Unmasking the Unspoken: Beyond the Edges of Taboos

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On Taboos

Forbidden Fruit a flavor has
That lawful Orchards mocks –
How luscious lies within the Pod
The Pea that Duty locks –

Emily Dickinson, c. 1876

By common understanding, taboos demarcate the forbidden, the impure, or the sacred, drawing a line between what is allowed and what is not. However, despite their apparent universality across cultures, time periods, and belief systems, taboos in fact prove far more elusive and contradictory than they first appear, resisting any fixed definition. The boundaries they establish, though ostensibly absolute, are rarely as stable as they seem and more often than not become charged sites of tension where the prohibition they enforce invites its own violation. Freud captured this paradox effectively when he observed that

the power of taboo lies precisely in its "capacity for arousing temptation" (1913 [1950], 41). In this sense, taboos function less as rigid barriers and more as thresholds, that is, unstable, liminal spaces where what is excluded inevitably re-emerges (perhaps unconsciously, as Freud would argue), not to be rejected but as an object of fascination and desire, unsettling and reconfiguring the meaning of what it once was.

This ambivalence is clearly apparent in some key narratives that have shaped Western culture. In the biblical story of the forbidden fruit, for instance, God's command – "Thou shalt not eat" – far from imposing a static prohibition, highlights the tension between divine authority, which forbids eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and human desire to disrupt the established order. The serpent's temptation reframes the boundary as an invitation instead of a restriction, and disobedience becomes a moment of radical identity transformation. The boundary thus turns into a space of transition, where Adam and Eve's transgression leads not only to loss, but to a new order of knowledge. Yet, whereas Eden portrays transgression as a path to knowledge, Emily Dickinson, in her poem above, shifts the focus to a different form of pleasure. More specifically, desire is driven not by the knowledge that comes from crossing the limit, but by the prohibition itself. Indeed, Dickinson suggests, the fruit's forbidden nature triggers a longing that "lawful Orchards" cannot satisfy. As her image of the "Pea that Duty locks" reveals, the true source of desire does lie in the charged tension between "duty" and its potential breach.

Once recognised, this pattern – the boundary which sustains desire – takes on various forms in myths where punishment is presented as perpetual or inevitable. In the story of Tantalus, famously, the gods impose not a final, definitive boundary, but one that endures: food and water remain visible yet forever out of reach. In this case, prohibition warps desire into a constant state of frustration, making punishment an ongoing condition rather than a one-off event. Similarly, the myth of Pandora's jar adds another dimension to this tension. The seal does not merely forbid the opening of the jar; it makes the act seem inevitable, as though the boundary itself compelled its violation. In much the same way, in the story of the Tower of Babel, divine prohibition does not

erase the unity of language but fractures it, multiplying meanings in the process. Viewed in this way, the boundary proves anything but absolute, creating a space in which limits are both enforced and surpassed. The examples above focus on an essential point: taboo is not a passive act of exclusion but an active force in cultural production. As Georges Bataille claims, transgression does not obliterate the limit but rather strengthens and completes it (Bataille 1987, 10). Prohibition and transgression, then, exist in a dialectical relationship that engenders new configurations of meaning. As such, taboo functions as a dynamic force connected to anything that challenges conventional categories – whether the sacred, the abject, or ideas which refuse to conform to established norms.

The complex dynamic between prohibition and desire becomes particularly evident if we turn to the colonial encounter between Western rationality and non-Western concepts of the sacred. When the Polynesian concept of *tapu* entered Western discourse through James Cook's 18th-century voyages, it triggered a significant epistemological short-circuit. In Polynesian cultures, *tapu* functioned as a relational system that managed sacred power, intertwining protection and danger, the permissible and the impossible in an inseparable knot. However, within the Enlightenment framework – shaped by ideals of reason, order, and universal rationality – this multifaceted concept was reduced to a static idea of prohibition. *Tapu*, once dynamic and relational, was semantically flattened and reinterpreted as rigid and dualistic, thus reflecting the colonial violence embedded in Western epistemology: where indigenous cultures recognised ambiguity as productive, Western systems sought to erase it, imposing clear binary distinctions between the sacred and profane, the rational and irrational.

By the 20th century, new theoretical approaches began to reframe taboo beyond the Victorian evolutionary perspective, which had culturally dismissed it as a feature of so-called 'primitive' societies. A key shift came with the French sociological school, particularly Durkheim's work (1895), which identified taboo as a social fact emerging from collective life. For Durkheim, the categories of pure and impure were two varieties of the sacred with the normative function of organising social relationships, though his distinction between religious

prohibitions – viewed as 'categorical imperatives' – and magical ones, relegated to utilitarian norms, remained problematic. Psychoanalytic approaches – from Freud's *Totem und Tabu* (1913) to Lacan's focus on prohibition within the symbolic order – interpreted taboo through structures of guilt, repression, and the law; in parallel, Durkheim's followers (Hertz 1909) foregrounded how purity and impurity emerged from social life and actively structured it. A second major development came with structuralist and symbolic approaches (Douglas 1966, Valeri 1985; 1999), which complicated the boundaries of the symbolic by showing how the categories of purity and impurity actively construct social order. In such a framework, taboo is no longer a static element within a cultural system, but a destabilising force that continually redraws the limits of meaning. This approach, further enriched by processual and dynamic approaches (Van Gennep 1909, Turner 1969; 1986), placed the tabooed object – be it the corpse, menstrual blood, or the sacred name – in a liminal space: expelled from the system yet central to its meaning. Particularly significant was Valeri's critique of purely taxonomic approaches, as he emphasised that classifications reflect normative impulses emerging from concrete social evaluations rather than abstract cognitive functions. On this view, taboo is context-dependent, as maintained by Allan (2018, 10): not an inert category, but a process driven by the interplay between cultural classification, social order, and normative practice.

This paradox – taboo as both stabilising and destabilising – underscores its enduring role in the production of cultural meaning. Far from being a relic of 'primitive' societies, taboo continues to govern boundaries, identities, and desires. In fact, contemporary societies still regulate the body, sexuality, food, and death through mechanisms of prohibition, albeit in less visible forms. The repression of death in industrialised cultures particularly exemplifies this shift. Death has been pushed to the margins – confined to hospitals, sanitised through funerary practices, and made almost invisible in daily life. Yet, this repression paradoxically intensifies the cultural significance of death as evidenced by its hyper-visibility in media: forensic dramas, horror films, and sensationalised depictions of violence all reveal how death persists as a site of collective fascination. The taboo, then, has not been abolished but displaced, re-emerging in forms that reflect contemporary anxieties and desires. Whether

in myth, colonial encounters, or contemporary art, taboo remains a dynamic mechanism that tests the limits of the thinkable and the permissible. In its ambivalence it exposes the fragility of the systems that attempt to contain it – and the transformative potential of transgressing them. This points to what might be seen as the self-perpetuating nature of taboos, where prohibitions do not silence but instead give rise to their own – and new – forms of expression.

The essays in this volume approach taboo as a shifting threshold, continually redefined, negotiated, and contested. While grounded in its own theoretical framework, each paper focuses on those spaces where prohibition meets transgression, where limits become sites of transformation.

A recurring theme across the collection is the tension between external restrictions and internalised prohibitions, particularly when negotiating political, religious, and sexual taboos. Rossana Sebellin explores how taboos around royal authority shape early modern depictions of Richard II in *Jack Straw*, *Thomas of Woodstock*, and Shakespeare's *Richard II*. While *Jack Straw* offers a loyalist portrayal of the king, and *Woodstock* bears the marks of censorship in its fragmented narrative, Shakespeare's *Richard II* navigates these constraints with greater subtlety. Drawing on Freud's notion of taboo as both sacred and dangerous, Sebellin highlights silence – whether in Mowbray's measured speech or Gaunt's appeals to divine justice – as a strategy for political criticism. Daniela Guardamagna extends this discussion by considering the impact of the 1606 Act to Restrain Abuses of Players. This legal prohibition, which served as both a restriction and a source of creative engagement, forced playwrights – including Shakespeare, in Guardamagna's case – to reinvent the boundaries of dramatic language. Through a close analysis of textual changes between the Quarto and Folio editions of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, Guardamagna demonstrates how the removal or replacement of oaths reflects Shakespeare's response to the pressures of censorship. In the same vein, Salvatore Ciancitto addresses the intricate dynamics of translating John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* into Italian, engaging with the interplay between taboo, censorship, and cultural adaptation. By focusing on three key translations of 1921, 1964, and 2010, Ciancitto's article investigates the threshold where the erotic language of the source text meets the cultural norms and ideological constraints of the target society. This threshold is both a boundary that imposes linguistic and moral

restrictions and a site of negotiation, where translation reimagines and reshapes the text's erotic charge.

Two essays explore silence as a means of both repression and resistance. Elena Cotta Ramusino examines the fraught dynamics of taboo, prohibition, and silence in Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*, with a particular focus on the linguistic constraints imposed by the protagonist's father. The article explores how the taboo against speaking English in Ireland functions as both a literal and a symbolic threshold, dividing the family and alienating Hanno from his community while paradoxically drawing him into an obsessive engagement with language. This prohibition, framed by the father's nationalist vision, transforms language from a medium of connection into a site of control and fracturing of identity. Giovanna Tallone, by contrast, examines the pervasive silence surrounding the Disappeared during the Troubles in Northern Ireland through Mary O'Donnell's novel *Where They Lie*. Her essay problematises the taboo of forced disappearances as a threshold between erasure and haunting – a site where social silences obscure and perpetuate the trauma of loss. O'Donnell's novel, as Tallone argues, navigates this threshold, using its narrative to challenge the denial and misinformation that envelop the Disappeared and their families.

Taboo's role as a site of resistance and reconfiguration is further explored through transgressive identities. Anna Fattori delves into the unsettling exploration of taboos in Robert Walser's late microscripts, focusing on themes of violence, gender, and social norms. By analysing *With Anger about her Anger She Was Green* and *Cruel Rites, Customs, Habits*, Fattori's essay sheds light on Walser's transgressive engagement with topics like phallophagy, cruelty, and gender fluidity. These microscripts, written in Walser's distinctive miniature handwriting, juxtapose playful, fairy-tale-like language with the disturbing nature of their content, creating a provocative tension that challenges the reader's moral and aesthetic sensibilities. In dialogue with Fattori, Noemi Fregara takes this discussion further in her study of Olga Tokarczuk's hybrid and monstrous figures – Saint Kummernis and the Ugliest Woman in the World. Drawing on Freud's and Cohen's theories of taboo and monstrosity, Fregara's analysis situates these figures as an embodiment of cultural anxieties about the other, whether it be gendered, animal, or otherwise. These characters,

at once abject and fascinating, reflect a broader critique of systems that marginalise what cannot be easily classified. Tokarczuk's exploration of these liminal identities transcends mere representation, urging readers to engage with their discomfort with boundary-crossing figures and to question social assumptions about normality, purity, and power.

Two essays turn to the question of belonging and identity, particularly in contexts of exclusion and cultural negotiation. Sara Villa explores haunting as a strategy in contemporary Spanish cinema, where migrant identities are portrayed as spectral – visible yet erased – reflecting Spain's unresolved postcolonial history. Films like *Poniente* and *Retorno a Hansala* insistently confront these realities, challenging the silence around immigration. In a different yet parallel case, Angela Sileo explores deafness as a cultural and educational taboo. Deaf individuals, Sileo argues, have often been pressured to conform to hearing norms, erasing their linguistic and cultural identities. By proposing Accessible Didactic Audiovisual Translation (ADAT) and Deaf-Inclusive Subtitling (DIDS), she envisions classrooms in which Deaf learners are given the chance to 'speak' with their own voice. Like the migrants who reject invisibility in Villa's work, Deaf learners deserve visibility, asserting their place in systems that would otherwise exclude them.

The final theme addressed is moral excess as the ultimate expression of taboo – moments when boundaries collapse and order gives way to chaos. Tommaso Continisio discusses *The Bloody Banquet*, a revenge play in which tyranny, sexual transgression, and cannibalism push the Jacobean social and political order to its limits. These acts of excess, Continisio suggests, reflect a breakdown of moderation and a descent into abjection. Pushing the boundaries even further, Francesco Sani closes the volume by confronting the ultimate taboo, euthanasia, not merely as an ethical or legislative dilemma, but as an area of tension where social prohibitions and the call for autonomy collide. For Sani, the taboo of assisted dying reveals deeper anxieties about the limits of agency, the sanctity of life, and the regulation of suffering. Situating these questions within a broader historical and cultural continuum, he considers how debates over assisted dying highlight the limits of existing frameworks while pointing towards new ways of imagining death as a space of dignity and choice.

In both cases, the refusal to allow for autonomy – over death in Sani's essay, over desire and identity in Continisio's – results in rupture and destabilisation.

Taken together, the essays in this collection expose the limits and – most importantly – the potential of taboos, insofar as prohibition and transgression drive cultural, political, and artistic transformation.

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Censorship and Self-censorship: Taboo Topics in the Representation of Richard II

ABSTRACT

Rooted in Polynesian origins, the term "taboo" expresses concepts relating to both sacredness and danger which, as Freud and Frazer have shown, also apply to figures of authority. This paper investigates how these taboos are manifest in the representation of Richard II in three plays: *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, Shakespeare's *Richard II*, and the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*. These texts, while all dealing with the same controversial monarch, offer different approaches to the depiction of royal authority, rebellion, and censorship. This paper examines the ways in which boundaries of political discourse were shaped by both explicit censorship and self-censorship, particularly in relation to the depiction of the king's failures and the social consequences of his rule. It highlights the role of taboos in early modern political theatre, revealing how the sacred and dangerous nature of kingship was negotiated on stage and how these themes were managed through complex strategies of language, silence, and omission.

KEYWORDS: Censorship; taboo; *Richard II*; *Thomas of Woodstock*; *Jack Straw*.

The term 'taboo' has been attested in English since 1777 (*OED*) as referring to Polynesian religious practices and beliefs. Even though I will be mainly using the word taboo in its more modern and extended sense ("2. Of a word, expression, or topic, esp. in social conversation: widely considered to be unacceptable or offensive, and therefore avoided or severely restricted in use by

social custom", *OED*), the origin of the term is paramount to understanding its relevance in depicting politically charged issues in plays.

In Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, the term is used in its etymological sense, underlying its Polynesian origin. However, Freud notes that the concept was present in ancient Rome as well:

> 'Taboo' is a Polynesian word. It is difficult for us to find a translation for it, since the concept connoted by it is one which we no longer possess. It was still current among the ancient Romans, whose 'sacer' was the same as the Polynesian 'taboo'. […] The meaning of 'taboo', as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, 'sacred', 'consecrated', and on the other 'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden', 'unclean'. (Freud 1913, 21)

Freud also deals with taboo in relation to Kings and Monarchs (Taboo upon rulers): since these are sacred figures, they are themselves at the centre of multiple interdictions, designed both to protect the ruler and to protect others from him.

> A ruler 'must not only be guarded, he must also be guarded against'. (Frazer, 1911b, 132.) Both of these ends are secured by innumerable taboo observances. We know already why it is that rulers must be guarded against. It is because they are vehicles of the mysterious and dangerous magical power which is transmitted by contact […]. (Freud 1913, 48)

The reason for the protection of the ruler is also obvious:

> The second reason for the special treatment of privileged persons – the need to provide protection for them against the threat of danger – has had an obvious part in creating taboos and so of giving rise to court etiquette. […] The need to protect the king from every possible form of danger follows from his immense importance to his subjects, whether for weal or woe. It is his person which, strictly speaking, regulates the whole course of existence. 'The people have to thank him for the rain and sunshine which foster the fruits of the earth, for the wind which brings ships to their coasts, and even for the solid ground beneath their feet.' (Freud 1913, 50-51; the quote is from Frazer 1911, 7.)

The sacred nature of Kings is therefore the origin of the taboos and interdictions surrounding their figures. As clearly demonstrated by several scholars (Kantorowicz 1957; Ciocca 1987; Bezio 2015; and others), from the Tudor Era onward an increasing emphasis is placed on the anointed figure of

the King or Queen: the sovereign, according to this political vision, rules by divine right, his/her power is transmitted by hereditary right, he/she is accountable to God alone and is due obedience by all subjects: resisting the King's will is a sin (Bezio 2015, 25).

Given these circumstances, the way one speaks to a king and of a king cannot be neutral and is subjected to restrictions and prohibitions. Similarly, the way a king is represented on stage is constrained by boundaries. Censorship and self-censorship are thus indicative of a tabooed subject, pertaining to the sacred figure of the ruler. This is apparent in the representation of the stage kings and queens in the several histories performed and published in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. According to the Freudian interpretation of taboo issues connected to figures of power, the necessity of protecting the monarch (the way he or she is addressed; the way he or she is represented) and of protecting oneself from the monarch (from accusations of treason, seditious behaviour, and so on) are both aspects of the interdictions and taboos pertaining to speech, print and visual depictions of the King.

This paper focuses on representations of Richard II in three plays depicting different moments of his reign: the anonymous *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, *Richard II* by Shakespeare, and the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*.

1. *Jack Straw*

The first play will only be referred to briefly, as a starting point for this analysis as it represents a different political point of view on Richard II: the plot revolves around the Peasants' Revolt (1381) and the young King, the then 14-year-old Richard, is invariably depicted as a positive figure. On the other hand the rebels, whose actions are justifiable at the beginning of the play, become increasingly avid and mutinous as the events unfold, with their requests far outweighing their reasonable original demands. There is scant information about this minor text as to censorship, but "[t]he structural imbalance and textual anomalies in the printed edition of *Jack Straw* are […] suggestive of censorship." (Clare 1990; 27) According to Clare, the exposition of the rebels' motivations is minimal, and the rebellion is depicted in fragmented scenes, suggesting that significant content may have been censored prior to publication.

Notably, the lack of political depth in the portrayal of themes like tax abuse and hostility towards foreigners (present in Holinshed, which is a source of the play, but absent from the text), was likely due to the intervention of a censor. The structure emphasises the play's political and hierarchical commentary over the rebels' plight, which diminishes the vitality of the rebellion compared to the lengthy discussions of royal authority: the King is a saintly figure and the sacred nature of royal office is upheld obsessively throughout the short play. Overall, the play's compressed narrative and its focus on loyalty to the monarch may reflect constraints imposed by censorship. (Clare 1990; 37-39) Dutton also considers *Jack Straw* "effusively loyalist in [its] deprecations of riot and rebellion" (Dutton 1991: 85), regardless of whether this comes from the anonymous author's political views or from censorship.

2. *Richard II*

In contrast to *Jack Straw*, Shakespeare's *Richard II* raises several questions about the depiction of royalty and the limits of expressing open criticism or accusations against the King.

In *Richard II* the first act is a masterpiece of self-restraint and meditations on the possibility of saying what one wishes to say. In scenes 1 and 3, for example, the character of Mowbray is depicted in a subtle balance between being outspoken and prudent; he must prevent himself from uttering certain sentences that can suggest any wrongdoing on the part of the Crown. The Duke of Norfolk's speech is rife with references to self-censorship from the very beginning: when responding to Bolingbroke's accusations – in particular that he had murdered the Duke of Gloucester – provoked on the subject, he says: "Yet can I not of such tame patience boast / As to be *hushed* and naught at all to say. / First, the fair reverence of your highness *curbs* me / From giving reins and spurs to my *free speech*" (*R2*, 1.1.54-57, my italics). Mowbray is here hinting at a necessity to restrain his speech so as not to offend the King by accusing his kin. But as sources and scholars have amply demonstrated, the part Mowbray played in the death of the King's uncle, Thomas of Woodstock, was far from clear-cut; be that as it may, the Elizabethan audience was quite convinced of the King's implication in the execution. When he is openly

accused of being the cause of the Duke of Gloucester's death ("I say, and further did maintain / […] That he did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death" *R2*, 1.1.98, 100), his answer can be considered a form of equivocation, as he replies: "For Gloucester's death, / I slew him not, but to my own disgrace / Neglected my sworn duty in that case" (*R2*, 1.1.132-34). In the footnote to these verses, Forker states:

> Was Gloucester's execution for treason the sworn duty that Mowbray neglected? Or does Mowbray mean that his duty was to save Gloucester's life and that in this he failed? […] The phrase *slew him not* may also be taken as an equivocation – a way of saying that Mowbray's servants rather than Mowbray personally carried out the killing. Although we cannot know Mowbray's veracity when he denies that he slew Gloucester, it seems clear that he is signalling Richard to come to his rescue; Mowbray implies that he cannot honourably defend himself unless the King restores his dignity by admitting his own role in the death of his uncle. (Forker 2002, 192n)

So, from his first appearance on stage, this character is the bearer of the very idea of a speech that is restrained by self-censorship, while at the same time hinting at the very possibility of speech. One other famous example of devious speech, which is even more telling in terms of this interpretation, is when in scene 3 Mowbray insistently refers to impeded speech: the topic is Mowbray's inability to speak English, having been exiled permanently by the King, but if we bear in mind the fact that according to popular knowledge, and in part to the sources – Mowbray was acting on the King's behalf and on his direct orders – the whole speech can be seen as a desperate attempt to win the King over to his side, while at the same time hinting at his ability to speak up, if he wished to do so.

> A heavy sentence, my most sovereign liege,
> And all unlooked-for from your highness' mouth.
> A dearer merit, not so deep a maim
> As to be cast forth in the common air,
> Have I deserved at your highness' hands.
> The language I have learnt these forty years,
> My native English, now I must forgo,
> And now my tongue's use is to me no more
> Than an unstringed viol or a harp,
> Or like a cunning instrument cased up –

> Or, being open, put into his hands
> That knows no touch to tune the harmony.
> Within my mouth you have engaoled my tongue,
> Doubly portcullised with my teeth and lips,
> And dull unfeeling barren Ignorance
> Is made my gaoler to attend on me.
> […]
> What is thy sentence then but speechless death,
> Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath? (*R2*, 1.3.154-69, 172-73)

Mowbray appears, quite evidently, to be fighting between the urge to speak and the impossibility to do so without self-accusation and without involving the King in the deed he is charged of having carried out. If the King understands what Mowbray is referring to, he refuses to admit his own involvement in the event leading to his uncle Gloucester's death. Perhaps precisely because he understands the innuendos in Mowbray's words, he condemns him to a wall-less prison where his very ability to speak is taken away: doomed to live wandering within a society that will not be able to understand him, he is reduced to a permanent, forced silence, his tongue useless and still. The accusation he addresses to King Richard, of having "engaoled" his tongue and "portcullised" his mouth, takes yet a deeper and more sinister connotation in view of their supposed complicity.

On the other hand, throughout the text of *Richard II*, any criticism of the King is counterbalanced by the proclamation of the Tudor principles on royalty: if the King is guilty, he is notwithstanding the King, and his subjects must remain faithful and loyal. In 1.2 – a scene which is not present in the sources and is an invention of the playwright – the Duke of Gaunt and the Duchess of Gloucester discuss her husband's death and her pressing request for vengeance. Gaunt's replies are an example of political orthodoxy: from the opening, he appears to be answering her plight with a first hint of the possible liability of the King, together with a strong appeal for Christian patience:

> But since correction lieth in those hands
> Which made the fault that we cannot correct,
> Put we our quarrel to the will of heaven,
> Who, when they see the hours ripe on earth,
> Will rain hot vengeance on offenders' heads. (*R2*, 1.2.4-8)

Gaunt's position is clear: the King is responsible and we cannot expect justice from him, but we must rely on Divine justice, which will descend on the guilty at the rightful time. And when the widow insists, he even more openly accuses her and defends royal authority:

> God's is the quarrel; for God's substitute,
> His deputy anointed in His sight,
> Hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully
> Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
> An angry arm against His minister. (*R2*, 1.2.37-41)

God alone can avenge the Duke of Gloucester's death as the King is sacred: he is God's representative on Earth. In *Romans* 12, 19, we read: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (AKV); subjects, therefore, must never rebel but rely on divine intervention in order to obtain justice. The same concept was repeated in sermons and publications such as the notorious *Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion* (1571). Gaunt stands therefore for orthodox policy and, even if he admits the culpability of Richard, he ultimately defends the divine right of the King: if he acted wrongfully (the "if" is here a powerful distancing tool), we are still bound to obey.

Both examples of self-imposed limitation in verbal expression respond simultaneously to the two instances described by Freud: protecting the King vs. protecting oneself (author or character) from the King. In a period of growing absolutism (Bezio 2015), protecting the King is a means of protecting oneself, as exposing the Monarch can have dire consequences.

The unsolved issue regarding *Richard II*'s political controversy is embodied in Act 4, which was famously published only in 1608, thirteen years after the tragedy was first written and performed. The deposition or parliament scene could not ultimately be published because it depicts a King who is either destroying his own authority or being deposed; in fact, it was only printed after Queen Elizabeth's death. The question has been long debated, as attested by Clare (1990, 47-51), Dutton (1991, 123-26), and Clegg (1997). According to these scholars, it is virtually impossible to say if the missing scene was authorised for performance but not for printing, or if it was never authorised in

the first place and was subsequently included for a later staging and publication. General opinion, as stated by both Clare (1990, 48) and Dutton (1991, 124), is that the omission of the scene concerned publication only:

> The traditional explanation for its absence is censorship – that Shakespeare included the scene from the beginning, but that it was excised, either by Tilney or by the bishops' censors for the press. The strongest argument for press censorship is that, almost immediately after the excision, the Abbot of Westminster says: 'A woeful pageant have we here beheld' (311), an apparent reference to Richard's histrionics, which would surely have to be changed by the actors if Tilney had insisted on the cut for the stage. (Dutton 1991, 124)

Nevertheless, the fact that Act 4 appears as an addition, as stated in the title page of one of the 1608 Quartos, is equally puzzling: was it new to the printing or was its new material never acted before?

> One (and only one) of the ten surviving copies of the 1608 quarto has a new title page, advertising 'new additions of the Parliament Sceane, and the deposing of King Richard. As it hath been lately acted by the King's Majesties servants, at the Globe' […]. The 'new additions' may have amounted to the restitution of material earlier cut for print. (Dutton 1991, 125; 126)

The scene in itself is not subversive: the King is formally abdicating, albeit under duress, but the simple act of showing a King being removed from office can be troubling.

All in all, the fact that *Richard II* is so well balanced between orthodoxy, self-restraint and veiled/open accusations mitigated by declarations of loyalty, testifies to the characters' – and ultimately their author's – inner struggle in navigating a taboo topic, between the need for self-preservation and the aim of safeguarding the King's authority.

3. *Thomas of Woodstock*

The anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock* is my third case in point. The only copy available, MS Egerton 1994, held at the British Library, was probably a prompt book. The pages are frayed with use and inscribed by several different hands; according to the scholars who have studied the manuscript (Frijlinck 1929; Rossiter 1946; Parfitt and Sheperd 1977; Clare 1990; Dutton 1991; Corbin and

Sedge 2002, *et al.*), the Master of the Revels, George Buc, was one of them. The interesting aspect of the censorship or self-censorship of this specific manuscript is that we have actual indication of what was to be left out in performance: lines are either struck out or marked "OUT" for deletion. The play, considered by many to be one of the most politically challenging of its time (Rossiter 1946; Axton 1976; Melchiori 1979; Stavropoulos 1988; Heinemann 1991; Tipton 1998; Jackson 2001) was processed by censors (probably both external, i.e. the Master of the Revels, and internal): a closer reading of the parts marked for deletion helps to identify the kind of taboo which surrounded power and its ramifications.

The many excised lines vary in range, from a single one to several ones together. The parts omitted, deleted or altered, appear to fall under the following few categories:

- Mention of God or swear-words (after the Act of 1606 intended to curb blasphemy or swear words[1]). This category is applied inconsistently:

1.1.7 (God substituted with Heaven); 1.1.133 (Afore my God); 3.3.82 (afore my God deleted); 4.2.51 ("afore my God", ~~my~~ deleted. It is not deleted a few lines later, (4.2.60). Elsewhere the name of God has not been crossed out: the Master of the Revels probably did not read the whole manuscript, but gave general indications to be subsequently followed by the company (Clare 1990; Dutton 1991), who may have suggested further deletions, as suggested by the different colours of ink in the various cuts.

 - Sentences or descriptions damaging to the image of the King:

1.1.30-37: this excision concerns an unflattering comparison between the King and his father, the Black Prince. King Richard is characterised as wild, degenerate and wanton;

4.1.139-60: this scene deals with the farming of the land, when King Richard leases out his realm to the flatterers in exchange for a sum of money[2]. The King's self-criticism, veined with self-reproach, and his own admission of

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[1]In 1606 the Parliament passed an Act to Restrain Abuses of Players to prevent blasphemy and profanity on stage. Players and companies could be heavily fined if they did not comply.

[2] This is the passage containing the debated "pelting farm" reference, which induced scholars to believe *Thomas of Woodstock* to be a source for Shakespeare's *Richard II*. The question, though still debated, is nevertheless quite settled and *Thomas of Woodstock* is now believed to have Shakespeare's play as source.

inadequacy if compared to his warlike father, is marked for omission several times on the same page.

- Political criticism of King Richard and his Court:

2.3.27-69: this is one of the longest cuts and it concerns an exchange between Queen Anne, the Duchess of Ireland and the Duchess of Gloucester. The three women openly criticise the King and his Court of flatterers, and defend the oppressed subject. The fact that women, particularly the Queen, are seen condemning the king's actions was possibly considered particularly unsettling, even in the company's view. The cut appears to have been carried out before the manuscript was complete, as speech prefixes are not present. This can be explained either as an act of self-censorship by the company or as a pre-reading by the Master of the Revels, who may have perused the manuscript before it was completed. The passage also explores the idea of rebellion, as the Queen fears the consequences of an oppressive rule of the commoners.

- Reference to rebellion:

1.1.127-28: the passage deals with the uncertainty of Woodstock who appears unsure of the best course to take in a time that he mentions as "busy" and "dangerous".

5.1.287-90: "The gentlemen and commons of the realm, / Missing the good old Duke, their plain protector, / Break their allegiance to their sovereign lord / And all revolt upon the barons' sides." Here Lapoole explicitly refers to a rebellion caused by the actions of the King, and the passage is considered too dangerous to be maintained. According to Clare:

> The deletion of these episodes suggests an attempt to diminish the elements and language of insurrection as part of the fabric of the play. […] In particular, allusions to the commons' grievances against the King brought about by exorbitant taxation and the political influence of flatterers may well have been perceived as carrying dangerously contemporary associations. (Clare 1990: 44-45)

Clare is convinced the play dates back to 1592-3, while according to more recent studies it is to be dated at the beginning of the 17th century (Lake 1983; Jackson 2001, 2007, and 2010); nevertheless, the preoccupation about "contemporary associations" can still be deemed true.

- Politically sensitive subjects:

2.2.110: the fact that Richard refers to himself as "Superior Lord of Scotland" may have been considered offensive to James I who had united England and Scotland under his crown.

5.1.21-27, 34-35, 41-43: Lapoole's pangs of conscience when faced with the task of murdering Woodstock are deleted. Interestingly, the culpability of the King is not obscured: Lapoole states very clearly that he must act on the King's orders and kill Gloucester o be killed himself. It is the distress of his interior struggle that is omitted, and thus the representation of the consequences of Richard's rule on the individual subject's mind is lost. If the audience sympathises with Lapoole, and he is not to be considered a flat-out villain, King Richard's choices appear even more reprehensible. (Clare 1990, 45)

5.1.278-79: "Drag the bodies; hurl them in the sea. / The black reward of death's a traitor's pay." Lapoole refers to the murderers who have just killed the Duke of Gloucester as traitors, therefore, since they acted on the King's order (albeit indirectly), the same could be said of the sovereign, thence the cut.

5.3.10-21: After the opposing forces (King and barons) face one another at the end of the play, the minions try to come to terms with the King's uncles, and reciprocal accusations of treason are exchanged. The Lords demand to be cleared of all accusations and to know what happened to their brother Gloucester. Again, the open clash of power between King and nobles is a politically sensitive topic, and one that can be considered safer to avoid on stage.

- Random cuts:

3.2.105 "On earth, I fear, we never more shall meet." This is the foreboding Woodstock experiences when he sees his brothers off from Plashy House. The passage does not appear particularly dangerous, especially if compared to a sentence which comes only a few lines later: "O vulture England, wilt thou eat thine own? / Can they be rebels called that now turn head?". This last sentence is *not* marked for deletion.

3.3.88-90 from the Farmer's speech: "we are not all one man's son […] for, I assure you". The sentence does not appear particularly offensive.

5.1.3-4 "the room is voided / No one can hear his cries", uttered by Lapoole moments before Woodstock is murdered. Again, not an offensive remark, given that we actually see the murder on scene.

Generally speaking, what is subjects to censorship or self-censorship is both open criticism of the Court and of the King. Either the Master of the Revels or someone in the company expunged the scenes where the King behaves inappropriately, or is represented as unfit or unable to reign; open references to rebellion are also expunged. In contrast, the commoners' speeches are not considered dangerously offensive. Neither the complaining commoners' complaints, nor the Sheriffs of Kent's and Northumberland's appeal to the law against abuse of power are touched (4.3). Even the libellous ballad by the schoolmaster is left untouched: the character's reliance on plausible deniability ("God bless my Lord Tresilian" is the incriminating sentence) ensures his apprehension should appear inequitable. On the other hand, commoners tend to self-restrict their speech; less so the nobles.

4. Conclusions

The comparison between these three texts dealing with the same controversial sovereign provides us with a partial but significant vision of censorship and tabooed subjects in print and performance. It is impossible to establish if the brief, possibly mutilated *Jack Straw* is so starkly orthodox because of censorship or if it was simply planned to be so. *Richard II* by Shakespeare is certainly a masterpiece of ambiguity and anamorphic speech, everchanging according to the point of view of the listener/reader/audience. Taboo subjects, such as the King's guilt or inadequacy, are craftily avoided, deviously uttered or counterbalanced with professions of loyalty and obedience. *Thomas of Woodstock* represents yet another instance, being the most openly unorthodox and subversive in its political stance of all three. All in all, commoners are rarely restricted in their speech by the censor, be it (possibly) because the author has them speak in milder, less inflammatory tones when compared to the noble uncles of the King. On the other hand, a subversive statement by a member of the Court carries more weight and is bound to be deemed too dangerous for

performance or for print. Avoiding taboo or dangerous political subjects fulfils the necessity of protecting the figure of the King as well as authors and companies from accusations of treason. Compelled by external forces of motivated by self-preservation, artists had to navigate a narrow passage between political constraints and artistic freedom.

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Shakespeare and Taking the Name of God in Vain: Oaths and Swearing on the Shakespearean Stage

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Jacobean censorship and its internalising as a kind of new taboo for Shakespeare and other playwrights. In 1606, the Puritan influence on performances took an important step: the "Act to Restrain Abuses of Players" was issued, forbidding profanity on stage. A comparison of Quarto texts and the First Folio versions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* shows that expletives were cancelled, though not consistently; oaths and swearing are adapted to new spaces (Egypt) and times (British ancient history) in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear*. Anglican Britain does not feature in plays after 1606, which may be due to the necessity of avoiding references to God, substituted with pagan deities such as Jupiter and Apollo. In Shakespearean texts after 1606 language had to be modified according to the new Canon. Folio versions sometimes weaken the language, causing some loss of characterisation and power.

KEYWORDS: Censorship in Jacobean times; *Hamlet*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Othello*; *Antony and Cleopatra*; *King Lear*.

Taboo and censorship are often connected, with religious practices offering some of the earliest examples of this relationship. One of the oldest is the taboo concerning the name of God, Yahweh. The second commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Exodus 20:7), prompted Second Temple Judaism (in about 500 BCE) to develop a taboo

resulting in the replacement of the most sacred name – the Tetragrammaton, YHWH – with the more neutral "Adonai" (meaning "my lord").

The nexus between taboo and censorship in early modern English drama is far from straightforward, showing instead a nuanced interplay between official regulation and linguistic norms. The 1606 Act to Restrain Abuses of Players is a key moment in theatrical censorship, since it formalised restrictions on religious language that had previously been more loosely enforced; this act marked a shift from the relatively permissive Elizabethan stage to a sterner Jacobean approach to stage content. Shakespeare's variations in the use of oaths, expletives, and religious references before and after 1606 can show how official censorship reshaped not only the dramatic language itself, but potentially the conceptual framework within which playwrights approached religious and political themes. In particular, a brief comparison of select lines in the Quarto and the Folio versions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, and some analysis of oaths and exclamations in *King Lear* and in *Antony and Cleopatra*, will emphasise the evolution of Shakespeare's language response to these new restrictions, in the light of the interplay between official censorship and artistic expression.

To be performed, early modern plays had to be subjected to the control of the Master of the Revels, who examined the playwrights' manuscripts to assess whether they contained any offence to the rules of propriety, from the religious, sexual, and political points of view. As some scholars have shown[1], the work of the Master of the Revels was not always consistent, probably due to haphazard reading practices based on samples rather than a thorough perusal of the whole text. The haphazard nature of the censorship allowed for some flexibility in language use, which Shakespeare naturally exploited. Yet, this inconsistency also meant that playwrights, including Shakespeare, had to contend with a somewhat unpredictable scenario of what was permissible, possibly leading to self-regulation in their plays.

Under Elizabeth's reign, swearing was reprimanded, but no law explicitly prohibited it, probably because the Queen herself was known to resort quite frequently to the manly habit of reinforcing her speech with oaths and

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[1] See especially Dutton 1991, Dutton 2002, Shirley 1979. See also Clare 1990, Clare 1999, Clegg 1997, Taylor 1993.

swearwords. I am referring here to mild oaths, such as "by God", "by my faith", or the like. Heavier ones, which were generally widespread and therefore mirrored in plays, involved the body of Christ and his Passion ("by the rood", "by God's wounds" shortened to "'swounds", "by God's blood" shortened to "'sblood", and the like).

