

# Introduction: Echo

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In those days, this nymph was more than a voice.  
— Ted Hughes<sup>1</sup>

Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,  
And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying.  
— Alfred, Lord Tennyson<sup>2</sup>

This present volume is indebted to an illuminating keynote lecture given in 2018 by the writer and translator Jhumpa Lahiri, for the Society for Italian Studies Biennial conference at the University of Edinburgh. Her lecture drew a sustained and insightful parallel between the mythical figure of Echo and the perils and potentials of literary translation, lingering on the intellectual depth of the echo as a concept. This depth is reflected in the many ways that the authors of this volume have chosen to engage with the theme. They draw on ideas of translation, but also on personal identity, memory, tropes, and trauma. They share with Lahiri's lecture an emphasis on the (mis)communication of the echo, an idea befitting the multilingual remit of *Working Papers in the Humanities*. With essays on literature and culture in French, English, German, Italian, and Spanish; and spanning from the work of Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, to Leila Slimani in the twenty-first century, we hope that readers find compelling threads between these diverse ideas and perspectives.

A salient feature of the echo is its dislocation, both in terms of place and time. This distance recalls a persistent temporal thread in last year's volume, entitled 'Reframing Exoticism in European Literature'. The contributors to the aforementioned volume often described a Western culture that conceived of the East in terms of an idealized, unreachable past. The echo is identified as a diminished present relative to a more complete past; but drawing on the critical theory of Exoticism we can question the truth of this original wholeness.

<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Echo & Narcissus', in *Tales from Ovid* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 74–84, (p. 75).

<sup>2</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Songs from *The Princess: The Splendor Falls*', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, Fifth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), pp. 994–95, (p. 995).

The contributors to this volume take up the rhetoric of the echo to examine diminishing returns in memory, or communication, positing that: where thoughts and language are filtered by writing, time, the spoken word, or the human mind, the location or even existence of their original cannot be taken for granted.

Without encroaching too much on the rich critical analysis of the Echo myth within Classics, it is compelling to consider how the story itself has been filtered through oral traditions and translations. Ted Hughes's version of the myth, itself adapted from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, highlights in the above quotation the sense of loss inherent to the idea of Echo. The echo as a literary device, or tool of analysis, brings to mind this sense of diminishing returns, or incompleteness. It suggests, as above, a more complete past. Indeed, part of the fascination with the idea of the echo may be the fallibility of the human yearning for completeness, as Peter Brooks confronts with his writing on the narrative yearning for innocence, where 'paradise is always lost, it is always in a temporal relation of irretrievability'.<sup>3</sup> Given that echo evokes spoken language particularly, this idea of irretrievability is key.

Yet although the original is lost, and the echo might alter or even distort in its transmission, a more positive interpretation would point to the echo's reverberations and repetitions as opportunities to communicate and disseminate images and ideas. There is an undeniable tragedy to the mythological Echo, who was once 'more than a voice'; but students of literature and culture might well point out the potential of a voice. Such an understanding allows for the use of the echo in literary analysis across time periods, between authors, between the narrating subject and their past self. Unbound from the notion of a pure original, the dislocation of the echo also resonates in dismantling hierarchies and traditional, linear, modes of thinking in favour of a plural cacophony of voices and perspectives. Discussing the historical development of identities, Joan W. Scott engages with these ideas in the formulation of her term 'fantasy echo', asking:

Where does the identity originate? Does the sound issue forth from past to present, or do answering calls echo to the present from the past? If we are not the source of the sound, how can we locate that source? If all we have is the echo, can we ever discern the original? Is there any point trying, or can we be content with thinking about identity as a series of repeated transformations?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> Joan W. Scott, 'Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity', *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (2001), 284–304, (p. 292).

[...] the Castilian translation of the *Decameron* is an echo: it is not a perfect reproduction of Boccaccio's text transposed into a different language, but an adaptation filtered through a sequence of human perspectives.

— Emily Di Dodo

Emily Di Dodo (University of Oxford) considers the levels of distortion that occur during the early textual transmission of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and in its subsequent Castilian translation(s). In her essay entitled, 'From Multifaceted Mosaic to Disjointed Anthology: The Distorted Castilian Echo of Boccaccio's *Decameron*', Di Dodo explains the processes by which such drastic variation could occur in early textual transmission, focusing in particular on subjectivity and human error. Di Dodo begins her essay by considering the textual history and transmission of the *Decameron* in Italian, moving onto the Escorial Manuscript and the Castilian translation first printed in Seville in 1496. Finally, she considers the drastic structural differences in the translated manuscripts (E and S). By comparing the translated manuscripts (E and S), Di Dodo hypothesizes that the evidence collected thus far strongly suggests that E and S are parallel reverberations of a single echo of the *Decameron*. The Castilian translations are achieved through a deconstruction and rebuilding, based on the textual decisions made by the scribe or compiler, of Boccaccio's carefully stratified mosaic of narrative voices, audiences and tales. Whilst there was a particular predilection for personalization in the early transmission of the *Decameron*, there certainly was not the same disregard for the *cornice* as in the Castilian translation. Despite the subjective distortions that characterize these echoes of the original Italian text, Di Dodo argues for their scholarly significance and for the importance of the *cornice* that Boccaccio so carefully constructed in the original text.

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If an echo is an externalized noise then traumatic events are also externalized from the subject's power in their re-enactment. The agency belongs to the scene, not the subject re-enacting it. — Isabelle Jenkinson

Isabelle Jenkinson (University of Leeds) proposes the term 'echo compulsion' in response to, and building upon, Freud's theorisation of the compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences. In her essay, 'Echo Compulsion: Formative Trauma in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*', Jenkinson posits that the echo is pertinent to the repetition of traumatic scenes in that it foregrounds the individual's lack of agency. A distinction is drawn between echo and mere repetition, drawing on the *compulsion* to reproduction implied by the former. Jenkinson roots this analysis in Jean Laplanche's distinction between two distinct schools of thought on subject formation, the Copernican and the Ptolemaic. The echo is aligned with the Copernican approach to subject formation in that it is externally produced, relative to the original sound, thus

decentring the individual's own agency. Jenkinson furthers these notions with close analysis of particular memories and their re-enactments in *Venus im Pelz*, paying close attention in the second half of the essay to the title image itself, and how it offers an incomplete distortion, or simplification, of earlier formative experiences. This argument outlines the Copernican dependency of the individual upon their environment; in the case of the masochist narrator, the subject is convinced of the Ptolemaic innateness of their own identity.

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[...] the text is structured in such a way that we see how it is possible to prioritize the echo of memory, over its original source. — Elizabeth Purdy

Moving into the twenty-first century, Elizabeth Purdy (University of Leeds) focuses on the hierarchies of memory for the first-person narrator in her essay entitled: “‘You still don’t get it. You never have and you never will’: Memory as an Echo Chamber in Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*.” Her analysis considers the similarities between the function of memory and the echo, where the distance of time presents a decay or distortion of the original ‘whole’. Purdy furthers this comparison by considering the concept of the ‘echo chamber’ in the literary context. Building on the meaning of the echo chamber in contemporary cultural use, where an individual or group reinforces their own perception through repetition within a vacuum, Purdy considers how carefully selected memories are ‘amplified’ by the narrator of *The Sense of an Ending*. The essay traces this process of amplification through a thorough close reading of the structure of the novel, demonstrating how the echoing of memories selected as ‘important’ by the narrator draws the reader into the same echo chamber.

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By centring the narrative on a killer nanny protagonist who commits various *soulèvements* [uprisings] against her employers and their children, Slimani recontextualizes and updates these fears of a dangerous servant figure in the twenty-first century. — Jessica Rushton

Jessica Rushton (Durham University) approaches the idea of echo through literary heritage, tracing the figure of the maidservant in the French novel. Her essay, entitled ‘Destabilizing the Nineteenth-Century Maidservant Revolt Narrative: Leïla Slimani’s *Chanson douce* (2016)’, considers how the archetypal figure of the maidservant is subverted in the contemporary text. This analysis is rooted in the particular context of the nineteenth-century figure, whose heritage is that of a shifting conceptualization of the domestic sphere amongst the French upper classes. Drawing particularly on Mirbeau’s *Journal d’une femme de chambre*, Rushton establishes a compelling link between the sociological and political mores of the nineteenth century, and their exploration within

the numerous texts she identifies as *le roman de la servante* (the novel of the servant). Transfigured into the twenty-first century, Rushton likewise addresses the idiosyncratic neuroses of the modern employer/ nanny relationship. Using Georges Didi-Huberman's categories of revolt as a framework, the essay interrogates the echoes of the nineteenth-century relationship between servant and employer with that of the modern day, focusing on the servant's unique position as simultaneous outsider and intimate aide.

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Humans are constantly losing pieces of themselves to the world; hair, skin, teeth, breath [...] Gell calls these lost pieces *exuviae* — that which is stripped down, drawn, or taken off the body, but remain associated with the individual who lost them, an echo of that person. — Emma Venter

In her contribution to this volume, entitled 'Oaths and *Exuviae*: Echoes of Credit in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', Emma Venter (University of Leeds) considers the physical and verbal echoes that humans leave behind in their social milieu. *Exuviae*, Venter avers, are pieces that humans lose to the world: hair, skin, teeth, breath or language. Such pieces remain associated with the individual who initially lost them, existing as an echo or remnant of their past selves. Venter investigates Alfred Gell's theory of 'distributed personhood' with particular emphasis on oaths and promises in early modern England.<sup>5</sup> Moving beyond a strictly physical consideration of *exuviae*, Venter examines immaterial *exuviae* such as names, breath and language; first in the economy of early modern England and then, more specifically, in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. In early modern England, oaths and promises were the foundations of a rhetorical cultivation of reputation and credit and thus echoes of the individuals that swore them. Notably, Venter does not strictly focus on the role of oaths and the verbal in the early modern economy, as she also draws on how the body is implicit in the language of credit. First, through the lens of Marxist economic ideologies; second, considering the physical oaths in *The Merchant of Venice* and third, analysing how the punishment for being indebted beyond one's means was physical harm on the body of the debtor. Venter conclusively argues that the reliance on *exuviae* to cultivate credit created an environment of mistrust and confusion of value, rather than improving upon a devalued coin economy fostered by the debasing carried out under Henry VIII's reign.

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It is our role then, as editors of *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*, to draw attention to the echoes that resonate between each of the essays

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 104.

that encompass this volume, mapping out the reverberations that link their distinctive interpretation of this year's journal theme: Echo. Each author has contributed to the heterogeneity of the term, echo, using it to fruitfully enrich their essays. Despite the wide scale of time that this issue addresses, moving from the fourteenth century in Di Dodo's analysis of Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Rushton's analysis of twenty-first century Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*; one distinct thread links each author's work, namely, their analysis of literature. Given the homogeneous decision to examine literary texts in light of the journal theme, it seems apt then to reflect on the frequent use of the echo, as an incomplete reproduction of an original whole, by writers and literary scholars. Joan W. Scott summarizes the dislocation of the echo often fruitfully used by literary scholars, '[e]choes are delayed returns of sound; they are incomplete reproductions, usually giving back only the final fragments of a phrase. [...] Poets and literary scholars have made much of this incomplete, belated, and often contradictory kind of repetition.'<sup>6</sup> Crucially, the early career literary scholars that contribute to this journal make use of this 'incomplete, belated and often contradictory kind of repetition' to explore various themes including memory, trauma, textual inconsistencies, environments of mistrust and echoes between literary figures and genres.<sup>7</sup>

Di Dodo, Purdy, Jenkinson and Venter, in particular, grapple with the incompleteness, imperfection and miscommunication at the heart of the echo. To discuss how echoing and remembering can be productively compared, Purdy uses John Mowitt's definition of an echo as a springboard for her analysis of Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, '[an] echo is structured by delay, by time. Moreover, the delay always marks a decay. Something is missing from the sound source, and as a consequence the "mirroring" is more than simply reversed; it is systematically imperfect.'<sup>8</sup> Mowitt's productive comparison of echoes and decay illuminates the central thesis of Di Dodo's essay, as she claims that the Castilian translation of the *Decameron* is not a perfect reproduction of Boccaccio's text transposed into another language, but rather an incomplete echo, filtered and distorted through human error and subjectivity. Di Dodo then, uses the systematic imperfection of the echo to comment on a very specific example of the distorting and indeed decaying, process of early textual transmission.

