which actually *produce* the reality they name. This framework may help in singling out some peculiarities of Shakespeare's use of language. It is useful to remember that Austin may be listed among the anti-representationalist theorists of language, though his speculations do not definitively obliterate the legacy of the correspondence theory, which survive in his treatment of the constatives. In later theorizations, in fact, Austin blurs the distinction between the two groups, making constatives a subcategory of performatives, as if to say that what counts more is not whether speech acts are true or false, but whether they are efficacious in relation to the specific circumstance in which they are uttered (Austin 1962, pp. 79-81).

Returning to *As you like it*, Touchstone's speech proves emblematic with respect to Austin's theory, in that it shows an awareness of how performatives work. The oath is attributed an illocutionary force (and hence a social validity) in itself, non-dependent on the truth-conditionality of the sentence. In Austin's – and later in Searle's – list of performatives, oaths, swearwords and other codified speech acts are classified as recognizable performatives in opposition to constatives that can be used performatively only in given circumstances (Austin 1962, pp. 90-95). In both *Macbeth* and *The Shrew*, Shakespeare dramatizes the latter possibility by playing on the relationship between constatives and performatives, what words say and what words do.

In *Macbeth*, we are offered an incisive example of the performative power of language in the remarkable cues of the Weird Sisters. Most of their words present the notorious rhetorical figure of amphibology (the most pernicious figure according to Puttenham), as in the scene of the three apparitions: "…For none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4. 1. 80-81) or "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be, until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinan hill / Shall come against him" (4. 1. 92-94). They ambiguously refer to impossible actions that in the end will be unexpectedly fulfilled in their literal sense. Paradoxically Macbeth will be defeated without properly preparing himself because he will only consider the prophecies metaphorically: he will be beaten by MacDuff, not born naturally but "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (5. 8. 15-16) and Malcolm and MacDuff's troops will assault Macbeth's castle, camouflaged with tree-branches, in order to appear like a walking forest.

The efficacy of the witches' words is warranted by the reality they refer to, as they *describe* (though in the negative) the situations that will cause Macbeth's downfall. In other words, Shakespeare underscores the mixed illocutionary nature of the Sisters' prophecies, which prove at the same time performative and constative.

At first glance, the constative mode derives from their reference to future events; the performative springs from the fact that they describe actions with illogical, impossible referents (tied to a walking forest and to an enemy not born of a woman). In the end, the fulfillment of the prophecies reverses this distinction as well as Austin's classification, showing how a performative may come to be achieved and expressed only if it is a constative and not vice versa.

The dramaturgical action in *Macbeth* is originated by the awareness that language can be self-referential, in order to go beyond this and explore more sophisticated ways in

which referentiality and self-refentiality may intersect. It is evidential in this respect, that the play openly refers to equivocation and probably to Father Garnet's trial through the comic character of the Porter: "Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven: O! come in, equivocator! (2. 3. 8-12)". The tone of the cue is hilarious and located in a context that impoverishes the potential menace deriving from a reference to *real* equivocation, and so proves functional in making the witches' language less decipherable and more dense with unforeseen implications.

The essence of this indecipherability is expressed by: "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (1. 1. 11), the oxymoronic chiasmus that opens the text. The sentence gives the axiological and ontological coordinates of Macbeth's microcosm in the terms of a linguistic interval suspended between referentiality and self-referentiality, denotation and connotation: the opposites, fair and foul, linked together by a syntactic connection, are posited in a relation of identity that blurs and relativizes not only their meaning, but also the relativisation itself. The semantic inversion (fair = foul) is subsequently turned around (foul = fair). The equivocation represented by the witches, then, consists not only in the interpretable nature of their speeches, but also in the fact that they stage an endless detour of sense, of which it is only possible to observe, as Macbeth does, that "Nothing is but what is not" (1. 3. 138-139).

4. The Obedience Speech: *The Taming of the Shrew*

The Taming of the Shrew presents the wooing and marriage of a shrew, Katherina, on the part of the bald Petruchio, apparently according to a theatrical vogue that entertained the audience through the ridicule of 'scolds', rebellious women who expressed their rejection of expected social roles through a harsh and excessive language which made them marginal and unfeminine (Mucci 2001, p. 68). The play does stage the taming of a shrew, but problematizes the gender roles normalized by the system and presented as 'natural'.

From the beginning, Katherina's words are marked by two main traits: directness and punning. She addresses her father politely but sarcastically when he announces that Bianca will get married only after Katherina's marriage: "I pray you, sir, is it your will / To make a stale of me amongst these mates?" (1. 1. 57-58); to Hortensio's indelicate replies – "Mates, maid! How mean you that? No mates for you, / Unless you were of gentler, milder mould" (1. 1. 59-60) – she retorts: "I' faith, sir, you shall never need to fear: / I wis it is not half way to her heart; / But if it were, doubt not her care should be / To comb your noddle with a three-legg'd stool / And paint your face and use you like a fool (1. 1. 61-5)". Katherina here shows how her behaviour does not comply with the patriarchal rule embodied by Baptista. Hortensio's final cue expresses another aspect of the voice of patriarchy: "From all such devils, good Lord deliver us!" (1. 1. 66).