Religious reaction to the general abuse of oaths had always been intense; I will mention two examples[2]. In a particularly heated didactic poem by Stephen Hawes (Hawes 1509, first issued in 1509, with two reprints in 1531 and 1555), swearing is equated to a new crucifixion. Jesus Christ himself is supposed to be denouncing the swearers:

> They newe agayne do hange me on the rode
> They tere my sydes and are nothynge dysmayde
> My woundes they open and deuoure my blode […]
> Wherfore ye kynges reygnynge in renowne
> Refourme your seruauntes in your courte abused […]
> Meke as a Lambe I suffre theyr grete wronge
> I maye take vengeaunce thoughe I tary longe […]
> Lo se my kyndenes and frome synne awake
> I dyde redeme you from the deuylles chayne […]
> Yet to the deuyll ye go nowe wyllyngly. (Hawes 1509, 5-6)

A long sermon preached by Abraham Gibson in 1613 contains a detailed and pedantic analysis of different types of swearing, which according to the preacher deserve a worse punishment than that which befell to "those that crucified *Christ* at the day of iudgement", who will be condemned to spend eternity "*in the Lake that burneth with fire and Brimstone*" (Gibson 1613, 24, 36). Oaths are defined here as

> *blasphemous*, *horrible*, *terrible*, by the parts or adiuncts of Christ, as by his *life*, *death*, *passion*, *flesh*, *heart*, *wounds*, *blood*, *bones*, *armes*, *sides*, *guts*, *nailes*, *foote*, […] vvhich a gracious heart cannot but melt to heare, tremble to speake, quake to thinke, and yet (good Lord) how common are they in the mouthes of the prophane sonnes of *Beliall*, whereby they peirce the sides, wound the heart, teare the soule, and rend in pieces the body of our blessed *Sauiour*; worse then *Iudas*, […] *worse then the Souldiers* […] these instead of Crosse & Nailes, do between their owne teeth grinde him, and

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[2] Both Gazzard 2010 and Munro 2017 give a few more examples of published indictments of swearing.

teare him. They did it *ignorantly*, these *wilfully*: they but once; these often […] Wherefore as these commit the greater sinne, so they must expect the greater condemnation[3].

This religious sentiment, though extreme in both portrayals, contributed to the ideological background of later, more formalised censorship of stage language. The intensity of such religious objections helps to explain why, when official censorship did come into force under James I, it focused particularly on religious oaths and expletives. Swearing on stage became a further occasion of reproach in the vexed question of performances: as is well known, the Puritans hated the theatre and would manage to close playhouses in 1642; but all sorts of 'godly' preachers ranted for decades about the wickedness of plays, denouncing their influence on audiences, their evil example and their nefarious effects on morals.

Pamphlets, sermons, and libels condemning performances and the playwrights' use of oaths on stage intensified in the second half of the 16th century, with works such as Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), Philip Stubbes' *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), up to the later *Histrio-mastix: The Players' Scourge, or, Actors' Tragaedie* (1633), by William Prynne, and, almost at the end of the century, Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage.*

Under King James I, the attempt to moralise the stage took on more vigour than under Elizabeth. The king's passion for performances may have influenced the decision to reform manners and morals on stage, so that preachers were discouraged from attacking it: its vices were to be ruled out, allowing performances to survive.

James rose to the throne in 1603, and 1606 is particularly significant in this context. In that year, many dramatic masterpieces were produced and staged in England: *Macbeth*; according to some philologists *Antony and Cleopatra* (though 1607 is more likely); Ben Jonson's *Volpone*; Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*; and a few months earlier *King Lear*, which was staged at Court in December 1606.

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[3] Italics are in the original text. Elsewhere, if not differently specified, they are mine.

Politically, 1606 is above all the year of the trials of the conspirators involved in the Gunpowder Plot of November 1605[4]. As is known, English Catholics were disappointed by James' religious position as it emerged in the first two years of rule (although James came from Catholic Scotland, and although his wife Anna was Catholic, he pronounced himself against Catholicism), so they tried to blow up the House of Lords at Westminster Palace, with the intent to restore a Catholic monarchy. There was more than one conspirator, of course, but Guy Fawkes became the lasting symbol of the plot. The Gunpowder Plot has lingered in the English collective consciousness for centuries, with bonfires celebrating its defeat on the 5th of November 1605 and continuing to this day. A Guy Fawkes mask was created, was worn by the protagonist of the successful film *V for Vendetta*,

Guy Fawkes mask in V for Vendetta*, 2005, directed by James McTeigue*

and still is by the members of the Anonymous activist group (which has attacked several institutions and has recently been very active against the Russian invasion of Ukraine).

On the 27th of May 1606, the Act which concerns misdemeanours on the stage was issued, the so-called Act to Restrain Abuses:

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[4] The plot was discovered on the night of November 5, 1605; the trial was held from January to May 1606.

An Act to restrain Abuses of Players

Anno 3 Jacobi I Cap 21

> For the preventing and avoiding of the great Abuse of the Holy Name of God in Stage Plays, Enterludes, May Games, Shews and such like; Be it enacted by our Sovereign Lord the King's Majesty, […] That if at any time or times after the End of this present Session of Parliament, any Person or Persons do or shall in any Stage-play, Enterlude, Show, May-game or Pageant, jestingly or profanely speak or use the holy Name of God, or of Christ Jesus, or the Holy Ghost, or of the Trinity, which are not to be spoken but with Fear and Reverence, shall forfeit for every such Offence by him or them committed Ten Pounds; the One Moiety thereof to the King's Majesty, his Heirs and Successors, the other Moiety thereof to him or them that will sue for the same in any Court of Record at Westminster, wherein no Essoin, Protection of Wager of Law shall be allowed.

(Ten Pounds was quite a remarkable sum, more or less the pay of a year for an established actor[5].)

Shakespeare's characters often "take the name of God in vain": one must wonder whether his plots were shifted to non-Christian countries so that his characters could enhance their speeches with oaths and swearwords, involving not God but Jupiter, or Apollo, or Diana, or other pagan deities. (Although pamphleteers and critics of drama condemned pagan invectives as well; but, of course, "by Jupiter" was unlikely to stir the censor's wrath as much as "by God".)

Setting his plays in a foreign, exotic, or ancient milieu was something Shakespeare did from the very beginning of his career. While his histories were, as is well known, a celebration of the Tudor dynasty staging recent English history, both his tragedies and his comedies were often set in non-English, non-contemporary, and sometimes non-Christian locations: from *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar* in ancient Rome, to *The Merchant of Venice*, divided between Belmont and Venice, to *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona, many of Shakespeare's pre-1606 plays show characters who are far away in time or place, professing non-Anglican beliefs. After 1606, however, there were virtually no plays set in

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[5] For a thorough comment on the Act, see Gazzard 2010.

modern England. *Macbeth*, probably dated mid-1606, is set in 11th-century Scotland; *Antony and Cleopatra* is divided between Egypt and Rome; *Coriolanus* is again set in ancient Rome; *Cymbeline* in ancient Britain; *The Winter's Tale* in Sicily – with a mention of the Delphi oracle, therefore probably at the time of Magna Graecia; *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in ancient Greece, and *The Tempest* between the memory of Milan and an unnamed island somewhere in the Mediterranean[6].

Critics have wondered whether Shakespeare internalised the official command and relocated all his post-1606 plays to places where the Act would not apply[7].

Some study has been devoted to amendments of oaths and swearwords made before the printing of the First Folio, and sometimes the dating of plays – for instance, the debated *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*[8] – is based on the presence or absence of expletives; although not all the oaths were corrected before publication in the Folio. Shirley (Shirley 1979, 105-06) points out that Hamlet's lines are sometimes weakened in the Folio version, where an anaemic "Why" substitutes the heavy expletives present in the original version.

For instance, when Hamlet is talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are trying "to pluck the mystery out of [him]", he exclaims:

"*'Sblood* (Q2), do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (3.2.361-62).
"*Why* (F), do you think that I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (3.2.359-60).

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[6] A recent hypothesis is that the island may be Lampedusa, although Shakespeare's general disregard for geographical and historical accuracy is well known.

[7] Giorgio Melchiori is convinced of this and proposes it as his working hypothesis in one of his many essays on *Othello* (Melchiori 1985). In his opinion, Shakespeare did not want to risk haphazard cutting of his text, therefore "he decided that the action of all his later plays should take place in pre-Christian times or in pagan countries, where there was no question of mentioning the Christian God" (ibid., 10-11).

[8] For a long time, *All's Well* was dated in the same span of years (1601-03) as the other 'problem plays', *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*. In 2005 the second edition of the Oxford *Complete Works* (Wells and Taylor 2005), influenced by a seminal essay by Macdonald P. Jackson (Jackson 2001), dated it 1606-07. The recent *New Oxford Shakespeare*, devoting various essays to *All's Well* (see References), dates it to 1605.

In his soliloquy of 2.2., "Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I", after the Player's monologue about Hecuba, Q2 has a "'swounds" transformed in F to a weak "Ha, why":

Hamlet, Q2	*Hamlet*, First Folio
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?	Who calles me Villaine? breakes my pate a-crosse?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?	Pluckes off my Beard, and blowes it in my face?
Tweaks me by th' nose, gives me the lie i'th' throat	Tweakes me by'th'Nose? giues me the Lye i'th'Throate,
'As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?	As deepe as to the Lungs? Who does me this?
Swounds, I should take it. For it cannot be	*Ha? Why* I should take it: for it cannot be,
But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall	But I am Pigeon-Liuer'd, and lacke Gall
To make oppression bitter; or ere this	To make Oppression bitter, or ere this,
I should have fatted all the region kites	I should haue fatted all the Region Kites
With this slave's offal… (2.2.507-15)	With this Slaues Offall… (2.2.566-74)

A similar weakening occurs in *Romeo and Juliet*, where in Q Mercutio uses the oath "Zounds" twice, in his quarrel with Tybalt and his subsequent death, and both instances are corrected in the Folio:

Romeo and Juliet, Q2, Q3, Q4:	*Romeo and Juliet*, First Folio:
No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o' both your houses! *Zounds*, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic! Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm. (3.1.97-105)	No: 'tis not so deepe as a well, nor so wide as a Church doore, but 'tis inough, 'twill serue: aske for me to morrow, and you shall find me a graue man. I am pepper'd I warrant, for this world. A plague a both your houses! *What*, a Dog, a Rat, a Mouse, a Cat, to scratch a man to death! A Braggart, a Rogue, a Villaine, that fights by the booke of Arithmeticke! Why the deu'le came you betweene vs? I was hurt under your arme. (3.1.103-09)

(Previously, in "Zounds, consort!" (3.1.48), when Mercutio makes fun of the word "consort" used by Tybalt to describe his friendship with Romeo – "what, do you make vs Minstrels?" –, "Zounds" is changed in F into the weak "Come".)

Lucy Munro (Munro 2017, 126) reminds us that Hamlet (and Hamlet only) swears quite heavily and frequently in the play. His "Zounds" and "'Sblood" are shared by such characters as Richard III, Iago, Mercutio, Aaron and Falstaff, among others: "not… the critical company that Hamlet generally keeps". Munro jokes about possible footnotes to make the reader aware of the disruptive force of the oaths and the insight they give into the character of the prince: "in addition to conveying strong emotions, such oaths were often associated with youth, masculinity, high-status and religious transgression" (Munro 2017, 133). All of this can be applied to Mercutio, while the motive for Iago's swearing in 1.1. is different: Munro underlines the passion ("impatience and vigour", 126) that Iago shows in his dialogue with Roderigo, who, while lamenting his lack of progress in gaining Desdemona's favours, opens the play with a pallid "tush". Both expletives are cut in F.

Among others, Shirley (1979) and Melchiori (1985) show how the progression of oaths accompanies the destruction of Othello at Iago's hand: in the beginning, Othello's lines are terse and rational, the language of Venetian civilisation Othello has learned, which he loses when he loses faith in it, and finds again when he discovers the lie Iago has imposed on him (Melchiori 1985, *passim*); in the inverted parable of the contamination of his mind by Iago's devilish manoeuvres, Othello's language disintegrates, and his oaths culminate in the heavy "'Swounds" in one of the final confrontations with Desdemona before her murder. No oaths are present in the Folio. (Luckily, an unexpurgated quarto of *Othello* has survived – a very late one, dated 1622 –, and we can compare it with the Folio. Melchiori shows very effectively, though, how both the Quarto version and the Folio version are authorially relevant, and how F adds key passages, compensating for the loss of the previous strategy[9].)

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[9] Here as elsewhere, Melchiori shows his uncanny capacity of predicting the ways of criticism well in advance: in 1984, he underlines how we should not choose a version above the other, but should realise that we have two *Othellos* (or more), both authorial, both worthy of being considered Shakespearean. In 1984 he knew of Stanley Wells' and Gary Taylor's decision to print

Even from this brief account, it is apparent how expletives are one of the many devices through which Shakespeare individualises his characters.

Turning briefly to *Antony and Cleopatra*, we notice a couple of oaths that remain unchanged from Qs to F (again, because they involve non-Christian entities).

Some unusual and strongly topical oaths are expressed by the Egyptian queen, but also by the Roman commander Antony. When Cleopatra learns from the Messenger that Antony is married to Octavia, these are her words:

> *Melt Egypt into Nile!* and kindly creatures
> *Turn all to serpents!* (2.5.78-79; F, 2.5.1124-25)

And a little later,

> *So half my Egypt were submerged,* and made
> *A cistern for scaled snakes!* (2.5.94-95; F, 2.5.1146-47)

Here, Cleopatra's longing for destruction reminds me of Macbeth's, when he orders the witches to answer his command and evokes the destruction of mankind:

> I conjure you by that which you profess,
> Howe'er you come to know it, answer me.
> Though you untie the winds and let them fight
> Against the churches; though the yeasty waves
> Confound and swallow navigation up;
> Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;
> Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
> Though palaces and *pyramids* do slope
> Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
> Of nature's germens tumble all together,
> Even till destruction sicken; answer me
> To what I ask you. (*Macbeth*, 4.1.51-62)

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two separate texts of *Lear* (in the 1986 *New Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works*, reprinted with revisions in 2005); certainly he could not know that in 2006 *Hamlet* as well would be printed separately, by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (see references), in its three versions from Q1 to Q2 to F.

In both cases, everything in the world must be subjected to the fulfilment of the protagonists' wishes and needs, in a highly egotistic perception of profit and loss.

Antony's swearing is somehow less desperate. He resorts to oaths that the Act might find objectionable: "The gods best know…" and later, "By my sword", which fits his status as a warrior and was a common oath, present in *Hamlet* as well, because of the cross-like hilt that most swords sported. But when he tells Cleopatra he is leaving for Rome, he imitates his queen with an oath which takes its substance from the fertile climate of Egypt and the main source of its fecundity:

> ANTONY
> By the fire
> *That quickens Nilus' slime*, I go from hence
> Thy soldier, servant. (1.3.68-70; F, 1.3.381-82)

Antony's piety has shifted from the Roman gods to the Egyptian ones, a subtle reminder of his swerving loyalties from Rome to his goddess of love.

I would like to conclude with an example from *King Lear*, which was written a few months before the Act to Restrain Abuses but would be staged at Court a few months later. According to Shirley, maybe Shakespeare "foresaw the impending legislation" (Shirley 1979, 127).

As one tends to forget, the play is set in ancient Britain, in the 8th century BCE. Lear and Kent swear "by Apollo"; God becomes "the gods". There are many daring lines, the cruellest being Gloucester's well-known, desperate statement about the human condition: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport (4.1.38-39)".

This is too important a statement to risk it being cut, as it expresses the despair of the suicidal Gloucester with memorable synthesis. Of course, the chronological setting may simply be derived from Shakespeare's sources for *Lear*, which placed the fable in a very distant time; or, did Shakespeare set his play in ancient Britain to allow statements such as this one, and to be sure the Act did not forbid it? The answer, as elsewhere, remains open.

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"Aurea mediocritas" Deconstructed: Devouring the Social Body in *The Bloody Banquet*

ABSTRACT

This article examines Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Bloody Banquet* (c. 1609) as a radical interrogation of transgression, abjection, and power dynamics in Jacobean drama. The play's staging of taboo violations – tyranny, sexual desire, and cannibalism – reflects a broader crisis of order and meaning in early modern English culture. Through a close reading of key scenes, particularly the grotesque bloody banquet, this article details how the central characters (the transgressive Queen Thetis and the tyrannical Armatrites) paradoxically embody dynamics of excess and restraint, subversion and containment. The play's portrayal of the erosion of social, political, and ontological boundaries challenges the early modern ideal of moderation, exposing the fragility of the self and the body politic amidst the radical destabilisation of stereotyped categories of identity and difference.

KEYWORDS: *The Bloody Banquet*; taboo; cannibalism; body politic; death drive.

1. The Paradox of Transgression

In early modern England, boundaries – between the licit and illicit, holy and secular, self and other – were being constantly reimagined. These boundaries, however, despite their ostensible rigidity, fostered a degree of fascination with

transgression, seen as both a source of anxiety and a site of subversive pleasure[1]. Amidst religious upheaval, political instability, and emerging capitalism, traditional hierarchies and moral certainties began to break down, providing new spaces for questions about what it meant to cross such boundaries.

Central to my analysis is the contradictory nature of transgression itself. As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, transgression is "the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin". However, as theorists like Georges Bataille[2] and Michel Foucault[3] have pointed out, the relationship between transgression and the boundaries it violates is intrinsically paradoxical. On the one hand, transgression draws its power from the limits it seeks to disrupt, feeding off their authority even as it challenges them. On the other hand, it promises a form of freedom, a temporary release from the normative constraints these limits impose – what Bataille sees as a momentary collapse of the autonomous, rational self, and of the boundaries between subject and object, self and other, thus granting access to a deeper connection with the cosmos.

The classical concept of moderation, captured in the Aristotelian/Horatian ideal of the 'golden mean'[4], began to buckle under increasing pressure from the "new Philosophy" that "call[ed] all in doubt". The Reformation's attack on the Catholic Church, with its rejection of clerical authority and focus on personal conscience, sparked waves of iconoclasm and anti-ritualism that overturned a centuries-old religious orthodoxy. Meanwhile, the rise of commerce and of the

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[1] "What is forbidden […] carries with it a propulsion to desire in equal measure" (Jenks 2003, 45).

[2] In *L'Erotisme*, Bataille argues that "La transgression n'est pas la négation de l'interdit, mais elle le dépasse et le complete" (1987, 10).

[3] Foucault, in *A Preface to Transgression*, asserts: "Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations; it does not transform the other side of the mirror, beyond an invisible and uncrossable line, into a glittering expanse" (1977, 35).

[4] The Aristotelian concept of moderation posits virtue as an ethical midpoint calibrated by practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and aimed at achieving *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. Hence, "moderation, both produced and was the product of the mean between extremes" (Shagan 2011, 253).

market economy eroded the time-honoured social bonds and moral obligations of feudal society, offering opportunities for mobility and self-fashioning as well as new forms of social dislocation. These forces, in response, prompted renewed efforts by Church and State to re-impose discipline and control in an attempt to contain the centrifugal energies unleashed by the collapse of the old order. The Elizabethan Settlement, aiming to impose a *via media* between the Catholic and Protestant extremes, is one example; likewise, sumptuary laws and moral regulations sought to preserve class distinctions and gender roles in the face of growing social and economic instability.

These religious, economic, and social transformations coincided with a political struggle over the nature of sovereignty, as the Crown and Parliament contended over their respective powers and prerogatives. Famously, the Stuart monarchs claimed theological legitimacy by asserting an absolutist view of monarchy grounded in the divine rights of kings. By contrast, Parliament and its allies espoused a competing vision of contractual and limited monarchy, based on the principle of King-in-Parliament and the subordination of the monarch to law and the collective will of the nation.

In this context of uncertainty and change, the humanist ideal of the rational, self-controlled individual began to disintegrate. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue, the early modern period was characterised by a "mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity" (Stallybrass and White 1986, 5). Without constant vigilance, the moderate self was always at risk of being overwhelmed by unruly passions (Shepard 2003, 30; Bryson 1998)[5].

This climate of anxiety and tension led to a new fascination with transgression and boundary violations. On stage, scenes and characters that violated all moral and social norms offered insight into the cultural contradictions of that period and a critical reflection on the fragile foundations of legitimacy and order. Taboo, in particular, emerged as a means to question and dismantle the norms and hierarchies that structured civil coexistence,

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[5] For instance, Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) presented the moderate, well-regulated individual as a model for imitation. Additionally, there was a proliferation of conduct manuals and courtesy books, with detailed prescriptions for proper behaviour.

opening up spaces of ambiguity and experimentation in which roles and identities could be refashioned and renegotiated.

Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Bloody Banquet* (c. 1609)[6] captures this fascination with boundary-crossing through its disturbing examination of desire, power, and human limits. In what follows, I argue that the play's staging of taboo violations – from adultery to tyranny and cannibalism – reflects and refracts the broader crisis of order and meaning that gripped early modern English culture. By pushing the conventions of revenge tragedy to their limits, the two Jacobean playwrights[7] question the extent to which the classical ideal of moderation has abruptly vanished, revealing the fragility of social, political, and ontological categories.

Moderation, I suggest, is an illusion of order and balance, always on the verge of being shattered by the excess it seeks to contain. In *The Bloody Banquet*, we witness this paradox of excess in its full complexity and ambiguity; although the playwrights indulge in the transgressive pleasures of their characters, they also acknowledge that such pleasures risk being constrained and co-opted. In doing so, *The Bloody Banquet* challenges the belief itself that "in medio stat virtus", forcing us to confront the instability of the order we cling to and inviting us to question whether, ultimately, we too are guests at the titular banquet.

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[6] The exact date of *The Bloody Banquet*'s first performance is uncertain, although the play was published in 1639. Scholars have advanced various hypotheses on the history of its composition and staging. Chris Meads suggests that the play may have been written in the late 1630s, calling it "a splendid summation of the trends and tropes of all banquet scenes up to that point" (Meads 2001, 154). This argument emphasises the play's engagement with the theatrical tradition of depicting courtly excess and transgression. However, Gary Taylor makes a more convincing case for an earlier date. Through close analysis of contemporary references in the play's parodic clowning scene, Taylor dates the original performance to around 1609, in the immediate aftermath of the Midland Rising. Nonetheless, he does acknowledge that the text likely underwent revisions before its publication in 1639 (Taylor 2001).

[7] Although the play was co-written with Dekker, whose hand is evident in the subplot, Middleton is generally credited with its more subversive elements, particularly in the handling of tyranny and transgression.

2. Consuming the Other: Staging the Cannibalistic Spectacle

In *The Bloody Banquet*, the climactic scene of cannibalism encapsulates the play's intertwined themes of power, gender, vengeance, and identity. In Act 5, Scene 1, the tyrant Armatrites forces his adulterous wife, Queen Thetis, to publicly consume the dismembered body of her dead lover, Tymethes. The banquet, conventionally a site of conviviality, becomes an arena of horror. This unspeakable act assaults the audience with a vision of abjection that subverts the expectations of hospitality and social order while breaching the boundaries between self and other, civilisation and savagery, the Symbolic and the Real.

The punishment inflicted on Thetis culminates in her forced ingestion of the object of her forbidden desire. Armatrites mocking words – "Here's venison for thy own tooth. Thou know'st the relish: / A dearer place hath been thy taster" (4.3.215-17)[8] – cruelly conflate the Queen's previous enjoyment of Tymethes's body with mere consumption; the innuendo of the "dearer place" equates her sexuality with a voracious, all-devouring mouth, drawing on the patriarchal fear of the female body as a consuming, destructive force. This imagery, of course, recalls the patriarchal fantasy of the *vagina dentata* – where female sexuality is imagined to be dangerous and castrating; within such a framework, Thetis's passion becomes a monstrous appetite to be controlled and punished.

This act merges sexual and alimentary appetites[9], crudely reflecting the Tyrant's belief that cuckoldry is akin to being metaphorically 'eaten' by a rival's desire. He turns this idea of erotic cannibalism against the Young Queen, forcing her to devour her "desirèd paramour" (4.3.275), thus reenacting her transgression as a grotesque self-violation and turning the lovers into symbols of patriarchal retribution. This brutal travesty of romantic communion

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[8] All references to the text are from *The Bloody Banquet* edited by Julia Gasper and Gary Taylor, included in *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, edited by Gary Taylor, John Lavagnino, *et al.*, published by Oxford University Press in 2007. Henceforth, act, scene, and line numbers will be given in parentheses after each quotation.

[9] On the many implications of the link between food and sex in early modern England, see especially Khamphommala 2008, Lennartz 2012, Nunn 2013, and Williamson 2021.

perverts the language of lovers 'feeding' upon each other's bodies, reducing them to mere objects of total abjection and domination.

The dynamic of forced consumption is further amplified by the scene's insistent blurring of literal and metaphorical cannibalism. The Tyrant's remarks that Tymethes's "flesh is sweet; it melts, and goes down merrily" (5.1.205) fuse the languages of erotic pleasure and physical digestion, reducing the lovers to meat to be savoured. And again, his declaration that "[t]he lecher must be swallowed rib by rib" (5.1.204) conflates moral condemnation with physical incorporation, as though Tymethes's transgression could be cleansed through this act of carnal communion. In this sense, cannibalism becomes a metaphor for the Hobbesian 'war of all against all', where the weak are swallowed up by the strong. This imagery, which permeates *The Bloody Banquet*, is summed up in the Clown's satirical account of the kingdom's different types of "wolves" (2.1.36 ff). In the banquet scene, these visions of social cannibalism are brought to life, coalescing into a single, overwhelming signifier of a self-devouring world – a communion in which all bonds of duty and community have dissolved.

The ceremonial staging of this banquet intensifies its sacrilegious overtones, as Armatrites mockingly imitates Christian ritual – especially the Eucharist, where spiritual nourishment through Christ's body is made grotesquely to materialise into a vision of damnation through flesh. He invites his guests to partake in a twisted communion: "Sit, pray sit, religious men, right welcome / Unto our cates" (5.1.144-45), mimicking Eucharistic language, with the pilgrims acting as unwilling witnesses. Tymethes's mutilated limbs, displayed before the Queen "with a skull all bloody" (5.1.SD), parallel the imagery of the cross, making this violent act a sacrilegious inversion of communion, devoid of redemption. This perverse Eucharist turns the Queen into an unholy altar of self-consuming transgression, her body becoming a grotesque site where forbidden desires are devoured, not absolved.

The sacrilegious blurring of the erotic and the Eucharistic reflects early modern anxieties about religious rituals and their counter-discourses. In the reformist Protestant imaginary, Catholic transubstantiation was often attacked as a form of cannibalism, since Catholics were said to 'consume' the literal body and blood of Christ. *The Bloody Banquet* plays on this discourse by likening

Thetis's adultery to a sort of pagan rite, as Armatrites observes: "The hour, the banquet, and the bawdy tapers, / All stick in mine eye together" (4.3.207-08). Here, "bawdy tapers" link the Queen's sexual 'feast' to the accusations of Catholic idolatry, with its elaborate rituals of ingestion.

Moreover, the language of feeding and consumption engages with early modern medical discourses rooted in Galenic humoralism. As is known, Galenic models, which conceived of the body as a hydraulic system of fluid humours, fostered pervasive cultural anxieties about the dangers of excess or imbalance in the regulation of appetites. The recurrent images of hunger and indulgence in *The Bloody Banquet*, often laced with pointed eroticism, confirm that the body is constantly at risk of being overpowered by its own desires. This dynamic is most vividly expressed in the perfidious courtier Mazeres's voyeuristic description of spying on the Queen's tryst with Tymethes: "I abusèd my eyes in the true survey on't, / Tainted my hearing with lascivious sounds" (4.3.45-46). His language of sensory abuse and contamination implies a form of self-poisoning through erotic excess, with consequences akin to an autoimmune disorder within the body politic. Armatrites himself, consumed by rage at his loss of control and said to be driven by "distractions" and "furies" (5.1.31), shows that unchecked passions ultimately destroy even those in power. Unable to emotionally digest the blow to his patriarchal authority, he is figuratively eaten up by his own burning anger.

Beyond its religious and medical connotations, the cannibalistic act also echoes the "cannibal encounter" (Lestringant 1997, 5) in early modern colonial discourse, a trope that defined European identity in contrast to the 'savage' Other. As Europeans encountered the New World, cannibalism became symbolic of otherness, reflecting fears of cultural devouring. Middleton and Dekker blur the boundaries between foreign and domestic threats, as the Clown's ethnographic satire on the "wolfes" that prowl the kingdom – from courtly to bourgeois to maritime – collapses the distinctions between the civilised court and the barbaric, colonial frontier: "The last is your sea-wolf, a horrible ravener too: / He has a belly as big as a ship" (2.1.68-69). These images insinuate that the same predation feared abroad also thrives at home, personified by the Court's very own tyrants. Moreover, Tymethes's reduction to flesh further breaks down the boundaries between eater and eaten, symbolising

mutual annihilation. As Kilgour notes, incorporation "assumes an absolute distinction between inside and outside, eater and eaten, which, however, breaks down" (1990, 7). The cannibal feast in *The Bloody Banquet* enacts a confusion between self and other. For the Young Queen, to eat Tymethes is in a sense to become him by absorbing his substance, with all its implicit erotic undertones of possession. In this respect, her cannibalism compels her to internalise her illicit desire, resulting in a self-violation, as the Tyrant chillingly reminds her: "[t]ill in thy bowels those corpse find a grave" (4.3.279). This collapse of bodily and personal boundaries evokes what Kristeva describes as the ultimate dissolution of meaning and identity in the face of the abject[10]. The Queen's forced, conscious moment of cannibalism, an act that more than any other sets *The Bloody Banquet* apart from its intertexts[11], marks a surrender to the abject; that act of psychic self-destruction collapses the boundaries of her subjectivity and leaves her consumed by the desire which once empowered her. Seen through this lens, Thetis's fate echoes the famous saying "quod me nutrit, me destruit": while her passion for Tymethes had allowed her to oppose the tyranny of Armatrites, that same passion becomes her undoing in the face of violent repercussions for her transgression. Thetis thus embodies the paradox of transgression itself, where the pursuit of freedom and self-realisation is one with the risk of annihilation and loss.

The ceremonial framing of the banquet as a twisted, profane Mass implicates both the onstage spectators and, by extension, the audience in witnessing the cannibalistic ritual. Like the pilgrims who watch the scene unfold, the audience is compelled to confront this "horrid and inhuman spectacle" (5.1.127), contemplating "with wonder" the "object" of the Tyrant's vengeance (5.1.SD). At this moment, the scene metatheatrically reflects the audience's own consumption of the play's transgressive spectacle, equating our scopophilic eye with the Tyrant's sadistic intent. Just as Armatrites forces the Queen to internalise her abjection by consuming her lover's flesh, so the play

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[10] "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. [...] It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (Kristeva 1982, 4).

[11] Unlike Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, Thyestes in Seneca's titular play and Tereus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who are unwittingly served their own children.

confronts us with its obscene vision, drawing us into its logic. Besides, by making this gruesome act a public spectacle, the play compels the audience to share in the violation it portrays and blurs the line between observer and participant. The Old King – Tymethes's father –, disguised as a pilgrim, watches in silent horror while Armatrites actively manipulates the scene:

> I perceive strangers more desire to see
> An object than the fare before them set.
> But since your eyes are serious suitors grown,
> I will discourse; what's seen shall now be known. (5.1.156-59)

At this moment, Armatrites forces the audience to confront the cannibalistic spectacle, making them complicit in what should be left unseen. Like the Queen, we are inveigled into this abomination, seduced into a symbolic act of consumption of the horror in front of us. Our eyes, now "serious suitors", implicate us in an uncomfortable communion with the obscene.

Thus, by the end of the play, the cannibal-tyrant himself is metaphorically eaten alive, devoured by his excessive thirst for power and revenge. His final lines, "'Tis more revenge to me / Than all your aims: I have killed my jealousy" (5.1.211-12), seem to proclaim a release from his inner turmoil, the certainty that killing the Queen has freed him from his obsessive hunger. Yet this declaration merely highlights the tragic irony: his insatiable drive for power and control has totally consumed him instead.

In *The Bloody Banquet*, the cycle of consumption turns inward: those who devour others are themselves devoured by their own uncontrollable desires. Montaigne has shown that the distinction between the 'cannibal' and the 'civilised man' is an illusion. In the end, the cannibal is truly "the thing of darkness" in all of us.

3. "None dares do more for sin": The Young Queen's Transgression

If the banquet scene stages transgression taken to its most disturbing extreme, the character of the young Queen Thetis embodies the gendered dynamics of desire and control, testifying to the dire consequences of asserting erotic agency in a system where female desire is both feared and condemned.

From her first appearance, Thetis is driven by an all-consuming passion for Tymethes that oversteps the legitimate bounds of marital propriety and political duty. Torn between this fierce – and illicit – desire and the danger it entails, she confesses:

> I never knew the force of a desire
> Until this minute struck within my blood.
> I fear one look was destined to undo me (1.4.42-44)

Her transgressive sexuality is portrayed as a self-destructive, insatiable hunger that threatens to consume her if left unsatisfied. This longing for Tymethes, and her attempt to fulfil her "accomplished wish" (1.4.136), thus becomes a physical rebellion against patriarchal control over her body.

Though aware of the "misery" that love would bring her (4.3.75), Thetis's illicit desire is framed in terms of appetite, an "aspiring force" (1.4.130) whose "sparks fly not downward" (1.4.131). This language of hunger and excess echoes early modern views of the female body as unruly, often "leaky", and in need of strict containment (Paster 1993, 24). Her bold declaration that "[n]one dares do more for sin than woman can" (1.4.138) claims the status of arch-transgressor, embracing forbidden desires as an act of defiance against the "pale jealousy" (1.4.184) of her marriage. The near reckless bravado of her rhetoric and the cosmic imagery she employs – "Yet were't thrice narrower I should venture on" (1.4.137) – possess a Faustian audacity, a willingness to risk everything for the sake of an impossible passion.

But the Young Queen's agency is constrained by the secrecy and the intermediaries required to pursue her desire[12]. The clandestine nature of the affair is insisted upon in the highly ritualised seduction scene in 3.3[13], as Tymethes is brought blindfolded to her chamber. The theatricality of the moment, with masked servants and a sumptuous banquet[14], underlines the

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[12] Thetis's struggle to reconcile desire and duty reflects what Dympna Callaghan describes as the "fractured subjectivity" of women in Jacobean tragedy, caught between assertive agency and the constraints of patriarchal ideology (Callaghan 1989, 75).

[13] The meal served to Tymethes by the Young Queen's servants, while ostensibly a hospitable gesture, is actually a precursor to the sexual encounter that follows. See Pannen 2012.

[14] Taylor argues that this banquet scene is the "visual correlative" (2001, 15) of offstage adultery, with the onstage eating mirroring the offstage sexual act.

artifice required for female desire to flourish within the constraints of Jacobean court culture. This staged seduction reflects the tensions between the eroticised female body, shaped by male fantasy, and the forces that suppress female autonomy. Thetis's declaration, "You cannot see me under death" (3.3.112), casts her as a figure of supernatural allure, yet her paranoia and fear of exposure – "if he know me— […] I am undone" (1.4.178-79) – underscore the danger and stigma attached to female sexuality. Her transgression is thus presented as a rebellious energy that must be violently suppressed in order to uphold male authority. Thetis, embodying what Kristeva terms the "improper" or "unclean" desires of the abject female body, stands as a threat to the social order, challenging the boundaries that patriarchal culture seeks to impose.

Indeed, as the love affair unfolds, it becomes clear that Thetis's sexual agency undermines Armatrites's fragile sovereignty. Even at its tenderest moments, her transgressive sexuality is always overshadowed by male violence and dominance. In one of the play's most disturbing scenes, Thetis is forced to shoot Tymethes dead to protect herself from her husband's wrath – an act of self-preservation which exposes her limited choices as both woman and queen. Mourning over Tymethes's body, she laments:

> Rash, unadvisèd youth, whom my soul weeps for,
> How oft I told thee this attempt was death!
> Yet would'st thou venture on, fond man, and knew?
> But what destruction will not youth pursue? (4.3.108-11)

Caught between her own desire and Armatrites's rage, Thetis is trapped in a cycle of transgression and violent retribution, highlighting the constrained agency of women within patriarchal systems. Her lament poignantly encapsulates her tragic predicament, rooted in the pathologisation of female desire by patriarchal society.

On the one hand, Thetis's killing of Tymethes can be read as a distorted attempt to reconcile her sexual agency with the expectations of wifely virtue: by making her lover pray before she shoots him[15], she frames his death as a religious and moral necessity – a just punishment for his presumption in

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[15] The echo of Hamlet and his inability to kill Claudius while he is praying is apparent here. See Gasper 2007, 640.

"offend[ing]" (4.3.68) against her inviolability. On the other hand, the scene's twisted logic also betrays the psychological pressure exerted by her attempt to negotiate the conflicting imperatives of her position: namely, the "horrors" stirred by her "desire" (1.4.187) and the "misery of love" (4.3.75) occasioned by her struggle to maintain a coherent self in an exotic Lydia that denies her full humanity. As such, Tymethes's murder mirrors the Tyrant's own brutal assertion of patriarchal dominance. Even as Tymethes "betrayed" (4.3.46) the Queen by uncovering her identity, so she betrayed him in turn, reinforcing the play's themes of false appearances and misguided desires. The erotic language and imagery of the moment – the phallic overtones of the Young Queen's pistols – further intertwine violence and sexuality, creating a cycle in which Eros and Thanatos ensnare both victim and perpetrator.