In their grapple with the systematic imperfection of the echo, Purdy and Jenkinson employ echo-related terminology to navigate the close interconnection between echoes and memories. Stemming from Freud's notion of the subject's 'compulsion to repeat' traumatic scenes, Jenkinson coins her own term, 'echo compulsion', that illuminates her analysis of the sexuality of *Venus im Pelz's*

<sup>6</sup> Scott, p. 291.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, p. 291.

<sup>8</sup> John Mowitt, *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities* (California: The University of California Press, 2015), p. 27.

masochist protagonist, Severin. Revising Freud's repetition compulsion into an 'echo compulsion' thereby incorporates the idea of an echo as a distorted re-enactment of the traumatic childhood moments that Severin experiences, that ultimately feed into his sexuality as an adult. Purdy's literary analysis of Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* is infused with the productive metaphor of memory as an 'echo chamber'. Drawing on contemporary notions of an 'echo chamber' as the tendency to surround oneself with those who perpetuate their worldview, as supported by Roland Barthes' contemplations; Purdy argues that Tony Webster's narration acts as an echo chamber for the perpetuation of his own version of events. Tony's narrative, rather than cohesively leading the reader to 'perceive beginnings, middles and ends through time', results in chaos, leaving the reader murkily questioning their own dynamics of memory.<sup>9</sup> If memory is intrinsically linked to the theme of echo in its imperfect reverberation of an original event and is potent in understanding the 'shaping power of narrative', Tony's narrative can shed light on the wider effect of literature and its relationship to echoing.<sup>10</sup>

Venter expands on the incompleteness that defines the echo in her analysis of the economy of exchange in early modern England and the role of *exuviae* in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Venter productively uses the theme of echo to consider how the plebeians of Rome have the power to put their 'tongues into [Coriolanus'] wounds', speaking for them, commodifying them and thereby producing verbal echoes of his original, complete physical body. By trading in echoes of his physical body, Coriolanus first risks becoming constructed and signified by his wounds and second, his body is evoked in an incomplete reverberation; the plebeians' verbal language can never match the completeness of Coriolanus' body, self and the origin of his wounds. Names, breath and language all function as a shadow of the being that created them, remnants of a more complete past. The breath and language of our authors within this volume then, exist as shadows of their work and as shadows of the plethora of texts they discuss.

Our remaining author addresses the cross-temporal reverberations that exist within a literary genre and how texts can shadow one another. Namely, Rushton outlines the echoes that reverberate between Leïla Slimani's twentieth-first-century novel, *Chanson Douce* and Octave Mirbeau's nineteenth-century novel *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, examples of what Rushton terms *le roman de la servante* (the servant novel). Slimani recontextualizes the fears of a psychotic, infanticide-driven servant figure in the twenty-first century with her unsettling representation of Louise's unstable psychological state. Slimani's nanny however does not simply echo the strategies of revolt of her nineteenth-century counterpart, Célestine, but Louise's revenge transcends that of the nineteenth-century literary maidservant, as she turns to murder as her solution.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks, p. 11.

In Rushton's paper, the echo is far more intense and psychotic than its original representation in the nineteenth century.

The human yearning for completeness and the irretrievability of a complete past that has been addressed in complementary manners by our aforementioned authors, can be contemplated further with regard to literature and death. In Walter Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, he remarks on theories of the novel and why humans are drawn to the art of storytelling. Conclusively, he claims that reading a novel, from start to end, encapsulates a wholeness that we could never obtain from our own lives: we can never entirely understand our story from its beginning to its final moments. He inextricably links the novel with the human yearning for completeness:

[t]he novel is significant, therefore, because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.<sup>11</sup>

We turn to literature, then, to strive for the completeness we lack in our own lives; this incompleteness and yearning for an irretrievable, complete past is inextricably bound up with the concept of the echo. In the same way that our memories, filtered by our subconscious and subjective minds, can never match up to the purity of an original event, literature acts as the imperfect reverberation of our own death, a finality that we ourselves can never truly digest or understand. Echo, then, in its multifaceted embodiment, can stand in for all creative and reflective phenomena that reverberate throughout the essays in this special issue.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in Dorothy J. Hale, ed., *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 362-78, (p. 373).



# From Multifaceted Mosaic to Disjointed Anthology: The Distorted Castilian Echo of Boccaccio's *Decameron*

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*Abstract.* The fifteenth-century Castilian translation of the *Decameron* is nothing more than an echo of Boccaccio's original text. To understand the level of distortion one must consider the textual transmission of the original, both to understand the author's intentions and to assess whether this corresponded with what early readers actually read. The Italian tradition certainly included personalisation by scribes, with a significant number of manuscripts containing only extracts from the *cornice* and individual *novelle* as part of anthologies. It is through this process that we reach the Castilian translation, transmitted through a manuscript (E) and five printed editions, the earliest of which is S. What is striking is that E, by choice of the compiler or scribe, only contains fifty *novelle* in a disrupted order, omitting the majority of the *cornice*; S, on the other hand, contains one hundred *novelle* but, like E, omits the *cornice* and reorders the *novelle*. The text of the *Decameron* has become so distorted in E and S that they transform Boccaccio's narrative stratification into mere anthology. The textual similarities suggest that E and S are in fact one translation, despite their drastic structural differences, meaning they were copied from different sources sharing a genealogical ancestor. Thus, they are two different redactions of the same echo of Boccaccio's text.

The *Decameron*, since Boccaccio's death in 1375,<sup>1</sup> has enjoyed a widespread dissemination across Europe, circulating in Italian (Florentine vernacular) and in other European vernaculars. In 1429 a Catalan translation of the text was produced,<sup>2</sup> the earliest extant translation originating in the Iberian Peninsula, which survives in a single manuscript witness that contains all one hundred tales, or *novelle*, and the narrative frame (*cornice*); the only structural change is the replacement of the *canzoni* sung at the end of each day with Catalan songs.

<sup>1</sup> Marco Cursi, *Il Decameron: scritture, scriventi lettori: storia di un testo* (Roma: Viella, 2007), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Brown Bourland, 'Boccaccio and the Decameron in Castilian and Catalan Literature', *Revue Hispanique*, 12 (1905), 1–232 (pp. 25–32); Johan Boccacci, *Decameron. Traducció catalana publicada segons l'únic manuscrit conegut*, ed. by Jaume Massó Torrents (New York: The Hispanic Society of America, 1910); Barbara Renesto 'Note sulla traduzione catalana del *Decameron* del 1429', *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana*, Núm. Extra (2001) 295–313.

The earliest witness of a Castilian translation is the mid-fifteenth century<sup>3</sup> manuscript (hereafter E) which contains fifty out of the one hundred *novelle* in a disrupted order and omitting the *cornice*. The first edition of the Castilian translation was printed in Seville in 1496 (hereafter S) and differs from E in that it contains one hundred *novelle*. However, like E, the *cornice* has been omitted and the *novelle* reordered. S was reprinted four times over the sixteenth century, between 1524 and 1550.

There are three levels of distortion that resulted in this deconstructed Castilian translation: the distortion within the Italian tradition of the text; within the process of translation; and within the textual tradition of the translation itself. The process of early textual transmission is one that is riddled with distortions, therefore textual scholars must take into account a level of subjectivity and human error that will undoubtedly occur. Thus, the Castilian translation of the *Decameron* is an echo: it is not a perfect reproduction of Boccaccio's text transposed into a different language, but an adaptation filtered through a sequence of human perspectives. It is not the initial, crisp reverberation, but the faint, muffled sound one hears before it dissipates into the air.

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### Italian textual tradition

The first level of distortion to consider is the textual history and transmission of the *Decameron* in Italian. The aim here is not to attempt to find a textual model for the Castilian translation but to provide a brief overview of how the *Decameron* was read and circulated in the first century after its completion. This will provide some insight into the variation that occurred within the manuscript tradition that might set a precedent for the structural changes we encounter in the Castilian translation.

According to Branca and Vitale, there were two redactions of the *Decameron*.<sup>4</sup> The earlier one is witnessed by manuscript P, transcribed by Giovanni d'Agnolo Capponi c.1365–1369 possibly from a service copy; the second, known as the Hamilton 90 codex or B, is the only extant autograph manuscript and dates to c.1370.<sup>5</sup> In B we see how Boccaccio, in the final years of his life and after

<sup>3</sup> The lack of an *explicit* indicating the date and location in which the manuscript was completed prevents us from settling on a precise date, though the style of the gothic hand indicates that it was completed in the mid-fifteenth century. Bourland, p. 32; Julian Zarco Cuevas, *Catálogo de los manuscritos castellanos de la Real Biblioteca de el Escorial* (Madrid: Escorial. Real Biblioteca, 1924–1929), 3 vols, II (p. 108); José Blanco Jiménez, 'Il manoscritto escurialense del Decameron', *Miscellanea Storica della Valdelsa*, 83 (1977), 54–84 (p. 55); Mita Valvassori, 'Libro de las Ciento Novelas de Juan Bocacio de Certaldo', *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana*, Núm. Extra (2009) 3–340 (p. 11).

<sup>4</sup> Vittore Branca and Maurizio Vitale, *Il capolavoro del Boccaccio e due diverse redazioni* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2002). See also: Vittore Branca, 'Su una redazione del *Decameron* anteriore a quella conservata nell'autografo hamiltoniano', *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 25 (1997) 3–131.

<sup>5</sup> Vittore Branca and Pier Giorgio Ricci, *Un autografo del Decameron (Codice hamiltoniano 90)* (Padua: CEDAM, 1962).

almost twenty years of its circulation, revisited the text of the *Decameron* and made systematic changes on linguistic, stylistic and narrative grounds. The subsequent transmission of the text contained in B by no means eliminated the redaction already in circulation: as Brian Richardson states '[t]his later version of the *Decameron* was read less widely: about thirty of the extant manuscripts are related to P, about twenty to B'.<sup>6</sup> The status of B as an autograph copy with revisions made by Boccaccio himself led Branca to establish this text as the authoritative version, which he would then use as the base text for his critical edition.<sup>7</sup>

Once the text of B was established and widely accepted by scholars, very little critical attention was paid to the other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts. The first to study each one and provide extensive detail on their history and material condition is Marco Cursi. He describes sixty manuscripts, finally shedding light on the 'oscurità dalla quale è avvolta la tradizione del *Centonovelle*'.<sup>8</sup> Where Branca only mentions if a manuscript was a partial copy (as opposed to a fragment or deteriorated witness) by writing *parziale* next to the entry, Cursi indicates which parts of the text were copied. This is invaluable information as these partial copies show how scribes personalised the text of the *Decameron* for private or commercial use. The manuscripts in question are those numbered 9, 11, 12, 14, 27, 30, 31, 53 and 55. All of these include at least one *novella*, and four of them also include an element of the *cornice*: 14 includes an extract from the introduction to Day IV (paragraphs 33–34); 27 consists of the conclusions to days I–IX and *novella* IX.10; 31 includes the introduction to Day III; 55 includes an extract from the introduction to Day IV (paragraphs 12–30) which contains the interpolated *novella* by the narrator. These personalised copies, contained in miscellanies and anthologies, show an appreciation as much for elements of the *cornice* as for individual *novelle*.