At this stage, thus, Katherina appears as a strong woman, whose strategy of survival within the household, however, is not only unsuccessful but becomes functional to the social structure. When she states that: "… a woman may be made a fool, / If she had not a spirit to resist", she shows her awareness of the subaltern positions to which women are exposed and subjected to in society; yet, it is precisely her "spirit" that places her on the fringe of society. The deviation to the patriarchal norm is not a source of effective agency, but leads to an open condemnation.

When Petruchio appears on stage, his behavior is rude and identical to Katherina's; even worse in his approach to marriage than to a mere business deal: "Signior Baptista, my business asketh haste, / And every day I cannot come to woo. […] / Then tell me, if I get

your daughter's love, / What dowry shall I have with her to wife?" (2. 1. 113-9). The play thus strikingly shows that similar linguistic habits come to be differently judged according to the speaker's gender. The disconnection Katherine feels and simultaneously enacts in respect to the household, is forcibly 'sewed' by Petruchio through a rhetoric that exploits the gap between feeling one way and appearing another:

> PETRUCHIO: I will attend her here,
> And woo her with some spirit when she comes.
> Say that she rail; why then I'll tell her plain
> She sings as sweetly as a nightingale:
> Say that she frown, I'll say she looks as clear
> As morning roses newly wash'd with dew:
> Say she be mute and will not speak a word;
> Then I'll commend her volubility,
> And say she uttereth piercing eloquence:
> If she do bid me pack, I'll give her thanks,
> As though she bid me stay by her a week:
> If she deny to wed, I'll crave the day
> When I shall ask the banns and when be married.
> But here she comes; and now, Petruchio, speak.
>   (2. 1. 167-180)

Petruchio too uses the word "spirit", which creates a connection between his own strategy and that of Katherina. Yet, whereas she aims at unveiling the discontent hidden beneath the norm by rejecting the role of the good silent woman (which at the beginning is embodied by her sister Bianca), he tries to force her into another masquerade. He states that he will create an alternative image of her, as his words will not refer to 'reality' but will perform its opposite, by describing what she is *not*. In comparison with the examples taken from *As you like it* and *Macbeth*, here the relationship between words and referents assumes another nuance, in the way that the play erodes the correspondence between world and speech by paradoxically showing the mechanisms themselves of the correspondence construction. Petruchio will break the correspondence by denying the truth of what he sees; in this way he will create another category of speech act, exploiting the illocutionary force of the performatives and inverting the function of the constatives. Petruchio, in other words, will use what we may label as 'anti-constatives', speech acts uttered with the deceptive intentionality of diverting 'what is' on the tracks on 'what is not', in order to finally make it real. In doing so, it is Petruchio who is the first to show the arbitrariness of language and the potential instability of the sign-system maintaining the household: if these signs are to be created, they are not 'natural' and less than ever fixed once and for all.

As in the conventional subversion typical of the Carnivalesque, however, his plan is going to end with the restoration or establishment of the 'right' gender order. As soon as they meet, Petruchio's first move is that of renaming Katherina, as if to anticipate his will to force her into another identity:

> PETRUCHIO: Good morrow, Kate; for that's your name, I hear.
> KATHERINA: Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing:
>   They call me Katherina that do talk of me.
>   (2. 1. 181-3)

Here we have an emblematic example of how Petruchio's strategy works: he denies Katherina's constative, opposing his own anti-constative. Katherina replies sarcastically and Petruchio intensifies the irony:

PETRUCHIO: You lie, in faith; for you are call'd plain Kate,
And bonny Kate and sometimes Kate the curst;
But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom
Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate,
For dainties are all Kates, and therefore, Kate,
Take this of me, Kate of my consolation;
Hearing thy mildness praised in every town,
Thy virtues spoke of, and thy beauty sounded,
Yet not so deeply as to thee belongs,
Myself am moved to woo thee for my wife.

                                    (2. 1. 184-193)

A powerful speech act opens the passage: "You lie, in faith", which falsely provides a 'description' of what is going on, i.e. Kate is lying. The recourse to the formula 'in faith' reminds us of Touchstone's speech on the possibility of swearing on what does not exist; the audience is aware that Petruchio is playing with false referents in order to trick Katherina.

KATHERINA: Moved! In good time: let him that moved you hither
Remove you hence: I knew you at the first
You were a moveable.

                                    (2. 1. 194-6)

Katherina does not appear intimidated but responds using her own punning register, channeling the rest of the conversation into a long sequence of sequiturs, concluding with an offensive physical gesture on the part of Katherina, who strikes Petruchio. This strong impolite move far from sanctioning Kate's victory over her rival indicates she is defending herself from his interlocutor's offenses. When, later, Katherina is at her best in showing rudeness towards Petruchio – "lunatic" and "mad-cup ruffian" are just two of the epithets she uses – he deliberately lies in front of Baptista, Gremio and Tranio, about their 'true' relationship:

KATHERINA: I'll see thee hang'd on Sunday first.
GREMIO: Hark, Petruchio; she says she'll see thee
hang'd first.
TRANIO: Is this your speeding? nay, then, good night our part!
PETRUCHIO: Be patient, gentlemen; I choose her for myself:
If she and I be pleased, what's that to you?
'Tis bargain'd 'twixt us twain, being alone,
That she shall still be curst in company.
I tell you, 'tis incredible to believe
How much she loves me: O, the kindest Kate!
She hung about my neck; and kiss on kiss
She vied so fast, protesting oath on oath,
That in a twink she won me to her love.
O, you are novices! 'tis a world to see,
How tame, when men and women are alone,
A meacock wretch can make the curstest shrew.