The tragic irony is even deeper since the murder is followed by the arrival of the Tyrant. Thetis's desperate attempt to cover up her crime by accusing Tymethes of rape highlights the limited options available to women in this society, as her false accusation invokes and reinforces the misogynistic stereotypes of female deceit. The Tyrant's response – "O, let me embrace thee for a brave, unmatchable, / Precious, unvalued, admirable – whore" (4.3.149-50) – obliterates any distinction between virtuous wife and sexual transgressor. In Armatrites's eyes, and by extension those of patriarchal society, the Young Queen's sexuality itself is a crime, no matter how it is expressed or constrained.

As *The Bloody Banquet* demonstrates, Thetis's transgression earns her the ultimate degradation. Her infidelity, once discovered[16], provokes Armatrites's "insufferable" (5.1.35) revenge, a brutal regime of torture meant to reinscribe her body with marks of shame and submission. At first, her body signifies royal authority and marital fidelity; however, through her affair with Tymethes, she rewrites this body-text with the signs of illicit desire and rebellion against social norms. This horrific reassertion of control over her rebellious body-text culminates in the titular banquet: the moment of forced consumption, as discussed above, seems to enact both a reverse childbirth – in which the Queen is made to "find a grave" for her lover in her own "bowels" (4.3.279) – and a

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[16] Armatrites once gifted a jewel to Thetis, who passed it to Tymethes. Amphridote, Armatrites's daughter and Tymethes's fiancée, asked Tymethes to give it to her. When her father asked her to show him the jewel, he discovered his wife's infidelity.

somewhat twisted form of writing, as Armatrites seeks to inscribe shame and submission onto her. Here, as elsewhere in the play, the female body becomes a site of monstrous excess and horror that needs to be violently controlled. In light of Kristeva's theory of the abject, the Young Queen's fate reflects the patriarchy's urge to expel whatever threatens its symbolic order. As a desiring subject pursuing her own pleasures and 'feeding' her own sin, Thetis embodies the pre-Oedipal space of polymorphous drives that constantly threatens to disrupt meaning and identity.

Nevertheless, even in her final subjugation, Thetis retains disturbing agency. Her silence during Armatrites's interrogation, her refusal to offer more than a terse "I do confess" (4.3.199), deliberately conceals her inner life from the devouring male gaze. If her body is made a site of atrocity, her mind remains her own, resisting patriarchy's full consumption and preserving a private space that "lust keeps in all" (4.3.179). Like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Thetis embodies a gendered discourse of excess, resisting male power while enduring its force.

Though she is ultimately destroyed by Armatrites's revenge, Thetis's transgressive desire opens up a space of ontological possibility that the play cannot fully close. In her sin, she highlights the violence embedded in the patriarchal order and the instability of the norms it seeks to enforce. Yet, through her persistence and refusal to be fully consumed or defined by the patriarchal narrative, she gestures towards a potential subjectivity beyond the binaries of Madonna and whore, "fair Thetis" (1.4.110) and "mystical strumpet" (4.3.175). Her presence is unruly, uncontainable, resisting reduction to a symbol.

4. "Insufferable vengeance": The Excesses of Armatrites's Masculine Power

While the Young Queen's transgressive desire underscores the subversive potential of female agency, the tyrant Armatrites embodies the destructive excesses of unchecked male power. From his violent usurpation of the Lydian throne at the start of the play to the sadistic dismemberment of his wife's lover, Armatrites's reign is driven by a brutal, insatiable hunger for domination and control. His compulsive subjugation of others shows the dangerous instability

of a social order grounded in absolute authority. As Alexandra Shepard (2003) points out, early modern masculine identity was closely tied to self-control and moderation: the ideal man was expected to master his passions and appetites through reason and self-discipline, and any failure to do so was seen as a threat to personal honour and the broader social order. I argue that in *The Bloody Banquet* Armatrites's theatrical display of power proves fragile, constantly on the verge of collapse under the weight of its own excess.

From the outset, the play emphasises the precarious nature of political authority and its susceptibility to brute force and Machiavellian cunning. Armatrites's coup against the Lydian throne is a shocking display of raw power as he physically ousts the rightful king and seizes the crown amid a flurry of drawn swords. His declaration, "Who wins the day, the brightness is his due" (1.1.7), claims that victory alone justifies his rule. Furthermore, his cry of "Speranza" (1.1.1) as he seizes the crown overflows with bitter irony, offering false hopes while crushing those of the ousted monarch and his loyal subjects. Nevertheless, much like Macbeth, Armatrites understands that he must cloak his deeds in the rhetoric of legitimacy and the common good, blending military valour with kingly virtue to justify his usurpation:

> Why, doting Lydia, is it of no virtue
> To bring our army hither, and put in venture
> Our person and their lives upon your foes?
> Wasting our courage, weak'ning our best forces,
> Impoverishing the heart of our munition,
> And having won the honour of the battle
> To throw our glory on unworthy spirits,
> And so unload victory's honey thighs
> To let drones feed? (1.1.19-27)

Here, Armatrites reframes his ruthless action as a noble sacrifice for Lydia's greater good, presenting himself as the defender of the kingdom. His use of the royal 'we' and his derision of the rightful king as weak and unworthy subtly echo King James I's theories of divine right, suggesting that sovereignty is a matter of kingly virtue rather than lineage. Yet, his strained metaphors reveal a discordance between his lofty rhetoric and the brutal realities of his rule, with

the abrupt shift to "victory's honey thighs" hinting at the dissonance between his idealised language and his violent methods.

By contrast, the deposed King of Lydia's response exposes the moral vacuity of the Tyrant's actions, condemning them as violations of "[r]eligion, loyalty, heaven or nature's laws" (1.1.12). For the Old King, Armatrites is a "tyrant" (1.1.13) because he has broken the social contract between ruler and ruled, betraying the "honesty and honour" (1.1.14) that should define true kingship. His appeal to friendship and lawful rule points to an alternative model of kingship based on mutual obligation rather than brute force. This tension between absolutist and consensual theories of rule forms the political core of *The Bloody Banquet*'s critique.

Armatrites's tyrannical appetite is often couched in predatory terms, evoking an insatiable drive to consume everything in his path. He vows to take absolute possession of the kingdom (1.1.30) and dismisses the deposed king's pleas for mercy with the chilling declaration: "Flies are not eagles' preys, nor thanks our food" (1.1.31). To Armatrites, sovereignty is a boundless act of devouring, where nothing is beyond his grasp. In a dark parallel to the archetypal Saturnine father who devours his children, Armatrites's insatiable lust for control becomes self-destructive, revealing that tyranny consumes itself. The patriarchal fantasy of absolute control over the female body – figured by the Young Queen's forced ingestion of Tymethes's remains – turns inward here, descending into a monstrous, self-consuming body politic.

Armatrites's fixation on control also extends to his obsessive surveillance of Thetis's sexuality, his desire to dominate her body mirroring his drive for political supremacy. His remark, "Women have of themselves no entire sway; / Like dial needles they wave every way" (1.4.103-04), expresses the idea that female agency destabilises the social order and, as such, must be forcefully suppressed. Thetis's transgressive desire becomes, in his eyes, a metonym for all that challenges his power – from the deposed king to Lydia's restless subjects.

However, while *The Bloody Banquet* stages the nightmare of unchecked power, it also discloses the instability within Armatrites's tyrannical ambitions. Despite his cruelty and cunning, Armatrites is a pathetic figure undone by his own paranoia. His murder of Thetis proves self-defeating, depriving him of the very prize he sought to possess. As he admits with his dying breath, "'Tis more

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revenge to me / Than all your aims: I have killed my jealousy" (5.1.211-12). With no-one left to dominate or abuse, the Tyrant is consumed by the same violence he meted out to others. Unlike Macbeth, whose downfall comes through guilt and a restoration of order, Armatrites's demise is purely circumstantial, driven by brute force rather than moral or political justice. The futility of his demise is captured in the Old King's bitter reflection on the arbitrary nature of destiny: "No storm of fate so fierce but time destroys, / And beats back misery with a peal of joys" (5.1.247-48).

In the end, the play would seem to suggest, the only force that checks tyranny is the turning of the wheel, a cyclical pattern of violence and counter-violence in which one form of oppression replaces another. *The Bloody Banquet* thus proves that crossing the boundaries set by taboos on the flesh – on the level of sex, food, or the body politic – leads to a fleeting freedom and an unconscious death drive. Following Thetis's murder, Armatrites's final bitter laugh – "ha, ha, ha!" (5.1.57)[17] – rhymes with the Duke's last gasp – "O" – in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Unlike the Duke or Thetis, however, Armatrites speaks two final lines after being shot: "My lust was ne'er more pleasing than my death" (5.1.218). A fitting epitaph for his personal and political parable that is also a reflection on the fundamental instability of early modern Jacobean culture.

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[17] For an analysis of "ha, ha, ha" as a scripted laughter instruction and its multiple implications in early modern plays, see Steggle 2007, 26-30.

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Translating *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* into Italian. Sex Taboos and Censorship in Translation

ABSTRACT

Erotic novels have historically challenged taboos, facing censorship dictated by cultural conventions like religion and law (Mudge 2017). This paper examines the Italian translations of John Cleland's *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-1749), translated around 38 times since 1918. Cleland's use of euphemisms and metaphors idealises sexual acts, distancing them from vulgar pornography (Hollander 1963; Spedding and Lambert 2011). Translating sexual content often reinforces societal norms but can also challenge them, with translators navigating censorship and ideological pressures (Santaemilia 2008). This study, framed within retranslation studies, analyses how Fanny Hill was translated in Italy in 1921, 1964, and 2010, revealing manipulations to align with contemporary societal standards. It highlights the evolving treatment of erotic content and the balance between textual fidelity and societal norms over fifty years.

KEYWORDS: Erotic novel; translation; metaphors; sex taboos; Fanny Hill.

1. Introduction

Erotic literature explores human sexuality, covering a range from explicit to subtle depictions. It intertwines desire, power dynamics, and intimate relationships, but faces societal taboos and censorship. Translating this genre is complex due to cultural and linguistic nuances, such as euphemisms and slang,

and societal norms. Translators must balance sensuality with cultural sensitivity and appropriateness, considering the target language and societal acceptance of sexuality.

One influential erotic novel is John Cleland's *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure,* published in 1748-1749. It is the first English prose pornography, employing explicit content and a literary style with elegant prose and playful euphemisms. It has been translated into various European languages, with about 38 retranslations in Italy alone. The Retranslation Hypothesis (Berman 1990; Chesterman 2004), suggests that new translations emerge as cultural and ideological circumstances change. Ideology, a key factor in translation practice, significantly influences the reception and adaptation of erotic literature, which, by its nature, is highly ideological.

Thus, this study aims to explore how retranslations adapt to new contexts while staying faithful to the source text.

2. Erotism and Sexuality

The concept of sexuality and sexual practices in the classical past would seem to be different from their modern conception, permeated by other cultural and social values. In particular, modern society seems to have a conflicting relationship with eroticism and pornography, despite being now even easier to access and consume thanks to the internet. If on the one hand there is an attempt to limit its diffusion and consumption through laws and regulations, on the other hand there are also online groups and communities that share pornographic material and support autoerotic practices.

This double attitude, in the modern era, is confirmed in the literary history of the erotic genre, whose descriptions of sex scenes have generated specific consumption and reading practices. Attitudes towards sexuality therefore influence the way individual works or erotic/pornographic products also on a deeper level. In the past, texts were amended from episodes or images linked to sexuality and sexual practices with a declared aestheticising intent, dictated by the conventions and moral convictions of the time, producing a criticism of sexuality disguised as literary criticism (Morales 2008, 39).

Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976) posits that the Western world has experienced a repressive relationship between power and sex over the past three centuries, beginning in the late 17th century due to the rise of capitalist and bourgeois society. Foucault argues that before the 18th century, sexuality discourse focused on the productive role of the married couple, regulated by canon and civil law. In the 18th and 19th centuries, sexual practices were considered "perversions", a debated concept between essentialists and social constructionists (Peakman 2009, 5-10). Foucault (1976, 34-49) argues that views about sexuality and perversion are rooted in control and power structures, represented in repressive legislation and as a result of violating established norms imposed by power structures. This system had significant effects on bourgeois society, which engaged in perversity but regulated its circumstances.

According to Watson (2017), the transition from eroticism to pornography, in its negative sense, occurred when the reproduction of obscene material was made simpler by the advent of the printing press, with the consequence of obtaining texts (and images) at low costs and with an affordable price. The erotic material became accessible to all social strata, with an effect judged as undesirable by the Church and the State, who sought to maintain control through moral reforms and legislative regulations.

Nevertheless, many of the erotic texts have circulated clandestinely and the way in which this literature was accepted depended a lot, as already expressed, on the ideology of the historical moment of a specific society.

2.1 Translating Erotica

Sexual cultures worldwide exhibit immense diversity, each characterised by unique linguistic features. Erotic literature reveals the complexities that emerge when disparate linguistic, disciplinary, and cultural contexts engage in critical discourse. These complexities include the translations and mistranslations that occur when bodies and desires are conceptualised as 'sex'. Erotic literature, both in its original and translated forms, is an important medium for providing new insights into how sexual ideas emerged in various contexts through a complex process of cultural negotiation. Translation has played a critical role in

shaping contemporary understanding of sexuality, allowing for the development of various national and transnational sexologies and their interrelationships (Bauer 2015, 1-2).

The field of translation studies lacks literature that focuses on a methodology for approaching erotic literature. Nevertheless, by defining clarity, reality, and inventiveness as a translator's "cardinal values", Pier-Pascale Boulanger (2009) established a framework for translators, providing a methodology designed specifically for translating erotic literature. Those three values are critical to ensuring that an erotic text can maintain the tension, rhythm, and suspension of desire.

By balancing linguistic fidelity with the task of capturing the sensuality and eroticism of the source text, translators can ensure that the translated work maintains its intended impact on readers, through their skill, cultural awareness, and a nuanced understanding of both the source and target languages. What seems to be a guideline in the study of the translation of erotica is the concept of norms. According to Gideon Toury's target-oriented approach (1995), we can identify three types of translational norms: initial, preliminary, and operational. Initial norms dictate whether to follow source or target culture norms, resulting in acceptable or inadequate translations. Preliminary norms govern translation policy and the acceptability of indirect translations. Operational norms govern the act of translation, influencing text structure and language choices. Toury acknowledged the sociocultural boundedness, instability, and extraction difficulty of norms, which are inherently unstable and change over time. As we have seen, ideas about what is admissible or not when talking about sex and sexuality vary with time and society, and norms always change accordingly. Thus, there is a link between norms, social values, power relations, and social structures (Hermans 2004) which shape discourse about sex. Within the translational process of erotic works, a crucial role is then played by various factors, including linguistic, ideological, poetics, and discourse aspects (Lefevere 1992,14), highlighting the interplay between the source text and its adaptation to the target audience's cultural and ideological norms.

Santaemilia (2008; 2015) conducted extensive studies on the erotic genre in translation, showing that the historical context surrounding the translation of *Fanny Hill* into Spanish was marked by societal changes, particularly the period

of 'destape' in Spain following Franco's death. The 'destape' era was characterised by a loosening of censorship and a more liberal attitude towards cultural expression, including a greater acceptance of erotic works (2015, 124). This shift in societal norms created a demand for a wider range of literary content, including translations of foreign erotic texts. His studies confirmed the complexity of translating a work like *Fanny Hill*, which delves into themes of sex and sexuality within an 18th-century English context, poses significant challenges for translators. The text's exploration of eroticism and its philosophical reflections on sex present nuances that may be difficult to capture accurately in translation. Translating such content goes beyond linguistic transfer; it involves navigating cultural differences, mediating between the original text and the target language's cultural norms, and grappling with the intricacies of conveying sensitive subject matter across linguistic boundaries. Thus, adaptation (Kaminski 2018) plays a crucial role in translating erotic literature because it allows translators to capture the subtleties of erotic language and imagery in the target language. Adaptation often requires finding equivalent expressions, metaphors, or euphemisms that effectively convey eroticism while preserving the tone and style of the original text and taking into account the preferences and expectations of the target audience (that is, aligning the content with the target cultural norms). Furthermore, adaptation allows translators to be creatively free to reimagine the erotic elements of the text.

2.2 Retranslation Studies

The term "retranslation" refers to either the act of translating a previously translated work into the same language or the resulting retranslated text. As stated, *Fanny Hill* has been translated into major European languages multiple times, with approximately 38 editions in Italy alone since the late 19th century. This exemplifies "active retranslation" practice (Pym 1998, 82), where retranslations from the same cultural and temporal context reflect disagreements over translation strategies, challenging the validity of previous versions (ibid., 83). Research traditionally focused on literary retranslations, generally viewed as positive, enriching interpretations of the source text.

However, views from the 1990s have been contested by recent studies, which highlight the complexity of retranslation, considering historical context, canonisation, norms, ideology, translator agency, and intertextuality (Susam-Sarajeva 2006; Deane-Cox 2014), emphasising "mobility, multiplicity and plurality" (Massardier-Kenney 2015, 82).

Progress-based views, such as the retranslation hypothesis from the 1990s (Chesterman 2000), suggest that retranslations aim to improve and get closer to the source text. Antoine Berman (1990, 1) argued that translation is inherently incomplete, striving for completion through retranslations. First translations are often thought to be driven by cultural and editorial concerns, tending to naturalise foreign texts for readability (Gambier 1994, 414), while subsequent translations appear to focus more on the source text's style and uniqueness. However, case studies have challenged the retranslation hypothesis, showing that first translations are not always domesticating and subsequent ones not necessarily more foreignizing (Koskinen and Paloposki 2004).

Another aspect concerns the ageing of translations: while originals remain timeless, translations may age, necessitating new versions. Yet, not all translations age at the same rate, and the need for retranslation varies (Hanna 2016, 129). Ageing involves not only language changes but also evolving translational and cultural norms (van Poucke 2017, 92). Factors such as genre, cultural, and ideological shifts influence the ageing process. Thus, no direct link exists between time passage and the need for retranslation (Gürçağlar 2009, 486).

Contrary to the linear progression model of the retranslation hypothesis, later research depicts retranslation as a field of continuous struggle for interpretative control between individuals and institutions. Retranslations aware of prior versions establish their uniqueness by differentiating from previous ones (Venuti 2013, 96).

Changing social contexts and evolving translation norms are major factors influencing retranslation choices (Brownlie 2006, 150), and this explanation seems in line with the fundamental translation principles concerning the erotic genres. Other reasons include unawareness of existing translations, leading to simultaneous new versions, so, retranslations may also aim to introduce new interpretations or address different readerships, as we will see with *Fanny Hill.*

3. English Erotic Literature in the 18th century: Cleland's *Fanny Hill*

3.1 The Literary Background

The English 18th century begins with "libertine literature" and concludes with the emergence of formal "pornography" (Alexandrian 2004, 161) while the rapid rise of the novel serves as a catalyst for the genre's development. During this time, erotica gradually separated from its diverse origins and established itself as a distinct category of sexually explicit artistic representation.

At the end of the 17th century, libertine literature in England appeared as 'whore dialogues', irreverent satire, and scandal fiction. Despite varying greatly in tone and subject, whore dialogues typically feature conversations between an experienced older woman and a younger, inexperienced maid. These dialogues, tracing their lineage to Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti* (1536), were imported into England via France (Mudge 2006, 416).

However, the market for libertine literature in early 18th-century England also included bawdy street ballads, sensational medical manuals, obscene travelogues, trial proceedings, and criminal biographies. These works shared a satirical, rationalist, and anti-ecclesiastical tone, often mocking pious ideals through explicit content. The novel's rise to prominence, marked by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), gradually displaced libertine literature, which had thrived on educated irreverence and wit. John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-1749), or *Fanny Hill*, exemplified this transition, marking a pivotal moment in English erotica as the novel began to dominate the genre.

Edmund Curll, an unscrupulous bookseller, was a key figure in the early 18th-century "curious book" trade (Foxon 1965, 14-15). From 1705 to 1745, Curll's shop offered an array of bawdy works, becoming emblematic of the period's literary landscape, because it also offered criminal biographies and trial accounts, reflecting the era's fascination with sensational and explicit content.

The range of erotica available on the market was then extensive in content and price. It is clear that a much wider readership of erotic and pornographic literature existed and included the lower classes (Peakman 2012, 37).

The transformation of erotic literature continued with the rise of the novel, and cynics such as Henry Fielding and John Cleland responded to Richardson's didactic approach with their own contributions, ultimately influencing the genre's evolution.

By the end of the 18th century, the novel had become the preferred medium for exploring sexual passion, and British erotica flourished in various forms. This period marked the maturation of the erotic imagination, setting the stage for the modern pornography industry.

3.2 Social Background in 18th-Century England

The redefinition of sex in 18th-century England was driven by several factors, including rising wages, proto-industrialisation, urbanisation, and changes in rural employment (Hitchcock 1996). These economic and social shifts encouraged earlier courtship, marriage, and sexual activity among young people. The transition from a period of greater openness for women to one where they were increasingly controlled by patriarchal ideology significantly influenced this redefinition. The mid-century emergence of romantic friendship also played a role, as heterosexuality became more phallo-centric, necessitating new categories to accommodate lesbian relationships. By the late 18th century, a penetrative and male-orgasm-focused sexual culture had developed, reflecting the diminished role of female sexuality and women's restricted societal roles.

Erotic novels of the period often featured women as the main protagonists, whether they were high-society ladies, students, or nuns. Women were typically the objects of male desire and were often depicted as passive, except in instances of flagellation where they played the role of mistresses.

Female prostitutes could potentially be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society through institutions like the Magdalen Hospital or Lock Asylum. Male sodomites, however, faced severe social stigma and permanent exclusion (Trumbach 1991, 196). This differentiation in treatment underscored the gendered nature of societal and legal responses to sexual behaviour.

Women's roles in 18th-century England were largely domestic, shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors (Le Gates 1976). Upper-class women managed households and oversaw social events, while lower-class women

contributed to the family's economic well-being through domestic production. Despite these constraints, some women engaged in social activism and reform movements, advocating for women's rights and challenging traditional gender roles (Hunt 2014).

Prostitution thrived in 18th-century Britain, but the period also saw efforts to reform and suppress it. By 1750, reformers focused on rehabilitating "penitent" prostitutes rather than eradicating the practice (Mudge 2000, 47-48).

Despite significant efforts and resources, these campaigns to combat prostitution faced financial constraints and fierce retaliation from brothel keepers, hindering the effective suppression of bawdy houses (Dabhoiwala 2007, 301). Nonetheless, these efforts reflect a broader cultural shift towards order, regulation, and the suppression of perceived immorality in 18th-century England.

3.3 John Cleland's Memoirs of Woman of Pleasure

Cleland's book consists of two letters from Fanny Hill to an unknown woman, addressed as "Madam", in which Fanny writes about her life and events (a similar structure to Pamela by Richardson). After her parents' deaths, Fanny moves to London from a small village, and accidentally, she is hired as a maid by Mrs. Brown, a woman who reveals herself to be a brothel madam. It is there that she discovers pleasure, by experiencing mutual masturbation with an older girl in the house, Phoebe. From that event onwards, Fanny discovers diverse typologies of sex through voyeuristic experiences and sexual encounters, until she meets Charles, with whom she falls in love. The two become lovers and escape from the brothel to live together lawfully.

Upon meeting him, Fanny discovers that Charles's father was the man who had originally paid a large sum to take her virginity, whom she had fought off. Charles mysteriously disappears; he has been sent by his father to the South Seas to win a fortune. In the second letter, Fanny works for Mrs. Cole in a brothel in Covent Garden. It is in this second letter that we find a homosexual scene between two young men. Eventually, Charles comes back to England, and the two marry.

This is roughly the plot of the novel, where casual and fatalistic events occur and are interposed with different sexual scenes, described by Cleland through very elegant prose and a heavy employ of metaphors and metonymies, in order to avoid (uselessly in reality) censorship by elevating the description of sex practices to a sort of artistic work of art. Metonymy, as a literary device, allows for the substitution of one word or phrase with another that is closely associated with it. In the case of terms like "mount-pleasant" and "mossy tuft" being used in relation to Fanny's mons pubis, Speddig and Lambert (2011) suggest that Cleland employed these metonymic expressions to symbolise and convey deeper meanings related to sexuality, desire, and femininity

Fanny's character had an impact on popular culture and literature marked by the continuous presence and adaptation of the book in various forms of media over time. She has been featured in comic books, men magazines, sexology manuals, and even portrayed in cinema globally. Additionally, adaptations of *Fanny Hill* have included portrayals alongside other famous characters like Lady Chatterley and the Red Baron, showcasing her enduring relevance and versatility in different contexts (Nace 2015, 137).

A study on the reception of *Fanny Hill* in Spain (Buendia 2002) reveals that the delay in the reception of the novel in Spain was partly due to censorship by both ecclesiastical and civil authorities during the 19th century. To attract readers, translators employed cultural adaptation techniques, such as adjusting references, idiomatic expressions, and cultural nuances. Paratextual elements, such as introductions, prefaces, and appendices, also played a crucial role in elevating the novel from its pornographic nature.

The historical context surrounding the translation of *Fanny Hill* into Spanish was marked by societal changes, particularly the period of 'destape' in Spain following Franco's death. The 'destape' era was characterised by a loosening of censorship and a more liberal attitude towards cultural expression, including a greater acceptance of erotic works. This shift in societal norms created a demand for a wider range of literary content, including translations of foreign erotic texts like *Fanny Hill* (Santaemilia 2005, 124).

4. *Fanny Hill* in Italy

For the present work, three translations of the book will be analysed, and they are:

(a) 1921: *Memorie di Fanny Hill, Ragazza di Piacere*, Collana: I Classici dell'Amore, translated by Mario Vinciguerra, Milano: L'editrice del Libro Raro (Corbaccio);

(b) 1964: *Fanny Hill, Le Memorie di una Ragazza di Piacere*, Collana: I Classici Proibiti, translated by Mariangela Angeli, Roma: Editori Associati;

(c) 2010: *Fanny Hill, Memorie di una donna di piacere*, Collana: Classici dell'Eros, translated by Franco Garnero, Milano: ES.

As stated in the postface of translation (c), tracking the source text of *Fanny Hill* is rather complicated and uncertain due to the fact that erotic books circulated clandestinely under no real authors' names or places of publication. Several hundred editions of *Fanny Hill* were published, and some of them had additions (obscene episodes) or deletions (Sabor 2010, 251). Some texts were published after Cleland's death, so they are not considered reliable.

For each text, we will analyse paratextual elements such as covers, illustrations (if any), and prefaces, as well as the translation strategies adopted with the scope of highlighting the aim for retranslating this book and the intended target readership. The analysis will be conducted on the first letter.

4.1 The Target Culture and Society

The first two translations, respectively from 1921 and 1964, were produced in specific historical and cultural moments in Italy. Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, in Italy, pornographic books printed on popular paper and illustrated with obscene photographs and engravings were published as a reaction to a century of intransigent moralism, and with the beginning of the crisis of values. They were botched anthologies with pieces by Aretino and ancient dialect poets.

At the beginning of the century, Paris, the capital of eroticism, attracted writers such as Henry Miller, Hemingway, and Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944).

In 1910, the year in which he published his first futurist manifesto, Marinetti also published *Mafarka il Futurista* (1910), the erotic and grotesque adventures of a young African king with an eleven-metre-long member who seduces young virgins. In general terms, the futurists saw the relationship between the two sexes as a collision, a clash; men and women were called to establish new relationships in constant confrontation and struggle (Bertolotti 2015, 183).

In the 1920s, after the First World War and the renewed love for life, erotic stories presented ambivalent female figures (wives and lovers as heroines of free love). Guido da Verona (1881-1939) was the most famous Italian erotic author of those years, and his novels were successful because they told stories of passion in a romantic but sinful way, allowing readers from the small and medium bourgeoisie to fantasise about abandoning themselves to pleasure even if they were aware that they were sinful. At the height of the fascist regime, Da Verona published a humorous erotic parody of *I Promessi Sposi* (1929). In the same years, *Gli Indifferenti* (1929) by Alberto Moravia was published, telling the sexual relationships of a ruined bourgeois family in a lucid and disenchanted way.

It is in this historical and cultural moment that the 1921 edition of *Fanny Hill* (a) emerged. The erotic literature of the time seems to confirm the figure of an upright woman as the moral fulcrum of society (of man) and that of the immoral and criminal woman, the prostitute, with a specific function and charm. In fact, the recognition of the legitimacy of desire also led to reaffirming the redeeming function of the prostitute in the belief that a satisfying sexual life was a question of bodily health and morality.

During the sixties, the years in which the translation (b) was published, eroticism came from the American youth movements, in the wake of the famous *Kinsey Report*, in which it was revealed that female sexual drive is similar to that of man.

The female consumer depicted in Italian television advertising in the late 1950s was an equally conservative figure (Morris 2006, 10). The economic miracle gave rise to a new society where tradition and modernity coexisted and new ideas challenged old. It was a time of gloomy, immobile housewives who were devoted to their families and homes. Additionally, it was the generation that the feminists of the 1970s rebelled against – the mothers of the feminists.

But during this time, the gender hierarchy was essentially unaltered (Wilson 2010, 113).

What seems to be interesting is the fact that throughout those periods, the role of the prostitute within Italian society remained unchanged despite *Merlin's Law* that, in 1958, established the closure of all the brothels that the fascist regimes had maintained open. Prostitutes continued to hold their social function of helping married men (and all the men in general) to keep their sexual desires at bay, ensuring that the pillar of the family, the married woman, could fulfil her role. The widespread belief was that a formally happy family was the pillar of a good society, and prostitutes were tolerated while at the same time maintaining their aura of mysterious transgression (Hipkins 2016, 26-30).

4.2 Translation Analysis: Paratextual and Linguistic Elements

Starting from the paratextual elements, it is interesting to notice the layout of each translation in the study, considering the cover, the book size, prefaces, and illustrations as indicative of the way in which the book was intended to be presented.

The first translation (a), dating back to 1921, was translated by a male translator, Mario Vinciguerra. It is a booklet, rather anonymous, with a white cover on which the name of the author and the title can be read in green. Since there are no illustrations, we can get a hint about the real content of the book from the reference given by the word "donna di piacere". We may assume that the book could be left on a table with no suspicion of its nature, probably imagining it to be a sort of real memoir or report. As for the preface, the translation is presented as an instalment of a series called *I Classici dell'Amore* (Love Classics), from which a reader would not immediately label the novel as erotic or pornographic. Furthermore, it is said to be part of this collection, which is published on fine paper and in numbered copies. In the preface, the editor supports the idea that *Fanny Hill* is a classic, which had arrived in those days in a non-definite form (highlighting the difficulties of having a faithful source text), thus presenting the text as a rarity for a sort of elite readership.

The second translation (b), published in 1964, is presented in an elegant box and hard cover in red and black fabric with no illustration. It is part of a

series called *I Classici Proibiti* (the Prohibited Classics), adding a nuance of transgression to the layout. In the preface, the editor states that the main purpose of the publication is to present a classic novel cleaned from obscene illustrations (in fact, inside we can find a new set depicting men always clothed and Fanny always naked) in order to do justice to a text that had suffered a sort of stigma.

The same philological purpose can also be traced in the translation (c) from 2010, by Franco Garnero, which is part of a series clearly labelled as *Classici dell'Eros* (Eros Classics). The preface explains the problem of receiving a complete source text, which had been manipulated somehow, clearly stating that the intended readership is made up of passionate and cultivated readers. The cover, framed in black, shows a 18th century painted girl at the forefront, setting the book in its historical context.

As previously described, Cleland wanted to avoid being censored, so his style is rich in euphemisms and void of vulgar or obscene words; nevertheless, he describes sexual scenes in detail. For the linguistic analysis, the focus is on three main lexical fields: the description of women's bodies, men's bodies, and sexual intercourses.

Woman's Bodies			
Source Text	**(a) 1921**	**(b) 1964**	**(c) 2010**
29: […]My breasts, if it is not too bold a figure to call so two hard, firm, rising hillocks, that just began to shew themselves, or signify anything to the touch, employed and amused her hands awhile, till, slipping down lower, over a	20: […] Il mio seno nascente, sodo e liscio, irritando sempre più i desideri della mia compagna, per un momento, le procurò un vivo piacere; finalmente essa mise la mano sulla impercettibile fessura, sulla	44 […] Le mie mammelle – se così potevano essere chiamate due dure, ferme, nascenti collinette, che incominciavano appena a farsi vedere, o significare qualcosa al tatto – tennero occupate e divertirono per un po' le sue mani,	24: […] I miei seni, se non è troppo immodesto chiamare così due dure, sode e rampanti collinette che avevano appena cominciato a mostrarsi o significare qualche cosa al tatto, attrassero e divertirono le sue mani per un po',

smooth track, <u>she could just feel the soft silky down that had but a few months before put forth and garnished the mount-pleasant of those parts, and promised to spread a grateful shelter over the sweet seat of the most exquisite sensation,</u> and which had been, till that instant, the seat of the most insensible innocence. Her fingers played and <u>strove to twine in the young tendrils of that moss,</u> which nature has contrived at once for use and ornament.	<u>peluria serica spuntata da qualche mese e che avrebbe ombreggiato un giorno la sede delle più deliziose sensazioni, ora le sed della più insensibile innocenza.</u> Le sue dita, giocando su quella peluria, si divertivano a fare delle treccioline; […]	finché scivolando un po' più in basso per un liscio tratto, <u>ella poté appena sentire il soffice setoso cespuglietto che solo pochi mesi prima era spuntato a nascondere il nido del piacere, e prometteva di rivelarsi amabile rifugio alle più squisite sensazioni.</u>	fino a che, scivolando giù in basso e seguendo un levigato percorso, esse poterono proprio sentire il soffice e setoso cespuglietto che era spuntato solo pochi mesi prima a <u>guarnire il monticello dei piaceri,</u> promettendo di espandere un grato riparo sopra la dolce sede delle sensazioni più squisite che era stata, fino a quel momento, <u>la sede della più inconsapevole innocenza. Le sue dita giocarono intrecciando i giovani germogli di quel cespuglio che la natura ha concepito per l'uso e ornamento.</u>
67: […] Whilst they were in the heat of the action, guided by nature only, I stole my hand up my	29: […] Mentre I due erano nel calore della lotta, io, facendo scivolare la mano sotto la camicia,	62: […] i cui [dell'azione] suoni e la cui vista mi fecero fremere sino in fondo all'anima, <u>e versarono lava</u>	42: […] Mentre erano nel pieno dell'azione, guidata solo dalla natura, infilai una mano <u>sotto le sottane e</u>

petticoats, <u>and with fingers on fire, seized and yet more inflamed that centre of all my senses: my heart palpitated, as if it would force its way through my bosom: I breathed with pain</u>; I twisted my thighs, squeezed and compressed the lips of that virgin slit, […]	<u>misi in fiamme il centro della mia sensibilità</u> […]	<u>infuocata in ogni vena del mio corpo.</u> […]	<u>con dita infuocate afferrai e dunque infiammai ancora di più il centro di tutti i miei sensi;</u> il cuore palpitava come se volesse aprirsi un varco nel mio seno; respirando a fatica accavallai le gambe, strizzai e schiacciai le labbra di quella vergine feritoia […]

Comparing the three translations, we will notice that (a) and (b) are, in many instances, shorter than (c), which is something unusual considering that Italian needs more prepositional phrases than English and that English words are very often mono or bi-syllabic. Hence, we can assume that some material has been deleted, not only when describing female anatomical parts but also in the other categories of analysis. The choice to translate breast with a medical term (b) can be a way to propose a less sexualised description in favour of a more poetic one. In fact, her lover's fingers do not play with her pubic hair, which in the same translation (b) is described as just grown. Translation (c) does not present deletion, and the descriptions are in the same style and quality as the source text.

Men's bodies			
Source Text	**(a) 1921**	**(b) 1964**	**(c) 2010**
74: […] Then his grand movement, which seemed to rise out of a	32: […] Il suo fratellino si slanciava pomposamente	82: […]	49: […] E infine il suo grande arnese, che sembrava

thicket of curling hair, that spread from the root all over his thighs and belly up to the navel, stood stiff and upright, but of a size to frighten me, by sympathy for the small tender part which was the object of its fury, […]	da un cespuglio di peli. Le sue dimensioni mi fecero tremare per quella piccola cosa che doveva riceverne i bruschi assalti.		sorgere da spessi ricci tutto intorno alle cosce e al ventre su fino all'ombelico, stava rigido e eretto e aveva dimensioni tali da farmi temere per la piccola, tenera parte che era l'oggetto della sua furia
188-189: […] those [buttons] of his waistband and fore-flap flew open at a touch, when out IT started; and now, disengaged from the shirt, I saw, with wonder and surprise, what? not the play thing of a boy, not the weapon of a man, but a Maypole, of so enormous a standard, that had proportions been observed, it must	59: Quelli [i bottoni] della cintura e della toppa mollarono facilmente, ed eccolo in libertà! Per bacco! Non era affatto un giocherello da ragazzi, e neanche delle proporzioni comuni di un adulto. Era un affare di proporzioni enormi, che poteva appartenere ad	123: […] Il mio giovane amico, sovraeccitato dai miei gesti […]	101: Quelli [i bottoni] del panciotto e della patta si aprirono al minimo tocco e l'affare venne fuori; e ora, liberato della camicia, vidi con meraviglia e sorpresa, che? Non un giocattolo di un ragazzo, non l'arma di un uomo, ma un palo di dimensioni così enormi che, se le

have belonged to a young giant.	un gigante.		proporzioni fossero state rispettate, avrebbe dovuto appartenere a un giovane gigante.