Though none of the above witnesses present the same level of deconstruction as the Castilian translation, it sets a precedent for a scribal culture intent on personalising a text where it suits the reader's needs. Above all, this shows that any structural changes made to the text of the *Decameron* in this period, apart from attesting to the popularity of any single *novella* (specifically IV.1), do not follow any particular pattern, but are guided by individual preferences. In any case, the predominance of complete witnesses along with the occasional inclusion of elements of the *cornice* in miscellanies, shows that the Castilian translation certainly displays an anomalous attitude by omitting the *cornice*.

Now that Cursi has provided us with detailed information on the material history of the witnesses, followed by an assessment of the *Decameron*'s

<sup>6</sup> Brian Richardson, 'The Textual History of the *Decameron*', in *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, ed. by Victoria Kirkham, Michael Sherberg and Janet Levarie Smarr (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 41–49 (p. 42).

<sup>7</sup> Vittore Branca, 'Introduzione', in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron: edizione critica secondo l'autografo hamiltoniano*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Florence: La Crusca, 1976), pp. 1–CXXXV (p. xcvi).

<sup>8</sup> Cursi, p. 12. 'the obscurity in which the tradition of the *Centonovelle* is enveloped'. All subsequent translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

early reception by Rhiannon Daniels,<sup>9</sup> the field of the textual history of the *Decameron* would certainly benefit from an exhaustive analysis of the text of these sixty witnesses, if not to construct a definitive *stemma codicum*, at least to trace the linguistic and textual variation that occurs.

Information on the presence of the *Decameron* in Spain, on the other hand, is scarce, with the most valiant attempts having been made by José Blanco Jiménez.<sup>10</sup> As is clear from the work of Branca and Cursi, there are no witnesses of the *Decameron* in Italian in Spain, and Blanco was unable to recover any evidence of the prior existence of any manuscripts in his archival research.<sup>11</sup> The only manuscript witnesses of the *Decameron* in Spain are the Catalan translation and E.

### The Escorial Manuscript

The most striking difference between this manuscript and the Italian text as written by Boccaccio is its anthologised structure.<sup>12</sup> E begins with nine chapters containing Boccaccio's introduction in which he describes a plague-ridden Florence and introduces the ten narrators of the tales, known as the *onesta brigata*. What follows are only fifty tales, presented in the order shown in TABLE 1.<sup>13</sup>

I,1	I,2	I,3	I,5	I,6	I,8	I,9	I,10	II,1	IV,3
VI,8	VI,2	VI,5	VIII,5	IX,3	IX,4	VI,3	VI,4	X,9	VI,9
VI,10	V,1	X,8	IX,9	X,1	V,3	II,4	VI,1	V,6	II,6
X,3	III,5	IV,1	V,8	V,9	V,4	II,10	VII,7	VII,9	VIII,7
VII,5	VII,6	VII,8	X,4	X,5	X,6	VII,1	VII,2	VII,3	VII,4

TABLE 1. Tales in E

Each *novella* is preceded by a short preamble in which the *brigata* reacts to the previous tale and introduces the new narrator for the following tale. As the order of the tales is so disrupted, the *novella* referenced in the introductions very rarely corresponds with the one that precedes it in the manuscript. The first tale to be omitted is I.4, told by Dioneo, but this is not taken into account

<sup>9</sup> Rhiannon Daniels, *Boccaccio and the book: production and reading in Italy 1340–1520* (London: Legenda, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> José Blanco Jiménez, 'Le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio in Spagna nel '400 e '500: una prima valutazione bibliografica', *Miscellanea Storica della Valdelsa*, 83 (1977), 35–52; 'Presencia de Boccaccio en España (con algunas correcciones)', *Mapocho*, 26 (1978), 35–64.

<sup>11</sup> Blanco Jiménez, 'Le opere', p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> As there has been no full assessment of all extant witnesses in Italian, it is impossible to know if any of them are genealogically related to the Castilian translation. Therefore, the only option for comparison is the text established by Branca (see n. 7), from which all references to the Italian text are taken.

<sup>13</sup> Juan Carlos Conde, 'Las traducciones ibéricas medievales del *Decameron*: tradición textual y recepción coetánea', in *Actas del IX Congreso Internacional de la Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval (A Coruña. 18–22 de septiembre de 2001)*, ed. by Carmen Parrilla and M. Pampín (Noia: Toxosoutos, 2005), pp. 105–22 (p. 107).

by the compiler,<sup>14</sup> who, in the introduction to the fifth *novella*, still references the omitted tale and narrator:

La nouella de dioneo contada con un poco de verguença pungio los coraçones delas dueñas presentes, la qual verguença asas demostro enel honesto color que enlos gestos suyos se ençendio<sup>15</sup>

where the Italian reads:

La novella di Dioneo raccontata prima con un poco di vergogna punse i cuori delle donne ascoltanti e con onesto rossore nel loro viso apparito ne diede segno<sup>16</sup>

E presents an almost word for word translation of the introduction to 1.5, where such close adherence to the original text impedes understanding rather than aiding it. These preambles, along with the introduction in chapters 1–9, are all that remains of the *cornice*: the introductions and conclusions to each day have been entirely omitted, along with Boccaccio's *Proemio* and *Conclusione dell'autore*. Through the *cornice* the reader is presented with a thematic structure for the *novelle*, as each night the monarch sets a theme for the following day; we are shown how the members of the *brigata* interact with one another and their staff and where they choose to tell their tales. All of this impacts how we read the tales themselves.

Several questions arise from even a cursory glance at this witness: why was the diurnal structure of the *Decameron* abandoned? Why do the first nine *novelle* conform to their original order (with two omissions), when there appears to be no discernible logic for the remaining forty-one? What criteria, if any, were employed to select the *novelle*? Beginning to answer these questions would require an in-depth thematic analysis of the *novelle* included to try to discern a pattern. However, the results of such a study can only confirm what we have seen in the history of the Italian text: many alterations and anthologisations of the *Decameron* were based solely on personal preference. Without a wider tradition of this text (E being the only witness), we cannot extrapolate those results and apply them to the preferences of a wider readership. This may be possible with S, as will be shown below, because the multiple editions and surviving witnesses attest to a level of popularity we cannot be certain E achieved.

<sup>14</sup> As will be shown below, E and S likely share a genealogical model, despite presenting vast structural differences. Thus, a translator refers to the person who created the “original” translation from which both E and S derived. The compiler of E, then, is the person who selected the fifty tales. This may have been the scribe, but not necessarily the original translator. The same applies for S, where the compiler is the person who selected the order of the tales, but this will not necessarily overlap with the original translator or the compositor.

<sup>15</sup> Madrid, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo El Escorial (RBME), J.II.21, fol. 22<sup>r</sup>. See footnote 16 for the relevant translation.

<sup>16</sup> Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1.5.2. ‘The story told by Dioneo at first pricked the hearts of the listening ladies with somewhat of shamefastness, whereof a modest redness appearing in their faces gave token’, *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccacci*, trans. by John Payne (London: Villon Society, 1886), 3 vols, 1, p. 70 <[https://archive.org/details/decameronofgiovao2bocc\\_o/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/decameronofgiovao2bocc_o/mode/2up)> [accessed 16 August 2020].

## The Seville Incunable

The Castilian translation was first printed in Seville in 1496 by Meinardo Ungut and Stanislao Polono. Like E, it begins with the narrator's introduction (chapters 1–11) and little else of the *cornice* is retained. The most obvious difference between the two texts is the fact that this edition includes one hundred *novelle* as opposed to fifty, ninety-eight of which correspond to the ones in Boccaccio's text.<sup>17</sup> In S there is an attempt to adhere to the *Decameron's* daily structure, evidenced by the fact that the first twenty *novelle* stray very little from Boccaccio's original order, as seen in TABLE 2.<sup>18</sup> The first tales of the subsequent two "days" are v.1 and iv.1 respectively and both include an introductory paragraph which contains the *cornice* description of the *brigata's* morning before they tell their stories.

I,1	I,2	I,3	I,9	I,8	I,4	I,5	I,6	I,7	I,10
II,1	II,2	II,3	II,4	II,5	II,6	II,7	II,8	II,9	II,10
V,1	V,6	V,3	V,7	V,8	III,4	VII,3	IX,6	VII,5	III,2
IV,1	IV,2	IV,6	IV,3	IV,4	VIII,5	IV,9	VIII,8	IX,2	IV,10
VI,5	VI,6	VI,7	VI,8	VI,1	VI,2	VI,3	VI,4	VI,9	VI,10
VIII,1	VIII,2	IX,3	VIII,10	IX,9	X,1	X,3	X,6	X,8	X,9
III,5	V,4	VII,8	VII,7	VII,9	VIII,7	X,4	X,5	VII,1	VII,2
VII,4	II,9	III,7	?	III,6	V,9	IX,10	(X,10)	IX,4	III,1
III,3	III,10	III,8	IV,5	IV,8	V,2	V,10	VII,6	VII,10	VIII,3
VIII,4	VIII,6	IX,8	X,7	X,2	IX,1	IV,7	V,5	IX,7	VIII,9

TABLE 2. Tales in S

Further evidence of the compiler's attempt to retain a vestige of the ten-tales-per-day structure is that the narrators for some *novelle* were changed so no narrator would speak twice in a "day" or ten-tale period, as shown in TABLE 3. The table shows us that only the first fifty *novelle* adhere to this structure. On the sixth "day" Neifile, Filostrato and Pampinea each speak twice, and then the structure breaks down completely as introductions to the *novelle* dwindle to nothing, and no attempt is made to ensure continuity with the preceding

<sup>17</sup> The two exceptions are the seventy-fourth and seventy-eighth *novelle* in the table (labelled 'Capitulo lxxiii [sic]' and 'Capitulo lxxvii [sic]' in the corresponding rubrics). *Novella* 73 does not appear in the original Boccaccian text, and it replaces ix.5. Bourland, p. 45; María Hernández Esteban, 'El cuento 73 de *Las cien novelas de Juan Bocacio ajeno al Decameron*', *DICENDA*, 20 (2002), pp. 105–20. The tale corresponding to x.10, the tale of Griselda, is modelled on the Latin reworking by Petrarch, rather than Boccaccio's original. For an exhaustive analysis of this anomalous tale, see Juan Carlos Conde and Víctor Infantes, *La Historia de Griseldis* (Lucca: Mauro Baroni, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Conde, 'Las traducciones', p. 111.