                                    (2. 1. 292-306)

This deliberate lie (as we spectators know that there has been no agreement between the two) opens a space of inwardness inhabited, according to Petruchio's rhetoric, only by the couple and in opposition to the rest of the world: the private space of husband and wife is, however, falsely presented as real, and Petruchio will have to wait before obtaining what he wants. But will he *really* manage to succeed in his intent?

The climax of his taming takes place on the way back to Padua, after having submitted 'Kate' to every sort of abuse (starving her, denying her clothing etc.), but language

returns as the ground on which Katherina's definitive entrance into her wifely role can be sanctioned. The conversation takes place on a public road during the day:

> PETRUCHIO: Come on, i' God's name; once more toward our father's.
>   Good Lord, how bright and goodly shines the moon!
> KATHERINA: The moon! the sun: it is not moonlight now.
>
> (4. 5. 1-3)

Petruchio again utters anti-constatives describing reality as its opposite, whereby Katherina replies with a constative aiming at reassessing the correct correspondence between word and world:

> PETRUCHIO: I say it is the moon that shines so bright.
> KATHERINA: I know it is the sun that shines so bright.
> PETRUCHIO: Now, by my mother's son, and that's myself,
>   It shall be moon, or star, or what I list,
>   Or ere I journey to your father's house.
>   Go on, and fetch our horses back again.
>   Evermore cross'd and cross'd; nothing but cross'd!
>
> (4. 5. 4-10)

Petruchio retorts by using a declarative – "I say" – imposing his viewpoint over the evidence of facts. She replies she *knows* "it is the sun that shines so bright", a cue that signals how Katherina is starting to create her own strategy. Petruchio has brought the battle to language and Katherina brings it to the level of her own conceptuality: the truth in her mind, her knowledge, is stronger than his words. From now on, Katherina modifies her linguistic register, accepting Petruchio's *vagaries* in the name of a new possibility of affirming her agency:

> KATHERINA: Forward, I pray, since we have come so far,
>   And be it moon, or sun, or what you please:
>   An if you please to call it a rush-candle,
>   Henceforth I vow it shall be so for me.
> PETRUCHIO: I say it is the moon.
> KATHERINA: I know it is the moon.
>
> (4. 5. 11-6)

Petruchio repeats the declarative that empowers him and Katherina replies repeating "I know" after having used "I vow", which apparently marks her declarative as semantically belonging to the sphere of devotion. "I pray" and "I vow" are acts of faith in opposition to the assertive "I say" with which Petruchio apparently establishes himself as the subject of the discourse. The final part of the passage shows an eloquent Katherina apparently accepting the rule of her new household:

> PETRUCHIO: Nay, then you lie: it is the blessed sun.
> KATHERINA: Then, God be bless'd, it is the blessed sun:
>   But sun it is not, when you say it is not;
>   And the moon changes even as your mind.
>   What you will have it named, even that it is;
>   And so it shall be so for Katherina.
>
> (4. 5. 18-24)

The dialogue between husband and wife has suddenly become a game in which the assertive 'values' of truth and lie are relativized and subordinated to the performing power of

hierarchical roles. Petruchio has obtained the creation of a private space of mutual agreement with his wife. However, this has also produced another private space, that of Katherina's mind. If we read her last speech as a long anti-constative, we come to the conclusion that she has appropriated Petruchio's strategy, shifting the focus of the signification and of the relationship between referents and language, between 'what is' and 'what is not', into her own inwardness: "Such duty as the subject owes the prince / Even such a woman oweth to her husband; / And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour, / And not obedient to his honest will, / What is she but a foul contending rebel / And graceless traitor to her loving lord?" (5. 2. 155-160). The analogy between a bad wife and a traitor evokes a series of subtexts and of political facts of the time, and seems to recall the trials and persecutions by which it was possible to escape only through recourse to one's inward truth (as casuists did). Is it so improbable that Katherina was enacting a similar strategy of concealment of her true intentions and beliefs? When Katherina was a shrew, she was admittedly classifiable as a deviation from the cultural norm, but now that she is *apparently* tamed and that has earned a place within the system, how can the system know whether and how she keeps on being disruptive? No reply is possible and the indeterminacy of this ending brings us back to the post-structuralist reflections on the deferral of meaning; in *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as in most of Shakespearean dramaturgy, it is possible to experience the deflagration of universals and the opening of semiotic spaces, in which significance is entrusted to the power of 'nothingness', illusion, what is not (yet).

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