When it comes to describing a man's body and, in particular, his penis, translation (b) shows entire deletions: in many instances, the penis is not described and entire parts are missing. We may assume that readers might have felt somehow offended by the comparisons that Cleland used with it. In the second instance, in fact, the penis is described as big as a Maypole, and in all the translations, the cultural reference (the English tradition of Maypole dancing) is lost, and the translator in (b) is somehow obliged to describe the penis by simply writing about its big dimensions. Translation (a), on the other hand, seems to use a sort of military or barracks talk, calling the penis "little brother" or "hero", reflecting the Italian culture of that period.

Sexual Intercourses			
Source Text	**(a) 1921**	**(b) 1964**	**(c) 2010**
82: […] He looked upon his weapon himself with some pleasure, and guiding it with his hand to the inviting; slit, drew aside the lips, and lodged it (after some thrusts, which Polly seemed even to assist) about halfway; but there it stuck, I suppose from its growing	32 […] Egli si avviò da sé stesso, e, dopo alcune spinte, l'amabile Polly fece sfuggire un profondo sospiro che non pareva affatto cagionato dal dolore. L'eroe spinge, lei risponde in cadenza ai suoi movimenti: ma ben presto i	66: […] Finalmente, la passione diventò troppo violenta per rispettare qualsivoglia ordine o misura; i loro movimenti si fecero più febbrili, i loro baci troppo ardenti e audaci perché natura umana potesse sopportarne più a lungo la furia.	49-50: […] Il giovane guardava con un certo piacere la propria arma e, guidandola con la mano verso l'invitante fessura, la portò tra le labbra e la conficcò (dopo qualche colpo che Polly sembrò addirittura assecondare) circa

thickness: he draws it again, and just wetting it with spittle, re-enters, and with ease sheathed it now up to the hilt, […]	trasporti reciproci aumentano a tal punto, che oltrepassano ogni misura. […]		metà, ma qui si fermò, suppongo, per il suo crescente spessore. La estrasse di nuovo e, inumidendola un poco con la saliva, rientrò e con facilità sprofondò fino all'elsa, […]
106: […] Being now too high wound up to bear a delay, he unbuttoned, and drawing out the engine of love assaults, drove it currently, as at a ready made breach... Then! then! for the first time, did I feel that stiff horn-hard gristle, battering against the tender part;	39: […] Sfoderò l'arma usata in simili combattimenti, e la spinse di tutta forza, credendo di camminare su di una via già battuta. […]	77: […] Troppo eccitato per un ulteriore indugio, egli si sbottonò e tirato fuori lo strumento per le amorose tenzoni lo guidò direttamente in quella che lui credeva una breccia già aperta…! Oh! Allora! Per la prima volta sentii quel rigido membro, duro come un corno, urtare contro la tenera parte; […]	61: […] Poiché era troppo eccitato per sopportare un rinvio, si sbottonò ed estrasse lo strumento per gli assalti d'amore guidandolo con estrema prontezza, come se la breccia fosse già stata aperta. Ecco! Ecco! Per la prima volta sentii quella rigida cartilagine dura come un corno battere contro la tenera parte, […]

Sexual practices in Cleland are not particularly inventive, but the description of the intercourses is similar to a classical painting or a sculptural group. Nevertheless, in translation (b), all references to bodies, anatomical parts, or

even positions are deleted in favour of a brief description of what the reader may presume happens. Probably, the translation was aimed at a female audience – bourgeois housewives who wanted to peep into the realms of transgression without being blatantly pornographic. In translation (a), sexual intercourses are described by emphasising sex as a sort of clash or fight between man and woman, according to Futuristic principles. The woman has a clear subordinate position because she follows her partner's movements accordingly.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the translations reveals distinct shifts in focus, language, and audience, reflecting broader cultural and societal changes over time. Adaptation for all three translations appears to be the principal translation technique since the changed norms and values of each historical, societal, and cultural context shaped the target texts aiming at different target readerships.

The 1921 text (a) predominantly centres on the female body, utilising military and fraternal language such as "fratellino" and "eroe", with minimal descriptions of male genitalia in favour of a male-oriented narrative approach.

On the other hand, translation (b) 1964 shows a shift towards emphasising female emotions and sexual experiences, eschewing crude descriptions in favour of more refined and less sexualised terminology. The narrative avoids references to self-pleasuring, detailed depictions of male genitalia, and explicit sexual intercourse, reflecting an attempt towards soft porn aimed at a female audience, as evidenced by the changes in illustrations.

The 2010 translation (c) presents a more philologically accurate and overtly sexualised lexicon and tropes, suggesting a more explicit portrayal of sexuality, showing the increasing openness towards sexual content in contemporary literature.

Finally, retranslations of *Fanny Hill* appear to originate in an attempt to present the book to a different type of intended readership, for which the retranslation has been adapted according to the norms of the period.

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Investigating Taboos in Robert Walser's Late Microscripts

ABSTRACT

For many years, the Swiss-German writer Robert Walser (1878-1956) has been considered a naive author who lived in isolation, writing pleasant, harmless and worthless texts, uninterested in the cultural, historical and social context. Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that he was deeply concerned not only with the issues of his time, but also with the delicate aspects of human existence, such as hierarchical social structures, normative modes of gendered behaviour, masochism, violence, death and suicide.

This short article explores some of these tabooed subjects and sheds light on the intertwining of form and content in some of Walser's late microscripts. In particular, it will focus on the short prose piece *With Anger about her Anger She Was Green* (1928), which features a disturbing phallophagic scene, and *Cruel Rites, Customs, Habits* (1926), a commented list of cruelties throughout the centuries.

KEYWORDS: Swiss-German Literature; cannibalism; sex; gender fluidity; violence.

The Swiss-German author Robert Walser was known for many decades as a 'writers' writer' as he was misunderstood or ignored by a large part of critics and appreciated by colleagues. Among his admirers were Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Hermann Hesse, Christian Morgenstern and Robert Musil[1]. Contemporary authors such as W. G. Sebald, Martin Walser, Nobel laureates

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[1] See Kafka 1978, Benjamin 1978, Hesse 1978, Morgenstern 1978, Musil 1978.

Elfriede Jelinek and J. M. Coetzee have commented very positively on his work[2].

The publication of the *Robert Walser Handbuch* (Gisi 2015) marked his official recognition as one of the three most significant Swiss-German writers of the 20th century, together with Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt; at present he is a model, a constant reference for several German-speaking colleagues. In their introduction to *Robert Walser. A Companion* (Frederick and Heffernan 2018), another milestone in the Walser-*Forschung,* the editors state that "Walser has been an open secret among writers in England and the United States for quite some time" (ibid., 3) and that he is now recognised "as one of the great German-language writers of the modernist period" (ibid., 8). With reference to the treatment of space and time, his writings have been compared to the abstract compositions of the avant-garde art of the Bernese painter Paul Klee, who was his contemporary[3].

Born in Biel in 1878, Robert Walser left school at 15 and led a wandering life in several places working as a clerk in a bank, as a butler in a castle, as an assistant to an inventor near Zurich, all the while producing essays, stories, poems, short dramas as well as other creative writing. In 1929 he had a nervous breakdown mainly due to professional problems, as he was nearly forgotten in the second half of the 1920s and could hardly find publishers for his texts. He ended up in the psychiatric clinic of Waldau, near Bern. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia, but his mental state improved in the clinic. There, he went on writing texts until 1933, when he moved to another asylum, Herisau, and stopped writing. He died in 1956[4].

Starting from the 1920s, or possibly even earlier, he began writing his texts with a pencil on recycled paper in a very tiny handwriting, producing the so-called "Microscripts" (*Mikrogramme*)[5].

From the very beginning, his writings displayed a peculiarly transgressive tendency, though most critics and reviewers failed to recognise the subversive

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[2] See Walser 1978, Sebald 1998, Coetzee 2000 and 2007. The Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek composed a play (*Er nicht als er*) based on Robert Walser; see Jelinek 1998.

[3] See Evans 1983.

[4] For Walser's biography see Echte 2008 and Bernofsky 2021.

[5] On the microscripts see v. Schwerin 2001 and Kammer 2015.

subtext which lay beyond the apparently naïve quality of his style. This is why for many years he was perceived as 'ein Idylliker', that is, an idyllic poet[6]. Even a giant such as Thomas Mann, after reading Walser's book *Die Rose* (*The Rose*), which is not harmless at all, defined him as "ein sehr, sehr feines, vornehmes, artiges und unartiges Kind" ("a really very delicate, refined, well behaved and at the same time naughty child") (Walser 1978, II: 118), a characterisation which seemed to offend or even hurt him, as he told his friend and executor[7] Carl Seelig.

If we consider his first book, *Fritz Kocher's Aufsätze* (*Fritz Kocher's Essays,* 1904), a fiction based on a collection of school essays written by a pupil before his death, the impression of naivety arising from the attempt to imitate a schoolboy's style contrasts with the critical approach to the topic of many of his essays. Fritz Kocher's humour and irony aim at subverting stereotypes and hierarchies. These strategies disorient and unsettle the reader, producing the ambiguity which permeates every page of Walser's writings. In the essay "Armut" ("Poverty"), he writes that the teacher "behandelt sie [arme Knaben] rauher als uns, und er hat recht. Ein Lehrer weiß, was er tut" ("treats [poor pupils] harsher than he treats us, and he is right. A teacher always knows, what he is doing")[8] (Walser 1978, I: 16). The genre of the school essay was rather popular at the beginning of the 20th century, and Walser takes it on in a peculiar way to display his critique of teaching methods and hierarchical authority. This was also the topic of *Professor Unrat* (1905), the novel by Heinrich Mann, which was very successfully released in 1930 as a film starring Marlene Dietrich. Still, in H. Mann's novel, the criticism of the school system is expressed in a quite different and indeed more direct way than in *Fritz Kocher's Essays*.

This brief introduction shows that a transgressive attitude can be found throughout Walser's work, from his early prose to his late microscripts. Here, in the late period, the playful treatment of taboo topics is much more evident, as I have stated elsewhere[9]. I will focus on two taboos: sex and cruelty.

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[6] See Bänziger 1978; Brod 1978; Johst 1978; Korrodi 1978a and 1978b; Loerke 1978; Pinthus 1978.

[7] See Seelig 1977, 13.

[8] If not differently specified, translations from German are mine.

[9] See Fattori 2020.

In the short prose *Vor Wut über ihre Wut war sie grün* (*With Anger about her Anger She Was Green*, 1928), a phallophagic scene is described. A man and a woman are having an argument, and a moment later, when the man is asleep, the woman cuts off his genitals, from which "seine Lebenslust, sein beleidigendes Prangen und Lachen herrührte. [---] [sie] entfernte […] von seinem Wesen, was ihrer Meinung nach keinesfalls dazu paßte" ("arose his lust for life, his offensive boastfulness and laughter […] [she] removed from his being what in her opinion did not belong there", transl. Evers 2018, 229) (Walser 1985-2000, V: 125). This "thing" ("Dinglein" in German) resembles "mehr einem Würstchen als dem Lauf einer Kanone" ("rather a small sausage than the barrel of a cannon", transl. ibid.) (ibid.). The woman fries in a pan what she has removed from the man and she eats it: "Muß das eine Lust gewesen sein hineinzubeißen. Sie aß es vor seinen Augen glatt auf" ("What a pleasure it must have been to take a bite. She ate it up right before his eyes") (ibid.). The man, now awake, says nothing; he just observes her eating and enjoying the cannibalistic meal. At the end of the short prose, nothing has changed compared to the beginning of the scene. The castration has not changed him: "Ganz derselbe war er. Solange er das Ding hatte, besaß er's, und jetzt, wo es ihm nicht mehr gehörte, war's nicht mehr sein" ("He was just the same. As long as he had the thing, he possessed it, and now, when it no longer belonged to him, it was no longer his", transl. ibid., 239) (ibid.).

The episode may be seen as a veiled, even unsettling sex scene, or as a grotesque representation of the traditionally taboo female sexual desire; words such as 'lust', 'satisfied', 'to play' seem to suggest this interpretation. However, it seems improbable that the man would not express any pain, shock or anger after such a violent and traumatic event; in fact, he continues to look at her "bruesk" ("rudely") (ibid.) as he did before the emasculation.

Evidence for an alternative interpretation can be found in the dazzling use of language. Diminutives such as "Blümlein" ("small flower") (ibid., 124), "Glöcklein" ("small bell") (ibid., 125), "Dingelchen" ("small thing") (ibid.), all used for the cut part of the body, the nearly mechanical confidence of the woman in carrying out the action, the childish phrasing, the gastronomical jargon and, last but not least, the fact that the man does not suffer at all (he shows no trace of pain or suffering), all these elements suggest that this short

prose is very similar to a *Märchen*, a fairy tale, of course a negative one, an evil fairy tale. In fairy tales, characters do not suffer, they are just role carriers, they have no feelings and do not feel pain[10]. The last lines give further clues to the interpretation of this amazing, baffling text that deals with, or at least alludes to, taboos such as masochism, cannibalism, onanism and the sexual impulse of women. In the final section, we read that no one has changed after castration, neither she nor he: "[E]s [kann] Dinge geben […], denen man zu viel Wert beimißt, da es auf eine Eigentümlichkeit mehr oder weniger nicht so viel ankommt, wie die meisten Menschen meinen" ("[T]here are things to which people attribute too much importance; in fact, if you have a characteristic more or one less, is a fact which is not so important, though many people think it is") (ibid., 125).

Of course, this anticlimactic conclusion is very different from the happy endings of fairy tales; although there is no reconciliation in Walser's prose, the final statement is worth a comment in terms of gender.

The part of the man's body which the woman cuts off is called 'small thing', 'small flower', 'object', 'small sausage', etc. It is characterised as an unrelated part, an object or an ornament, something which is not essential, which is implicit in the diminutive Walser uses. The short story about castration can be considered as a bizarre, peculiar representation of Walser's artistic and existential vision, expressed in his statement that "[d]as Schreiben […] °ist männlich und weiblich zugleich" ("Writing […] is masculine and feminine at the same time") (Walser 1978, XII: 182). His exploration of fluid identity in both writing and human subjectivity, as well as his attempts to deconstruct hierarchies and break down prejudices and heteronormativity, presents interesting parallels with questions of gender fluidity and identity construction that would later become central to postmodern critical discourse.

This unusual text about sex and cannibalism, together with some idyllic, rather evanescent *Prosastücke* – e.g., "Seltsame Stadt", "Phantasieren", "Träumen" – belongs to Walser's utopian writings; in *With Anger about her Anger She Was Green* he outlines the ideal of a relationship between man and woman which swerves from traditional models inasmuch as gender-related features play

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[10] On this aspect of the genre of the *Märchen* see Lüthi 1985.

no role in the relationship and also in the building of hierarchies. In some other texts from the late microscripts, e.g., in the theatrical scene *Die Chinesin. Der Chinese,* he stages an astonishing battle of the sexes by playing with stereotypes and prejudices, thus radically questioning the traditional images of man and woman in a verbally aggressive manner [11].

The second text by Walser I am going to consider, "Grausame Bräuche, Sitten. Gewohnheiten usw" ("Cruel Rites, Customs, Habits etc.", 1926), consists of a commented list of historically documented cruelties from Antiquity to the Modern Age. Cutting off the nose, blinding, cannibalism, breaking on the wheel, whipping, widow burning, etc. are some of the acts of violence which are provided with historical coordinates and discussed in an objective and often quite humorous style: "Die Guillotinen der großen Revolution verfuhren, früheren Strafarten gegenübergehalten, wesentlich humaner" ("Compared to earlier forms of punishment, it is immediately evident that the guillotines of the Great Revolution proceeded substantially more humanely", transl. Evers 2021, 243) (Walser 1985-2000, IV: 179.) About drowning: "jeder Einsichtsvolle [muß] zugeben, daß solche Tötungsart gelinde genannt zu werden verdient" ("every judicious person has to admit that such killing method deserves to be called a gentle one", transl. ibid. 245) (ibid., 179) About blinding: "Blenden oder Augenstechen scheint geraume Zeit eine recht sehr beliebte Methode gewesen zu sein" ("Blinding or eye-gouging seems to have been for long time a rather popular method") (ibid., 180). Because of its apparently childish tone, this late text could be one of the essays in the above-mentioned early collection *Fritz Kocher's Essays*, were the topic not so delicate.

There is no empathy here, no identification with the tortured; everything is described in an ironic, objective tone which puzzles the reader: "Grausame Bräuche, Sitten, Gewohnheiten usw. haben ja, unsentimental betrachtet, etwas Naives, Drolliges, vielleicht auch etwas Puppenhaftes, als wenn körperlicher Schmerz im Grund gar nicht so schlimm wäre" ("If looked at without sentiment, cruel rites, customs, habits etc. have something naive, something droll about them, possibly something dollish, as if bodily pain were basically not so bad", transl. ibid. 244) (ibid., 178). The instruments of violence are

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[11] For an in-depth comment on this scene see Heffernan 2007, 128-39.

described in a very precise, realistic language; some descriptions recall cartoons, which are very often full of violence. The text is very peculiar: the objective, referential language puzzles the reader and the unusual, grotesque drollery provokes irritation and even indignation. How is it possible for these cruelties to be described as "pompously comical" ("pompöskomisch", ibid., 178)? The text says exactly the contrary of what is really meant. The deliberate drollery and the detached style are to be understood on the level of narration as a tool of guiding the reader; they are a formal strategy aimed at making the reader perceive on a deeper level the tragic nature of the situations, that is, "the darker regions below the surface of [the] charming style" (Evers 2018, 229). The form deliberately contrasts with the tragic, taboo topic of the text[12]. When the narrator claims that the cruelties he is depicting are hilarious, he is inviting the reader to disagree with this statement, to take a different position and to reflect on the tremendousness of the cruelties he is describing that have actually been practised in human history. The seemingly merciless, heartless drollery is a deliberately targeted stylistic device.

The text *Cruel Rites, Customs, Habits* makes it clear that Robert Walser is not, or not merely, to be considered as the poet of the idyll; in fact, he was a very critical observer of complex periods in European history (for example, the war between the Slavic and Germanic tribes, the Inquisition, the Peasants' War), during which social taboos were pervasive, though the "spectral beauty of [his] meandering sentences" (ibid., 231), which often have a deliberately scholarly, naive and ironic tone, may be misleading.

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[12] For more details about this strategy, that is, about the deliberate contrast between form and content, see Fattori 2020.

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Woman-Man and Woman-Animal: The Taboo of Hybrid Identities in Olga Tokarczuk's Works

ABSTRACT

Taboo does not just indicate a sacred entity; it also designates a dangerous and uncanny prohibition, as illustrated in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913). This latter interpretation typically stems from something deviating from the norm that evokes fear and is therefore marginalised. The offensive label "menstrual literature" coined by male Polish critics can stand as an example. This tag was supposed to define the rising number of female authors in the 1990s who were considered inadequate and too eccentric in their way of portraying the world. In wider terms, whether they were narrative voices or fictional characters, unconventional women were perceived as dangerous and monstrous. This article sets out to show the case of the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk who in some of her works has represented new hybrid identities as the woman-man and the woman-animal challenging the boundaries between mankind and the human or non-human 'other'.

KEYWORDS: Taboo; Tokarczuk; gender studies; monster studies; patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Flipping through the pages of *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud presents a variety of intriguing theories about the concept of 'taboo', whose origins seem to lie in the earliest human communities. The term itself bears a twofold meaning: it

can denote that which is sacred or consecrated, yet it can also indicate that which is "uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean" (Freud 1913, 37), standing in contrast to the concept of *noa,* which encompasses all that is "'common' or 'generally accessible'" (ibid.). Psychologist Wilhelm Wundt attributes this curious ambiguity to an overlap between the 'sacred' and the 'unclean', explained by an alleged "dread of contact" (Wundt 1906). This widespread belief in primitive populations claims that certain animals, human beings, and objects were presumed to possess a demonic power[1] associated with a supernatural and divine nature and should therefore not be touched. Such an assumption leads to a simplified interpretation of taboo as a moral prohibition and restriction, not to be confused with a religious interdiction. If the spiritual is generally motivated by specific reasons, the ethical seems to have no grounds and is therefore particularly unsettling. According to various psychologists, taboos constitute the "oldest human code of laws" (Freud 1913, 37), with their transgression triggering retributive actions. Such violations are met with punitive measures by either the tabooed entity itself or the community, which aims to prevent the supposed 'power' from spreading through physical contact with objects, clothing, or other items. There can be three main categories of taboo, depending on their subject. The first relates to animals and includes prohibitions against killing and eating certain species. The second pertains to human beings and comprises those considered in 'unusual conditions', such as women who are temporarily tabooed during menstruation and childbirth, as well as the dead. The last type is directed at 'objects' like plants, trees, houses, and places which could cause fear and be subject to taboo.

Taboo always generates fear and terror, which are conventionally embodied in the figure of the monster, created to incarnate extraordinary and disturbing features, as shown by Jeffrey Cohen in *Monster Theory Reading Culture* (1996). In this seminal work belonging to the field of Monster Studies, Cohen lists the characteristics determining 'monstrosity'. One of them is based on the body, which becomes a vehicle of fear and anxiety because it symbolises a precise 'cultural moment', as Cohen calls it, namely a frightening place, time, and emotion. On these grounds, these figures can be defeated and expelled from

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[1] The tabooed person, animal or object was believed to possess a form of power called *mana*, which could be intrinsic or transferred.

society through specific rituals recognised and performed by the whole community. To mention some examples of these practices, the monster can be driven through the heart with a stake or buried under a crossroads, a strategy to disorientate it. Besides, these creatures are fleeing since they naturally tend to disappear and reappear abruptly. This characteristic gives their bodies immateriality, which is therefore perceived as a distressing and unsettling attribute that is impossible for human beings to comprehend. In addition, monsters defy categorisation: they do not belong to the normal 'order of things', which disrupts social stability because they cannot be included in any group and be clearly defined. In this respect, the monster is also a synonym for difference: these creatures embody everything that is rejected by the reference model established at the cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual, and gender levels. These dreadful figures also "police the borders of the possible" (Cohen 1996, 12), meaning that only they can venture into the unknown, whereas 'normal' or 'common' human beings must not cross the boundaries of what is legitimate and acceptable. According to Cohen, this repulsion is also tied to desire: monsters are often depicted as engaging in polygamy and cannibalism, behaviours that are prohibited by the human social order: all rules and stereotypes are defied by monsters, who are therefore rejected (ibid., 3-25).

Western societies have long been characterised as anthropocentric and androcentric, a framework that sets men as the normative standard of humanity. This paradigm, however, is not a natural given but a socio-historical construct (Ortner 1972; Butler 1990). Within this system, women, together with non-human entities, have been relegated to 'otherness' (Budrowska 2000; De Beauvoir 1949; Janion 1996). The association of women with taboo, as suggested by Freud (1913), reflects not an inherent 'dangerous power', but rather social anxieties about female bodies and their reproductive capabilities. Contemporary feminist scholarship (Grosz 1994; Kristeva 1982) reframes these 'exceptional physical states' not as deviations from a male norm, but as different expressions of embodied experience. Such a perspective invites us to examine social taboos around female bodies that reinforce gender hierarchies rather than reflecting any innate 'danger' or 'power'. As also Barbara Creed affirms, "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject. [...] When

woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (Creed 1993, 1). For example, menstruation and childbirth cause physical changes, leading to exceptional circumstances that may seem threatening because they are beyond men's control (Lerner 1986). In response to these terrifying features, men have tried to suppress these powers described almost as demonic manifestations. Female monsters often do not conform to the women's stereotype elaborated by patriarchal society. From the archetypes of the deviant and unemotional mother – able to give and take life – to the seductive and luxurious *femme fatale,* female monsters can take many horrifying and repulsive shapes: they can look like hybrids, a combination of animal and human elements, or they can be merely cruel and unmerciful individuals, as Jude Doyle illustrates in *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (2019). Amongst the typical monstrous-feminine creatures, Doyle describes "dead girls", "demon daughters", "living dead girls", "vampires", "beauties and/or beasts", "Faery Serpents and Lizard People", "sirens", "old deceivers", "witches", "unnatural goddess[es]", "femme fatales", "bad mothers" (Doyle 2019).

These monsters are the emblems of society's attempts to confine what is 'above the normal' under taboo. In Poland in 1989, a year of a literary turning point, there was an 'explosion' of women authors labelled as "menstrual literature" by male critics and writers like Jan Błoński – who is believed to have coined the term – and Andrzej Stasiuk (Filipiak 1999). They aimed to show the 'monstrosity' of both the eccentric female characters represented in this kind of literature and the authors themselves, because they were both violating taboos. The journalist Bożena Umińska comments on the review of Maria Bigoszewska's poem by Andrzej Stasiuk, implied in the "menstrual literature" tag. This label seemed to indicate something of little value to the male writer, "babskość, maciczność, fizjologiczność kobiecą, czyli coś, co z definicji jest gorsze i drugorzędne"[2] (ibid.). Even though nobody had ever mentioned 'male literature' before, during these years much attention was paid to the so-called 'feminist literature'. Moreover, various male Polish writers seemed convinced that poetry "była trudnym, acz cenionym kunsztem" and "znała kilku

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[2] "la femminilità, l'utero, la fisiologia della donna, cioè qualcosa che per definizione è peggiore e di secondo piano" (Filipiak 2005, 207. Translated from Polish by Amenta).

mistrzów"[3] (ibid.) who were largely male. Amongst the most well-known 'monstrous' women writers of that time were Izabela Filipak, Magdalena Tulli, and Olga Tokarczuk.

2. The Taboo of Physical Hybridism

The 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature winner, Olga Tokarczuk, has been included in the "menstrual literature" phenomenon due to her portrayal of eccentric female personalities in many of her works (ibid.). Her novels and tales often host bizarre characters with unusual features exhibited through physically deformed and hybrid bodies, rebellious attitudes, and unconventional behaviour, paying particular attention to the most vulnerable categories of the anthropocentric and androcentric society, such as women, foreigners, plants, and animals[4]. Two of the most noteworthy hybrid identities in her works are Wilga, or Saint Kummernis, from the collection *House of Day, House of Night* (1998), this latter representing the figure of the woman-man, and The Ugliest Woman in the World from *Playing on Many Drums* (2001) designating the woman-animal.

   The story of Wilga, the first character, unfolds through different short tales by a fictional writer, a monk who happens to find a booklet about her life in the village of Wambierzyce. According to the author's words, Wilga's initial flaw is her gender. Her father seems disappointed that she is a woman because he considers her the weaker sex: "Kummernis was born imperfect in her father's eyes, but only according to a human understanding of imperfection – for her father longed for a son" (Tokarczuk 2003, 52). Being a woman means being seen as imperfect in the eyes of the patriarchal society[5]. This is because women naturally embody diversity and are seen as deviating from the norm due to the significant bodily changes they experience, such as lactation, menstruation, and pregnancy, which men do not experience[6].

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[3] "era un'arte difficile"; "aveva diversi maestri" (ibid., 204).
[4] See also Chowaniec 2015, 183-94; De Carlo 2017, 119-31; Świerkosz 2022, 346-67; Witosz 2009, 115-25.
[5] For further analysis of the female sex perceived as a lack in patriarchal society see Cixous 1975.

However, Wilga grows up, becomes a beautiful young woman and receives numerous marriage proposals. Her attractiveness meets the expectations of the patriarchal female stereotype, according to which women should attract men's eyes, get their attention, and be the object of their desire[7]. As soon as her father returns from the wars, he arranges marriages for all his daughters, except for Kummernis, who is sent to a convent where she finds peace and the true meaning of her life. But her father is convinced that her fate, like the one of all women, is to marry. So, after some time, he settles to make her marry a friend from the wars, Wolfram von Pannewitz. She refuses because she wants to take her vows in the convent. After a series of adventures that lead her to her home and then to the mountains before returning to the convent, she is kidnapped by her father and her intended husband even though she has already taken her vows. To force Kummernis to marry Wolfram, the girl is locked in a windowless room without food or water. She feels that her beauty has become a heavy burden and the cause of all her troubles. One day, she asks God to help her and to free her from her feminine aspect, because it no longer holds any meaning for her:

> You provided me, O Lord, with my sex and my woman's body, which has been a bone of contention and a source of all manner of desire. Deliver me, O Lord, from this gift, for I do not know what I am to do with it. Take back my beauty and give me a sign of covenant that You love me too, unworthy as I am, and have destined me for Yourself since birth. (ibid., 62)

After the request, the miracle happens and Wilga's face changes into that of a bearded man. Waiting for her to change her mind, Kummernis' father encourages her future husband to force her to marry him by any means possible, which highlights the patriarchal tradition of controlling women's sexual and social lives by the 'male elders' (Lerner 1986). Convinced by the words that the girl's father had told him, Wolfram enters the girl's room and is left in a state of complete shock:

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[6] For further analysis of the role of the female body, see Butler 1993; Shildrick 1996, 1-15; Wehrle 2016, 323-37.

[7] For further analysis of the objectification of women's bodies, see Dworkin 1974; MacKinnon 1987; MacKinnon 1989, 314-46; Papadaki 2010, 16-36.

> In the windowless room stood Kummernis. But it was not the same woman that they all knew. Her face was covered with a silky beard and her hair fell flowing to her shoulders. From the tattered bodice of her dress there protruded two naked, girlish breasts. (Tokarczuk 2003, 63)

Her transformation seems to refer to the figure of Lamia, a popular mythical creature from Greek mythology who is portrayed, for instance, in *The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents* (1658), a collection of illustrations of legendary specimens created by the clergyman Edward Topsell. In the book, this creature is depicted with a phallus, which today could be interpreted as an allusion to a transgender identity. In the light of this figure, Saint Kummernis can also represent a transgender character becoming taboo because of her ambiguous traits associated with a non-normative and indefinite identity halfway between woman and man[8]. The taboo of the new hybrid protagonist is encouraged by the horror it causes to people like Wolfram, who cannot help but feel fear and rejection, making Kummernis the anthesis of the female stereotype:

> His face was the picture of horror – he was opening and closing his mouth, and pointing behind him. The din in the hall fell completely silent. The baron sprang to his feet and rushed in the direction of Wolfram's pointing finger, and after him slipped the curious guests, servants and musicians. (ibid.)

Also, the radical transformation of Kummernis is better understood by the change of her name from 'Wilga' to 'Kummernis', which underlines a deeper identity mutation, as if she had become a new living being.

A physical hybrid aspect is also presented by The Ugliest Woman in the World, the protagonist of the short story in the collection *Playing on Many Drums* (2001)[9]. The Ugliest Woman, whose first name is unknown, is described as a horrible creature who works in a circus shocking people and making them laugh by exploiting her disturbing and terrible body, which is similar to that of a monkey:

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[8] See also Larenta 2020, 83-113.

[9] As a result of the unavailability of the collection translated into English, the bibliographical references will be given using the volume which contains the English version of the short story by Olga Tokarczuk (Hemon 2011, 179-92).

She had a large head covered in growths and lumps. Her small, ever-tearing eyes were set close under her low, furrowed brow. From a distance they looked like narrow chinks. Her nose looked as if it was broken in many places, and its tip was a livid blue, covered in sparse bristles. Her mouth was huge and swollen, always hanging open, always wet, with some sharply pointed teeth inside it. To top it all of, as if that wasn't enough, her face sprouted long, straggling, silken hairs. (Tokarczuk 2001, 179-80)

The taboo lies not only in the issue of categorisation proposed by Cohen, but also in the combination of human and animal elements, which suggests a union of two normally separate realities: civilisation and nature[10]. When humans surpass the limitations imposed by their society, they become monsters difficult to control because they enter a natural world that is unknown to them. In this respect, the deformity of the woman seems particularly threatening not only because of its complex classification, but also because it is the outcome of nature, a complex whole with different laws (Diehm 2007). Early ecofeminist and ecocritical scholars, such as Carolyn Merchant (1980) and Val Plumwood (1993), highlighted the historical association of women with nature, emotions, and the body, in contrast to men's association with culture, logic, and the mind. However, this binary framework has been extensively criticised to reinforce essentialist notions of gender and potentially reify problematic nature/culture dualisms. Contemporary scholars like Stacy Alaimo (2010) and Catriona Sandilands (1999) have called for more nuanced approaches that take into account the entanglements of gender, nature, and culture. These approaches emphasise the 'fluidity' of these categories and their social construction, and also acknowledge the material realities of bodies and environments. Moreover, intersectional ecofeminism (Kings 2017) highlights how experiences of nature and embodiment are shaped not only by gender, but also by race, class, and other social factors, complicating simplistic gender-nature associations. Thus, the whole composition of animal and female features makes the ape-woman extremely frightening (Gaard 1993; Poks 2023). The woman's appearance is so unbearable in its deformity and ambiguity that people feel horror when looking at her (Mellor 1992):

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[10] See also Haraway 2008.

The first time he saw her she emerged from behind the cardboard scenery of a traveling circus to show herself to the audience. A cry of surprise and disgust went rolling over the heads of the crowd and fell at her feet. She may have been smiling, but it looked like a woeful grimace. (Tokarczuk 2001, 180)

Despite her terrible aspect, the woman is married to a man who has incessantly pursued her with flowers and gifts. As the story unfolds, he turns out to be an impostor because he uses the marriage as a business opportunity to exploit her horrific body as a freak show. He therefore organizes tours and meetings all over the country, exploiting her for money:

They began the next season on their own. He had some photographs of her taken and distributed them worldwide. The bookings came by telegraph. They had numerous appearances and travelled first class. She always wore a hat with a heavy, grey veil, from behind which she saw Rome, Venice, and the Champs-Élysées. He bought her several dresses, and laced up her corset himself, so when they walked down the crowded streets of the cities of Europe, they looked like a proper human couple. (ibid., 187)

Besides, he demonstrates that he has to fight against the disgust he has always felt when looking at her. He seems to feel slightly better when he keeps watching her because he 'gets used' to her abnormality:

He needed this spying, because day by day his disgust was lessening, melting in the sun, disappearing like a puddle on a hot afternoon. Gradually his eyes were growing used to the painful asymmetry of her, the broken proportions, all her shortcomings and excesses. Sometimes he even thought she looked ordinary. (ibid., 184)

Her husband is so haunted by her aspect that he vilifies her through story tales alluding to her, which lets the reader understand what he truly thinks about her. Furthermore, his disgust is so utter that it prevents him from touching her and being intimate with her, which recalls the "dread of contact" of ancient civilisations mentioned above:

"Let's go now, my love," she whispered in his ear. But he clung to the edge of the table, as if pinned to it by invisible tacks. The more observant guests might have assumed he was simply afraid of being intimate with her, naked—afraid of the obligatory post-nuptial intimacy. Was that in fact the case? "Touch my face," she asked him in the darkness, but he wouldn't do it. (ibid., 185)

Nonetheless, after the marriage, he has an intimate relationship with her and has a child who resembles an animal and is as scary as his wife.

3. The Taboo of Disruptive Behaviour

The physical hybridity of the two protagonists is accompanied by deviant behaviour which substantially contributes to the rejection of the standard female patriarchal stereotype and turns the two women into objects of taboo. As far as Wilga is concerned, she is destined to marry and has no other choice, like all girls her age. According to the society's androcentric tendency, women had to be 'passed' on from one master (the father) to another (the husband)[11], as also her father remarks (Lerner 1986): "So he said to her: In the body, you belong to the world and you have no other lord and master than me" (Tokarczuk 2003, 56). However, she dislikes her promised husband Wolfram and does not want to marry and have a family, but to take the vows and stay in the convent. Not only is this a groundbreaking decision, but she also resists her father's impositions and decides to flee from her house against his will, refusing to satisfy his expectations when he brings her back home after a period spent with the nuns. This is unusual behaviour for a young girl who could not be independent and rebel against her father's desires. Moreover, according to patriarchal stereotypes, women are supposed to have a mild and condescending character, whose purpose is to satisfy all men's requests (Frye 1983). Women become dangerous and rebellious when they revolt against male control and the "logic of domination" (Warren 2000).

These manifestations of transgression against the traditional canon are blocked by attempts at submission and restoration of the norm through the reinforcement of the taboo, put into action by different characters. For instance, the main measures taken by the father of Kummernis consist of various forms of violence. Amongst the most common strategies of oppression are "reduction, immobilisation, and molding" (Li 1993, 285). In Kummernis' case, her father uses "immobilisation": "The *immobilization* of women eventually reduces their own needs, values, and capacities" (ibid.). To

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[11] For further analysis on women linked with social justice, see Nussbaum 1999; Nussbaum 2002, 398-403; Okin 1979.

make his daughter marry his friend, the father imprisons her to control and convince her to accept his orders:

> So he incited Wolfram and together they committed a terrible sacrilege – by force of arms they attacked the convent where Kummernis was living, recaptured her, tied her to a horse and kidnapped her. Despite the fact that she begged and implored them, reminding them over and over that she no longer belonged to the world but to Jesus Christ. They ignored all her pleas, locked her up in a windowless room and left her alone for some time, so that her will would be crushed and her belief in marriage would return. (Tokarczuk 2003, 61)

However, Kummernis' father cannot accept her rebellious behaviour and uses violence as a strategy of oppression to dominate her: "Oppressive institutions use various tools of subjugation (e.g., violence, threats, exploitation, colonization, exclusion) to reinforce the power and privilege of Ups in oppressive systems and to enforce the subordination or domination of Downs" (Warren 2000, 54-55). His punishment becomes even more extreme after seeing her face changed and her future husband gone. Mad with rage, he kills his daughter in the same way Jesus was executed:

> Blinded by rage, he threw himself upon her, and shouting oaths, he stabbed her with a dagger. But even this was not enough for him, so he raised her body and nailed it crucified to the roof beams, crying out as he did so: If God is within you, then die like God. (Tokarczuk 2003, 67)

Also, in "The Ugliest Woman", the protagonist rebels against her husband: in effect, when she discovers his escapades from time to time to drink and meet prostitutes, she blames him for his behaviour. The protagonist transgresses the female stereotype according to which women are passive, while men are believed to have a more active temperament (Mills 2003). In this case as well the weapon employed by the Ugliest Woman's husband to suppress her revolt is violence:

> He'd start sweating and choking, and so take a wad of cash, grab his hat, and run down the stairs, soon finding himself, unerringly, slumped in one of the dives near the port. Here he'd relax, his face would go slack, his hair would get ruffled, and the bald patch usually hidden under his slicked-down locks would emerge insolently for all to see. Innocently and joyfully he would sit and drink, letting himself ramble on, until finally some persistent prostitute would rob him blind.