Panfilo	Neifile	Filomena	<i>Emilia</i>	Lauretta	Dioneo	Fiam- metta	<i>Elissa</i>	Filostrato	Pampinea
Neifile	Filostrato	Pampinea	Lauretta	Fiam- metta	Emilia	Panfilo	Elissa	<i>Filomena</i>	Dioneo
Panfilo	Pampinea	<i>Lauretta</i>	<i>Filomena</i>	<i>Neifile</i>	<i>Dioneo</i>	Elissa	<i>Filostrato</i>	<i>Emilia</i>	<i>Fiammetta</i>
Panfilo	Pampinea	<i>Fiammetta</i>	Lauretta	Elissa	<i>Dioneo</i>	<i>Neifile</i>	<i>Filostrato</i>	<i>Emilia</i>	<i>Filomena</i>
<i>Pampinea</i>	<i>Filomena</i>	Filostrato	Emilia	<i>Elissa</i>	<i>Panfilo</i>	<i>Neifile</i>	<i>Lauretta</i>	<i>Fiammetta</i>	<i>Dioneo</i>
Neifile	Panfilo	Filostrato	<i>Pampinea</i>	Emilia	Neifile	Filostrato	Fiam- metta	<i>Pampinea</i>	<i>Dioneo</i>
			Filomena	<i>Emilia</i>	Pampinea		Emilia		Filostrato
	<i>Dioneo</i>			<i>Dioneo</i>	<i>Dioneo</i>	Dioneo			

TABLE 3. Narrators in S

Plain type indicates no change to the narrator of the tale, italics indicate that the narrator has changed and blank cells indicate where no narrator is mentioned in the introduction or that there is no introduction.

*novella* or to avoid narrators speaking more than once in a “day”. Indeed, on the eighth “day” Dioneo is the only narrator who is named, and what is more absurd is that three of the four *novelle* attributed to him in S were not originally narrated by him. At this point we may be tempted to ask why the structural changes were applied with so little consistency; perhaps the compiler lost interest, or maybe even ran out of time. Like with E, a thematic examination of the new order is required to determine why certain *novelle* were prioritised by this compiler.

### One translation?

The drastic structural differences between E and S may lead one to believe that they are two independent translations; an analysis of their approaches to translation may also support that fact. In general, E presents a word-for-word translation, where S shows a preference for plot and heavily edited descriptive passages. An example of this can be seen in tale v.4, in the initial description of the protagonist Caterina, shown in TABLE 4. There are no noteworthy deviations from the Italian text in E whereas in S there are many omissions (italicized in the Italian). These omissions do not add anything to the plot, but merely emphasise or reiterate what is already there.

<i>Italian</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
la quale <i>oltre ad ogni altra della contrada</i> , crescendo, divenne bella e <i>piacevole</i> : e per ciò che sola era al padre ed alla madre rimasa, <i>sommamente</i> da loro era amata <i>ed avuta cara</i> e con maravigliosa diligenza guardata, <i>aspettando essi di far di lei alcun gran parentado</i>	¶ la qual allende de toda otra dela encontrada creciendo se fizo bella τ plazible τ por que sola ment era al padre τ ala madre quedada era dellos amada τ avyda muy cara τ con maravillosa diligençia guardada esperando ellos de fazer della alguno grand emparentado	la qual creçiendo se fizo bella. τ por que sola al padre τ a la madre que dada era dellos amada: τ con diligencia guardada.

TABLE 4. Comparison of *novella* v.4.5 with E and S.<sup>19</sup>

<i>Italian</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
ornamento del cielo leggiadri motti alcun leggiadro ornamenti del corpo	afeyte y apostura del cielo graciosas τ breues palabras et prestas los preciosos motes τ palabras presas grande vicio τ apostamiento del cuerpo	afeyte y apostamiento del cielo graciosas τ breues palabras et prestas los graciosos motes y palabras prestas guarnicion τ apostamiento del cuerpo

TABLE 5. Comparison of *novella* 1.10.3–5 with E and S.<sup>20</sup>

Despite this, there are instances in which both texts present the same approach to certain passages and deviate from the Italian in an almost identical fashion, as seen in TABLE 5. Each of these examples is an instance of amplification, a common rhetorical device used by medieval writers. In the first and last examples the translator does not opt for the simplest solution by translating ‘ornamento’ (‘decoration’) with its Castilian equivalent. A reason for this may have been that the translator preferred to use an alliterative pair of words, which may not have been possible had ‘ornamento’ been retained. In the last example the noun ‘ornamento’ is translated differently, with ‘guarnicion’<sup>21</sup> (‘adornment’) instead of ‘afeyte’ (‘trimming’). The adjective

<sup>19</sup> Boccaccio, *Decameron*, v.4.5. ‘who grew up fair and agreeable beyond any other in the [contrada]; and for that she was the only child that remained to her father and mother, they loved and tendered her exceeding dear and guarded her with marvellous diligence, looking to make some great alliance by her.’ Adapted from Payne, II, p. 184; RBME, J.II.21, fol. 117<sup>v</sup>; Brussels, (KBR), Inc.B.399, fol. 123<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1.10.3–5. ‘ornament of the sky’; ‘witty sallies’; ‘sprightly saying’; ‘adornment of the body’ (Payne, I, p. 91 <[https://archive.org/details/decameronofgiovaioibocc\\_o/page/n7/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/decameronofgiovaioibocc_o/page/n7/mode/2up)> [accessed 16 August 2020]; RBME, J.II.21, fols. 27<sup>r</sup>-29<sup>v</sup>; KBR, Inc.B.399, fols. 18<sup>v</sup>-19<sup>v</sup>).

<sup>21</sup> ‘guarnicion’ (decoration) in S is ‘grande vicio’ (‘great vice’) in E. This is clearly an error as it does not correspond with the Italian. This may be a misreading of an older text (from which E may have been copied) where ‘guarnicion’ looked similar to ‘grande vicio’ due to the gothic script that was used.



'leggiadri' ('graceful') is amplified to encompass three adjectives, and along with this the translator uses hyperbaton on the final adjective positioning it to the right of the noun. Clearly, there were purely rhetorical motives for these changes, as they elevate the style of the Castilian, but do not accurately reflect what is rendered in the Italian. In the third example, 'leggiadro' is used by itself and the aforementioned 'motti' ('sayings') are implied, yet in both E and S the word 'motes' has been added. We see a difference here between E and S, as the former uses 'preciosos' ('beautiful') where the latter uses 'graciosos' (elegant). It is reasonable to assume that this variation was caused by a misreading, as 'pre' and 'gra' would look similar in gothic script. Another difference is 'presas' ('taken') in E as opposed to 'prestar' ('witty') in S. This was probably an error in E, due to the fact that in the previous example 'prestar' was used in both witnesses to amplify the meaning of 'leggiadri motti'.

From this short passage we can draw some initial conclusions regarding the relationship between E and S. The similarities between all four examples, in terms of both vocabulary and syntax, show that they derive from the same original translation because there is nothing in the Italian that would lead two different translators to those precise solutions in Castilian. However, the fact that the earlier text E contains errors not present in S ('grande vicio' and 'presas') shows that S is not directly derived from E and therefore they were copied from different sources that shared a textual model. A provisional *stemma codicum* can be drawn from this evidence, see FIG. 1, where  $\Omega$  is the original translation. A full assessment of errors must be carried out between the two texts to confirm a genealogical link, but the evidence collected so far strongly suggests that they are parallel reverberations of a single echo of the *Decameron*.

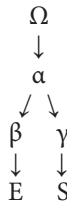


FIG 1. *Stemma codicum* for E and S

### Textual transmission of S

There were four sixteenth-century reprints of S, of which fifteen copies survive: Toledo 1524 by Juan de Villaquirán;<sup>22</sup> Valladolid 1539 by Diego Fernández de Córdoba;<sup>23</sup> Medina del Campo 1543 by Pedro de Castro;<sup>24</sup> Valladolid 1550 by

<sup>22</sup> Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (BSB), Res/2 P.o.it.11; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (BNCF), MAGL.1.5.55.

<sup>23</sup> KBR, V.6884c; BSB, Res/2 P.o.it.12.

<sup>24</sup> Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE), R/11313; London, British Library, c20d6; Rome,

Juan de Villalquirán.<sup>25</sup> The proximity and occasional collaboration between the printers of these editions<sup>26</sup> tempered any substantial distortions. An analysis of the first eleven chapters of the text has shown that meaningful errors are incredibly rare, and that the most significant and consistent changes that take place are conscious decisions by each of the compositors to modernise the grammatical and graphical presentation of the text. The reprints of the Castilian translation thus represent a diachronic echo, where the language of each edition differs from the one that preceded it and conforms to contemporary linguistic developments.

All further echoes of this translation and any other Castilian translation of the *Decameron* are abruptly dulled after the Valladolid 1550 edition. This is unsurprising because 1559 saw the publication of the first *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* by Inquisitor General Valdés, in which the *Decameron* was listed in the Castilian and Portuguese language sections.<sup>27</sup> The next comprehensive list was published in 1583 by Quiroga, and the *Decameron* appears in all four language sections: Latin, Castilian, Portuguese and Italian.<sup>28</sup> A direct result of this is that there would be no updated translation until the nineteenth century: 'La inquisición española suprimió todas las tiradas en lengua castellana [...] Durante tres siglos no se reimprimió el Decameron en castellano'.<sup>29</sup> The prohibition of this work also partially explains why so few witnesses remain on the Iberian Peninsula, either in Italian or Castilian.

### Conclusion

The *Decameron*, given a cursory glance, appears to be a simple anthology of one hundred tales; or, at least, this was the reaction of the compiler of the Castilian translation. My aim with this paper was to explore the processes by which such drastic variation could occur, and though we have seen that there was a predilection for personalisation in the early transmission of the *Decameron*, there certainly was not the same disregard for the *cornice* as in the Castilian translation.

Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), Stamp.KKK.VIII.39; Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino (BNUTO), Res. 243; Orléans, Médiathèque municipale, 2°D2428 Fonds ancien 1.

<sup>25</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Rés. Y2 D-207; Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (ÖNB), \*38.A.32; Lisbon, Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal (BNP), Res. 266°; Oxford, Bodleian Library, G 4.2 Art.; Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek (HAB), A: 13.2 Eth. 2°; Porto, Biblioteca Pública Municipal (BMP), L-13-18.

<sup>26</sup> Juan Delgado Casado, *Diccionario De Impresores Españoles, Siglos XV-XVII*. (Madrid: Arco-Libros, 1996). For Diego Fernández de Córdoba, see pp. 224–26; for Pedro de Castro, see pp. 131–33; for Juan de Villalquirán, see pp. 713–14.

<sup>27</sup> Jesús Martínez de Bujanda, *Index de l'inquisition espagnole 1551, 1554, 1559* (Sherbrooke: Centre d'études de la Renaissance, 1984), nn. 540, 696.

<sup>28</sup> Jesús Martínez de Bujanda, *Index de l'inquisition espagnole: 1583, 1584*, (Sherbrooke: Centre d'études de la Renaissance, 1993), nn. 247, 1834, 1918, 1930, 1979.

<sup>29</sup> Antonio Palau y Dulcet, *Manual del librero hispano-americano* (Barcelona: A. Palau, 1949), 28 vols, II-B, p. 291. 'The Spanish Inquisition suppressed all print-runs in Castilian [...] The *Decameron* would not be reprinted in Castilian for another three centuries.'

The textual history of the *Decameron* is nothing if not a series of echoes, becoming more distorted with every reverberation throughout history. Boccaccio's stratified mosaic of narrative voices, audiences and tales was often torn to pieces and rebuilt as the scribe or compiler chose. It is through such tendencies that we reach the Castilian translation. The decision to deconstruct and anthologise the *Decameron* may not have been made by the original translator: this may have occurred in the textual history of the model used for translation, or even within the early tradition of the translation, in archetypes  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$  shown in FIG. 1.