The first time the Ugliest Woman reproached him for his behavior, he punched her in the stomach, because even now he was afraid to touch her face. (Tokarczuk 2001, 188)

In addition, the husband's exploitation of her horrific aspect to make money, and exhibit her as if she were a freak show and an object he possesses, represents a strategy of oppression similar to 'colonisation' which is generally used to refer to the body of women. His domination and control over the Ugliest Woman continue even when she becomes pregnant because he starts thinking about the profit he could make from this event:

When he came back several days later, he had ideas for their itinerary and promotional engagements all ready. He wrote to the professor and arranged for a photographer to call, who with hands shaking through flash after flash of magnesium recorded the monstrous ugliness of both creatures. (ibid., 190)

This exploitation is rational and deprived of any form of emotion, whereas, in front of her pregnant belly, even the audience no longer considers her unsightliness. People become more and more interested in her story and start to feel sympathy for her:

"Ladies and gentlemen, here we have a freak of nature, a mutant, an error of evolution, the real missing link. Specimens of this kind are very rare. The probability of one being born is about as miniscule as the likelihood of a meteor hitting this very spot as I speak!" […] Her belly gave the audience courage, and made it easier for them to forgive her monstrous ugliness. They started asking her questions, which she would answer shyly in a quiet, unconvincing way. Their closer acquaintances began to make bets on what sort of child she'd have and whether it would be a boy or a girl. She took it all as meekly as a lamb. (ibid., 188)

His feelings do not change even at the end of her life, when she and her child fall ill with the Spanish flu. On this occasion, not knowing what to do, the husband calls a scientist who had already examined her, and brings the two inanimate bodies to him, where he is offered money to carry out further studies:

Afterward the professor handed him a piece of paper and the widower signed it with his right hand, taking the money with his left. But that same day, before vanishing into the port, he helped the professor to transport the bodies by carriage to the university clinic, where soon after they were secretly stuffed. (ibid., 192)

The final taboo characterising these figures concerns their extraordinary abilities which pertain to their disturbing behaviour, especially for a patriarchal mindset. As for Kummernis, her faith in God gives her the supernatural power to perform miracles. The monk describes two of them. Firstly, the Saint heals some children who had eaten poisonous mushrooms and, lastly, she cures a man possessed by the Devil:

> When his family brought him to the saint, she leaned over him and spoke a few words in his ear. Those present heard how she addressed the Devil that inhabited the unfortunate man. They conversed for a while, and then suddenly the Devil left the sick man through his mouth, and was seen bolting into the forest in the shape of a wolf. The man recovered and lived in health and happiness to a ripe old age. (Tokarczuk 2003, 58)

Similarly, the Ugliest Woman seems to be particularly intelligent, a characteristic remarked precisely by her future husband who seems shocked. As a woman (and an animal-like individual), he envisions her to be emotional rather than cerebral, in line with patriarchal expectations:

> […] he found her to be quite clever. Of course, she could speak, and make perfect sense too. He observed her closely, wrestling with his fascination with this freak of nature. She could see right through him. […] She was making witty remarks, she was coherent and specific – not at all what he'd been expecting. (Tokarczuk 2001, 180)

But above all, what truly shocks the man is when the woman exercises her most natural and scary power: childbirth. In effect, the Ugliest Woman completes this incomprehensible 'ritual' alone, without any help, resembling an animal more than ever:

> She gave birth in the night, without any fuss, quietly, like an animal. The midwife only came to cut the umbilical cord […] The child was horrible, even worse than the mother. He had to close his eyes to keep from retching. Only much later did he satisfy himself that the newborn child was a girl, as the mother had proclaimed. (ibid., 190)

4. Conclusions: The Message of the Monsters

The phenomenon of the purported "menstrual literature" seems to unveil a feeling of threat in male writers caused by female authors' determination to affirm themselves in the literary scene. This tag reveals the everlasting conflict between men and women, the dichotomy constructed by patriarchy that has separated culture from nature, mind from body, and reason from emotion. In the 90s, in Poland, the association of the rising number of female writers with menstruation, an obscure and non-controllable condition guarding the power of giving birth, brought to light men's feelings of fear, anxiety, and jealousy towards women's power. Hence, the reason why male individuals feel the need to control them through the establishment of stereotypes is to blur their visibility and eccentricity, under penalty of being regarded as a taboo. According to Freud's research, this concept aims at safeguarding the rules imposed by a given society while censuring the horrible creatures and dangerous practices that turn our world, namely Western societies, upside down. Monsters seem to be created for the same reason: as Cohen argues, these figures were born precisely to express the frightening and unacceptable impulses of humankind and to show the community that breaking a rule is a cause of problems. Monsters and taboos serve to defend civilisation and keep potential threats at a distance, sublimating horrific figures into frightening beings. As explained above, dread is caused by deviance from a norm and women have always been considered 'anomalous' in comparison to men. In a patriarchal society, female figures can be accepted but only under special conditions, or under precise models which gave them only the chance to be mild, tranquil objects of desire, dependent on men's lives. The heroines of "menstrual literature", like Saint Kummernis and the Ugliest Woman in the World depicted as subversives just as their creators, have courageously fought against the prejudices and all strategies of oppression. They have proclaimed themselves revolutionary through their hybrid and terrifying physical aspects, and their rebellious behaviour towards the anthropocentrism and androcentrism that made them taboo objects and thus monsters. Jeffrey Cohen writes: "These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have

misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression" (Cohen 1996, 21). As demonstrated in the analyzed works, Tokarczuk challenges the patriarchal stereotype of women by representing hybrid, deformed and monstrous female characters who defy their traditional perception as weak and passive objects of desire.

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Taboos, Prohibitions and Secrets in Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*

ABSTRACT

The Speckled People, the 2003 memoir by Hugo Hamilton, narrates the growth of little Hanno from childhood in the 1950s in Ireland to early manhood. The family life pivots on the major taboo dominating their home: the absolute prohibition on the use of English, implemented through harsh punishments. This taboo is functional to the reversal of Irish history planned by his nationalist father. The present article aims to analyse the consequences of this taboo for the protagonist. This ban on the use of English has devastating psychological consequences for Hanno: a perennial sense of displacement, constant queries about himself and where he belongs and the impossibility of making friends.
The father's original taboo, detrimental to his own identity, is his planned oblivion of his own father, because he served in the British Navy during WWW I and spoke English – a taboo issue in Irish society until at least the 1980s.

KEYWORDS: Taboo; language; nationalism; identity; silence.

The Speckled People is a best-selling memoir published by Hugo Hamilton in 2003 which tells the story of young Hanno and his family. The title is explained at the beginning: Hanno and his siblings have a German mother and an Irish father, an uncommon predicament in Ireland in the 1950s, which their father defines as their being 'speckled': "speckled, dappled, flecked, spotted, coloured" (Hamilton 2003, 7). Trying to resort to words familiar to their experience, he

explains that they are "Brack home-made Irish bread with German raisins" (ibid.), brack coming from the Gaelic breac, an adjective, moreover, with very positive connotations in Irish culture. In the memoir, however, Hanno's (and his siblings') predicament is quite the opposite. Instead of representing a source of richness, their multicultural and multilingual condition proves to be extremely difficult, as "this mixed heritage confines rather than liberat[e] the author." (Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 15) As Hamilton makes clear in his essay "Speaking to the Walls in English", "that idea of cultural mixture became an ordeal for us, full of painful and comic cultural entanglements out of which we have been trying to find some sense of belonging ever since"[1]. Indeed, Hamilton has claimed in several interviews that "My writing came from an attempt to explore that difficult issue of belonging" (Allen Randolph 2010, 14). The purpose of the present work is to show the difficulties and pain resulting from the taboos inflicted on him and on his siblings by their father's authoritarian dominance.

1. "A battle over language"[2]

The phrase "A battle over language", taken from Hermione Lee's review for *The Guardian*, is a very simple but apt definition of the memoir. In fact, language – the use and the prohibition of language – is at the core of Hugo Hamilton's work.

Notably, *The Speckled People* revolves around a major taboo established by the protagonist's father: the use of English is absolutely forbidden at home. As the interdict is not on more likely issues like death, sex or religion, it might seem a minor prohibition, but the children are subjected to a strict code of linguistic behaviour and have to move carefully between what is allowed and what is forbidden. They are allowed to speak only Irish or German – their home language – while their mother, who knows English, does not speak Irish, which excludes her from a whole area of communication, also testifying to the imbalance of power in the family.

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[1] Hamilton 2005.
[2] Lee 2003.

The strict linguistic rules within the family create an atmosphere of watchfulness – "we have to be careful in our house and think before we speak" (Hamilton 2003, 28) –, of insecurity: "In our house, it's dangerous to sing a song or say what's inside your head. You have to be careful or else my father will get up and switch you off like the radio" (ibid., 80), but also a pervasive sense of danger and confusion. As a result, "the apparently safe domestic spaces [of the family home] conventionally characterized as nurturing" (Reeds 2016, 429) turn out to be a site of implacable repressive authority.

Taboo is a social phenomenon, and the community on which it is enforced in this case is the family. Besides, taboo hinges on language and is closely connected to silence, to what can and what cannot be said. In the case of the Hamilton children what cannot be said is, first of all, English words, even if they are harmless words, or rhymes that fascinate them. At a certain stage, for example, Hanno is fixed on the trochaic rhythm of what seems to be an ad, "don't forget the fruit gums, chum" (ibid., 157), for him these are "my secret words" (ibid.) and he simply cannot resist repeating them. The father's reaction to this harmless advertising slogan magnifies his absurd and obsessive strictness, so that when the children break his rules, the punishments are appalling, even if their infringements are not serious or if the siblings are unaware of doing something wrong. He also punishes or scolds them if they listen, even without speaking, to English words: to songs on the radio, or to other kids on the street.

As language is intertwined with the construction of identity, the consequence of this relentless imposition is an ingrained sense of not belonging. Growing up between an idealised Ireland dreamt by his father and the real Ireland rejected by him, Hanno is confused, he is dislocated, and does not know where home is: "When you're small you know nothing. You don't know where you are, or who you are, or what questions to ask" (ibid., 2). Paradoxically, he "becomes metaphorically homeless without ever leaving the place of his birth", in that, according to Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh, he "personifies the plight of the migrant", for whom "home constitutes a fundamental locus of trauma and alienation, for home is always an imagined space which serves only to remind the migrant subject what he has lost" (Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 117). As a matter of fact, *The Speckled People* was published at

a time when Irish society had deeply changed since Hamilton's youth and had become a widely multicultural society, as in the Celtic Tiger period – roughly from the mid-1990s to the economic recession in 2008 – Ireland became a country of immigration from other countries, thus reversing its history of emigration.

For the Hamilton children real Ireland, the place outside their house, where people do not speak Irish, is "a foreign country where they don't have our language and nobody will understand us" (Hamilton 2003, 5), since "everything out there is spoken in English. Out there is a different country, far away" (ibid., 8).

The family – or rather, their father's – rules inevitably mark them as different: "Outside you have to be careful, too, because you can't buy an ice pop in German or in Irish, and lots of people only know the words of the Garda and the workers" (ibid., 29), that is English, because most people in Ireland in the 1950s and '60s only speak English. But these children must be truly Irish as well as German, they are children "wearing lederhosen and Aran sweaters, […] Irish on top and German below" (ibid., 2). They move in and out of Germany and Ireland: "When I was small I woke up in Germany. […] Then I got up and looked out the window and saw Ireland" (ibid., 1).

Their linguistic interdiction goes with the absolute prohibition of making friends with kids who speak English, so that the children are ostracised as they cannot play with other children in the neighbourhood. The latter, on the other hand, see their imposed multicultural identity – half Irish and half German – as different and unlikeable and so reject and bully them, accusing them of being Nazis, making an equation between Germans at large and Nazis. They beat Hanno and his brother Franz, and stage a mock trial in which Hanno is accused of being Eichmann, the war criminal whose trial was held in Jerusalem in 1961.

The choking taboo dominating the family is alluded to metaphorically halfway through the memoir: one day their mother, in order to save some money, "bought a big tongue from the butcher, a cow's tongue which she said was very cheap and tasty" (ibid., 157). They looked at it "curled up in a big jar" and Hanno "thought of what it would be like to put your tongue in the vice, because that's what my mother said she would have to do with the cow's tongue" (ibid.). This passage also refers back to the epigraph of the memoir

which the author chose from the first volume of Canetti's autobiography, *The Tongue Set Free*: "I wait for the command to show my tongue. I know he's going to cut it off, and I get more and more scared each time". The tongue (the cow's tongue) put in the vice is a metaphor for Hanno's (and his siblings') tongue, put in a metaphorical vice by their father's taboo and silenced.

2. Nationalism

The father's stand on the Irish language is due to his nationalism. He wants to reverse Irish history and he is determined to pursue his project at all costs; "he's in a hurry to do all the things that are still left unfinished in Ireland" (ibid., 104). He has pursued it unsuccessfully since his youth: he changed his name from English to Irish – from Hamilton to the Gaelic Ó hUrmoltaigh – making it almost impossible to pronounce, with inevitable and somehow exhilarating consequences[3]. As Hanno reflects:

> It's the name that causes all the trouble. The Irish name: Ó hUrmoltaigh.
> People jump back with a strange expression and ask you to say it again. They don't really trust anything Irish yet.
> 'What's that in English?' They ask. (ibid., 109)

He made speeches at street corners trying to convince people "but he started speaking in Irish, and not everybody understood what he was saying" (ibid., 39).

When he created his own family, he decided that it would be the first 'cell' of a new Ireland that would then expand to the rest of the country. That's why Hanno, repeating his father's words, says that "we are the new country, the new Irish" (ibid.), but this new Ireland "depends […] on the construction of an idealized past" (Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 120), the past as it should have been. His father's nostalgy for an Ireland that never was is, according to Tatiana Bicjutko, "the embodiment of nostalgia defined by Linda Hutcheon as one 'that teaches us to miss things we have never lost'" (Bicjutko 2008, 30-31). His children must

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[3] When the father tries to increase his income selling things, he fails, because he demands that people pronounce and write it correctly but they can't, so he refuses to sell them "party hats and crackers" (ibid., 108), which they would be very interested in buying, and he in selling, as he needs the money, but principles are principles.

speak Irish "Because your language is your home and your language is your country" (Hamilton 2003, 161). Hanno's father is obsessed by Irish history and its injustices, like the Famine, or the loss of the Irish language. He wants to "make Ireland a better place to live" (ibid., 100), and long before the Celtic Tiger period, when this phenomenon actually took place, he wants to reverse emigration – "he doesn't want the song about emigration to go on forever" (ibid.) – and to bring people to Ireland, instead of having Irish people go away, scattered all over the world. This makes Hanno think "that's why he married my mother and now she's the one who does all the dreaming and singing about being far away from home" (ibid., 33). Ironically, in the authoritarian zeal with which he carries out his project he "replicates many of the abuses of power typical of colonial and dictatorial regimes" (Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 119).

He has imposed the language taboo because, along with history, he wants to reverse the destiny of the Irish language, since it is his belief that only going back to Irish all the unresolved issues in Ireland can be settled. Only speaking Irish again can the Irish people feel at home at last. He refers to the loss of the Irish language as due to a weakening of the language: seeing the world in terms of power dynamics, he speaks of powerful vs. weak languages[4]. Accordingly, referring to the Ordnance Survey of the 1830s and the Anglicization of Gaelic placenames, he tells his children that when their language became weak the people lost their way, because they "didn't know where they were going any more, because the names of the streets and villages were changed into English. People lost their way because they didn't recognise the landscape around them. […] They were homeless. […] and ashamed" (Hamilton 2003, 160).

In order to improve their fluency as part of his linguistic policy and to show his family how beautiful it is to live in an Irish-speaking community, the whole family dutifully goes on holiday to the Gaeltacht, with some hilarious episodes, and Hanno and Franz later on spend the whole summer there in order "to be as Irish as possible" (ibid., 230). The result is that when he goes back to school, Hanno is so fluent in Irish "that the principal said I should be on television as an example of how history could be turned back" (ibid., 236).

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[4] As Hamilton (n.d.) writes in "Speaking to the Walls in English": "My father saw it as a matter of winning and losing, surviving or going into extinction". http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/hamilton.html (7/10/2005) (no longer retrievable).

But this, again, marks him as different, because, as Hanno knows, "Nobody really wanted to be that Irish" (ibid.).

Nationalism and the taboo on the use of English are closely interwoven, and they dominate the family life both through explicit prohibitions and through unspoken rules about issues which cannot be openly addressed. When the children break the rules, even unknowingly, the father is wrathful and punishes them for their own good. He either reacts immediately and violently, or he brings them upstairs, makes them kneel down and prays "that he was doing the right thing for Ireland" (ibid., 158). He tells them this is a necessary sacrifice:

> one day when he heard that I had brought English words into the house, he was very angry. […] My father knew what to do. He picked out a stick in the greenhouse and said we had to make a sacrifice. (ibid.)

He tells Hanno that he has asked God "how many lashes he thought was fair" and "heard God saying fifteen and not one less" (ibid.). This passage is both appalling and funny at the same time, because, with the naïve directness of a child, Hanno silently comments that "I was hoping that God said no lashes, because I didn't mean it and maybe it was better for Ireland to give me a last chance" (ibid.). His father had previously beaten and broken Franz's nose because, while walking on a brick wall he had made, he sang a harmless singsong in English "Walk on the wall, walk on the wall" (ibid., 29). His outright refusal of anything English is also ruthlessly enforced in the paranoiac rejection of a neighbour's gift to the children of Remembrance Day poppies.

His father's relentless overbearing behaviour arouses the protagonist's anger, for which he blames himself as he cannot rationally understand it. His anger is an issue he has increasingly to come to terms with, but it will take Hanno a long time to realise it is a reaction to his father's vexations, and not a feature of his own evil nature. As a matter of fact, anger was his predominant feeling when Hamilton started to write *The Speckled People*: he began writing from the point of view of an adult, but had to give up, because, as he explained in a 2004 interview, he "noticed that I was writing out of prejudice and anger.

Time and again I realised that if the story was to be told at all, it had to be told through the child's voice"[5].

3. Things Unspoken

Apart from the explicit prohibition on the use of English, there is one topic which the father has had no need to prohibit because it has always been kept hidden, and therefore the children are unaware of it. It concerns his own father, of whom the children ignore everything, even his existence, and who gives the title to the following memoir by Hamilton: *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, 2006[6]. Just by chance, looking and nosing around in their parents' room, fascinated by objects like old coins and medals, the children discover the picture of a sailor "with soft eyes" (Hamilton 2003, 13) hidden at the bottom of their father's wardrobe. They see his "waterproof identity papers" (ibid., 11) and find out that he was their father's father, of whom they had never heard.

> Some things are not good to know in Ireland. I had no idea that I had an Irish grandfather who couldn't even speak Irish. His name was John Hamilton and he belonged to the navy, the British navy, the Royal Navy. (ibid., 12)

His whole existence was kept hidden from the Hamilton children because his son has never forgiven him for having joined the British Army, even though Ireland was then part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland; moreover, he has not forgiven him for not speaking Irish. The children know nothing of him because while the pictures of their German grandparents hang in the front room, and their mother lovingly and repeatedly talks about them, there are no pictures of their Irish grandparents in the house. After the discovery of the photograph, Hanno reflects that "Our German grandparents are dead, but our Irish grandparents are dead and forgotten" (ibid.). This also confuses him, but he understands the reason for this secret: their father "didn't want any of us to know that he had a father in the navy who could not speak Irish and once stood in a war against the Germans, when his own country was still not free" (ibid., 14-15). John Hamilton, the sailor grandfather, embodies

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[5] Casal 2009, 55-71, 61n1.

[6] *The Harbour Boys* is the title of the American edition.

one of the taboos in Irish society until at least the nineteen eighties, which concerns those who joined the British Army during the First World War (MacBride 2001; Brearton 2000), what Haughey calls "the Great Amnesia" (Haughey 2012, 61). When they came back from the War, they often met with fierce hostility: a wide range of the population and the new free State organisation were against them; the social stigma was not attached to their linguistic abilities, but to having served in the British Army. As a result, even the construction of commemorative monuments to the fallen in World War I were delayed and often not placed in city centres in what became the Republic, while they were duly commemorated in the North. They too were cancelled and forgotten.

The consequence of the taboo on their grandfather is that, even after seeing his picture, which caused the anger of their father, they were not able to remember him because he was never mentioned again. This once more stresses the crucial role of language: "We didn't know how to remember him, and like him, we lost our memory" (ibid., 15). As a matter of fact, their father's policy is not to talk about certain – several – subjects; there are no explicit rules to guide the children, but the underlying principle is that "The only thing was to stop talking about them and they would go away" (ibid., 54). The practice confuses the protagonist, also because mistakes are harshly punished, so that, as a result, "I don't know what to tell or not to talk about any more. […] it's hard to know what's right and wrong" (ibid., 50). As a consequence, the children have "started doing a lot of things that make no sense" (ibid.). For example, his brother Franz "One day […] put stones in his ears and he couldn't hear anything any more" (ibid.). Hanno, in turn, "started throwing the toy cars in the fire" (ibid.).

There are subjects of which both parents do not want to speak, but their attitude, in this as in most other areas, is very different. Apart from the taboo around his own father, the father also wants to keep hidden from his family, especially from his wife, that when he wrote for an extreme right-wing radical nationalist newspaper – "*Aiséirí*, which is the Irish for resurrection" (ibid., 116) – he wrote antisemitic articles. One in particular, entitled "Ireland's Jewish Problem" which he wrote immediately after the war in 1946, resulted in the police closing the newspaper office.

What Hanno's mother cannot talk about is the repeated rapes she suffered in Germany during the war. She still feels trapped in the past, "as though the film is never over and she'll never escape" (ibid., 19), in Hanno's words, and she cannot give voice to her trauma. She tells her children that "Everything can be repaired […] except your memory" (ibid., 153). His mother's feeling of being trapped in the past, of not being able to escape, with several hints that she is also trapped in the present, as the dictatorial behaviour of her husband recalls aspects of Nazi Germany, are constantly reiterated throughout the memoir. After a trip to visit her sister in Germany she brings back a typewriter, and she starts keeping a diary; referring to his mother typing Hanno uses an onomatopoeic verb to reproduce the noise when she presses the keys:

> She's *lettetetting* and *lettetetting* because there's a story that she can't tell anyone, not even my father. You can't be afraid of silence, she says. And stories you have to write down are different to stories that you tell people out loud, because they're harder to explain and you have to wait for the right moment. The only thing she can do is to write them down on paper for us to read later on. 'To my children' she writes. 'One day, when you're old enough, you will understand what happened to me, how I got trapped in Germany and couldn't help myself.' (ibid., 68)

Unlike Hanno's father, Irmgard, his mother, shows and also teaches the children the healing power of words: while he imposes silence, she fixes difficult situations, or her children's diseases, with stories (and also hugs and cakes). Stories are helpful, because they can offer a shelter: "Everybody has a story to hide behind, my mother says" (ibid., 196). Hanno perceptively thinks that his "mother tells stories like that because there are other stories she can't tell. When it's silent, she thinks of all the things she has to keep secret" (ibid., 203).

4. Silence and Words

Hanno can find a shelter from language and pain only in silence, which is present both as a "narrative element or a textual strategy […] in the work of contemporary [Irish] writers" (Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero 2023, 1). In the memoir under scrutiny silence is a form of resistance against authority

and the damaging "effects of taboos and prohibitions" (ibid., 2-3). It is, in M.T.Caneda-Cabrera and J.Carregal-Romero's words, "the most effective 'sabotage' against normative discourses" (ibid., 4). In "Speaking to the Walls in English" (n.d.), Hamilton claims that

> All I can remember doing as a child was hiding. I developed ways in which I could conceal myself from the world, ways in which I could be invisible and not have to face the issues of identity, the most effective of which was remaining silent, in my own imagination. We became very isolated and reticent.

Silence is also an answer to fear, an increasing fear of the threat voiced through Elias Canetti's words in the epigraph of having his tongue cut off. Yet silence can also can also have positive connotations: for Hanno the locus of liberating silence is mainly underwater, "where there was no language only the humming bubbles all around" (Hamilton 2003, 194), so that underwater becomes a place of freedom, where he is not imposed any language, because there is no need of language: "I have to go swimming a lot and dive underwater and stay down there as long as I can. I have to learn to hold my breath as long as I can and live underwater where there's no language" (ibid., 290). He is very good at resisting underwater: "I could stay under until my lungs were bursting, until I nearly died and had to come up for words" (ibid., 194). Here Hanno replaces and thus equates breathing air, necessary for life, to words, which are therefore revealed as necessary for him, although he tries to free himself from them.

Also rain favours freedom for Hanno: "All of us dreaming and sheltering from the words, speaking no language at all, just listening to the voice of the rain falling […] and the water continued to whisper […] like the only language allowed" (ibid., 181).

As their life revolves around a linguistic taboo, the memoir foregrounds Hanno's emphasis on language and the narrator interprets the world or the actions of people around him in terms of communication: when he sees his father making a big fire in the garden after he broke Fritz's nose, this seems to him "as if he wanted to send a message around the whole world with smoke" (ibid., 31). As the gardener, like all workers, speaks English, he mentions him as clipping the hedges in English. As a consequence of his father's tyrannical

behaviour, Hanno develops serious breathing problems, and his chest 'howls', as if trying to express what he cannot say. A key figure in the memoir – which is the source of the title of the Italian translation, *Il cane che abbaiava alle onde* – is the stray dog that keeps barking as if wanting to say something to the waves. Even "the people who died in the Irish Famine are still talking" (ibid., 71) his father tells him. Hanno perceives the sound of the foghorn as "one word" (ibid., 271), "The same word all the time, as if it had only one word to say" (ibid., 262).

At the end of the memoir, the father "knows he's lost the language war because he's behaving more like other fathers now. He bought a television set and started watching programmes in English […]. He got a car, too, and buys petrol in English" (ibid., 281-82). When his father dies, the source of taboos and prohibitions disappears, and Hanno reflects that "There's nobody telling me what to do any more and what language to speak in" (ibid., 290), but he has introjected and absorbed them, and he has yet to learn to overcome them, not giving in to what he inherited: "You can inherit things like that. It's like a stone in your hand. I'm afraid that I'll have a limp like him. […] I know I have to be different. […] I have to pretend that I had no father" (ibid.). The only way out for him is to accept the richness of his legacy: "I'm not afraid any more of being German or Irish, or anywhere in between. […] I'm not afraid of being homesick and having no language to live in. I don't have to be like anyone else" (ibid., 295). It is only after having started to accept this that Hanno "turns into a transcultural citizen of the world" (Altuna-Garcia de Salazar, 2013, 192). It is only then that he can overcome his father's exclusivist perspective that made him tell his mother that "'You can't love two countries,' I said. 'That's impossible'" (ibid., 120). It is only then that the image of the speckled children acquires inclusive overtones and becomes truly positive:

> We are the brack children. Brack, homemade Irish bread with German raisins. We are the brack people and we don't have just one briefcase. We don't just have one language and one history. We sleep in German and we dream in Irish. We laugh in Irish and we cry in German. We are silent in German and we speak in English. We are the speckled people. (ibid., 283)

5. Conclusion

This article has explored Hugo Hamilton's 2003 memoir *The Speckled People* from the perspective of the taboos, in the first place linguistic, imposed by the narrator's father, highlighting the father's staunchly tyrannical attitude. His worldview is based on antithetical oppositions and power dynamics that cause a permanent sense of displacement and homelessness in Hanno, as well as enormous difficulties in the development of his identity, thwarted by his father's prohibitions and punishments.

Notwithstanding the sufferings the protagonist has to endure, the narrative is extremely lyrical and hilarious at times. As a matter of fact, Hanno narrates his story with the candour typical of a child, giving very emotional and intimate accounts of the world around him. Indeed, the adoption of the child as the point of view of the narrative is a most suitable stylistic choice; Hanno's naïve and imaginative gaze presents and interprets the world in uncommon and surprising ways, and, in a child's unknowing perspective, it levels the degree of relevance of events, so that contemporary or past historical events seem to have the same importance as family incidents or things happening to neighbours, and Irish patriots become familiar presences in the house.

Due to his father's impositions Hanno becomes a migrant in his own country who, unlike real migrants, has no home to look back to and to pine for. He has to unlearn the exclusivist antithetical binaries taught by his father which constantly undermine the construction of his own identity. It is only trusting the power of words, instead of fearing it, that Hanno can undertake his enterprise of finding a language and therefore a home to belong to, thus breaking the taboo that has marked all his life.

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Silence and Lying: The Taboo around the Disappeared in Northern Ireland in Mary O'Donnell's novel *Where They Lie*

ABSTRACT

In her fiction and poetry, Mary O'Donnell has often touched topics dealing with explicit taboo subjects, masturbation, anorexia, menopause, abortion or domestic violence. In her 2014 novel, *Where They Lie*, O'Donnell tackles a different taboo, the neglected and disturbing topic of the Disappeared during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. These men and women were kidnapped, killed and buried somewhere in the country, mostly by Republican paramilitaries because believed to be informers. Reticence and lies surround the Disappeared in current discourse and O'Donnell's novel aims at breaking down this taboo.
The purpose of this essay is to fathom the narrative strategies O'Donnell uses to face and to deal effectively and emotionally with the taboo of language surrounding the tragedy of one of the most touching and still unsolved issues in recent Irish History.

KEYWORDS: Northern Ireland; the Troubles; the Disappeared; silence; grief.

1. The Writing of Mary O'Donnell

As a poet and fiction writer, Mary O'Donnell is a special voice in the landscape of contemporary Irish writing. Her extensive production is varied, as she moves at ease between different literary genres and forms of expression (Gonzáles-

Arias 2009), having published eight collections of poetry, four novels and three collections of short stories. She has been involved in translation projects, has written critical and academic essays and has been a drama critic for the *Sunday Tribune*. Furthermore, she has taught creative writing and presented literature programmes for the radio, in particular "Crossing the Lines" for RTÉ about European poetry in translation. She has received numerous awards for her work, including prizes from the Fish International Short Story Competition and the Cardiff International Poetry Competition.

She was born in Monaghan, a border town, the county being an area in the Republic only a few miles from the border with Northern Ireland, which gives her a "privileged position to witness the social and historical changes in both the Republic and Northern Ireland in the recent decades" (Jaime de Pablos 2023, 209). O'Donnell has repeatedly underlined the relevance of her South Ulster roots (O'Donnell, Palacios 2010, 168) in "the making of her artistic self" (Gonzáles-Arias 2009) and Inés Praga-Terente has emphasised her position between two cultures and traditions (Praga-Terente 2014, 147). From this liminality O'Donnell develops her poetic discourse interweaving her personal concern with the present of contemporary Ireland in its various shades with the constant awareness of what was and is going on in the North (Mills).

Her wide spectrum of interests covers areas mostly, but not exclusively, related to the female experience and the range of issues and thematic richness of her work (Ní Dhuibhne 2018, viii) make her difficult to classify or categorise (O'Siadhail 2014, 213; Fogarty 2018, 159). Gender identity, the passing of time, sexual awakening, the ageing female body, the role of women and their elision from history characterise her poetry and fiction. However, her novels in particular "consciously treat taboo subjects such as infertility, sexuality, grief, violence and desire" (Fogarty 2018, 163). Interestingly, in an interview with Anne Fogarty in 2018, Mary O'Donnell wonders if these taboo subjects are "really 'taboo' any more" (ibid.) in the twenty-first century. Rather, touching challenging topics is part of her programmatic intention to write in order to disclose what is hidden, to reveal what is generally not spoken about and kept silent, and unveiling lies is often at the heart of her fiction. In fact, as she said in an interview with Helen Thompson in 2003, "Lifting facades has to be one of the joys of being a writer" (Thompson 2003, 124-25). Mary O'Donnell lifts

facades on the situation of women writing in Ireland in the 1980s, something she and other poets did "in a well of silence" (O'Donnell 2000, 155), but she also sheds light on explicitly taboo subjects in Ireland in the 1990s, such as "masturbation, anorexia, menopause, abortion" (Villar-Argáiz 2018, 41), topics "to be avoided in the official discourse" (Ozga, Piechnik 2021, 7). Originally meant as a strong prohibition in actions and language, the word taboo "in everyday usage is something prohibited by custom" (Walter 1991, 295), something to be avoided in doing and saying and thus surrounded by silence. It is "something too horrible even to think of" (Ozga, Piechnik 2021, 94), and therefore unsayable or unspeakable. Taboos become part of social norms and may change according to contexts and times (ibid., 7). To a large extent, O'Donnell breaks silence unveiling a variety of taboo topics.

The purpose of this essay is to consider examples of taboo in Mary O'Donnell's poetry and fiction before focussing on her 2014 novel *Where They Lie*. Here O'Donnell openly deals with the interrelation of taboo and silence in a precise context in space and time, as she tackles the neglected and disturbing topic of the 'Disappeared' during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This is the term generally used to describe or define the sixteen people who, between the early 1970s and late 1980s, at the heart of the Troubles, were kidnapped, killed and buried somewhere in the country, mostly by Republican paramilitaries, because believed to pass information to the British forces. Most of the bodies have never been found, some of them were instead discovered by chance, but over the years or decades information about their fate, death and place of burial was not disclosed or was misdirected. Reticence surrounds the Disappeared in current discourse and O'Donnell's novel aims at breaking down silence and retrieving untold and unwritten stories that have not found closure yet. The novel thus provocatively challenges the taboo of what is silenced and has been kept undisclosed. However, this is not O'Donnell's first step in facing taboos in an extended sense, as taboo topics or taboo references recur throughout her career.

2. Taboos in Mary O'Donnell

Mary O'Donnell addresses taboo already in her first poetry collection *Reading the Sunflowers in September* (1990), whose poems focus on female experiences and the female body in different ways. For example, in "Excision", O'Donnell shockingly tackles female genital mutilation: "She grapples in child innocence, mad / with hysteric hurt as the women hold / her down and bind with florid pain" (O'Donnell 1990, 15). In "State Pathologist" the "domestic secrets" of a woman's body are revelatory of domestic violence, the "code of bruises" or "wrenched hair" are signs of "Crimes of passion" (ibid., 51), a type of crime and taboo typically surrounded by silence. Anorexia is at the heart of the title poem, which according to Luz Mar Gonzáles-Arias is "a thought-provoking reflection on eating disorders" (Gonzáles-Arias 2010, 257): "Such starvation is an art" (O'Donnell 1990, 18), the body speaks for the self who cannot put distress into words, in what Elaine Scarry calls "resistance to language" (Scarry 1985, 4). In a similar way, the poem "It Wasn't a Woman" from her 2020 collection *Massacre of the Birds* makes a list of forms of abuse, whose heaviness is stylistically emphasised by the interlacing of title and text, the lack of capitalisation and the virtually total absence of punctuation: "'It Wasn't a Woman' / who used a stick to abort the baby in an 11-year-old girl" (O'Donnell 2020, 33). Likewise, "# Me Too, 12 Remembered Scenes and a Line" lists in chronological order personal memories of "the number of times I myself was predated on as a younger woman" (Jaime de Pablos 2023, 206), each three-line stanza opening with a year: "1968, County Wexford, the light flick / of the Colonel's hand up my summer dress / as I dart from the hotel stairwell" (O'Donnell 2020, 35).

Taboo topics mark her fiction in both short stories and novels. Transvestism and transgender characterise the final part of the story "Strong Pagans" from her first collection of the same title (1991) as a way to "subvert the established social order to achieve self-realization and happiness" (Jaime de Pablos 2018, 114). The short story "Aphrodite Pauses, Mid-Life" from *Storm over Belfast* (2008) focuses on the way Carol faces menopause, a taboo word which never appears in the text, crossing a boundary between fertility and

infertility, aware of her "about-to-be-permanently-silent body" (O'Donnell 2008, 209). In a similar way, the taboo of infertility is at the heart of the story "Breath of the Living", of the poem "Antarctica" ("I do not know what other women know", O'Donnell 1990, 7), and of the novel *The Light-Makers* (1992). The explicit sexuality of her 1996 novel *Virgin and the Boy* found negative responses among some critics (Thompson 2003, 119) for its "outrageous (hetero)sexual transgression" (St. Peter 2000, 5) and in *The Light-Makers* the sinister scene of the stag party brings to the fore the cruelty of a fertility rite. The taboo of death looms in the poem "Cot death" and in the "dystopian" story "The Deathday Party" (Jaime de Pablos 2018, 104), while her novel *The Elysium Testament* (1999) looks "at the taboo of death from another angle" considering the death of a very young child (Fogarty 2018, 159) as a result of his mother's abuse. The taboo of domestic violence interweaves with "the taboo subject of a woman's repugnance for her own child", which reverberates stylistically in a maternal narrative which "is itself uncannily split and fragmented" (Fogarty 2000, 78). The taboo of death finds different expressions and is magnified in O'Donnell's writing about the Troubles, which is consistent with her concerns with various facets ad forms of taboo in her writing.