Scholars of the Italian tradition of the text have aided us in reaching the source of these echoes and stabilising it by producing a critical edition of the Italian text. My own research will allow me to produce a critical edition of the Castilian translation and afford it its place in the field of Boccaccio's reception in Europe.<sup>30</sup> This distant echo of Boccaccio's *Decameron* has become a text in its own right, and careful study can enlighten us not only on the reception of the *Decameron*, but the act of reading itself, as well as highlighting the importance of the *cornice* Boccaccio so carefully constructed, and what is lost when it is stripped away.

<sup>30</sup> Emily Di Dodo, 'A Critical Edition of the Medieval Castilian Translation of the *Decameron*' (forthcoming doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2022).

# Echo Compulsion: Formative Trauma in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*

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*Abstract.* This essay argues that the sexuality of *Venus im Pelz's* masochist protagonist, Severin, is characterised by what I term the 'echo compulsion' of a traumatic, childhood scene. This term is a development of Freud's notion of the subject's 'compulsion to repeat' traumatic scenes but which emphasises the impossibility of any perfect repetition of such scenes — an echo literally being, in Joan Scott's words, 'an imperfect return of sound'. My argument draws on the work of psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche and in particular his account of Copernican (exogenous and traumatic in origin) and Ptolemaic (biological and endogenous in origin) subject formation. This dichotomy of Copernican and Ptolemaic subjectivity plays out at each erotic re-enactment throughout *Venus im Pelz*. While Severin labours under a Ptolemaic illusion that his masochism is innate, the Copernican truth undermines the illusion as each erotic re-staging exposes his compulsion to echo the formative trauma. The echo compulsion reveals the fallacy of Severin's claims of sexual autonomy by highlighting the re-enactment's distortion, but the notion of the echo also highlights a further removal of Severin's sexual autonomy. An echo is not only a distorted return but it is an externalised manifestation of its own source. Severin may believe he regains control of his sexuality in choreographing restaged scenes of his childhood trauma, but like an echo, the scenes become externalised from him as they are performed and thus removed from his control.

\* \* \* \* \*

Following Freud's comparison of the independent agency of the unconscious with Copernicus' discovery that the Earth is not the centre of the universe in 'A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis' (1917), Jean Laplanche mobilises 'Copernican' and 'Ptolemaic' as descriptors of two models of subject formation present in Freud's work.<sup>1</sup> 'Copernican' describes theories of subjectivity that are formed *exogenously* by *others* which see the unconscious as an internalised other, decentred from the conscious ego, while 'Ptolemaic' describes *endogenous*

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 135–44 (pp. 139–43).

theories that recentre the unconscious as a product of the *self*.<sup>2</sup> Laplanche identifies that Freud's thought alternates between 'relapses into Ptolemaism and resurgences of the Copernican, other-centered vision'.<sup>3</sup> Freud's abandonment of seduction theory in 1897 for a theory of infantile sexuality is the most visible Ptolemaic shift — or 'going-astray' in Laplanche's words — in Freud's thought, and sees the formation of the subject's sexuality go from being conceived as exogenously formed by others to being endogenously formed from within.<sup>4</sup> Laplanche, contrastingly, insists on the 'exogenous, traumatic and intrusive' formation of the sexual subject.<sup>5</sup> Trauma, as discussed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), is also subject to the Copernican-Ptolemaic duality. Freud discusses the victim's 'compulsion to repeat' traumatic events.<sup>6</sup> While 'compulsion' suggests that Freud's formulation is Copernican (the subject being *compelled* to act a certain way), this is complicated by the Ptolemaic implication of the word 'repeat'. Freud's repetition compulsion sees the subject attempt to claim ownership or control of a passively-experienced traumatic event by actively bringing about its repetition, making it a Ptolemaic act of recentring agency. But, because the subject is *compelled* to this repetitive behaviour, doubt is cast upon the validity of this Ptolemaic control. Joyce McDougall, who argues that 'neosexualities' (a term including masochism, sadism, etc.) precipitate from originary trauma, identifies this when she compares the repetition *compulsion* to the addictiveness of drugs.<sup>7</sup> However, the suitability of the word 'repeat' in Freud's formulation has not been subject to the same Copernican-Ptolemaic scrutiny. *Repetition*, by insinuating accuracy, serves a Ptolemaic purpose by suggesting that traumatic scenes can be revived faithfully by the subject. But *can* the subject ever exactly repeat their trauma?

This essay proposes that revising Freud's repetition compulsion, into an *echo* compulsion, more comprehensively grasps the Copernican nature of trauma in conceding that exact repetition is impossible. Two formal aspects of echoes make them suitable metaphors for trauma. The first is that, in Joan Scott's words, they are 'incomplete reproductions...giving back only the final fragments of a phrase'.<sup>8</sup> That is, an echo is an inherently distorted and fragmentary reproduction of sound. Used figuratively within the echo compulsion this means that revived traumatic events are also distorted — their

<sup>2</sup> Jean Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', trans. by Luke Thurston in *Essays on Otherness* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 52–83 (p. 60).

<sup>3</sup> Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> John Fletcher, 'Introduction to Laplanche' in *Essays on Otherness*, pp. 1–51 (p. 6).

<sup>6</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Standard Edition, Volume XVIII*, trans. by Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 7–33. Freud describes as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the [subject's] protective shield', p. 29; for repetition compulsion see pp. 18–23.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce McDougall, *Theatres of the Mind: Illusion and Truth on the Psychoanalytic Stage* (London: Free Association Books Ltd, 1986), p. 255.

<sup>8</sup> Joan W. Scott, 'Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity', *Critical Enquiry*, 27, 2 (2001), 284–304 (p. 291).

organic unity as scenes being fragmented in and by their reproduction. The second formal aspect is that an echo is a *reverberation*: a sound reproduced *externally* from source. If an echo is an externalized noise then traumatic events are also externalized from the subject's power in their re-enactment. The agency belongs to the scene, not the subject re-enacting it.

To illustrate the Copernican potential of the echo compulsion, this essay explores the traumatically formed masochist protagonist of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* (1870).<sup>9</sup> The novella contains the memoirs of Severin von Kusiemski that narrate his affair with Wanda von Dunajew — a relationship driven by Severin's specific masochistic needs and punctuated by choreographed erotic scenes of domination and beating in which he roleplays as her slave. Despite playing the passive role, these scenes are carefully directed by Severin. The formation and activity of Severin's masochism, I argue, exist within the Copernican-Ptolemaic tension Laplanche identified in Freud's work. While Severin operates under a Ptolemaic illusion of ownership and control over his preferences, within his own narrative the Copernican fact of his traumatic and exogenous sexual formation undermine his attempts to recentre his sexual agency. Over the past two decades critics have identified how Sacher-Masoch's writing, especially *Venus im Pelz*, was reductively treated as evidence for the author's own masochism. Albrecht Korshorke reads the novella in dialogue with Hegel, Sean Kelly argues for a political Sacher-Masoch whose masochistic writing asserts the need for universal human rights, and Birgit Lang analyses the novella's critical treatment as a psychoanalytic case study.<sup>10</sup> This essay, while remaining within a psychoanalytic theoretical framework, is not interested in Sacher-Masoch's personal history, but seeks to demonstrate the traumatic effect of what Kelly calls 'the unjust domination of one creature over another'.<sup>11</sup> It explores how Severin's childhood trauma is compulsively *echoed* throughout the affair with Wanda and in the retelling of his childhood — during which the formative trauma occurred. Before examining his echo compulsion though, it is necessary to analyse his Ptolemaic fantasy of owning the origin of his 'Seltsamkeiten'.<sup>12</sup>

Severin tells Wanda that his sexual tendencies are innate and were present even during infancy. The term he uses to describe taking pleasure from

<sup>9</sup> Masochism was named after Sacher-Masoch by Krafft-Ebing who identified it as a specific sexual behaviour in Sacher-Masoch's writing. See Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study*, trans. by Charles Gilbert Chaddock (Philadelphia; London: The F.A. Davis Co., Publishers, 1892), p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Albrecht Koschorke, 'Mastery and Slavery: A Masochist Falls Asleep Reading Hegel', trans. by Joel Golb, *MLN*, 116, 3, German Issue (2001), 551–63; Sean K. Kelly, 'Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Human Rights', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 2010, 43, 3 (2010), 19–37; Birgit Lang, 'The shifting case of masochism: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* (1870)' in *A History of the Case Study: Sexology, Psychoanalysis, Literature*, ed. by Lang, Joy Damousi and Alison Lewis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 19–54.

<sup>11</sup> Kelly, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus im Pelz* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2013), p. 39; 'singular tendencies', *Venus in Furs*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 30.

pain and humiliation is *suprasensuality*: ‘ja schon in der Wiege, so erzählte mir meine Mutter später, war ich *übersinnlich*’.<sup>13</sup> Severin’s tracing back of his allegedly inherent *suprasensuality* to his cradle sees him claiming his sexuality as his own biological nature. It surpasses even Freud’s theory of infantile sexuality in naturalizing Severin’s masochism for while Freud locates primal sensual pleasure in breastfeeding (which the child auto-erotically replicates through thumb-sucking), Severin goes a step further in claiming that his innate *suprasensuality* saw him reject the wet nurse’s breast in favour of goat’s milk.<sup>14</sup> John Noyes explains that masochists deny masochism’s ‘essentially communicative orientation’ and divorce their behaviours from the ‘sociohistorical matrix that makes their communicative coding possible’.<sup>15</sup> Masochism, by being ‘communicative’ in its behaviour (i.e. requiring external participants) and formation (formed by one’s social and historical placing in the world) is thus exogenously constituted. However, Noyes goes on to say that these behaviours ‘are then mapped onto a mythology of the human animal’s universal biological constitution’ by the masochist.<sup>16</sup> This is a coping mechanism for the masochist’s lack of ownership over a sexuality that has been formed exogenously; it is essentially what Severin does when he claims the biological innateness of his *suprasensuality*. The irony is that even in Severin’s Ptolemaic myth of an in-cradle *suprasensuality*, this mythology’s communicative coding is exposed by his own admission — it is based on information told to him by his mother.

The reality of Severin’s masochistic behaviours, which manifest as specific, non-negotiable requirements in the erotic scenes between himself and Wanda, is that they were traumatically formed in the following teenage scene of beating by his aunt:

Unerwartet trat sie in ihrer pelzgefütterten Kazabaika herein, gefolgt von der Köchin, Küchenmagd und der kleinen Katze, die ich verschmäht hatte. Ohne viel zu fragen, ergriffen sie mich und banden mich, trotz meiner heftigen Gegenwehr, an Händen und Füßen, dann schürzte meine Tante mit einem bösen Lächeln den Ärmel empor und begann mich mit einer großen Rute zu hauen, und sie hieb so tüchtig, daß Blut floß und ich zuletzt, trotz meinem Heldenmut, schrie und weinte und um Gnade bat. Sie ließ mich hierauf losbinden, aber ich mußte ihr kniend für die Strafe danken und die Hand küssen.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 39; ‘Even in my cradle, as my mother subsequently told me, I was *suprasensual*’, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Freud, ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’ in *The Standard Edition, Volume VII*, trans. by Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 125–245 (p. 181); Sacher-Masoch, p. 39; pp. 30–31.

<sup>15</sup> John K. Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Noyes, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 41; ‘Unexpectedly she entered in her fur-lined kazabaika, followed by the cook, the kitchen maid, and the little cat that I had spurned. Wasting no time, they grabbed me and, overcoming my violent resistance, they bound me hand and foot. Next, with a wicked smile my aunt rolled up her sleeves and began laying into me with a heavy switch. She hit me so hard that she drew



Trauma, say Laplanche and Pontalis, is ‘characterised by an influx of excitations’ that exceed ‘the subject’s tolerance and capacity to master such excitations’.<sup>18</sup> ‘An *influx* of excitations’ [My italics] necessitates that trauma invades the subject exogenously, which Freud corroborates in *Beyond*.<sup>19</sup> The binding of Severin’s limbs and the whipping he receives from his aunt in this authentically passive position sees Severin totally mastered by such an influx of violent excitations. He can tolerate this influx no more than he can master it, screaming and begging for mercy. This scene retains a hold on Severin’s erotic desires, which is evidenced in the following extract of a later scene that clearly echoes the original:

drei junge, schlanke Negerinnen, wie aus Ebenholz geschnitzt und ganz in roten Atlas gekleidet, hereintreten,...Wanda, welche, hoch aufgerichtet, ihr kaltes, schönes Antlitz mit den finsternen Brauen, den höhnischen Augen mir zugewendet, als Herrin gebietend vor mir steht, winkt mit der Hand, und ehe ich noch recht weiß, was mit mir geschieht, haben mich die Negerinnen zu Boden gerissen, mir Beine und Hände fest zusammengeschnürt und die Arme wie einem, der hingerichtet werden soll, auf den Rücken gebunden, so daß ich mich kaum bewegen kann. »Gib mir die Peitsche, Haydée«, befiehlt Wanda mit unheimlicher Ruhe.<sup>20</sup>

This may look like a repetition of the original scene, but on inspection the elements comprising it are distorted. The three servants, rather than whatever household staff were available, are exoticized African women who resemble ebony statues (‘wie aus Ebenholz geschnitzt’). The wearing of the fur coat by the women brandishing whips may be the same, but the swiftness of his aunt’s rapid activity is distorted as Wanda’s movements are slowed until she ‘freezes into postures that identify her with a statue’.<sup>21</sup> The erotic scene covers two pages whereas the traumatic one is only one paragraph. Finally, Severin does not protest his being bound this time precisely because he has coached Wanda into playing the dominant role to his submissive slave. Koschorke notes how ‘despite all self-styling into victim of his mistress’s unfettered caprice: the masochist knows very well how to assure primacy for his pleasure principle’.<sup>22</sup> Severin’s passivity and Wanda’s activity are thus both directed by

blood, and for all my heroic valor I finally screamed and wept and begged for mercy. She then had me untied, but I was forced to kneel down, thank her for the punishment, and kiss her hand.’, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), p. 465.

<sup>19</sup> Freud, *Beyond*, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 89; ‘Three young, slender African women came in — carved out of ebony, as it were, and clad entirely in red satin...Wanda, standing erect before me, turning her cold, beautiful, and somber face, her scornful eyes toward me, imperious as my Mistress, gestured. And before I even realized what was happening, the Africans had yanked me to the floor, bound me tightly hand and foot, with my arms around my back, so that I was like a man about to be executed, barely able to move. “Give me the whip, Haydée,” Wanda ordered with sinister calm.’, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. by Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Koschorke, p. 553.



him. Moreover, the artistic control he has over her activity in the slowness and stillness of her motion reinforces the notion that through re-enactment comes recentred agency for the once-beaten child. However, in aestheticizing these elements, Severin loses the organic unity of the original scene and the elements of the servants, the woman in fur, and the beating all become increasingly distanced and fragmented from one another. The scene therefore echoes rather than repeats. Given this, Severin cannot gain control over the scene which has made him compelled to reproduce it because it is *now* only available to him in this echoed form.

It is not just that the originary traumatic scene is distorted and fragmented by its erotic re-enactment, but the scene itself acts as an echo of the 'matrix of sociohistorical' influences upon the child Severin's sexual formation.<sup>23</sup> In Scott's words, the scene of beating is but 'the final fragment' of the whole phrase which constitutes Severin's sexuality.<sup>24</sup> The most complex object of Severin's masochistic imagination gives the novella its title. In order to unpack the matrix of exogenous influences that constitutes the imaginary figure of Venus in furs, it is necessary to trace it back to his childhood. Severin describes to Wanda how, afraid of the imagery of the church, he would sneak into his father's library to admire instead a plaster statue of Venus. However pagan the object, the devotion he shows it is Christian: '[ich] kniete nieder und sprach zu ihr die Gebete, die man mir eingelernt, das Vaterunser, das Gegrüßt seist du Maria und das Credo'.<sup>25</sup> The Hail Mary becomes more significant when Severin describes how one night the moonlight fell on the Venus giving her a blue hue and causing him to throw himself at her feet and kiss them, 'wie ich es bei unsern Landleuten gesehen hatte, wenn sie die Füße des toten Heilands küßten'.<sup>26</sup> The statue is now conflated with Christian worship and the image of the Virgin Mary, who is conventionally rendered wearing blue in artistic representations. On this same night however, he describes how, having lost control of himself, he stopped kissing the statue's feet and kissed its lips, but on pulling away is filled with dread, flees and has dreams of Venus' raised arm threatening him.<sup>27</sup> The figure of Venus later becomes combined with the image of his fur-wearing aunt but even the foundation for this is laid by the earlier association his family have made of her with Messalina.<sup>28</sup> Messalina, the infamous wife of Claudius, is another classical figure who, like Venus, is the subject of much erotic art. We know that Severin is familiar with antiquity and its artistic rendering because he admits to spending his adolescence obsessively studying Classics. As quoted

<sup>23</sup> Noyes, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, p. 291.

<sup>25</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 40; 'I would kneel down and recite to her the prayers that had been inculcated in me, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Credo', p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 40; 'as I had seen our farmers do when they kissed the feet of the dead Savior', p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 40; p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 41; p. 32.

earlier, when his aunt ceases beating him she makes him kneel, kiss her hand and thank her for the punishment.<sup>29</sup> Again he is kneeling before, admiring and kissing a threatening woman (like he had done with the statue in his father's library), but if he is familiar with art and literature about Messalina then he will not only have seen her as the adulterous wife of Claudius, but also from the submissive perspective of slave-lovers.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere Severin talks of having read Tacitus' *Germania*, which details the ancient Germanic tribe, the Sitones, the men of which are so ruled by women that 'they sink not merely below freedom but even below slavery'.<sup>31</sup> It is not inconceivable then to think that he has also read Tacitus' work on Messalina which figures her in terms of chaotic but potent desire.<sup>32</sup> When his aunt beats him then, he has already been instructed to view her through slave's eyes. The figure of Venus in furs, which crystallises in the scene of trauma, therefore sees Severin combine the images of his aunt and Venus into one erotic object. However, this figure has actually been forged over time and is made up of Venus, Mary, Messalina and then his aunt, although the remembrance of Messalina and Mary are no longer consciously kept. Venus in furs, by consciously being the conflation of Venus and Severin's aunt but forgetting Messalina and Mary, is thus the echo — the last and lasting fragment — of the whole complex of exogenous influence that formed it.

The second formal feature of echoes which makes it a suitably Copernican metaphor for trauma is that echoes are *externally* reproduced from their source. The moment where Severin describes hearing his escaped laughter echoed captures the external nature of echoes: 'Ich muß unwillkürlich laut lachen, so daß es widerhallt und ich über mein eigenes Gelächter erschrecke'.<sup>33</sup> His laughter is externalised by its reverberation against the walls of the room and it startles him. It is important that Severin is startled by the echo and not the laughter itself. The echo's externality from its source signals the lack of ownership Severin had over the laughter in the first place *and* the lack of control over the precipitating reproduction of it. During this period in the novella, moreover, Severin is effectively method-acting the part of Wanda's slave Gregor, yet something unknown to him makes him break character and laugh. It is the externality of his laughter in its echo which he hears, but it is the 'mirth' ('Gelächter') that it evidences which really shakes him. This is his fantasy being enacted, but in this moment of echoed laughter he is confronted with the fact of his lack of control over his own place within it.

This is not the only occasion where Sacher-Masoch presents Severin being

<sup>29</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 41; p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, 'Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina', *Signs*, 21, 2 (1995), 50–82 (pp. 54, 61)

<sup>31</sup> Tacitus, *Germania*, trans. by J.B. Rives (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 96.

<sup>32</sup> For discussion on the historian's difficulty in describing Messalina outside of Tacitus' characterisation, see Joshel, pp. 50–82.

<sup>33</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 78; 'I couldn't help bursting into raucous laughter, which echoed so loudly that I was frightened by my own mirth', p. 65

startled by a confrontation with his decentred agency. Chronologically in the book, the first of these occasions involves the statue of Venus in the garden shared between himself and Wanda and occurs before they have begun any meaningful relationship. Severin has become enamoured with this statue: 'diese Venus ist schön und ich liebe sie, so leidenschaftlich, so krankhaft innig, so wahnsinnig...'<sup>34</sup> Severin has lent Wanda a book but has left inside its pages a small reproduction of Titian's *Venus with a Mirror* on which he has written the words '*Venus im Pelz*'.<sup>35</sup> Having found the picture she places a fur on the statue in the garden, then one on herself and waits on a nearby bench. His reaction is first to the statue, then to her. On seeing the statue in fur, his fantasy brought about by *another*, he is arrested by anxiety before trying to flee.<sup>36</sup> He is so dazed by this external manifestation of his fantasy though that he loses his way and stumbles upon Wanda, wearing a similar fur.<sup>37</sup> The initial anxiety at seeing the furred statue escalates now on seeing his stone ideal made flesh. Earlier I cited Deleuze who notes the becoming-statue of Wanda during the erotic scenes directed by Severin. His ideal is not the statue becoming woman but the reverse. This makes perfect sense given that stone cannot have any independent agency unlike a real woman. It is significant therefore that it is her laughter at him in his shock that leaves him breathless.<sup>38</sup> His fantasy-ideal of Venus in furs, like his laughter when he hears its echo, has externalized itself and laughs at him.

That this incident of Wanda externalizing a distorted and traumatic version of Severin's fantasy marks the beginning of their interaction is significant, because a parallel episode marks the end of their affair. Throughout their relationship Wanda warns Severin that he does not actually want what he asks her for, that his ideas will give her independent ideas of despotic cruelty that will exceed his desire and tolerance: '»ich bin ein leichtsinniges, junges Weib, es ist verkauft für Sie, sich mir so ganz gehörtgeben, Sie werden am Ende in der Tat mein Spielzeug«'<sup>39</sup> He does not heed her. The final erotic re-enactment of the traumatic scene makes clear, in brutal detail, just how reliant on the compliance of external others his masochistic fantasy was. In this episode, Wanda ties Severin so he cannot move and puts on the fur as usual, but then she invites another man inside to whip him.<sup>40</sup> He demands to be untied but is not. The man, referred to by Severin as 'der Grieche', adorns the fur before whipping him more powerfully than Wanda could. The originary trauma is echoed far beyond his control as he is once more authentically passive to being beaten by a stronger individual wearing fur. The believed ownership of the scene is exposed

<sup>34</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 19; 'this Venus was beautiful, and I loved her as passionately, as morbidly and profoundly, as insanely...', p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 20; p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 22; p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 22; p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> Sacher-Masoch, 'es benimmt mir den Atem', p. 23; 'took my breath away', p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Sacher-Masoch, p. 49; 'I'm a young, frivolous woman. It's dangerous for you to submit to me so completely. You'll actually wind up as my plaything', p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Sacher-Masoch, pp. 134–35; 'the Greek', pp. 114–16.

as the mere illusion of control as he is now unwillingly subjected to the echo of his traumatic sexual formation as reverberated and distorted from without.