3. The Troubles in O'Donnell's Writing

Though the Troubles do not specifically represent a main concern in Mary O'Donnell's writing (Villar-Argáiz 2018, 54), a few poems indulge on the conflict, often making reference to childhood and young adulthood memories. The sonnet "Legacy", written after the death of Bobby Sands (ibid.), exploits the stylistic form traditionally related to lyricism and feelings to confront and juxtapose the "Poor little bigot from the black North" and "we poor little bigots from the free South" (O'Donnell 1990, 66). The blackness of the North is reiterated by the lexical choice of items traditionally related to the Troubles, "terrors", "stripes of blood", "bins and drums", "furls of hate", while the cries are "impotent" (ibid.). O'Donnell goes back to her birthplace in the poem "Border Town", characteristically composed in couplets and clearly divided into two parts, dealing with past and present respectively, "once" and "now" (ibid., 92). In "Derry Nocturne" the city is repeatedly a "tomb city" where the

speaking voice frets ("I fret in this tomb city", ibid., 152) and then feels "trapped" in the oxymoronic "screaming silences" (ibid.) contrasting with the musical reference embedded in the title. In "A Southerner Dreams the Future" the dream is of a future free of conflict and violence, "Not a blasted street, a shattered limb / in sight" (O'Donnell 1998, 21). The Troubles and the sectarian conflict in the North are rooted in the consciousness of the Monaghan-born writer, who has always been aware of the proximity of the border and of the events beyond the border as a local and universal frame of anger and violence.

Before casting attention to the aftermath of the conflict and its violence in *Where They Lie*, it is worth considering the short story "Border Crossing", from the collection *Storm over Belfast*, set in 1974 at the time of the Troubles, the only story dealing explicitly with the border and the sectarian divide. The stylistic choice of first-person narration and of the present tense increases the immediacy of the events. In fact, the nameless 18-year-old girl crosses the border to have sex with her Irish boyfriend for the first time; at the same time, the reference to historical occurrences takes a special relevance. The farmhouse where senator Billy Fox was murdered by IRA gunmen in March 1974 "stands darkened" as a result of fire, but it also looks "innocent and ordinary" (O'Donnell 2008, 189), as a permanent sign of violence disturbingly marking the landscape and entering everyday life, while checkpoints recur on different occasions. Unlike the story, the novel *Where They Lie* is set in the early twenty-first century, thus at a time in which the Belfast Agreement, or Good Friday Agreement of 1998 had officially put an end to decades of violence. However, the legacy of the Troubles still reverberates in the lives and experiences of the novel's protagonists, who are trying to come to terms with a painful past.

4. *Where They Lie*: The Disappeared and the Silence of a Communal Taboo

The expression 'The Disappeared' is for Peake and Lynch a "moniker" that "signifies a group of 16 individuals separately abducted, killed, and secretly buried by republican paramilitaries over the course of The Troubles" in unmarked graves (Peake and Lynch 2016, 453). In a recent study, Pádraig Óg Ó Ruairc provides a definition of what Human Rights Law calls "forced

disappearances" as follows: "The practice involves executing enemy combatants, political opponents or civilians, and hiding their bodies for a political or military purpose" (Ó Ruairc 2024, 1). He points out that in Ireland the phenomenon is not limited to the Troubles and the IRA, but had its "forerunners" (ibid., 2) in the 1920s during the Civil War and goes back to the end of the 18th century, as "the practice of forced disappearance was undoubtedly relatively commonplace during the 1798 rebellion" (ibid., 11). The Disappeared thus mark Ireland's history for over two hundred years, even though disappearances connected to the Troubles have repeatedly attracted significant attention in the media (ibid., 2).

Mary O'Donnell's novel *Where They Lie* is a work of fiction that has its roots in the period of the Troubles whose aim is to break the silence that surrounds the "Disappeared", an area "that has not been explored by many writers from the Republic" (Walshe 2018, 93). It is not a historical novel about the Disappeared, rather a novel on what is unsaid or what cannot be said about the tragedy of a specific historical moment in recent times, a novel on those who have survived, on grief, loss, the impact of the past and history on the present. Set in the first decade of the new century, the novel locates the disappearance of twin brothers Sam and Harry Jebb in the 1990s. O'Donnell thus takes historical liberty, suggesting that certain wounds are still open. Sam and Harry Jebb's business on both sides of the border, "moving along the border from one equestrian event or sale to another" (O'Donnell 2014, 107), may have made them suspicious of being informers.

Graham Dawson refers to the 'Disappeared' as an example of "communal taboos" (Dawson 2007, 75) which still haunts present day Ireland as "one of the most traumatic and until recently silenced episodes related to the Irish Troubles" (Estévez-Saá 2018, 106). The interrelation of taboo, silence and trauma underlies a disappearance and its aftermath, heavily haunting the void, the limbo of uncertainty, which remains for many families in the silence that surrounds the disappearance of their beloved ones (Dempster 2019, 4). Often whispers and rumours, if not misinformation and lies, went around, in a way deceivingly counteracting silence, together with "hyperbole, speculation…even fantasy" (Ó Ruaric 2024, 322) or "superstition, folklore or spiritual beliefs surrounding sudden death and unconventional burials" (ibid., 323). Mostly it

was said that these people had left the country and started a new life elsewhere, but the most disturbing feature surrounding the Disappeared was that they were informers, or "touts". A tout is in Patrick Radden Keefe's words "a folk devil – a paragon of treachery" (244), a stigma that involved the whole family at large.

A case in point, and maybe "one of the most infamous events of the Troubles" (Cummins 2010, 27) was the disappearance of Jean McConville, a widowed mother of ten children, abducted in December 1972 from her flat in Belfast, allegedly for having passed information to the British Army through a transmitter. Her body was found only in 2003 by a passer-by on a beach in Co. Louth. In these long years the family met a "wall of silence" (Keefe 2019, 72) that protected the IRA in West Belfast. Only nine bodies were found and investigation is still being carried out by the Independent Commission for the Recovery of Victims' Remains, created after the 1998 Belfast Agreement with the objective of recovering the bodies and providing closure to the cases and the families' grief.

A net of silence surrounds the Disappeared; as Lauren Dempster claims, "'Disappearing' is to a significant extent *about* silencing: silencing those 'disappeared', their loved ones, … silencing knowledge of the crimes committed" (Dempster 2019, 31). Quoting Jennifer Schirmer, Dempster claims that disappearing is the perfect crime as it is invisible (ibid., 30), absence of individuals merging with absence of bodies. Silence is a form of denial (ibid., 136) but it was also a political strategy on the part of the IRA, the sentence "I have nothing to say" was the rule in case a member was arrested and questioned by the police.

Interestingly, *Where They Lie* was published in May 2014, more or less at the same time when Gerry Adams, the Sinn Fein leader, was arrested and being questioned in relation to the disappearance of Jean McConville. Such coincidence may give the novel an overtly political perspective which yet eschews politics (Walshe 2018, 93) to focus on the emotional lives of the four characters who mourn the twins. They are Gerda McAllister, who was with the boys at the moment of abduction, the boys' sister Alison, her husband Gideon, Gerda's brother; and Gerda's former lover, Niall, a Dublin teacher of the Irish

language. In *Where They Lie* O'Donnell interweaves taboo, silence and trauma playing with the multiple meanings of the novel's title.

In fact, the title plays on the ambiguity of the verb "to lie" and its multiple referents. On one hand, the expression "where they lie" implies the possible location of the unretrieved bodies, the hiding place of death where the bodies of the Jebb twins may or may not be found. From this point of view O'Donnell plays intertextually with Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" – "The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low" (l. 7). This uncertain burial ground is also at the centre of what is said about the fate of the twins, as "to lie" also refers to saying what is not true, to the lies that surround their disappearance, the misinformation provided by the alleged informer Cox and/or his claims to be able to reveal where the bodies lie. Lies interlace with the taboo of language about the Disappeared, with the "silence filled with hauntings" that underlies a traumatic experience (Goarzin 2011, 12). In fiction as in real life, the Disappeared are not there, they remain ghosts and are truly lost in life as well as in narrative.

The physical violence that led to the torture and murder of Sam and Harry Jebb is magnified in the psychological violence their family and friends have to undergo as indirect victims in the obsession of not knowing. From this point of view the novel can be read through the lens of Cathy Caruth's classic trauma theory in "the complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma" (Caruth 2016, 4). In the dynamic between not knowing and gradually getting dubious and deceiving information about the reasons for the boys' disappearance, their burial place, and the identity of the perpetrators of such violence, *Where They Lie* can be read as a trauma narrative in which traumatised characters try to suppress what they know or the traumatic experience. Gerda McAllister, the journalist and friend who was with the twins in the moment of abduction, is plagued by recurring nightmares in which she relives the experience. For example, Part 1 is characterised by the obsessive recollection of the "Four men and two women" who broke in, "All wore balaclavas" (O'Donnell 2014, 1). Not by chance does the novel open with Cox's telephone call which acts as a provocative trigger to keep Gerda's memories and recollections painfully alive. The recurrence of her nightmares highlights the way in which the experience repeats itself (Caruth 2016, 2),

which is stylistically made more relevant by the use of the present tense – e.g. "When I dream of that night, I am circling over my body", "I watch television", "I glance out of the window" (O'Donnell 2014, 2); "In the dream, my eyes start to prickle with tears", "I feel cool metal on my pubic bone", "my body is sliding and dissolving. They are screaming at me … At that point I always wake up" (ibid., 3-4). These repressed memories leave traces in the persecutory presence of the traumatic experience as PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. For example, Niall considers the changes the event has caused in Gerda: "Any normal person who'd been through what she'd been through would carry the trauma. But she also turned into an over-energetic sex maniac, a shopping-mall addict, binge-drinker and incessant, repetitious spinner of tall, illogical tales" (ibid., 10). In a similar way the aftermath of trauma displays physical traces in Alison: "Ever since the boys' death, Alison had had a small bald patch on the right side of her head, small enough to be concealed, except when the wind was strong enough. Stress-related alopecia" (ibid., 100).

Interestingly, the short story "Storm over Belfast", from the 2008 collection of the same title, provides a springboard for the development of the novel. In both, O'Donnell sheds light on the on-and-off relationship (Walshe 2018, 94) between a young man from Dublin and his Belfast ex-girlfriend. In the novel, Gerda is trying to come to terms with the trauma of having been present at the abduction and disappearance of her friends, and of being unable to have information about their fate. As José Manuel Estévez-Saá points out, the depression of the woman in the compression of the short story finds an outlet and an explanation in the novel, and the "intimate relationship" (Estévez-Saá 2018, 108) between story and novel represents an interesting case of direct intertextuality. In fact, the story is a "prequel" (Fogarty 2018, 166) to *Where They Lie* but also an inset text incorporated nearly verbatim in the novel's first chapter. The interdependence between novel and story is clarified in an interview with Lia Mills, in which Mary O'Donnell explains she "hadn't quite finished with the title story" (Mills 2014), and felt the need to expand its narrative material. Furthermore, the electric storm which is a subtext in the story is briefly retrieved at the end of Chapter One, when "Over the mountain, an electrical storm was breaking" (O'Donnell 2014, 15). The novel takes up this fil rouge occasionally using references to storms in relation to Gerda (ibid., 23),

compared to a storm when invading other people's lives, but also a victim of the storm of trauma that plagues her life.

At the opening of the novel, Gerda receives a phone call, and it is soon clear that throughout the novel her daily life is obsessed and persecuted by continuous and repeated mysterious and disturbing phone calls, in which someone called Cox keeps telling her he has information about where to find the twins' bodies, where they lie. Silence and lies are thus embedded at the opening of the novel while references to silence recur in this section, highlighting the silence around Sam and Harry as well the silence that actually characterises Cox's speech. The telephone "went silent" (ibid., 1), visiting the twins in Co. Tyrone kept Gerda away from "who was involved and who stayed silent" (ibid., 2). Remembering the break in, "I dammed up my lips" and "Sam and Harry were also silent" (ibid.).

Passages of the telephone conversations are usually italicised, which is a textual marker, an interesting textual choice in a novel about lies, creating a distance between past and present, truth and lies. This graphic device also gives rise to doubts about the reliability of what is being said, so that on some occasions the voices of Gerda and Cox are undistinguishable, on others the impression is that Gerda is dreaming, or that Cox is only a product of her imagination. Gerda paradoxically feels free to speak about her trauma with Cox's disembodied voice, who constantly repeats that he is just offering his help and materialises when she accepts to meet him hoping to obtain the information he promises, he is silent though he speaks. In Chapter 6 his speech act is characterised by isolated words marked by full stops: "I. Am. Trying. To. Help. You!" (ibid., 67). The fragmentation of the sentence implies the capacity of language to hide rather than disclose (Ephratt 2008), so that words and silence seem to overlap. As a matter of fact, when finally Cox provides some sort of information about where to find the boys' remains in a remote peninsula in Co. Antrim, and Niall, Gideon, Gerda and Alison's digging does not lead to anything, nothing is found except some debris and Cox's revelations turn out to have been a lie.

Language tries to hide the trauma, in the same way as the "case of the disappeared was initially and conveniently silenced" (Estévez-Saá 2016, 29). The abduction of the boys is referred to as the "events" (O'Donnell 2014, 5),

alluding to their remains Cox says they were "disposed of" (ibid., 11). When Gideon comes across a report on the Disappeared in the Sunday paper he reflects on the use of the word: "It was a strange use of language. They were never referred to as 'those who had disappeared' but as an entity, as if 'the Disappeared', a collective noun could possibly recreate the nature of those who had gone" (ibid., 99-100).

Gerda's name has a special relevance, as it is the name of the protagonist of Andersen's fairy tale "Snow Queen", which haunts the subtext of the novel. The splinters of the evil mirror of the fairy tale seem to have somehow entered the hearts of various characters, not only the violent intruders who abducted the boys, but Gerda in particular, whose life and heart have changed forever. Notably, the fairy tale becomes part of one of the telephone conversations with Cox, and Gerda tells him the story to counteract his silence: "I think she [my mother] named me Gerda so that I could travel wherever I would or needed to, if necessary to the north of the Snow Queen, to Baba Yaga…." (ibid., 111). And as a matter of fact, Gerda travels north following Cox's directions, yet his words "in the story lies the truth" (ibid.) implicitly suggest that other lies are instead lying in the background.

In a similar way, the mysterious Cox has a widely used name, nickname or surname appropriate for someone who may not exist. The name may derive from the Old English "cock", which means a "heap" or "mound", and its topographic relevance connects the name to the heap or mound where the bodies may lie. His voice is persuasive, coaxing, so to speak. As a colloquial abbreviation of coxswain, Cox is someone who steers the boat of Gerda's needs, a puppeteer, who finally directs Gerda, Alison, Gideon and Niall to the nightmarish landscape where he claims the bodies are to be found. This is the place not of discovery of the bodies but of revelations, it is a moment in which the truth about Sam and Harry Jebb comes to the fore, unearthing Gerda's "complex relationship with the dead twins, involving sex but also accumulated information which may have caused their murder" (Lehner 2020, 59). Several taboos are thus broken, in which silence dominates in a variety of ways on the lives of the living and the dead.

The novel contains several intertextual elements, scraps from newspaper articles and radio programmes, and especially the U2 song "Mothers of the

Disappeared" Gerda listens to obsessively. The song puts grief into words, pointing out what is not said and cannot be said. The presence of the song pervades all the second part of the novel in an attempt to break the silence about the Disappeared. Interestingly, O'Donnell does not use direct quotation from the text, rather focuses on the sound effect: "the pulsing sound of the U2 anthem for the Disappeared swelled in the room, the drumming, the guitars, that voice pushing into every corner, around the cobwebs" (O'Donnell 2014, 154), the "dirge" (ibid.) has a persecutory form, "the music wailed" (ibid., 155) breaking the silence of suffering.

5. Conclusion

The word "closure" referred to disappearance is generally connected to the retrieval of the bodies (Cummins 2010, 42) and often recurs in the novel highlighting the impossibility of knowing the truth (Estévez-Saá 2016, 26) and pointing out the impossibility of such closure. Interestingly the novel remains literally open with the final words "Then the door opened" (O'Donnell 2014, 223). By doing so, Mary O'Donnell is consistent with her stylistic credo of leaving her endings unfinished, "I don't believe in 'closure' endings because I don't believe in the idea of closure" (Fogarty 2018, 164). *Where They Lie* closes with an opening, in a circular pattern the boundary between beginning and end becomes fluid, which reminds the reader that the story and certain wounds are still open. The door that is opening on the last page metaphorically suggests that the taboo around the Disappeared still remains surrounded by silence and lies.

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Taboos, Haunting, and the Spectre of Immigration in Contemporary Spanish Cinema

ABSTRACT

Building on Jo Labanyi's influential 2006 work, this article refocuses her analysis of the haunting motif on a pressing contemporary issue in Spain: immigration. While Labanyi explores how ghosts represent repressed fears associated with the Spanish Civil War, this study extends the metaphor to challenge outdated notions of 'Spanishness' in the face of the country's evolving multicultural identity. Two films by Chus Gutiérrez, *Poniente* (2002) and *Retorno a Hansala* (2008), show how this haunting theme now encompasses immigration and underscores the need to confront both historical and current challenges. In these films, spectral figures represent not only Spain's unresolved past, but also its future, urging a redefinition of national identity that embraces cultural diversity. As with earlier works on the Civil War, *Poniente and Retorno a Hansala* call for a collective reckoning with Spain's complex, hybrid identity.

KEYWORDS: Haunting motif; 'Spanishness'; immigration; ghosts; historical past.

1. Haunting and 'Spanishness' in Post-Franco Cinema

In Spain, taboos have historically shaped cultural identity, particularly when it comes to confronting difficult pasts and silenced truths. After the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-1975), open discussion of the trauma and violence of these periods was systematically

suppressed. However, as Spain transitioned to democracy and became a popular destination for immigrants – particularly from Africa – new taboos emerged around immigration, race, and the country's postcolonial legacy.

Building on Jo Labanyi's influential 2006 work on historical memory, this article examines how two contemporary Spanish films by Chus Gutiérrez, *Poniente* (2002) and *Retorno a Hansala* (2008), use the 'haunting motif' as a narrative device to challenge exclusionary definitions of 'Spanishness'. Both films, I argue, call for a more inclusive rethinking of a national identity that embraces diversity rather than rejecting it.

While much existing scholarship[1], including Labanyi's work, has focused on 'historical memory' in relation to the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, this article shifts attention to a critical contemporary issue in Spain: immigration. I argue that the trope of 'haunting' in these films highlights outdated and inaccurate ideas of 'Spanishness' that need to be addressed and reconsidered. *Poniente* (2002) and *Retorno a Hansala* (2008) challenge the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about Spain's historical past that are at odds with its evolving multicultural identity.

This emerging concept of 'Spanishness', centred on the immigrant experience and the haunting spectres of the nation's past, echoes earlier explorations of the enduring trauma of the Spanish Civil War. In her analysis of post-Franco literary production and the challenges of reconciling the past, Labanyi asserts that

> if we view modernity not in terms of capitalist development but as a particular set of attitudes toward the relationship of present to past, it becomes possible to elaborate a conception of modernity that, while it accepts the importance of moving on and continues to believe in the possibility of creating a better future, is also respectful of the need to acknowledge the past. (2007, 91)

According to this perspective, then, modernity does not require a complete break with the past; on the contrary, it demands that modernity "engages with the past and regards ruins as something to be cherished" (ibid., 102).

Historically, taboos have protected social norms by preventing the discussion of particular topics. From Spain's transition to democracy (1975 to

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[1] See, above all, Graham 2001; Marcos 2010; Davies 2011.

1982) to the present day, attempts to confront the spectres of the past, especially the Civil War and Franco's regime, have been limited. The recovery of the lost past of Spanish history from the years of the Civil War (1936-1939) to the end of the dictatorship (1975) seems to have really taken off only since 2000, when some grassroots movements, human rights, and non-profit organisations – and a more supportive political party line – formed a collective "*lieux de mémoire*" (Colmeiro 2011, 28*).* Labanyi distinguishes between two approaches in Spanish literature and cinema to this pre-democracy past: one that presents a realistic account, making the history palatable to a broad audience while neutralising its potential for advocacy; and another that uses non-realist modes of interpretation to demonstrate the relevance of the past in the present. Haunting narratives belong to the latter category, pushing for revised accounts of the past in order to expand the collective sense of what it means to be Spanish. According to Labanyi, these narratives – which avoid realism and instead focus on the haunting past – "retain a sense of the difficulty of understanding what it was like to live that past, as well as making us reflect on how the past interpellates the present" (Labanyi 2007, 112).

Such narratives are thus not only therapeutic, but also a call to action, as they stress the legacy of the past in the present. In the case of immigration, ghost narratives serve the dual purpose of "making visible the disappearances and absences silenced in normative historical accounts, while confronting a difficult past that has been viewed as taboo and that still needs to be dealt with in the present" (Colmeiro 2011, 30).

Just as haunting narratives previously questioned Spanish society's silence on the atrocities of the Civil War, more recent ghost motifs in immigration films unsettle the preconceptions of the African 'other', and thus challenge the very idea of 'Spanishness'. Christina Sánchez-Conejero (2007) notes that the simplistic image of Spain promoted by Franco – a white, monolingual, Catholic nation – is both reductive and illusory. In contrast, 'Spanishness' seems to emerge much more "as an openly plural concept in post-Franco Spain" (Sánchez-Conejero 2007, 4) in terms of ethnicity, religion, and language. She further observes that 'Spanishness' cannot simply be defined as a post-national state or a 'post-national identity'; it must also take into account what Javier

Tusell describes as "patriotismo de la pluralidad" (1999, 232), which acknowledges a plurality of cultures within Spain (Sánchez-Conejero 2017, 7).

Since 2000, much of the literary and cinematic production on immigration and memory has focused on dismantling exclusivist, clear-cut notions of 'Spanishness'. In these works, ghosts are often used as narrative tools to defy such narrow conceptions, especially in stories that explore the intersections of immigration and historical erasure. The spectral immigrant and the haunting historical past converge to unsettle the very notion of 'Spanishness' which, according to these films and stories, needs to be rethought if Spanish society is to move forward.

Following Spain's transition to democracy after the death of Franco, and its subsequent accession to the EU, there has been a significant increase in the number of films, novels, documentaries, and other artistic representations addressing the complexities of immigration. In the early twentieth century, migratory movements were decidedly directed outward – to Latin America and the industrialised European cities – or to urban centres within Spain. However, it was only after 1975 that Spain began to attract diverse immigrant groups, especially from North Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Many immigration-focused films from this period depict the 'otherness' of immigrants, often relying on stereotypes and highlighting the conflicts that arise from cultural encounters. Despite the potential for diverse narratives, the representations of immigration have often remained confined within narrow frameworks, emphasising the tensions and struggles stemming from cultural clashes. However, the cinematic output of the 1990s, while acknowledging these conflicts over immigration, also began to denounce the intolerance, xenophobia, and racism prevalent in Spanish society.

Director Chus Gutiérrez has made significant contributions to this discourse with her films *Poniente* (2002) and *Retorno a Hansala* (2008). Unlike earlier Spanish productions, Gutiérrez's films offer nuanced and multifaceted perspectives on immigration, addressing the past, the present, and the material and metaphorical dimensions of the issue while incorporating the lens of historical memory (Berger 2016, 187-88). The following section explores each film, paying particular attention to the ghostly or spectral motifs that enrich their themes.

2. *Poniente*: Spectral Visions of Immigration

Poniente (2002) tells the story of a patriarchal family of horticulturists living in the fictional coastal town of La Isla in southern Spain, who exploit and discriminate against their immigrant workers. Fed up with the abuse, these immigrants unite and fight against their bosses for better wages, leading to violent confrontations and the forced exodus of the immigrant workers. The protagonist, Lucía (Cuca Escribano), returns from Madrid, where she worked as a teacher, to bid farewell to her dead father, from whom she inherits his greenhouse business. This return to her roots is also a means for Lucía to reclaim an identity that she has suppressed during her time away. Lucía embodies the struggle of being an outsider in her own homeland – an emancipated woman asserting her agency in a patriarchal context where opportunities for women are scant, particularly in the greenhouse culture of southern Spain. Although her 'otherness' differs from that of the immigrant workforce of the *invernaderos*, Lucía nonetheless witnesses and experiences discrimination repeatedly throughout the film. Her character acts as a bridge between the past and the present, reflecting how Spain's history of oppression and exclusion is echoed in its treatment of immigrants today. Her interactions with Curro (José Coronado), a mediator who informs her of the changes in the village and the greenhouse, and Adbenbi (Farid Fatmi), a worker in her greenhouse, symbolise the urgent need for Spanish society to confront its fears and prejudices – modern-day taboos that need to be addressed.

Curro, an outcast who has spent most of his life in industrial Europe, desperately wants to find himself. With Pepe, another man familiar with the immigrant experience, Curro is a conduit to historical memory. In a pivotal scene, the duo watches a domestic film about Spaniards migrating to Switzerland during an economic crisis. The black-and-white shot seems almost like a spectral vision of a past that has come back to haunt the present, making the audience aware of the "urgent need to create a collective memory of traumatic historic episodes in order to transcend the chronic amnesia that has historically characterized Spanishness and, by doing so, reshape the national identity" (Ballesteros 2005, 11). Failure to reckon with this past can have serious consequences not only for immigrants, who in this case are forced into a

perpetual nomadic exodus, but also for Spaniards, who remain blind to their hybrid identities. Adbenbi, the immigrant *savant* who organises the workers in their struggle for better conditions, is the only character who has successfully accepted his hybrid identity, cherishing his past rather than obliterating it. His dialogue with Curro below, for instance, emphasises the crucial issues of identity and shared history:

> *Adbenbi***:** Te lo he dicho mil veces. Que no somos árabes. Nuestro pueblo tiene cinco mil años de historia y se extiende por todo el norte de África. Tenemos nuestra identidad, nuestra cultura. Nuestra propia lengua.

> *Curro*: Tienes suerte de tener raíces.

> *Adbenbi*: Mis raíces son tus raíces. Nuestros ancestros fueron los mismos. España fue un país bereber durante muchos siglos.

This exchange challenges Curro's narrow view of otherness and reveals the intertwined nature of their identities. Adbenbi's assertion that "Mis raíces son tus raíces" ("My roots are your roots") rejects oversimplified narratives of nationalism, emphasising their common ancestry and the long presence of Berber culture in Spain. He invites Curro, and by extension the audience, to acknowledge the hybrid nature of their cultural heritage, arguing for a shared past that can foster mutual understanding and solidarity in the face of contemporary challenges.

    In *Poniente*, Chus Gutiérrez draws inspiration from real-life events, particularly the clashes between locals and immigrants in El Ejido, Almería, in 2020, to craft the film's climax – the exodus of the immigrant workers. During a violent uprising against the group of immigrant workers, two scenes recall the repression of the past as a political taboo, revealing a collective inability to confront historical traumas. Some locals, fearful of changing social dynamics and resistant to the assimilation of immigrant workers, take advantage of the precarious economic situation to incite violence, culminating in the expulsion of the immigrants. This expulsion, as well as the burning of books and the "Moors out" graffiti seen on the streets throughout the film, evoke a centuries-old fear of the 'other'. Once again, Spain fails to recognise itself as a

convergence of cultures and peoples that have coexisted for centuries, leaving indelible roots – an undeniable reality that Adbembi persistently tries to explain to Curro.

In conclusion, *Poniente* presents a spectralisation of the past through the black-and-white documentary footage that haunts the main characters, Curro and Lucía[2], with the aim of creating a collective memory that can transcend the traumatic history of Spain while, at the same time, forging a cross-national identity. However, the main characters are not yet ready to accept this new reality, indirectly re-enacting the symbolic rejection of "the Moors" that occurred more than 500 years ago. They fail to see themselves in the 'other' and continue to cling to an exclusionary self-perception. As the director herself remarks, "si la gente dejara el miedo a un lado y se mirara a los ojos, comprendería que de algún modo es también el otro"[3]: this is the message that Adbenbi, the 'other' of the film, as well as the ghosts of the past, are trying to convey.

3. *Retorno a Hansala*: Redefining Spanish Identity

Retorno a Hansala (2008) delves into the taboo of migrant deaths, an issue fraught with political and social implications that is often overlooked in public discourse. The film's opening scene immediately throws the audience into the midst of a familiar nightmare: thousands of people crossing the sea in search of a better life, many of whom often fail to make it. The visual juxtaposition of shots above and below the water's surface alludes to the agony of those who drown, their clothes floating helplessly as they struggle in vain. By opening the film with such imagery, Chus Gutiérrez immediately grabs the audience's attention, forcing them to face the reality of those risking their lives to reach Europe – a reality many prefer to turn away from. The taboo in this context is the shared responsibility of European nations, including Spain, for these ongoing tragedies.

[2] As Daddesio remarks, "both Curro and Lucía experience a sense of displacement but, whereas Lucía is returning to a place where she lived and felt compelled to leave, Curro is living in a place that he hardly knows" (2009, 56).

[3] https://revista.consumer.es/portada/en-el-tema-de-la-inmigracion-hemos-querido-borrar-nuestro-pasado-pero-no-podemos-ignorar-el-futuro.html (1 June 2024).

The film's protagonist, Martín (José Luís García), works in a morgue, trying to identify the bodies of those who have drowned while crossing the sea. When he discovers a personal connection with one of the deceased, Martín embarks on a journey to the migrant's homeland. In this narrative, the journey is both physical and deeply personal, a means of Martín's self-discovery. Unlike the conventional immigration narratives revolving around external conflict, *Retorno a Hansala* explores Martín's inner struggle to find and redefine himself. As a man undergoing an existential crisis – or more precisely, a *crisis de masculinidad* – he has to deal with the crumbling of his personal and professional life. His wife has cheated on him, his daughter manipulates him for her own ends, his work gives him nightmares, and the 'other' – represented by Leila (Farah Hamed), the film's female protagonist – challenges his ingrained assumptions about race and gender. From the outset, Martín is haunted by his personal failures, the unspoken truths presented by Leila, and the bodies lying at the bottom of the ocean, which he can no longer dismiss as faceless statistics.

Retorno a Hansala becomes a road movie, a quest that Martín must undertake to confront the suffering of others and recognise the human stories behind the nameless bodies he deals with in his morgue (Cornejo Parriego 2013, 22). Through this odyssey, he comes to understand that the silenced victims of history – the drowned migrants – are not just numbers but individuals who deserve justice. He becomes aware of the suffering of others, learns to recognise the human stories behind the numbers, and begins to feel responsible for their deaths. As Jacques Derrida (1994, 15-16) argues, justice can only be achieved when we acknowledge our responsibility towards those who have been erased or forgotten. This is precisely what Martín ends up doing. His transformation over the course of the film gestures towards the potential social change that could result from breaking the silence around immigration; his evolution from a detached professional to someone who genuinely empathises with the migrants represents the possibility of redefining Spanish identity itself. At the end of the film, Leila also recognises his transformation when she wryly remarks that Martín's job has become a vocation rather than a business.

Leila's role as an equal, or even a protagonist, is another novel aspect of the film. Far from being a passive character, she is depicted as an empowered

Muslim woman, integrated into Spanish society with friends who treat her as an equal. Leila embodies agency, defying the stereotypical expectations associated with her race and gender. In the end, it is through her journey with Martín – returning the personal belongings of the unidentified dead to their families – that the latter finds a deeper meaning in both his personal and professional life. His growing awareness of the 'other' gives him a sense of belonging that had previously eluded him. The ethical acceptance of the spectral figures – the unnamed dead – instils in Martín the sense of responsibility needed to do justice to the anonymous bodies that all too often wash up on Spain's shores. By the end of the film, Martín is a changed man who embraces a new kind of 'Spanishness' that rejects exclusionary, monolithic notions of identity.

The final scene is charged with symbolism and captures the new relationship between Martín and Leila. As they stand together, looking out towards a horizon where Africa can be glimpsed, Leila points it out to Martín. This moment highlights not only the geographical proximity of Africa, but also the historical and cultural ties between the two places. The scene symbolises the new, hybrid identity that both Martín and Leila now embody, which recognises the interconnection of their histories and the need for solidarity in the face of contemporary challenges.

4. Conclusions

In these and other recent films, North Africa (and Africa more broadly) re-emerges to as a spectral force that symbolically haunts Spaniards, reminding them of the historical events that bind these two lands: from the rise and fall of Al-Andalus to the Spanish protectorate over the Western Sahara between 1884 and 1975, from the involvement of Moroccan soldiers in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the disputed status of Ceuta and Melilla, to the close economic bonds of recent decades, these films remind us of a past characterised by power imbalances, exploitation, and racial hierarchies. Acknowledging this past disrupts the long-held image by confronting uncomfortable truths about power, exploitation, and racial hierarchy that challenge both the image of Spain as a unified, homogeneous nation and the national myths of identity and self-perception. Mirroring this, modern immigration destabilises the notion of a

singular 'Spanishness', as the cultural diversity introduced by immigrants disrupts traditional perceptions of national identity. This disruption often leads to social anxiety and the stigmatisation of immigration, marking it a modern taboo. Viewers of these films are asked to acknowledge this new 'Spanishness', to respond to the ghosts of Spain's recent past, and to reconcile that past with the present. In this way, we are shown that Spanish society can move forward.

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Rethinking Accessibility through ADAT: Challenging the Taboo on Deafness in Foreign Language Education

ABSTRACT

A persistent fear of the 'diverse', combined with scarce intercultural awareness, has long reinforced entrenched socio-cultural taboos that have impacted the social and cognitive development of marginalized, non-mainstream communities, such as the Deaf. This tension has been at the core of a fierce debate over the supposed supremacy of the oral method as opposed to manualism (Hutchison 2007), with major implications for minoritized deaf learners. In light of the latest technological innovations and the growing emphasis on inclusive teaching methods, this article aims to propose the application of Accessible Didactic Audiovisual Translation (ADAT) and – more specifically – of DIDAT (Deaf-Inclusive DAT) for teaching English in a mixed classroom environment with a focus on written comprehension and production. An experimental lesson plan based on didactic keyword captioning is proposed to introduce learners to subtitling, followed by the preliminary results from the submissions of 20 deaf and hearing B1-level students at an Italian university.

KEYWORDS: Deaf-related taboos; audism; manualism; inclusive method; DIDAT.

1. Confronting the Double Taboo around Deafness

The concept of a 'double-sided' taboo surrounding deafness brings to light a nuanced system of social, cultural, and personal pressures that shape Deaf experiences in a predominantly hearing world. By 'double-sided', I refer to a sort of two-layered stigma that has been operating both externally – through social attitudes and institutional practices – and internally, as Deaf individuals have navigated identity pressures to conform to hearing norms.

Any discussion about the taboos on deafness, and any considerations about the challenges faced by Deaf individuals in educational and social contexts, must start from the premise that these taboos are not inherent in deafness but are socially constructed, maintained by power dynamics that devalue Deaf identity and enforce conformity to hearing norms. One side of this double-sided taboo is the dimension of audism – a pervasive ideology that frames hearing as the normative standard. As defined by Humphries (1977), audism is the belief that one's worth is linked to the ability to hear or mimic hearing behaviors. This bias is embedded in social institutions, from medical practices to educational systems, where D/deaf individuals are routinely marginalized, 'corrected', or merely 'accommodated' rather than valued for their distinct cultural and linguistic identities. In this context, the hearing-centric approach is far from neutral, as it actively reinforces the perception of deafness as a deficit and casts D/deaf people as "deviants" from the normative ideal (Bauman and Murray 2014).

However, what makes the taboo around deafness particularly insidious is its 'internal' dimension: a subtle but pervasive pressure for D/deaf individuals to conform to hearing norms, even at the expense of their cultural and linguistic identities. This internalized pressure reflects what Lane (1992) describes as the "mask of benevolence", where hearing educators and policymakers, under the guise of goodwill, promote a paternalistic form of assimilation. Such "benevolence" demands that D/deaf individuals suppress aspects of their identity to fit hearing society's expectations, often prioritizing speech and lip-reading over sign language. This trend stretches back to before the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf, held in Milan in 1880: despite the

establishment of the first school for teaching 'deaf-mute' students by sign language, founded in Paris in 1760 by L'abbé Charles-Michel de l'Epée (1712-1789), other European countries openly championed oralism – in Germany, Samuel Heinicke founded a school for deaf pupils and fiercely opposed the French teaching methodology (Hutchison 2007). The resolutions passed by the 1880 Congress would affect the Deaf community for a long time in positing the absolute superiority of the oral method in DHH (Deaf and Hard of Hearing) education and banning the simultaneous use of sign languages (ibid.). A similar debate also raged in the US, where oralists maintained that signing contributed to the isolation and discrimination of deaf people, and consequently promoted oralism as a means of emancipation, whereas numerous deaf leaders accused oralists themselves of oppression[1]. Lane contends that this assimilationist stance not only undermines D/deaf autonomy, but also enforces a cultural erasure which prevents D/deaf individuals from fully expressing their identity. As a result, the internalized dimension of this taboo complicates identity formation, leaving D/deaf people caught between social biases on the one hand, and the pressure to align with hearing norms on the other.