This essay has examined the sexual formation of the protagonist of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* as it engages with Laplanche's terms of Copernican and Ptolemaic subject formation. The novella showcases the double nature of masochism which, on the one hand, is formed Copernically (exogenously and traumatically), and on the other, encourages the masochist to conjure myths and behaviours of Ptolemaism (that attempt failingly to recentre ownership and agency onto the subject). This essay, moreover, has deployed a revision of Freud's repetition compulsion in the form of the trauma victim's compulsion to *echo* their traumatic past, in order to reinforce the truly Copernican nature of traumatic sexual formation.

‘You still don’t get it. You never have  
and you never will.’:  
Memory as an Echo Chamber in  
Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*

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*Abstract.* Julian Barnes’s 2011 novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, begins with a carefully careless list of images that the narrator claims to remember ‘in no particular order’. As the novel progresses, these images are revealed to be significant for the narrator because he associates them with two events from his time at University: a failed relationship and the suicide of his close friend. By the end of the novel, however, it becomes clear that the narrator has falsely attributed significance to these memories and that — within a broader context — there were other moments which could have shed far more clarity on the events of the past. This article closely examines the narrator’s list of memories, in order to demonstrate that they are comparable to a sequence of echoes that reflect the plot of the novel. It argues that this process of echoing enables the reader to consider the distortive effects of memory, by emphasizing certain aspects of the story over others and thus altering the sequence of events, just as echoes distort sound. Through this line of reasoning, it draws upon the work of Peter Brooks and Roland Barthes to consider how memory acts as an echo chamber for the narrator, permitting him to use remembered events to create a false narrative which continually perpetuates itself, even when faced with contradictory evidence. The article goes on to argue that the beginning of the novel even exploits the reader’s own memory, forcing them to become complicit in the narrator’s echo chamber.

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The fact is that echo is structured by delay, by time. Moreover, the delay always marks a decay. Something is missing from the sound source, and as a consequence the “mirroring” is more than simply reversed; it is systematically imperfect.<sup>1</sup>

John Mowitt’s definition of ‘echo’ seems a striking place to begin any discussion of the way echoing and remembering can be productively compared. The terms

<sup>1</sup> John Mowitt, *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2015), p. 27.

employed by Mowitt make it particularly easy to see how the word ‘memory’ could be substituted for ‘echo’: memory, too, is ‘structured by delay’ and consequently ‘marks a decay’ since that which we remember is rarely a direct, cinematic reproduction of events.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, remembering something, even in the immediate aftermath of that event creates a space in which things can go missing and other things can be gained, whilst still maintaining the illusion of authenticity. Memory, like the echo, ‘is systematically imperfect’ without us ever quite realizing that it is the case. As a consequence of this, the metaphor of echo for memory is used often, implemented within neurological research, cultural studies and poetry, to name a few. The aforementioned metaphor demonstrates how memory functions within our brains, how it can be passed between generations, and the powerful emotions associated with remembering.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I will focus on a specific dynamic of echoing in order to further explore the depiction of memory in literature. When we hear an echo, what amazes us is the fact that we hear a sound from the past — that by rights should have faded away — come back towards us. We focus less on the things that we have lost and more on what we have gained; the echo acts to place a retrospective significance on that which we retain. Therefore, the amplification in echoing, at least where there is a human listener, is two-fold. First, there is the amplification of the sound itself, second there is the mental amplification wherein we focus our attention on this new ‘systematically imperfect’ version of the sound. To demonstrate this, I will draw upon Julian Barnes’s 2011 novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, to argue that this two-fold amplification is central to the text’s depiction of memory. I will suggest that the text is structured in such a way that we see how it is possible to prioritize the echo of memory, over its original source. In doing so, I demonstrate how memory in the novel acts as an echo-chamber for the narrator’s perceived version of past events.

*The Sense of an Ending* tells the story of Tony Webster who, after receiving a surprise bequest from an ex-girlfriend’s mother, decides to find out why. The first part of the novel describes Tony’s adolescent life, detailing: his school-aged friendship with the brilliant Adrian Finn; his turbulent student relationship with Veronica Ford; Veronica’s subsequent relationship with Adrian; and Adrian’s suicide during his postgraduate degree. The second part of the novel describes Tony’s bequest from Veronica’s mother of £500 and Adrian’s diary, and his pursuit of Veronica to discover what Adrian’s diary contained and how her mother came to have it. Veronica refuses to relinquish the diary from her possession and, by way of explanation, takes Tony to meet a disabled man in his forties. At the close of the novel, a waiter at a pub informs Tony that the man is not Veronica’s child (as he had assumed), but rather her brother. Tony then

<sup>2</sup> Mowitt, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Mark E Wheeler et al., ‘Memory’s Echo: Vivid remembering reactivates sensory-specific cortex’, *PNAS*, 97 (2000), 11125–29; Desmond Manderson, ‘Memory and Echo: Pop cult, hi tech and the irony of tradition’, *Cultural Studies*, 27 (2013), 11–29; Christina Rossetti, ‘Echo’ in *Poems*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906), p. 51.

understands that Adrian and Veronica's mother had an affair and that the man he met is both the product of this affair and the reason for Adrian's suicide.

Throughout the novel, Tony continually draws upon his memories of the past to find a reason for the bequest and guess at the identity of the man. Yet these consistently lead him down the wrong path, leaving him ultimately unable to understand. Given this constant recourse to the past within the novel, the theme of memory in *The Sense of an Ending* is difficult to overlook. Indeed, Justine Jordan, reviewing the novel for *The Guardian*, described it as 'a highly wrought meditation on ageing, memory and regret'.<sup>4</sup> However, as I will illustrate, the interconnected motif of echoing is equally embedded into this strand of the narrative. I argue that understanding Tony's narration to be an echo chamber for his own version of events, is key to understanding how the novel has been constructed.

The echo chamber is characterised by confinement and containment; this confinement leads to amplification, forcing the sounds that have been reflected to be repeated and distorted, creating a new version of the original sound. As a result of this, in contemporary culture the term echo chamber is often used to describe a person's tendency to surround themselves with like-minded individuals in order to perpetuate their world view. Roland Barthes, in particular, has paid critical attention to the echo chamber. He argues that 'in relation to the systems which surround him,' man is

an echo chamber: he reproduces the thoughts badly, he follows the words; he pays his visits, i.e. his respects, to vocabularies, he *invokes* notions, he rehearses them under a name; he makes use of this name as of an emblem (thereby practicing a kind of philosophical ideography) and this emblem dispenses him from following to its conclusion the system of which it is the signifier.<sup>5</sup>

Barthes's description of an echo chamber relates to the way in which people absorb and restate in their own terms philosophical and critical notions such as 'bourgeois'. Barthes argues that in re-expressing these terms 'words are shifted' away from their original meanings.<sup>6</sup> However, this concept need not only apply to complex concepts. It can also be used to understand the way in which we interact with the world around us. Indeed, this is exactly the process that Tony experiences in *The Sense of an Ending*, as he attempts to find a sequence of events that could have led to Veronica's mother being in possession of Adrian's diary.

A prime example of this comes after Tony meets the man who is later revealed to be Veronica's brother, for the first time. Tony says that '[t]his was Adrian's

<sup>4</sup> Justine Jordan, 'The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes — review', *The Guardian*, 26 July 2011 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/26/sense-ending-julian-barnes-review1>> [accessed 12 June 2020] (para. 8 of 8).

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (California: University of California Press, 1977), p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, p. 74.

son. I didn't need a birth certificate or a DNA test — I saw it and felt it'.<sup>7</sup> After this revelation, Tony reconstructs his version of the past through the lens of a letter he wrote in response to Adrian and Veronica forming a couple. In this letter, Tony wrote that 'part of me hopes you have a child, because I'm a great believer in time's revenge' (p.138). Using this letter as a prompt to construct the narrative of the man's existence, Tony decides that he has 'some answers to the questions [he] hadn't asked' (p.139) and writes Veronica an email in which he apologises for his letter and refers to Adrian as 'the father of [her] son' (p.143). However, Veronica later emails Tony back to inform him that he 'still [does]n't get it' (p.144).

In the above sequence of events we can clearly see how Tony has 'reproduce[d]' his own past thoughts 'badly'.<sup>8</sup> He has, quite literally, 'follow[ed] the words', by only paying attention to what he immediately surmised, rather than considering other possible meanings.<sup>9</sup> As a result, he has created a version of events which — despite making sense to him — has no bearing on reality. The echo chamber of his own mind has prevented him from seeing what past events truly signify.

Perhaps the most interesting function of the echo chamber in *The Sense of an Ending*, is the way Barnes frames the narrative to encourage his readers to participate within it. The novel begins with a list of specific moments that Tony remembers from his past:

I remember, in no particular order:

- a shiny inner wrist;
- steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it;
- gout of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house;
- a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torchbeams;
- another river, broad and grey, the direction of its flow disguised by a stiff wind exciting the surface;
- bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door.

This last isn't something I actually saw, but what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed. (p. 3.)

This list provides the reader with seemingly random fragments of the plot to come, without context. We are, therefore, encountering the echoes of the plot before being given the opportunity to read it within a wider frame. In effect, we are stepping into the world of echoes without ever hearing the original sound.

Structuring the novel in this way has a profound effect on the experience of reading it. Indeed, the way in which we usually read a text is reversed. In a normal narrative situation, as described by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*,

<sup>7</sup> Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Vintage, 2012), p. 137. [All further references to *The Sense of an Ending* will be made by page number in the body of the text unless otherwise specified.]

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, p. 74.



reading is characterized by ‘the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that [...] promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle.’<sup>10</sup> We are, therefore, encouraged by the author to search for hermeneutic “clues” throughout the text which will give us some indication as to where the plot is going. However, in *The Sense of an Ending*, rather than being presented with a narrative that we must use to scour for significant information, we are presented with significant information that we must search for within the narrative itself.

It is through this shift that the extent to which Tony’s narration works as an echo chamber becomes evident. In searching for Tony’s pre-selected memories in the text, we are ensuring that his version of events perpetuates itself. We attribute significance to the same events as Tony, and therefore we make the same mistakes as him when we try to resolve the mystery at the heart of the novel. This is not an uncommon feature in first-person narration; the reader is often trapped in the errors of the narrator. However, in *The Sense of an Ending*, we are not simply observing the erroneous narrative that Tony constructs, but we are also constructing it for ourselves. Just as Tony tells his story by hanging it on the points that he has already highlighted as significant, the version of the story we make for ourselves is focused around our earliest memory of the text. As Oliver Paynel has put it, these ‘anchoring points’ demonstrate how it is easy to ‘ris[k] distorting and perverting our understanding of history.’<sup>11</sup>

*The Independent’s* review of *The Sense of an Ending* describes how ‘the concluding scenes grip like a thriller — a whodunnit of memory and morality.’<sup>12</sup> Indeed, taunted by the novel’s refrain of ‘you don’t get it do you?’ (p.100), the reader arrives at the final pages of the novel with the same sense of questioning that characterizes a ‘whodunnit’ novel. This confusion — our inability to ‘get it’, which mirrors Tony’s inability — is a direct consequence of the list of memories which begin the novel. We have borrowed Tony’s memories and created the only narrative that seems to make sense, demonstrating the extent to which *The Sense of an Ending* is shaped by the echoes that begin it. The sounds we first hear are amplified back to us, often several times, and at each repetition the volume of their significance increases.