Problematizing this double-sided taboo calls for a critical examination of the institutional biases and power structures that uphold hearing norms as the default standard. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) advocates for linguistic human rights, arguing that sign languages and Deaf ways of knowing deserve equal recognition and protection on par with spoken languages. From this perspective, expecting D/deaf individuals to conform to hearing norms both belittles their linguistic identity and limits their right to live fully within their cultural identity. Kusters *et al.* (2017) further highlight that forced assimilation can lead to a form of "self-audism", where Deaf individuals internalize the stigma against their identity, often feeling compelled to suppress Deaf cultural markers to gain acceptance – especially since deafness, as an invisible disability, easily lends itself to 'passing'. This dynamic, of course, reinforces social power imbalances, requiring D/deaf individuals to 'pass' as hearing, thus creating a persistent tension between authenticity and social acceptance. Therefore,

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[1] Source: <u>Oral Education as Emancipation | Gallaudet University</u> (9 November 2024).

dismantling this 'double-sided' taboo implies reimagining inclusion beyond mere accommodation, striving to embrace deafness as a legitimate cultural identity, one equal to hearing norms. This shift depends on a joint commitment from both Deaf and hearing communities to develop inclusive and accessible frameworks that honor the diversity of D/deaf experiences, in order to create a space where D/deaf people can live without the burden of audism and forced assimilation.

In this context, Accessible Didactic Audiovisual Translation (ADAT) and its sub-branch DIDAT (Deaf-Accessible DAT), which in its turn is the hypernym of Deaf-Inclusive Didactic Subtitling (DIDS), present promising pathways to creating equitable and engaging language-learning environments for DHH students. Mainstream education, particularly in foreign language instruction, presents barriers that go beyond simple access to information; auditory-based methods in language learning systematically exclude DHH students, intensifying their sense of marginalization and reinforces the conviction that inability to hear is a taboo. Given that most foreign language curricula – in an era in which the urge to communicate rules supreme among teaching methods – emphasize listening and speaking skills, DHH students are very often limited in their participation, a fact that reinforces the biases in favor of hearing norms.

What follows aims to outline the limitations of traditional foreign language education for DHH students, positioning ADAT as both a pedagogical tool and a cultural intervention that directly challenges the double-sided taboo around deafness. Drawing on Lane's perspective, which recognizes deafness as a valid cultural and linguistic identity rather than a disability, ADAT and DIDS empower DHH students to engage fully in language learning without being sidelined by hearing-centered approaches. Through accessible, visually oriented subtitling exercises, ADAT and DIDS facilitate an inclusive learning environment that respects Deaf epistemologies, fostering engagement and cross-cultural understanding. This approach also introduces hearing students to Deaf culture and its linguistic diversity, bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing students and promoting a more integrated classroom experience in mixed scenarios.

2. Theoretical framework: ADAT and DIDAT

In recent years, Foreign Language Education (FLE) has undergone a dynamic transformation, driven by the adoption of new teaching strategies and a heightened understanding of learners' varied needs. Among the approaches, Audiovisual Translation (AVT) has proven highly effective, offering a means to facilitate language learning while fostering inclusivity in educational settings. The integration of AVT into FLE has sparked considerable interest, with notable research by Talaván Zanón (2013; 2019; 2023) showcasing the positive impact of active subtitling practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Together with contributions from other scholars – Hornero-Corisco and Gonzalez Vera (2020) and Bianchi (2015), to name a few – these findings have laid the foundation for what is now known as Didactic Audiovisual Translation (DAT), a specialized approach to foreign language teaching that supports learning in several key ways, as posited by Talaván *et al.* (2023, 55-63):

- Boosting Motivation: DAT engages learners emotionally, which is essential for sustaining interest and motivation in language learning.

- Promoting Independent Learning: By actively involving students in the process, DAT encourages a sense of ownership over their learning journey.

- Fostering Cognitive Development: DAT promotes a balance between higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) – such as critical analysis, evaluation, and creative thinking – and lower-order thinking skills (LOTS), including memorization, comprehension, and application, as conceptualized by Bloom (1956).

- Encouraging Social Interaction and Collaboration: Through group work and pair activities, DAT fosters communication skills and helps students progress from their current skill level to higher potential abilities, within Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

- Enhancing Literacy, Cultural Awareness, and Mediation Skills: DAT aims to deepen students' language proficiency, cultural understanding, and ability to mediate across linguistic contexts.

    – Providing Structured Learning Opportunities: DAT employs scaffolding techniques, such as activating prior knowledge, pre-teaching vocabulary, and organizing interactive tasks like "show and tell" exercises, which guide students and support language acquisition.

This growing body of research positions DAT as a valuable resource in foreign language education, with the potential to reimagine traditional teaching methods through multimedia-based translation tasks. However, despite these acknowledged benefits, there is a significant gap in research about the application of AVT in inclusive language teaching, especially for Deaf and hard of hearing students. This gap is significant given the specific challenges they face in learning foreign languages, such as limited access to auditory input and the need for visually-oriented materials. Addressing this gap conforms with the broader goals of equity, accessibility, and inclusion championed by global initiatives: the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – defined in 2015 for 2030 – include as the fourth goal to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"[2]. In particular,

> By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy. Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

> 'Special' students like deaf and hard of hearing students

> need to use foreign languages just like their hearing peers if they want to enjoy the same benefits of the technical advancements and globalization of our times, yet they cannot take part in the same foreign language (FL) education: the approaches, methods and materials developed are inadequate, and teachers trained to teach hearing learners are ill-equipped. (Domagała-Zyśk and Kontra 2016, 1)

Recent advancements in DAT prove great promise, particularly because of the engaging nature of audiovisual content, which allows students to adapt or creatively rephrase material in the very same source language. Unfortunately, as noted earlier, Accessible DAT (ADAT) still remains unexplored, and Deaf-Inclusive Didactic Audiovisual Translation (DIDAT) has yet to be given the

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[2] Source: Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development | Department of Economic and Social Affairs (un.org) (15 February 2024).

attention it deserves. Hence, the objective of this study is to fill this gap in current research by investigating the efficacy of subtitling as a tool for inclusive language teaching in mixed classroom environments.
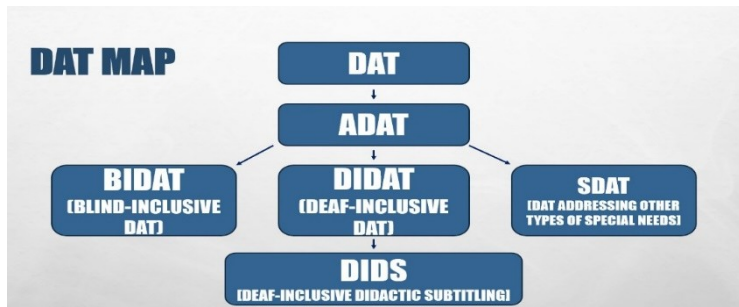

Figure 1. *A map of DAT. Source: author.*

3. Deaf-inclusive EFL teaching

The evolution of teaching methods has shifted radically from the once-dominant Medical Model (Kormos 2017), a 'deficit approach' where difference and disability were seen as conditions needing segregation rather than inclusion, achieved through separate schooling. The ensuing Social Model

> reframed disability in terms of social and environmental barriers […], difficulties are attributed not to the individual learner but to a mismatch between their way of working, the physical environment, the design of the curriculum and materials, and most importantly, the attitudes of the educational community. The goal here is to direct every effort towards altering the learning environment and adapting teaching to suit the learners, rather than expecting individuals to fit into their environment. (ibid., 9)

The later Interactional Model introduced an even more nuanced perspective on the learning difficulties experienced by disabled learners, as they are conceived as the result of an interaction (hence, the name of the model) between individual and environmental factors, in terms of the barriers experienced by each learner. The model brought about increasing "awareness of the importance of recognizing and understanding the individual differences

of learners, and not ascribing their difficulties only to external factors" (ibid.). As a result, by rejecting a one-size-fits-all approach to disability, the Interactional Model acknowledges the need for adaptive and responsive teaching practices.

Building on the above bases, the 'Inclusive Model' which I am going to develop aims at total inclusivity, keeping in mind the interplay of both internal and external factors – as posited by the Interactional Model. Practical applications include, as an instance, computer-based lesson plans (henceforth, LPs), which can be accessed in any place and context, and at any time, and which are designed in a way to overcome acoustic barriers or any hindrance to full auditory accessibility, and, as importantly, which are focused on deaf-related issues, in order to raise intercultural awareness on the topic and help dispel the fear of the D/deaf. Promoting and developing interculturality plays a pivotal role in breaking down deep-seated stereotypes, which are profoundly culture-related taboos[3]. My ongoing research project, currently in its pilot phase, aims to create a physical, emotional and cognitive environment that is fully accessible to DHH learners, where English as a foreign language (EFL) can be taught in a truly inclusive setting that respects and accommodates individual needs. By 'inclusive', I mean a teaching model and a situational context in which all students are valued and which respects

> the fact that people are different, that each individual experiences learning in their own way, and that everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses. Underpinning inclusion is the principle of equity, which in education means ensuring that each learner is provided with what they need; in other words, every learner gets the accommodation or differentiation they need in order to succeed. (Kormos 2017, 10)

When it comes to an 'invisible' taboo such as deafness, inclusion also needs to entail careful consideration of the learning environment. Seating arrangement, for instance, is very important for facilitating interaction with

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[3] Fisher *et al.* (2019) delve into less usual taboos among the deaf which are specific to the nature of the oppression the deaf community experiences: for example, when "a non-fluent signer from outside deaf communities uses bits of signing for self-promotion and profit" (ibid., 144); correcting a deaf person's pronunciation of a word they have voiced as well as breaking eye contact can also be taboo (ibid., 149); finally, taboos also exist within deaf communities and they largely involve hierarchies (ibid., 153).

DHH students. Ideally, classrooms should allow seating in a semicircle, so that all students could see each other's faces and the entire signed space. This spatial arrangement of the classroom promotes social interaction, and encourages peer-to-peer engagement as well as collaborative learning. Further specific strategies for complete inclusion when teaching in a mixed classroom environment are listed below[4]:

– to start with, DHH students should sit at the front, so that teachers' face and lips are perfectly visible – for this reason, good lighting is paramount;

– while speaking, teachers should face students, not the board behind or beside them;

– they should speak clearly, emphasize keywords, repeat and rephrase, if necessary;

– they should also provide written handouts and show captioned or interpreted videos;

– reducing background noise is crucial, too, especially for students using a hearing aid.

In addition to this, a crucial aspect of inclusivity worth considering is the need to ensure and maximize accessible content to all learners (Kormos 2017, 25): for DHH learners, adapted materials are recommended, meaning that the content should be simplified and re-arranged by decreasing the amount of information per page; alternatively, in an inclusive classroom environment with hearing and DHH students, additional time should be allocated to each activity in order to accommodate slower reading speeds. As posited by Sedlá□ ková (2016), DHH students are poor in reading comprehension, a skill gap which can negatively impact their academic and career success. This is especially true for deaf learners born to hearing parents, who find themselves in a 'non-language' environment, limiting their exposure to comprehensible language input from an early age and hindering overall cognitive development. As a

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[4] Source: 7 Teaching Strategies to Empower Deaf Students | Deaf Unity (26 October 2024).

consequence, proficiency in reading skills should be one of the main aims of foreign language teaching to DHH.

A further goal of ELT to DHH students is to nurture their motivation, a process which demands considerable effort on the part of students with special needs. Among the captivating tools and methodologies, we can mention the use of audiovisual products. As assumed by Podlewska (2021), film is an inclusive medium that allows learners to engage with real-life topics – thus, filling the gap between the classroom environment and the real world; consequently, using film in language education has several benefits, such as "greater inclusiveness, increased motivation and willingness to perform in- and out-of-class activities, exposure to authentic language" (ibid., 54). Donaghy (2015) reckons how the use of moving images is

> very effective at reaching and empowering children with learning disabilities [*and this*] increases even more when learners are actively involved in making their own moving image texts. Learners are usually highly enthusiastic, and prepared to put in a huge amount of time and effort when working on a moving image project because it is their own and it has a tangible result. (ibid., 16)

Enthusiasm, motivation, the possibility to deal with real-life deaf-related topics in a dynamic and practical way, the chance to work individually, setting one's own pace, and developing one's own digital skills in parallel with the enhancement of students' meta-linguistic competence as well as both productive and receptive language skills, are among the key factors which prompted me to devise deaf-inclusive lesson plans, to be carried out anywhere and at any time and submitted via Google forms. Perhaps most importantly, DHH students are free to choose whether to communicate via either verbalization or live chats.

4. A Deaf-Inclusive Lesson Plan (LP) on *The Sound of Metal* (2020)

As previously discussed, DAT has countless benefits to foreign language acquisition; among them, flexibility contributes to decrease the level of stress or pressure that some students may experience in a crowded classroom environment and to increase motivation (Talaván *et al.* 2023). It is

recommended, however, to support students through their initial encounters with DAT-based lesson plans, until they reach a sufficient level of independence to navigate the materials confidently.

The table below shows the model of a deaf-inclusive LP, divided into three main parts[5]. The pre-DAT task is allotted 15 minutes, while the post-DAT task is allotted 10 minutes, as most of the time is to be devoted to the DAT task proper (35 minutes). The entry level is B1: based on this, as outlined by the CEFR[6] (Common European Framework of Reference) for languages, students are expected to be able to write texts on topics with which they are familiar or of personal interest – such as deaf-related issues – and to describe experiences and impressions, in a simple but coherent way. With regard to receptive skills, they can understand texts that consist mainly of high-frequency language related to everyday life or work, and the description of events and feelings in personal letters. In this specific case, the tasks assigned are comparatively easier, as this LP is meant to serve as a first approach for non-trained B1-level respondents to AVT and subtitling.

DURATION	PHASE	DESCRIPTION	AIM
15 MIN	**Warm-up** Introduction to subtitling and accessibility criteria	Reading comprehension of a written text followed by a short videoclip.	One open and five multiple-choice questions aiming to check students' comprehension.
35 MIN	**Didactic subtitling** Re-production task	Keyword captioning (fill in the gaps of already provided subtitles).	To work on vocabulary retention and allow for a first approach to subtitling.
10 MIN	**Post DAT** Reflection task (written production)	Composition on the deaf-related topics covered in the videoclip.	To promote inter-cultural awareness and foster reflection on taboos and identity.

Table 1. LP *"Introducing Subtitling:* The Sound of Metal *(2020)"*

[5] It is available at https://forms.gle/FDscPAF7ytLMSf6i6.
[6] Source: Common European Framework of Reference for Language skills | Europass (26 October 2024).

4.1 Warm-up Phase (15 minutes)

Speaking and listening activities are not feasible in mixed hearing and DHH classes: although some students might have partial hearing or be post-lingually deaf, which means they have become deaf after the language-acquisition stage, others might be trained enough in oral speech production, a common tendency especially in the past, when some teaching approaches meant to "close the gap between deaf and hearing learners [*by*] fostering the integration of hearing impaired people into the majority society (Domagała-Zyśk and Kontra 2016, 2). In light of this, and since my main aim is to produce lesson plans accessible to all forms/types of deafness, never compelling any DHH students to forced verbalization as in oralist approaches, I have based my LPs on reading and writing tasks only.

At this stage, students are introduced to subtitling as an AVT sub-branch and to the basic concepts and criteria for offering a good accessibility service and, above all, the fundamental criteria[7] for high-quality subtitles. The initial task requires respondents to provide their own synthesis or re-elaboration of an extract from a textbook on subtitling, thus fostering written production in L2 in which both language rephrasing and content consistency are rewarded. The ensuing task includes 5 multiple-choice questions based on a short videoclip which provides precious tips and guidelines for creating correct and accessible subtitles, with detailed and practical examples on such crucial issues as line breaks, sound effects, numbers, capitalization, and so on.

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[7] They are mostly inspired by the "Code of good subtitling practice" developed by Mary Carroll and Jan Ivarsson and endorsed by the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation in Berlin on 17 October 1998.

Question 1

We had a bottle of / wine, and then we went home.
We had a bottle of wine, / and then we went home / to sleep.
We had a bottle of wine, / and then we went home.

Question 2

She is forty years old. / She was born in the '80s.
She is 40 years old. / She was born in the '80s.

Question 3

This is absolutely weird.
This is ABSOLUTELY weird

Question 4

when he got home, / he found the dog on the couch.
When he got home, / he found the dog on the couch.

Question 5

Dave woke up at half past five.
Dave woke uo at 5:30.
Dave woke up at 5:30.

Table 2. *Warm-up, task 2: Which one is correct?*

The questions are based on these very same tips and ask respondents to select the correct alternative among different subtitle options. This is meant to help visualize the fundamental criteria listed above and reinforce visual imprint, which is paramount especially for DHH learners. At the end of the lesson plan, once the form has been submitted, respondents are given their total score and have access to the correct answers.

4.2 Didactic Subtitling Phase – Didactic Keyword Captioning (35 minutes)

The videoclip selected for the core task of this lesson plan is taken from a movie entitled *The Sound of Metal* and released in 2020: it is the story of Ruben, a drummer who slowly loses his hearing and is doomed to complete deafness. As the plot unfolds, the main character struggles to cope with his life being upset by this discovery, but finally accepts to embrace his new identity as a member of a Deaf community where addicts are rehabbed and children are taught ASL. He learns sign language himself and starts feeling part of the community. However, the urge to resume his past life leads him to do "the deed", a euphemism for cochlear implant surgery, often considered a refusal of deafness and a betrayal towards one's own community and nature. The videoclip shows Ruben as he goes back to the community, run by Joe, and brings the man the unwelcome news. The slow-paced scene allows viewers to fully enjoy the inner struggle experienced by Ruben and the pain in Joe's eyes and voice when he is compelled to beg him to pack up and leave for the sake of the whole community, who believe in deafness as a value, not as a handicap to fix. At this time, Ruben is still on the edge between deafness acceptance and disability refusal, pressured by the need to get back into mainstream hearing society. He finally yielded to the "deed", which signals his violation of Deaf trust, and for this reason he has to leave.

The type of subtitling task assigned in this specific LP is among those recommended for AVT beginners and/or for lower levels of proficiency (Talaván 2020), e.g., A1 to B2 levels, and is meant to enhance vocabulary and spelling – whereas more creative activities, such as creative subtitling, are best suited for B1 to C2 levels of foreign language proficiency. Didactic keyword captions simulate a fill-in-the-gaps exercise, although the gaps happen to appear within ready-made and segmented subtitles (Talaván *et al.* 2023). By resuming and re-watching the video again and again, they will be able to complete the task without having to deal with technical issues implied in managing specific software.

In this phase, the video should be played twice, at least (ibid.), to make students acquainted with the key events within the scene. Self-contained scenes

– no longer than 3 minutes – are recommended because students' comprehension does not depend on previous scenes and the level of concentration required remains manageable (Hornero Corisco and Gonzales-Vera 2020, 63), although some background information should be provided in order to achieve full comprehension; for this reason, I offered some insights into the movie's plot, main characters, and prior events. This specific video is around 6 minutes long, but the scene pace is slow and features a short dialogue, which can be accessed both by selecting subtitles on the clip itself and by reading them below the videoclip within the same section of the form.

Ensuing questions provide subtitles which miss one or more words, generally among the vocabulary that is fundamental to grasp the meaning of the scene, including key verbs and nouns such as "trust", "belief", "handicap", "fix", "deed", etc. In this way, respondents will get to focus on more information-dense elements of the source text, while still being exposed to copious carriers of orality and also taboo language, which abound in Ruben's speech more than in Joe's.

1. Ruben: I did the _____.

   Joe: The _____?
   [NB: The same word is repeated in both lines, so you must provide only one word.
   A hint: Ruben is referring to the surgery]

2. Joe: I wonder, uh /

   all these mornings
   you've been sitting in my study /
   sitting /
   have you had any moments of _____?

3. Joe: But ... /

   I see you've made your _____, right?

4. Joe: As you know, /

   everybody here shares in the _____
   that being deaf is not _____, /
   not something to _____.
   [NB: You must provide three different words separated by a comma]

5. Joe: And my house

   is a house built on that belief /
   and built on _____.

6. Joe: When that trust is _____,

   things happen.

7. Joe: I'm gonna have to ask you

   to _____ your bags today /
   and find another _____ to be, Ruben.
   [NB: You must provide two different words separated by a comma]

Table 3. *Subtitling task – keyword captioning: Fill in the gap*

4.3 Post-DAT Phase (10 minutes)

This stage is devoted to post-DAT reflection. Once the clip has been watched several times, before and during the above task completion, and the content and dynamics have been thoroughly acquired, respondents have the chance to elaborate their own viewpoints and opinions on the topic of discussion and put themselves into both characters' shoes, share their pain, and feel for them. Some DHH students may find this task an opportunity to express – even in plain words – how difficult and painstaking the struggle between the DHH and hearing identities might be, meaning they can draw from their own personal, first-hand experiences. This might serve as an additional motivation factor for them. As for hearing students, presumably not acquainted with such issues that are crucial for the Deaf community, this LP might turn out to be a moment of epiphany, of enlightenment.

> Now take some minutes for reflection and type down your thoughts and observations on the main topics of the videoclip, more precisely on cochlear implant as a refusal of or betrayal to the Deaf identity and also on Ruben's internal struggle between his old hearing self and his new Deaf identity.
>
> [Write around 100 words]

Table 4. *POST-DAT task: written production*

This final task may also be turned into an oral production task, which would make the LP a more complete one, thus allowing respondents to enhance all four main abilities. Students may record their own voice on their mobile phone and upload the recording in a proper section within the LP. Due to the inclusive aim of ADAT, however, this oral task may be carried out only by hearing students and oralist DHH learners who are willing to communicate in English.

5. Assessment criteria

The WARM-UP phase is aimed at promoting both students' L2 written production and reading comprehension. Its additional goal is also to allow respondents to get acquainted with subtitling and the main criteria for producing accessible subtitling. The open-ended question shall be worth up to 5 points:

- 1 point for accuracy, spelling, and grammar;

- 1 point for consistency with the question – thus, testifying for comprehension of the source language;

- 1 point for content originality and personal re-elaboration – meaning respondents shall rephrase the source text's sentence structures, syntax, and word choice;

- 1 point for task completion or, in other words, for complying with word count (no fewer than 100 words);

- 1 point for synthesis ability, meaning respondents are able to provide thorough replies from the context viewpoint.

Each entry – whether accuracy, spelling, and grammar or content originality and personal re-elaboration – can be graded on a flexible scale, allowing evaluators to assign half-points if needed. DHH students should be graded while taking into account the onset of deafness – as pre-lingual deafness might result in less advanced skills in written language production, also in terms of spelling accuracy –, their overall level of literacy and educational background.

Each of the 5 multiple-choice questions shall be graded 1 point. Thus, the total amount for this task shall be 10 points. This task should account for 1/3 of the total score for the lesson, which is 30 points.

As for the DAT phase proper, inspiration has been drawn from Appendix 3.1 of *Didactic Audiovisual Translation and Foreign Language Education* (Talaván *et al.* 2023, 97) to evaluate each reply:

– 0.5 points shall be awarded to spelling accuracy – still keeping in mind that DHH students generally display a higher rate of spelling mistakes, compared to hearing students;

– 0.5 points shall be awarded if respondents provide the correct missing word or an equally feasible one.

This task is worth 10 points, the same as the previous and the following sections included in the LP. As for the subsequent phase, the post-DAT section shall be awarded 10 points. Each of the following criteria shall account for 5 points:

	1 pt.	2 pt.	3 pt.	4 pt.	5 pt.
Accuracy, grammar, syntax/sentence structure	Very poor	Almost sufficient	Good	Very good	Excellent
Content originality	Very poor	Almost sufficient	Good	Very good	Excellent

Table 5. *Post-DS assessment rubric*

Accuracy in grammar and spelling is just as important as fluency, sentence structure, and content originality. At this point, students should have their own perspective and opinions, and be able to put them down into a well-structured, grammatically correct, and inter-culturally accurate way. They should also reference the previously-taken lesson plan word count: written responses counting between 50 and 100 words shall be decreased by 1 point; those counting 0-50 words shall be decreased by 2 points.

6. Results and observations

As already said, the LP was submitted by 20 BA first-year – both DHH and hearing – students who are being trained to become LIS translators and interpreters in an Italian university. Their entrance level is B1. This LP was

devised as a first encounter with subtitling, which they were going to delve into in more detail in the ensuing lessons.

The overall average score was 18.2, with scores fluctuating from 8 out of 30 to 28.5/30, signaling that the entry level is – as expected – not homogeneous. Spelling accuracy has proved more difficult for DHH students, as anticipated; for this reason, only a 0.5 penalty was awarded in such cases. The warm-up section average score was 3.4 out of 5 for task 1 and 4.25 out of 5 for task 2: replies to task 1 generally did not comply with the mandatory word count, while some of them totally lacked re-elaboration. The core activity scored only 4.65 out of 10, and one can only infer why: some students must have clearly misunderstood the task's instructions, resulting in replies totally non-consistent with or absent in the original dialogue; some others lost interest in the lesson and/or got distracted, and ended up submitting the form without completing the final task – as was the case with respondents #10, 14, and 18, two of whom happen to be deaf. During a post-LP discussion, held in both English and LIS, students reported that the POST-DAT task proved the most difficult, which is the reason why 5 of them did not carry out the task, adding to 1 student who did not manage to submit the form within the allotted 60 minutes. The average score for this final task was 3.73 out of 10, with scores fluctuating from 0 to 9.5, and with a couple of noteworthy replies, one apparently copied from a film review website[8] – which praised the movie but totally ignored the question's main topic – and the other one presumably generated by AI, dealing with deafness and deaf identity from a more general viewpoint and only slightly touching upon the issue of cochlear implant, using a formal style and complex phrases which are not plausible in a B1 level. Around 50% of replies were inaccurate, both in terms of spelling, punctuation, and grammar, and lacked content originality. Finally, around 60% of respondents did not provide a 100-word reply, which resulted in a 1- or even 2-point decrease.

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[8] Sound of Metal movie review & film summary (2020) | Roger Ebert (16 November 2024).

Task type	Maximum score	Average score	Score range	Key observations
Warm-up Task 1	5	3.4	0-9.5	Word count issues, lack of re-elaboration
Warm-up Task 2	5	4.25	1-5	Strong performance overall
DAT	10	4.65	1-10	Instruction comprehension issues
Post-DAT	10	3.73	0-9.5	Mixed results, completion challenges
Total	30	18.2	8-28.5	Variable levels

Table 6. *Overview of students' performances*

All things considered, the LP achieved its original objectives in that all of the students managed to access the contents and carry out the tasks without any barrier whatsoever. The overall impression was positive, as they felt strongly motivated by the empowering captioning task and even more so when they realized that they would be working with audiovisual products and, most importantly, that the grading process would take into account and partially ignore spelling inaccuracies, verb government mistakes, and post-nominal adjective positioning more typically – but not exclusively – found in DHH learners of English. The timing allotted to each task was sufficient for 95% of them, with only one exception. The post-LP discussion allowed hearing and oralist students to verbalize their thoughts and reinforce their oral production skills, while signing in LIS, in order to stay within the safe borders of inclusivity and discuss a fairly debated topic, i.e., deaf identity embracing and/or escaping.

7. Conclusions

Deep-rooted socio-cultural taboos resulting from fear of diversity and limited intercultural awareness continue to significantly affect the social and cognitive development of marginalized, non-mainstream communities, such as the Deaf. This impact has been most evident in the historical tension between oralism and manualism, most notably crystallized in the 1880 Milan Congress's declaration of speech superiority and the following ban of sign languages in education. As a result, these decisions have influenced deaf education for generations and created lasting barriers to true inclusion.

In this perspective, the present study has proposed an experimental application of DIDAT for teaching English in a mixed classroom environment by means of a lesson plan, which should be considered as a preliminary attempt to use DIDS in a mixed class, as previous research has mainly focused on classes of either only hearing students or deaf students. In the name of inclusivity and accessibility, therefore, it was necessary to adjust some of the activities/tasks in order to make them feasible for any Deaf student, such as:

- by leaving out mandatory oral comprehension and production tasks,

- adjusting the tasks' pace to accommodate slower reading speed,

- selecting deaf-related video clips as DAT tasks, and

- selecting audiovisual input whose visual component is totally predominant whereas the acoustic component is irrelevant – which means that they can be watched in a sound off mode;

- last, but not least, providing original subtitles.

Although preliminary, the results of this pilot implementation are encouraging. DIDAT effectively bridges the educational divide while promoting intercultural understanding. Moreover, when approaching deaf-related content through subtitling activities, students not only developed their language skills, but also engaged in meaningful discussions about deaf identity and culture.

This combination of language development and cultural awareness suggests a promising direction for inclusive education.

Nevertheless, several challenges emerged during implementation: variable completion rates and engagement levels suggest the need for refined task design and clearer instructions. As shown above, some students struggled with time management and task comprehension, indicating that successful implementation requires careful scaffolding and consistent support.

Of course, this method needs continued experimentation and refinement. Further research should examine the long-term impacts of DIDAT implementation, explore the possibilities of technological integration, and investigate how these approaches shape identity formation in mixed learning environments. In addition, testing this methodology across different levels of proficiency and educational contexts would clarify its broader potential. Through well-designed implementation and (inter)cultural awareness, approaches like DIDAT can help create truly inclusive learning environments while challenging persistent taboos around deafness in education.

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Euthanasia and the Right to Die: The Ultimate Taboo

ABSTRACT

In the many years of legal attempts in the English, Scottish, and Italian parliaments to overthrow a thinly-veiled hypocrisy surrounding the right to request medically-assisted dying for those whose life has become intolerable, there has been a wealth of discussion as well as misinformation on the topic of 'a good death'. In my contribution I will attempt to show how this taboo-laden 'ethically sensitive topic' has parallels in these two nations: through a narrative that encompasses parliamentary legislation, dictionaries, and other sources, I will endeavour to explore the shifting concept of suicide through the centuries, including the way in which death is seen to belong to the individual or to society. It is ultimately by freeing death of cultural structures that we can look at assisted suicide for the terminally ill, for example, as a question of human rights against inhumane suffering, rather than something taboo that must remain underground.

KEYWORDS: Death; assisted suicide; euthanasia; dying; taboo.

1. Cross-Cultural Issues and Why Assisted Dying Matters

Allow me to begin on a personal note: having lived between Italy and the United Kingdom since I was a teenager, I developed multiple perspectives on certain issues, one of which is how death is seen and dealt with. About twenty years ago, I was putting my bilingual abilities to good use by assisting the

Associazione Luca Coscioni on several translations and edits in connection with, among other initiatives, the Second World Congress for the Freedom of Scientific Research (2009). Through this, I became interested in the ethics debate on assisted suicide, looking at how legislative reforms had been attempted or were being pursued in the parliaments of Italy, England, and Scotland: why, I wondered, were legislators across two countries and three parliaments unable to reflect public opinion on assisted dying? Was regulating this issue in medical or private settings so taboo as to be virtually untouchable?

The narrative of assisted suicide and euthanasia prohibition can be summarised by its association with the archetype/spectre of the killer nurse/doctor: the Lucy Letbys and Harold Shipmans of this world are one of the nightmares that all legislators want to avoid. The reality, of course, is that one cannot legislate one's way out of murderous intent – it will often find a way – and that by closing the debate or brushing it under the carpet one may potentially endanger patients. Much has been said, for example, about the unwanted double-effect of opiates such as morphine, even though it seems that myth must be carefully separated from reality (Faris, Dewar and Dyason 2021): hypothetically, if a doctor unintentionally hastened a terminally ill patient's death through excessive morphine administration, would this be seen as malicious intent? Would it be on the same plane as active euthanasia?

It is the lack of specific legislation, campaigners may argue, that leaves many vulnerable to a bad death, rather than introducing assisted suicide into the healthcare equation. Yet, an ethical hypocrisy of brushing difficult issues under the moral carpet seems to persist: just as we see with sex work, any fruitful political discussion on subjects considered taboo is often shirked. Where something is known to exist but remains illegal, it causes harm at both an individual and a societal level. A sex worker in a country where selling sex is illegal might be unable, for example, to report violent clients to the authorities for fear of prosecution: regulating sex work, though problematic in appearing to legitimise the sexual exploitation and trafficking of individuals, may at least give those involved some agency. In the same way, a family member helping a terminally ill patient ending their life, with their written request and consent, in a country where assisting and abetting suicide was illegal, would likely refrain from declaring their involvement out of fear of prosecution, whereas regulating

this practice would allow the process to fully surface from the shadows of shame.

Creating a culture of covertness and taboo does not sow the conditions for protecting individual autonomy and bodily rights; rather, it pushes these issues underground along with the lives of those dealing with them; where something is hidden by guilt and shame, there grow illegality, malpractice, and harmful behaviour. Recent issues around the revisiting of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States have parallels to the aforementioned: legislators who cannot reconcile their ideological convictions with the bodily reality of womanhood, that is, the need to have control of one's reproductive rights, are more inclined to deny legal abortion than allowing it. Liberal laws tend to benefit many more people than prohibitive ones: the central tenet is that I may not agree with *x* but I will not deny you the right to it. For example, I may not agree with eating meat, but I would not deny meat-eaters the right to enjoy it. The latter could be applied to any number of human areas:

- how one should dress in public;
- how one should educate one's child(ren);
- how one should love and make love;
- how one should be religious, that is, one's faith;
- how one should behave with people of a different gender;
- how one should communicate at home, i.e. in what language one should do so.

The list is probably endless, and illiberal rulers down the ages have intrigued historians by coming up with countless new modes of interference into people's private lives, new lists of prohibited behaviours, and new things to ban from 'orthodox' morality.

As I looked at attempts to reform the law in the parliaments of Westminster (London), Holyrood (Edinburgh), and Montecitorio (Rome), I came across figures such as Lord Joel Joffe, Baroness Mary Warnock, Debbie Purdy, Dianne Pretty, Dr. Anne Turner, Loris Fortuna and Margo MacDonald. The last name is important to me because in 2010 I was fortunate to interview her regarding her Assisted Suicide (Scotland) Bill (2013), not long before she eventually succumbed to her incurable illness (2014). In the interview, Margo MacDonald highlighted how support for a reform to assisted dying was usually high in the political world – until, that is, a new election cycle loomed closer,

and the fear of the electorate's judgment would set in. She was clear that her bill would only apply to those patients who were *compos mentis,* which would be one of the checks and balances to avoid situations where someone without mental capacity would be taking this route. Many others have tried setting up goalposts between a patient's initial request and final access to assisted suicide, proposing similar checks and balances to ensure protections for vulnerable patients. Despite such efforts many bills have failed, with opponents invoking the 'slippery slope' argument, which warns that legalising assisted dying is only the first step toward active euthanasia – where a medical professional intentionally causes death by direct intervention.

Opponents of assisted dying, such as Care Not Killing and other anti-euthanasia groups, weaponise data from countries that permit assisted dying by spinning it in such a way as to imply flaws in the process and that in so doing imply that the rise in requests for assisted dying is somehow irrefutable proof of a euthanasia epidemic. Committees in the British Parliament have heard evidence from key witnesses and experts who have offered factual knowledge of the assisted dying models enshrined in the legal system of countries such as Holland, Switzerland, and the American state of Oregon; some have even travelled to those countries to gather first-hand evidence in an attempt to remove any doubt over those legal frameworks. The reality, whichever side of the debate one may be, is that there is no hidden truth: while assisted dying must be scrutinised for abuse there must be enough trust in it lest those countries that want to legislate on it may forever hesitate.

At its core, assisted dying is about patient autonomy: patients and healthcare professionals involved in this option generally agree that it gives patients peace of mind, especially for those in the case of terminal, incurable illnesses. It would allow the people in question to choose the timing of their death, often at home, saying goodbye to one's family without fear of legal prosecution for them; it would also prevent them from resorting to extreme methods (e.g., jumping from a window) or having to die sooner than intended (e.g., by having to travel to another country to legally access assisted dying, which has to be done before one is too ill to make that journey).

2. Pain Relief, Sanctity of Life, and Dying Mores through the Ages

In discussing assisted dying, one of the counterarguments often brought to the fore is the following: were there to be better and universal palliative care for the terminally ill, there would be no need or desire for assisted suicide. However, the truth is that, on the basis of what we currently have in place, this ideal will likely never be fully realised. There will always be individual situations where pain relief methods are inadequate for a particular scenario and/or where a patient may not wish to spend their final days in a drug-induced stupor but opt for an early exit while still fully conscious and able-minded. The palliative care ideal shares much common ground with that of assisted suicide: both hold dear the patient's quality of life, meaning, the desire to make a person's final months, weeks and days as comfortable, pain-free, and tolerable as possible. This is the idea of a 'good death', an exact translation of the Greek word *eu-thanasia*. While laudanum and other opiates were historically available to some, it was only in the twentieth century that medical science made possible the prolonging of life beyond what was previously conceivable. As a result, we have come to witness cases such as those of, for example, Terri Schiavo, Piergiorgio Welby, and Eluana Englaro, all of whom were kept alive by artificial ventilation, nutrition, and hydration. These cases have provoked deep feelings and debate both in their respective countries (the US and Italy) and abroad: what does 'quality of life' or a 'good death' mean for someone who is terminally ill or in a permanent vegetative state?

Another landmark case is that of the Italian disc jockey Fabiano Antoniani, a.k.a. DJ Fabo. After a car accident left him blind and tetraplegic, he chose to die at the Swiss Dignitas facility, with the support of Marco Cappato from the Associazione Luca Coscioni. His death sparked a judicial journey up to the Italian Constitutional Court, with the latter absolving Cappato in 2019 of any wrongdoing and urging Parliament to legislate on the issue of assisted suicide. Unlike Schiavo, Welby, or Englaro, DJ Fabo was not dependent on life-sustaining treatments like artificial ventilation or feeding tubes, which could be removed to bring about death. Instead, he faced the prospect of a blind, immobile consciousness for the rest of his life, with no prospect of ever returning to a life that, for him, was worth living. An ethical legislator should

have no qualms with the idea that the state should allow someone in that predicament to choose to die on their terms, and that life should not be forced on them.

The history of pain relief, as I mentioned above, included opium and its derivatives as well as other medicinal herbs; however, artificial breathing, nutrition, and hydration did not exist. As a result, neither did the medical dilemmas we now face such as deciding on the fate of a patient in a permanent vegetative state who had not previously laid out advance directives to inform medical staff on what their wishes would be in that situation. As medicine creates more possibilities to sustain life, we are able to delay death and, by this course of action, we also engender more nuanced ethical conundrums. In Western culture the concept and practice of dying have taken many shapes; while there are parallels in the physicians' desire to relieve their patients' suffering, the idea of people ending their own life has often been cloaked in ideology. In ancient Greece and Rome, suicide may have been acceptable in specific situations, for example women under threat of rape or losing a loved one, or men about to be captured by the enemy in battle or sentenced to death by the state. From Syrinx the nymph to Seneca the senator, honourable dying in so-called classical antiquity had poignancy and some tolerance, something that we also see in philosophy – for example in the writings of Plato, who even in earlier works such as *Phaedo* did outline scenarios where the unyielding tenet of suicide as reprehensible could meet with some moral compromise. Indeed, the idea of life as a divine gift occupied the mind of many more than just the ancient Athenian philosophers: in the aftermath of the fall of the western Roman empire, the establishment of Christian theology shaped the mediaeval moral universe in such a manner that its increasingly doctrinal thinking wove its way into all areas of daily life, from eating and drinking to fertility and, inevitably, dying.

In the Augustinian universe, as seen in his *De civitate dei* (413- 427 AD), that Platonic interpretation of suicide was reinforced while the scholar focused the early mediaeval mind on viewing the ending of one's life as a crime against the divine: for the following millennium, that is from the fifth century AD to the fifteenth, Christian ideology filled the vacuum left by the fallen Roman empire while the Church of Rome increasingly viewed itself as sole executor of God's

will on Earth. However, Christian political activism gave its blessings to many ills, under the banner of God's work, from witch hunts and torture to 'holy' wars and massacres. The question is: how could this be reconciled with the banning of suicide as a sinful act? How could Christianity be uncharitable to one's decision to end one's life but allow, for example, burning *suspected* heretics at the stake? How could Crusaders be given carte blanche to kill and maim but people fighting a personal battle with heartbreak or ill health be condemned to burn in infernal eternity for ending their life? We may not find it possible to reconcile these views all too easily, therefore we may want to focus less on suicide and shift our gaze to dying intended as a process: here we find a great deal of detail to help us find some answers.

In the late-mediaeval tome, the *Ars moriendi*, we have a fifteenth-century summary of the general thinking on the subject of dying: the title, which in the Caxton translation of that time became *The Art and Craft to Know Well to Die*, offers advice on what should be done at the dying person's bedside; this, of course, included specifics on praying rituals. What is perhaps unsurprising is the way in which human death, like other human endeavours at the time, is the relinquishing of one's life back to the deity, as though it were on loan for the time of one's existence, reinforcing a belief that what is paramount is our preparation for that return journey to the spiritual world, to the afterlife. The concept of a 'good death', therefore, was not seen as a matter temporal but a matter spiritual: the dying must be spiritually prepared according to the rites established by doctrine, which included prayers and atonement, lest they should find themselves cast into eternal damnation after having passed on. The bed, therefore, was a different place for the living and the dying: while in life, especially for the wealthier, it may have been adorned by fine linen to signify status, in death it did away with those fineries and became unadorned, stripped back to basics, signifying that the dying person renounced material concerns and eschewed greed. This image of the "honest bed" (French, Smith and Stanbury 2016), that is, a bed that symbolises the good reputation of a household and its virtuousness, was part of mediaeval iconography and reinforced the symbolism of dying as an abandonment of earthly materialism.

What is also interesting is that death occurred mostly at home, meaning that unless one had died in battle or at sea or in other such scenarios, the

expectation was that one would have the time to prepare oneself for dying in one's own bed (or equivalent). This is in sharp contrast with what post-war industrialisation brought about in twentieth-century life, where the increasing medicalisation of birthing and dying stripped those moments of the home-centred rituals that had been continuously in use across western cultures from mediaeval times to pre-industrial, agrarian societies. It will suffice to look at the *wakes*, still used in the second half of the twentieth century and within current memory in several parts of Scotland such as the Outer Hebrides, where the deceased would be kept in their home for one or two nights to give the community an opportunity to come and pay their respects. In these small communities, another example being in pre-evacuation St. Kilda, when a person departed from life then all work and schooling would cease and be suspended for as long as the wakes and funereal rites were in process: death demanded a collective pause for unity and reflection.

The medicalisation of dying, with hospitals replacing homes and a meaningful community, has signified a profound change: with surroundings stripped of personal symbolism or memory, the deathbed is immersed in the neon light of a ward, with no belongings, animals or even flowers allowed, all of which in the name of better physical care for the sick. "Dying is removed from the home to the hospital and is dissected into little bits. Those monumental reminders of death, the dying themselves, the sick and the aged, are systematically hidden from public view." (Tierney 2011). This removal from sight, this erasing of public dying happened non-linearly across countries and history, but in the case of the two cultures that I inhabit it has been an almost universal shift as agrarian customs were gradually giving way to post-industrialised mores. "Remembering death is one of the most rooted taboos of our time. Our society exorcises the fear of death with contradictory attitudes [...] which causes both an emotional and rational devaluing of death itself". (Salvestrini, Varanini and Zangarini 2007, VII; my translation). The deathbed of a hospital or hospice is not the 'honest bed' of mediaeval memory: if we wanted to generalise, we could almost conclude that the former is concerned with the body physical whereas the latter with the body spiritual. The contradiction of our time is that on the one hand we have shed the devout mourners' preoccupations at the mediaeval deathbed, while on the other we are

so afraid of openly discussing death that governments of many advanced industrial nations cannot adequately legislate on medically-assisted suicide: we have removed the old taboo of suicide but made a new one out of assisted suicide.

3. How 'Good Death' Definitions Changed after the Middle Ages; a Euthanasia Timeline

Given that classical antiquity, as indeed Roman emperor Augustus (63BC-AD14) had wished for himself, valued a good death in the sense of kind, gentle, and painless, and had indeed a term for it (*eu-thanasia*), how did that meaning almost disappear out of language for a millennium? Or rather, how did dying become concerned chiefly with the health of one's soul? The scope of my inquiry here does not aim to answer this particular question: having seen how Christianity dictated the morality of the dying, I am satisfied to leave this interrogative unanswered; instead, I wish to investigate not only how from the early sixteenth century the term euthanasia began resurfacing and reconnecting to its classical ancestry but also how a more human-centred *Weltanschauung* and medical advances added more ethical nuance to it thereafter. To assist me in this task I will mainly refer to one article (Paoli 2019) resulting in a brief chronology of changing usage and shifting attitudes.

> 1516: In Thomas More's *Utopia*, "voluntary death" is mentioned as a means to escape "torturing, lingering pain, without hope of recovery or ease". (Biotti-Mache 2016)

> 1580: In the *Lexicon græco-latinum novum* by Johannes Scapula we can see both Euthànatos and Euthanasìa, in Greek, each of them translated into Latin as 'good and happy death'.

> 1588: "[...] In the *Vita del sereniss.mo S.r Guiglielmo Gonzaga duca di Mantoa, et di Monferrato &c. Descritta da Lodouico Arriuabene*, [...] it is written of the man's death, who [...] 'died of a very peaceful and pleasant death [...] which he [Augustus] [...] called Euthanasia". (Paoli 2019; my translation)

1605: Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* wrote: "I esteem [...] the office of a physician not only to restore health, but to mitigate pain [...] not only when [it] may conduce to recovery, but when it may serve to make a fair [...] passage. For it is no small felicity [...] *Euthanasia*". (Biotti-Mache 2016) This type of euthanasia was referred to by Bacon as *exterior* in that it concerned the body rather than the soul.

1723: 'Palliative euthanasia' is found in the *Disputatio inauguralis medica de mortis cura, etc.* by George Christopher Detharding. (Paoli 2019)

1829-1840: In the *Vocabolario universale italiano* (Universal Italian Dictionary), Naples, a theological meaning is recorded for euthanasia: "Happy death or sweet passing and tranquil and in a state of grace". (Paoli 2019; my translation)

1879: In his *Diphtheria: its nature and treatment, varieties and local expressions* Sir Morell Mackenzie writes: "Some [...] have maintained that even [...] where the patient is dying from dyspnoea, tracheotomy should be performed with the view of promoting the euthanasia. It is true that death from syncope or gradual exhaustion is much less painful than [...] from apnœa". (Mackenzie 1879, 96)

1905: "Alfredo Panzini, in his *Dizionario moderno: supplemento ai dizionari italiani* [Modern dictionary: supplement to the Italian dictionaries] prints the term Euthanàsia [...] thus defined: '*the good, the peaceful death* thanks to medical actions that take away the pain of agony with drugs'". (Paoli 2019; my translation)

1963-1994: "In 1963 the Zingarelli [dictionary] [...] 9th edition [...] expressly states that the term [euthanasia] [...] denotes the 'anticipation, by painless means, of death for an incurable patient [...] tormented by his illness; denounced by the Church, defended by some doctors and biologists'". (Paoli 2019; my translation). Seven years later, in the 10th edition of the same dictionary "the definitions are inverted, indicating that the meaning from the medical context has become established [...]: 'Euthanasia 1 (med.) Quick closure, by any means suited to causing death painlessly, of a pathological process with a hopeless prognosis accompanied by suffering deemed intolerable'." (Paoli 2019; my translation) Finally, in the 12th edition in 1994 "we read: 'euthanasia 1. (med.) Pain-free death caused in cases of fatal prognosis and of suffering deemed unbearable. *Active e.* by administering certain substances *Passive e.* by withdrawing medical treatment'". (Paoli 2019; my translation)

Through this brief timeline we see, both in the Italian and the English sources, a moving set of goalposts from the mediaeval preoccupation with the

soul's condition at death's door to the Renaissance's human-centred concern for easing the patient's suffering in a more open debate around a good death. Beyond the Renaissance, we start noticing a more medicalised usage of the terms, which reflects a move away from the theological to the physical. Of course, dictionaries do not always reveal society's attitude to a particular concept: just because there was a word for something, and it did not have a negative descriptor, it does not mean that the practice of it was favourably viewed by people at large. For example, using an adjective to describe someone's ethnicity could be seen as neutral on paper, but in practice that word may be loaded and used in a derogatory tone; also, a word used as an insult may be reclaimed by a victimised group as a badge of identity, thus reinforcing the inability for us to understand the true firepower of that word if going simply by its definition within contemporary glossaries. This means that euthanasia may now be more precisely defined in language, but it does not necessarily reflect the strong feelings and ideological opposition to it: indeed, people practising it, like doctors who carry out abortions, may be in danger of being eyed with suspicion in a culture where either those practices are officially illegal, or they are legal but are undermined by many obstacles in clinics and hospitals (for example, with regard to abortion, through the practice of widespread 'conscientious objection' on religious grounds).

If dictionaries only yield part of the information about various societies' attitudes to a concept across time, what should we consult to gain a better appreciation of that concept's cultural context? In the case of death and dying, including suicide (with or without help from a medic), how could one have the finger on the pulse of societal attitudes? News outlets and media sources may satisfy most of our questions in this area; however, given that the origins of modern newspaper publishing are put to the early years of the eighteenth century, what would we look at going further back in time? Overall, written literature extends much farther back, which is very fortunate as it allows us to trace not only the belief systems of the authors but also, through their eyes, those of the societies of which they were a product.

If we look at the last seven hundred years, we will find much writing about dying: from Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) and the deadly plague scenes in his *Decameron* to Vittoria Colonna (1492-1547) and her sonnet XXII, *Quando*

Morte tra noi disciolse il nodo (*When Death the bond between us had released*) dealing poetically with the grief of losing her husband; from Æmilia Lanyer née Bassano (1569-1645) and her physical depiction of the dying Christ in her *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* (*Hail God, King of the Jews*) to John Donne (1572-1631) and his Holy Sonnet 10, *Death, Be not Proud*, where he elevates humanity while debasing death's power; and on, from Johann Wolfgang von Göthe (1749-1832) with the suicidal young man in *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*), where only death cures love's ills, to Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827) and the suicide of a young man, lovelorn and disillusioned by unachievable political aspirations, in *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (*Jacopo Ortis's Last Letters*) – with both of these works carrying the echoes of that most celebrated play from 1597 featuring the double suicide in Verona of a young couple in a forbidden relationship.

The list continues through the centuries, with examples such as *Sappho's Last Song* by Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837); *Cold in the earth – and the deep snow piled above thee* by Emily Brontë (1818-1848); *Because I could not stop for Death* by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886); the war poems by Wilfred Owen (1893-1918); *Elm* by Sylvia Plath (1932-1963); *Football season is over* by Hunter Thompson (1937-2005); and many, many more. What the last two have in common, incidentally, is that both authors committed suicide; indeed, while Leopardi's ill-health and suicidal thoughts did not push him too to end his own life, his writings can be scrutinised for clues about his thoughts on his own demise, just as one could with those of Plath and Thompson.

An earlier poet who, like Leopardi, did wish for a way out of ill-health, physical deterioration and suffering, was John Keats (1795-1821): in his 1819 poem *Ode to a Nightingale* he wrote:

> My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
> My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
> Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
> [...] Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death,
> Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
> To take into the air my quiet breath;
> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain [...]

Upon arriving in Rome in late 1820, with hopes that a warmer climate would alleviate his tuberculosis, he only worsened: taking up lodgings in what is now the Keats-Shelley Museum on the Spanish Steps, he endured a hundred days of a weakening body and of blood loss through coughing. The illness that killed his brother Tom came to scythe him too into death's arms, while his friend James Severn and his doctor nursed him as best they could, day and night. What Keats asked for, that is, laudanum (opium in an alcoholic solution), was not given to him for fear that he may use it to commit suicide; however, it would have greatly eased his pain, something that the last line of the quoted excerpt makes abundantly clear. The poem was written the year before he undertook the journey to Rome, already suffering from the effects of 'consumption' (pulmonary tuberculosis), an illness that was only defined as such in the immediate years after the poet's passing.

The British philosopher and House of Lords Peer, Lady Warnock, titled her co-authored book on euthanasia *Easeful Death* in memory of Keats and, we could add, of the inhumane suffering during the later stages of his terminal illness. In it she writes: "By what moral argument can we justify [...] keeping those people alive who sincerely want to die, when their life is, in their own eyes, not worth preserving?" (Warnock and Macdonald 2008, 137) She continues thus: "It is not irrational or morally wrong for people in some situations to be, like poor Keats, 'half in love with easeful death'" (ibid.). She also goes on to say that escaping pain is not the only reason for seeking an early exit: "Those who beg for death [...] may also be motivated by the desire not to spoil [...] the life they have lived by lingering on in a state of hopeless dependence and lack of dignity" (ibid., 138).

Warnock had seen Lord Joffe's 2002 Assisted Dying Bill repeatedly defeated in the House of Lords, and from the final vote in 2006 there would be no further bills on the subject until Lord Falconer's one in 2013, the same year that saw MSP Margo MacDonald's Assisted Suicide Bill introduced in the Scottish Parliament. Mary Warnock saw both attempts fail, as well as MP Rob Marris's Assisted Dying Bill in 2014 (defeated in 2015); after her passing in 2019, another bill on assisted dying was proposed and introduced in the Lords by Baroness Meacher in 2021, but the following year it ran out of time to progress within the parliamentary session.

The current situation is that Lord Falconer has returned to these matters this year by putting forward his Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults Bill, which will get a second reading in November, but, significantly, there are concurrent proposals both in the House of Commons, with news on October 3rd that MP Kim Leadbeater will introduce her Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill, and in Holyrood, with MSP Liam McArthur's Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults Bill at the first of three stages, with the relevant committee having tabled an eight-week programme for gathering evidence before progressing to the second stage (amendments). Were these not cause to be expectant of forthcoming change, the Tynwald (the Isle of Man's Parliament) passed the first stage of MHK Dr. Alex Allinson's Assisted Dying Bill (2023) this summer at the third reading in its House of Keys, ready for a vote this month in the Legislative Chamber, which means that it could become Manx law in 2025, and the British Prime Minister said that he would not oppose it.

Meanwhile, Italy drags its heels with no proposed laws on assisted suicide: aiding and abetting suicide carries similar punishment in both countries (up to fourteen years' imprisonment in the UK and twelve in Italy), and indeed Italy too has tried spurring Parliament into action through civic action such as a referendum on legalising euthanasia, organised by the Associazione Luca Coscioni in 2021 (and able to garner over 1.2 million signatures) but declared inadmissible by the Constitutional Court the following year. Meanwhile, thanks to the same Court's pronouncement in 2019 declaring that article 580 of the penal code (which dates back to the 1930 *Codice Rocco* of Fascist Italy) was unconstitutional, assisted suicide could be allowed under certain circumstances, and it was left to public healthcare providers such as hospitals, given checks made by the relevant ethics committees in the territory, to make the necessary arrangements for a patient to be enabled to take the necessary drugs to end his/her life.

Following this pronouncement, the first medically assisted suicide that legally took place on Italian soil was in June 2022, with a tetraplegic patient (Federico Carboni) finally being able to have an assisted death through self-administration, via an intravenous pump (and a switch activated with his mouth), of the drug recommended by the ethics committee (Pentothal

Sodium). It should be added, however, that it took two years for Federico to actually have his will fulfilled, with the help of civic action and legal representation from the Associazione Luca Coscioni that included not only taking the regional healthcare agency to court for failing to assess that he had the prerequisites mandated by the 2019 Constitutional Court pronouncement, but also having to issue numerous compulsory warnings to the agency and the ethics committee for failing to fulfil their legal duty to assist him in ending his life. What is even more demoralising is that while this patient was given the green light on medically assisted suicide, the healthcare provider would then give no material assistance for this procedure: Federico and the Associazione Luca Coscioni managed to raise the funds themselves to cover the considerable costs for both drugs and machinery.

Even though the Constitutional Court issued further guidelines in July 2024 (Sentence 135/2024) to extend the term 'trattamenti di sostegno vitale' (life-sustaining treatments) to pharmaceutical therapies and any treatment involving medical staff or caregivers without which the patient could die, the Italian Parliament continues to defy two sentences by the Constitutional Court and to default on its obligations, allowing the legal limbo to saunter on indefinitely: the last parliamentary debate, which examined the legalities of medically assisted death ('Esame delle norme sulla morte medicalmente assistita'), took place in March 2022. Since then, a new government came to office, which again delayed any hope of progress, leaving patients and their families with no certainty over imminent or future choices for how to legally request and access an 'easeful death' within their territory.

4. Closing Statement

In a recent review of US assisted dying (Kozlov 2022) the analysis made of Medical Aid in Dying data from nine states from 1998 to 2020 that legalised assisted dying, showed some interesting statistics, of which I will list five:

> 1) of the 8,451 patients who received a prescription, 5,329 actually took it and died (ca. 63%);
> 2) 90% of the ones who took the prescription to end their lives did so at home;
> 3) 88% had medical insurance and had informed their family;

4) 87% had enrolled in hospice care / received palliative care;
5) 74% had cancer.

These findings shed light on many important factors in legalised assisted death:

1) having a prescription for assisted dying is often done for peace of mind, but not everyone will end up taking the prescription, for a variety of reasons;
2) dying at home is overwhelmingly a factor in where people choose to die;
3) being uninsured is not a prime statistic for those who took the prescription;
4) a high palliative care enrolment shows that assisted dying is not at odds with palliative care;
5) cancer is by far the biggest reason for assisted dying.

In addressing issues around financial pressures or increased palliative care spending, therefore, it seems that a false premise is set. One of the authors examined (Pereira 2011) goes to great lengths in reviewing the assisted suicide model, based on safeguards, and addresses the slippery slope concerns. While dealing with assisted dying is always a delicate matter, personally and societally, the numbers of people affected are still relatively small compared to the general mortality of the populations in countries such as the Netherlands or the USA: taking the latter as an example, in the state of Oregon, 367 people died through assisted suicide in 2023, against over three million (3.09m) in the whole country, making the Oregon assisted deaths 0.01% of the whole country's mortality.

The arguments put forward about an epidemic in deaths, again, do not take into account issues (Cornfield 2023) relating to increased information access to patients about their right to access physician-assisted dying under state law, as well as better reporting by authorities of those deaths as separate from deaths due to, let us say, the patients' underlying conditions. Reporting is an important matter not just for policymakers but also for public perception: if domestic abuse rates are up, is this because previous generations experienced fewer instances of it, or because victims have more agency to speak out and can be better supported? What, exactly, should be classed as a social epidemic, and on what basis?

There are indeed fears of pressures on the vulnerable, but the safeguards in place across laws passed and currently under scrutiny usually require more than one physician to consent to the patient's request and/or a

psychologist/psychiatrist assessment, with some legislation dictating terminal illness with a limited life expectancy period and other restrictions. Debates over assisted dying understandably involve emotional arguments for and against it, some ideologically rooted and others stemming from harrowing family stories: all of these must be heard but it is hard to evidence how much evidence can move legislators to truly shift their feelings on assisted dying at the point of voting.

On a final point: in the years 1998 to 2020 (Kozlov 2022) there were 5,329 medically-assisted suicides in the USA; in the same period and country, there were 1,097 state executions, according to the Death Penalty Information Center (2024). How do we square these two statistics? Can capital punishment, still legal in that country, be looked at with the same prism as physician-assisted suicide? What about the right of death row prisoners to access assisted dying if they met the requirements under state law?

If death is taboo; if it has become invisible to the living; if it resided by the 'honest bed' of mediaeval custom but it now resides by a hospital bed; if, finally, it is no longer in the community but shut away, out of sight; how can we, in any society, converse openly about ways in which to normalise death and better prepare for it? Legislating on assisted dying is only part of the conversation on a good death, as much as better and universally available palliative care should be. In the end, unlike state executions, assisted dying and conversations around it must put compassion for the person at their core. Whether the taboo of dying will soon be a thing of the past, it is too early to tell.

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REVIEWS

Nick Havely,

Apennine Crossings: Travellers on the Edge of Tuscany. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

As generous as scholarly, Nick Havely's latest gift to the community of readers is a treasure trove of travelling impressions, quotes and trekking itineraries. Its richness and diversity place it at the crossroads of various literary genres, enabling reviewers to approach it – like a peak – from different sides. I will present it as the latest fruit in a genealogy of mountain writing that includes Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (written at the time of WW2, but published only in 1977) and Robert Macfarlane's mountain trilogy, opening with *Mountains of the Mind. A History of a Fascination* (2003).

What Havely's account shares with these beautiful books is an underlying experiential, in-depth connection with mountains, which it combines with a wide-ranging, erudite but always enlivening interest in their cultural perception through the centuries. In other words, this cleverly luring volume puts readers into contact with both the living mountains and the mountains of the mind.

Havely foregrounds his book's central trope right from the title – *Apennine Crossings*, later explaining that this term "has two linked meanings: literally, going over the ridge as all these characters did; and metaphorically,

encountering their stories, as I continued to do during and after the journey." (7) This counterpoint mode, this juxtaposing of different melodies, informs the whole volume, unceasingly opening up new vistas. It marks the rhythm of a travelogue that aims at slow motion but always keeps the reader's interest alive through a vibrant network of connections. The author proves so adept at shifting between different times and experiences (as distant and diverging as the medieval wanderings of exiled Dante and the misadventures of WW2 fighters) that the medieval and modern travellers who accompany us along the way turn almost into fellow hikers in our readerly experience.

This trans-historical and transnational polyphony becomes apparent already at the beginning of the book and of the author's westward journey across the Apennines, along the GEA route (Grande Escursione Apenninica), a 425 km long itinerary that was created in the early 1980s along the ridge between the Emilia-Romagna region to the North and Central Italy. Havely's deft time-shift technique becomes apparent when he contrasts the silence he experiences at the Bocca Trabaria pass (between Tuscany and the Marche region, not far from the Adriatic coast) with the "thud and crash of artillery firing" (14) that would have echoed up there in the summer of 1944.

Thus begins a flashback in which the Royal Horse Artillery Regiment is training its fire towards the nearby city of Sansepolcro, when a vague memory starts taking shape in the mind of officer Anthony Clarke. It is indeed in Sansepolcro, as Clarke suddenly realises, that Piero della Francesca's Resurrection of Christ is frescoed in a room of the Palazzo Comunale. Clarke's consequent decision to withhold fire, trusting the locals who claimed there were no more Germans in town, exemplifies the overlapping of tactical and cultural concerns that marked the liberation of Italy.

As this anecdote proves, in Havely's eyes culture is never disconnected from the political, the social and the material. An engaged humanist, he is particularly attentive to this intricacy of (at times conflicting) motives, and ready to avail himself of journals, poetry and other forms of testimony by a variety of witnesses, including WW2 fighters. This adds further poignance to a book that celebrates both the nature of the Apennines and the layers of cultural references and historical events that sedimented onto this mountain range over the centuries.

The book also traces changes in the history of taste, contrasting the attitude of medieval and early modern travellers – for whom crossing the Apennines was mainly an experience of fear, boredom and discomfort – with the enthusiasm of those later travellers who saw these mountains through the lens of new aesthetic paradigms. Richard Colt Hoare's 1791 visit to the Montastery of La Verna epitomises this new sensibility, "a love of those scenes, where nature exhibits her original and undisguised character; scenes which furnish gratification to the eye, and employment to the pencil." (36) This increasing appreciation of the Apennine landscape, in the light of new aesthetic categories, is also apparent in John Chetwod Eustace's description of his 1802 visit to nearby Camaldoli, where "the gloom of forest scenery is softened by an agreeable intermixture of lawn and down, not altogether unlike the varieties of an English park." (52)

All through the book, Havely skilfully contrasts this modern thirst for mountain scenery with the previous dread – not to say horror – of mountains, which often acquired an existential and theological meaning, as shown by Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux or by Thomas Burnet's 1684 *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, where the crossing of the Alps forces the author to question his "ideas about Nature's orderliness" (96), causing a crisis in his ongoing quest for transcendental meaning.

This phobia of mountains reaches a climax in the travelling accounts concerning the road between Bologna and Florence, which a large number of travellers were forced to take in order to reach central Italy, and which posed the twin obstacles of danger and inconvenience. While the 17th- and early 18th-century travellers who crossed the Apennines through the Giogo Pass either gave vent to their complaints or simply kept silent, things started to change at mid 18th-century, when the road was redesigned to cross the mountains at the nearby Futa Pass. This material change combined with a new gothic sensibility, engendering a darkly narrative approach to this stretch of road. The presence of mysterious fires in the vicinity of the aptly named village of Pietra Mala coalesced with a series of criminal events that took place at the turn of the century either in that village or in nearby Covigliaio (as variously reported by travellers), exerting a new fascination. This aura of terror was experienced – and duly reported – with various shades of pleasure by entire

generations of 19th century travellers until it turned into a stereotype to be disproved.

As Havely moves westward along the Great Apennine Excursion, new cultural connections materialise, as shown by his beautiful chapter on the Garfagnana region and poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The Shelleys' love for the spa resort of Bagni di Lucca is well known, but what a smaller percentage of readers may be aware of is the debated question of whether Shelley actually undertook a poetic pilgrimage to the nearby shrine of San Pellegrino in Alpe between 12th and 13th August 1820, as indicated by Mary Shelley in her journal. The question becomes of wider interest since it was this trip that ostensibly inspired the writing of "The Witch of Atlas", but reaching the shrine in the space of a day was not an easy feat to accomplish.

The connection between hiking, reading and writing comes to the fore with utter felicity in this chapter, which shows Havely literally following in the foosteps of Shelley in order to prove that he may have reached San Pellegrino in Alpe on foot thanks to a path that subsequently dropped out of use and was forgotten… The material dimension of hiking combines here with poetry when Havely's own descriptions of the Apennine woods symbiotically resonate with lines from "The Witch of Atlas", ultimately inviting readers to rediscover both Shelley's poem and the Garfagnana valleys in the light of this happy literary conjunction.

As is hopefully apparent from my comments, Havely's book is a pleasure to read, but reading it also amounts to a philosophical experience, like hiking, when the mind reaches a quieter state and opens up to a different kind of thinking. In the author's words, *Apennine Crossings* "affirms the value of slow encounters with remote landscapes" (9-10). It is about looking around oneself and noticing and describing, which can translate precisely into a burgeoning form of poetry, as previously hinted. The book also amounts to a meta-narrative reflection on the act of story-telling, enriching the experience of hiking in the here and now with a trans-temporal stream of lives and gazes, translating the present into a kind of augmented reality. These cultivated narrative digressions are moreover matched by a number of material detours, some of which are part and parcel of the Great Apennine Excursion while others are entirely unexpected.

As Havely clarifies, *Apennine Crossings* includes "several accounts of travellers (including myself) getting lost." (9) In the kind of pilgrimage he describes what matters is not reaching the ultimate destination, but rather the quality of the journey. Getting lost, as every true traveller knows, results at best in an act of serendipity, at worst in an adventure, the skirting of danger, the ordeal of fatigue and distress we would have never opted for willingly. These experiences become in turn a source of anecdotes that surprise and delight, often in a comic vein, as when a desperate author resorts to the trick of showing passing cars a 50,000 lire banknote in the attempt to obtain a much-needed lift...

I could go on describing the many beauties of *Apennine Crossings*, which resonate deeply with my own life-long experiences of the Apennines, but I will let readers discover the book by themselves. I cannot conclude these remarks, however, without addressing heartfelt thanks to Nick Havely, whose passion for these mountains combines with a number of other qualities, starting from a welcome combination of cosmopolitanism and localism.

While collecting travelling impressions and related forms of Apennine experience, Havely moves freely across a variety of boundaries, tracing connections between the experiences of medieval and modern Italian poets (from Dante to Dino Campana), British, American and continental travellers, Risorgimento fighters and WW2 soldiers who are often portrayed in their relations with the local population, from partisans to peasants… Yet, his attention to individuals and places in their singularity is never flagging. Each person and each place is worth his firm gaze, his authorial concentration, which stems from a lifetime of reading and studying and hiking. This unfailing interest, this form of deep-set respect for the singularity of every being and place and time is one of the great lessons of this book, which has much to teach us in an age of TikTok videos and other forms of shallow entertainment.

Apennine Crossings is vibrant with energy. It stems from concentration and demands concentration, but a quiet and meaningful concentration, the kind of concentration people used to find in the past, while we now often unconsciously pursue forms of improductive tension. I would like to think there is a connection between Havely's imaginative focus and the application the locals instinctively practised while building a stone and wooden barn or

even the absorption of a nest-building bird. We still need to seek this intensity in the accomplishing of an effort, as hiking teaches us. We also need to revere our being rooted in nature if we wish to avoid getting lost, this time in the unproductive maze to which the easy paths of consumerism lead.

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Fabio Ciambella,

Teaching English as a Second Language with Shakespeare. Elements in Shakespeare and Pedagogy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024.

In the video abstract mentioned on the unnumbered page previous to the "Contents" section of Fabio Ciambella's *Teaching English as a Second Language with Shakespeare*, readers are invited to watch the author while briefly summarising why he wrote this book and the purpose of it, beside outlining the structure of his text (at www.Cambridge.org/ESPG_Ciambella). The main reason he stresses is the teaching of pragmatics in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class by using Shakespeare plays to improve students' language skills (reading, writing and speaking mainly, in this case). This might surprise the reader, since we know that Shakespearean language, being five hundred years old, is not completely addressable even by native speakers, not to mention foreign people. But here the main tool Ciambella introduces, the teaching and consequent awareness of pragmatics, seems on the one hand to reduce this secular gap and on the other to help the complex understanding of Shakespearean language 'in action' (that is, in its pragmatic context) and its 'translation' into our contemporary language use.

The didactic purposes of the volume (which is issued in the series "Cambridge Elements. Elements in Shakespeare and Pedagogy) are immediately clear when the author stresses the presence in the book of lesson plans directed to high school and university ESL teachers. These plans are structured in teaching and learning phases that should accompany the class work. Of course, teachers adopting this approach should already be conversant with the major principles of pragmatics (from speech acts to interaction strategies concerning both politeness vs impoliteness attitudes), or – at least – ready to study and learn them. Without these, the book – which in itself is a guide to practicing pragmatics teaching – might risk being difficult to grasp. One aspect which is mentioned in the volume, but not so much stressed as it should be, is the fact that, working on early modern plays, teachers (and consequently students) have to be aware of the role of diachrony in their work, that is, that they need to be aware that the results of Historical Pragmatics

research are applied to the chosen text, be it *Richard III* in Chapter 1 for an overview of the speech acts used by the protagonist, or *Romeo and Juliet* in Chapter 2 in order to recognise the presence and value of discourse markers in a dialogic encounter, or *The Taming of the Shrew* in Chapter 3, where one of the many rough exchanges in the comedy is explored in search of (im)politeness situations.

The lesson plans provided are differentiated between those for high school and for university learners, respectively, this because Ciambella well distinguishes between the didactic approaches to, and the results achievable/expectable from, the different students' age and level groups. Evidently the author takes advantage of his own teaching experience and scholarly competence, since in each chapter including lesson plans the volume also offers summaries of the main aspects of pragmatics, so as to refresh users' knowledge of them.

But why choose Shakespeare for an ESL course?, the reader might wonder. As said above, the author, accepting the principle of contemporary Historical Pragmatics which considers plays as very adequate text types to study the language of the past, applies the interesting tenets of this theoretical stance to Shakespeare plays, achieving workable results. One of them, possibly the most relevant in the ESL domain, is the last phase of each lesson plan, when students are asked to render Shakespearean pragmatics into contemporary speech acts, or discourse markers, or (im)politeness linguistic attitudes.

For example, the third (and last) chapter – devoted to the study of "(Im)polite Shakespeare in *The Taming of the Shrew*" – stresses the fact that "*swearwords and taboo expressions* […] are noteworthy socio-pragmatic phenomena to deserve attention by both teachers and students […] as any other speech acts" (p. 62), since they may be "an index of authenticity" of a dialogue (p. 63). Therefore, after analysing the standpoints of scholars pro- and against teaching such expressions, and the theory of (im)politeness according to the latest pragmaticians (Jonathan Culpeper especially), Ciambella investigates *The Taming of the Shrew*, 4.1.91-138*,* i.e. a dialogue between Petruchio, some of his serving men and Katherina, in order to stress the gender and power relationships among the various characters who fight for the discursive floor. The phases of the lesson plan in this chapter include a first step during which the text must be

understood by the students (analogously to the structure of the other working chapters), then a second step which leads secondary school learners to "write alternative versions of the insults provided, toning them down", and university students to "write down a list of indictments against Petruchio by paraphrasing the insults he uttered against his servants" (p. 79). The third and most creative step consists, for secondary students, in launching a "TikTok challenge" during which impolite (and modernized) language is pleeped in order to hide taboo phrases and words, whereas their university colleagues set up a modern courtroom with "Katherina, Grumio, [where] all the servants will play the prosecution, while Petruchio plays the defence" (p. 80). All this aims at making students active users of English and cognisant of the subtleties of the language (also to avoid unpleasant and offensive situations).

Ciambella also introduces contemporary technology into the teaching he proposes, and stresses how the Shakespeare language transmuted into modern words and pragmatically equivalent exchanges (which does not mean simply 'translated') helps students not only understand Shakespeare, but also become aware of the finer nuances of a language, be it old or contemporary. Because, in the end, they will know that learning a second language does not only imply grammar, syntax, pronunciation etc., but also the full understanding of the human relationships conveyed by word usage, and – especially – that speaking a language is "to do things" with that language: blandishing or offending, feeling concern and compassion or disgust and opposition…

The methodology proposed by Fabio Ciambella is certainly transdisciplinary, involving linguistics, pragmatics, Shakespeare and cultural studies, language teaching, and therefore it is an exacting approach, but the results may really be rewarding, leading students to a major awareness that the acquisition of a second language is a tool to grasp and manage human relationships. After all, pragmatics helps people make the best of them.

The volume is very well-read (all sources mentioned find their place in the nineteen pages of the "References" section at the end) and is enriched with a Glossary containing simple definitions of unusual or difficult terms used in the book. What is 'missing' (of course this is not a fault of the book, and I hope it will be compensated for in the near future) is the reaction of ESL teachers to Ciambella's didactic suggestions: teachers introducing the methodology

proposed by the author of this book will be its best and truest reviewers, because they will have experienced the impact it can have on their teaching and on students' learning achievements.

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inglese, 1992), one to John Heywood (*Mad, merry Heywood*, 1997), one to David Lodge's novels (*Il demone della forma*, 2001), and *Introduzione allo studio del teatro inglese* to the material culture of the theatre (2003, with Romana Zacchi). She has also published a volume on the aside in Shakespeare's plays (*Parlare per non farsi sentire*, 2018). *Healing Words. The Printed Handbills of Early Modern London Quacks* (2015) deals with linguistic aspects of medical practitioners' advertisements.

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