Take, for example, the ‘shiny inner wrist’ which begins the list. This image reappears three times throughout the narrative. The first comes early in the novel and offers the context of the image. We are told that, as a compromise for their lack of ‘full-sex’ (p.22), Tony ‘would place [his] hand flat on the floor and

<sup>10</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Oliver Paynel, “‘Serious about being serious’: History and the Claims of Memory in Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*”, *STET*, 4 (2014), 1–17 (p. 3); Paynel contextualises his argument within Frank Kermode’s notion of ‘consonance’. However, my own argument is grounded with Brooks as, whilst the links between the two versions of *The Sense of an Ending* are clear, the relationship between Barnes’s text and detective fiction such as those used by Brooks, merits further attention.

<sup>12</sup> Boyd Tonkin, ‘*The Sense of an Ending*, by Julian Barnes’, *The Independent*, 5 August 2011 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-sense-of-an-ending-by-julian-barnes-2331767.html>> [accessed 15 June 2020] (para. 6 of 6).

[Veronica] would rub herself against [his] trapped wrist until she came' (p.33). The 'shiny inner wrist', then, becomes a slightly surreal indicator of the extent of Veronica's unwillingness to have sex with Tony. Indeed, Tony testifies to his 'resentment' (p.33) of this arrangement, describing how he 'was, presumably meant to feel closer to her, but didn't' (p.34). This first echo, then, becomes a sign of their relationship as fundamentally flawed, with Tony as its hapless victim.

This depiction of Tony's relationship with Veronica as ludicrous and with Tony as its victim, is again perpetuated in the echo's second repetition, when Tony tells his ex-wife Margaret that Veronica's mother has left him a bequest in her will. Margaret asks Tony if he would 'start rolling up [his] sleeve and taking off [his] watch?' (p.76) if Veronica were to walk in at that moment. In response to this, Tony blushes, confirming his relationship with Veronica to be ridiculous. However, the fact that it is Margaret rather than Tony who says this is significant; through this frame the reader is presented with a view of the echo-chamber that they find themselves in. Tony has told Margaret this memory and thereby highlighted it as important and accordingly, Margaret has reflected the memory back to him and increased its importance. Indeed, Tony's exchange with Margaret seems to lay bare the cracks in Tony's narration. For example, Margaret refers to Veronica by the nickname '[t]he Fruitcake' (p. 74). However, Tony notes that 'it was [his] account that had given rise to the nickname' (p. 75), since when he told Margaret about Veronica '[he]'d laid it on a bit, made [himself] sound more of a dupe, and Veronica more unstable than she'd been' (p.75). What is interesting here is the focus that Tony puts on his amplification of events. In retelling his story, he has made it 'more', placing emphasis in particular places to shape it to his version of events. Just like the echo dynamic described at the start of this article, retelling Tony's story has distorted its focus, drawing Margaret into Tony's version of events to such an extent that she herself begins to perpetuate it.

The third repetition of this image comes towards the end of the novel when Tony, increasingly desperate for an explanation, writes to his solicitor requesting that he seek 'a speedy resolution of the issue' (p.132). At this point, Tony 'allow[s] [him]self a private nostalgic farewell' (p.132) and thinks 'of [his] 'inner wrist looking shiny, of [his] shirt sleeve furled to the elbow' (p.132). The repetition of this image then, serves both as 'nostalgia' and as justification for Tony's actions: it returns the reader to the image of Veronica as '[t]he Fruitcake' whose interactions with Tony are marked by what he perceives as 'instability' (p.132). Echoing this image throughout the novel, then, both places it within a context and confirms Tony's perception of events, trapping us within the echo-chamber of his narration and leaving us powerless to see past this view.

This process of echoing and amplification is repeated to some extent, for all the memories on the list. The result is that the original story is so distorted that any attempt to read it with impartiality is futile — our perspective of events and

the memories of them we have formed through reading, are too bound up with Tony's for us to solve the mystery. Thus, we are ultimately left clueless. Indeed, the end of the novel testifies to the fact that the only way to understand what has happened is to break it down and re-evaluate it. Tony says that 'later, at home, going over it all, after some time, I understood. I got it' (p.148). Rather than focusing on specific incidents, he has taken the story in holistically, hearing the sounds that he had previously omitted. The novel ends with another, far less structured, list. Tony presents us with a new set of memories, none of which are new to the story but that have never previously been marked as significant. The list describes the images that Tony has called upon, in finally being able to make sense of what has happened:

I thought of a bunch of kids in Trafalgar Square. I thought of a young woman dancing for once in her life. I thought of what I couldn't know or understand now, of all that couldn't ever be known or understood. I thought of Adrian's definition of history. I thought of his son cramming his face into a shelf of quilted toilet tissue in order to avoid me. I thought of a woman frying eggs in a carefree, slapdash way, untroubled when one of them broke in the pan; then the same woman, later, making a secret horizontal gesture beneath a sunlit wisteria. And I thought of a cresting wave of water, lit by a moon, rushing past and vanishing upstream, pursued by a band of yelping students whose torchbeams criss-crossed in the dark (pp.149-50).

Like Tony, we come to realise in reading this list that all the information we required to 'get it' was present in the story. However, such was the amplifying effect of Tony's first list, we let the true significance of the events evade us. Brooks has described how 'memory — as much in reading a novel as in seeing a play — is the key faculty in the capacity to perceive relations of beginnings, middles and ends through time, the shaping power of narrative.'<sup>13</sup> However, by the close of *The Sense of an Ending*, we realize that memory has not worked with us but rather against us: the 'shaping power of narrative' is one of chaos rather than cohesion.

The intertwining of our own memory into the story is significant because it uses the reader's mind to call into question the dynamics of memory. Indeed, the list at the beginning of the novel poses the question: do we remember things because they are important or are things important because we remember them? Ironically, one possible answer to this dilemma can be located in the form of the opening list.

Tony claims that this list is presented in 'no particular order' (p.3) and, at an initial glance, this is plausible: the events listed are not in chronological, alphabetical or any other recognisable order. However, upon further inspection, the form of the list suggests that it works as a mnemonic, indicating the extent to which remembering these events has become ritualized for Tony. Perhaps the most obvious indicator of the list as a mnemonic is the fact that it is bullet

<sup>13</sup> Brooks, p. 11.

pointed. As bullet points are highly unusual in a literary text, the information in this list is marked as significant. The list begins with a colon, thereby suggesting that it should be read as a single entity. Automatically then, the fact that Barnes has begun the novel with one long, heavily structured sentence encourages us to search for a sense of unity between these images. Despite the protestation that the list is in 'no particular order', its structure creates a desire to find further significance in its order.

The obvious uniting point between these images is that they all — to a certain extent — can be linked to water (two describe sinks, another two describe rivers). However, the images in the list are depicted in such a way that the word 'water' is deliberately avoided until the final memory on the list. This structure, of emphasizing water by avoiding explicit use of the word, results in the list building in a steady crescendo towards the mention of 'bathwater'. The effect of this is that all the events on the list are tied to this last one, which we later come to realize pertains to Adrian's suicide rather than Tony's relationship with Veronica, as is the case for the other memory points. A biproduct of the amplifying effect of delaying the use of the word 'water' is that it brings a sense of theatricality to these opening scenes. Barnes creates the impression that Tony's memories are deliberately stylized into striking, memorable images, designed to bring to mind something larger. For example, the image of 'bathwater, long gone cold behind a locked door' describes the location of Adrian's suicide. However, the image has been deliberately and self-consciously over stylized to focus on the bathwater — which is what we will subsequently try to locate — rather than its gory contents.

The list, then, is an exercise in repetition, of the same motif repeated several times without using the same language to replicate it. Douglas Hintzman has noted that 'the fact that repetition improves retention [...] seems beyond dispute.'<sup>14</sup> As such, both the memorable form of the list and the fact that the images themselves seem to have been chosen to facilitate remembering, imply that Tony has selected these moments as important and then deliberately gone about remembering them.

Through the ritualised and performative memory seen on the opening page of *The Sense of an Ending*, we come to understand how the echo chamber, which has caused both us and Tony so much difficulty in our efforts to 'get' what is going on, has been constructed. Barnes demonstrates neatly, through this opening list, how easily the simple repetition of particular memories distorts a story through the same two-fold process of amplification that occurs in echoing. Sabine Sielke describes how 'remembering in fact weakens memory, puts it at risk by irritating the reconsolidation process.'<sup>15</sup> It is this effect that the initial list

<sup>14</sup> Douglas L. Hintzman, 'Repetition and Memory', *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 10 (1976), 47–91, (p. 47).

<sup>15</sup> Sabine Sielke, "Joy in Repetition"; or The Significance of Seriality in Processes of Memory and (Re-) Mediation', in *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film*, ed. By Russel J. A. Kilbourn and Eleanor Ty (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2013) pp. 37–50, (p. 46).

of memories has on both Tony's experience in the story and our experience of the story. The echoing of specific parts of a wider story makes them stand out from the rest of the narrative, but it also encourages us to earmark these parts as important, prompting a search for significance in them. Yet this is a fallacy; the parts of the story that Tony repeatedly returns to, are simply parts of a wider whole, just as the echo is part of a wider sound. The amplification, as much with memory as with sound, is simply an accident of nature, leaving what we hear 'systematically imperfect'.

# Destabilizing the Nineteenth-Century Maidservant Revolt Narrative: Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce* (2016)

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*Abstract.* This paper argues that Leïla Slimani's novel, *Chanson douce* (2016), recontextualizes and renews a nineteenth-century French discourse surrounding the literary figure of the feared and rebellious maidservant through the representation of her twenty-first-century avatar: the nanny. By analysing how Slimani's nanny figure echoes the strategies of revolt used by vengeful maidservant protagonists in nineteenth-century novels, notably Mirbeau's *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900), I propose that *Chanson douce* transforms a discourse that characterizes a genre of nineteenth-century French literature: *le roman de la servante* (the servant novel). Writers of this genre posit a maidservant protagonist who revolts, seeks revenge and often has a hidden, double life. Fictions in this genre, as shown through Mirbeau's novel, act as performative texts: they embody and exacerbate the century's discourse around the feared, rebellious maidservant. By applying Georges Didi-Huberman's four categories of revolt to Slimani's protagonist, I investigate how the strategies of revolt implemented by dubious maidservants in nineteenth-century texts, are turned, in the twenty-first century, against the modern employer.

\* \* \* \* \*

'On la regarde et on ne la voit pas.  
Elle est une présence intime mais jamais familière.'<sup>1</sup>

In Leïla Slimani's Goncourt Prize winning novel, *Chanson douce* (2016), the nanny protagonist, Louise, is paradoxically an intimate stranger, never truly integrating into the family for whom she works. While Louise's role inherently connects her to the private sphere of the home, the nanny is perceived neither as a family member nor as a close friend: '[c]'est notre employée, pas notre amie.'<sup>2</sup> *Chanson douce* generates a sense of uneasiness about a stranger whose role providing personal services in the home allows her to infiltrate the private lives

<sup>1</sup> Leïla Slimani, *Chanson douce* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), p. 66. 'You look at her and you do not see her. Her presence is intimate but never familiar.', Leïla Slimani, *Lullaby*, trans. by Sam Taylor (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198. 'She's our employee not our friend.', *Lullaby*, p. 165.

of a family. This anxiety around an employee's proximity to the home echoes a commonplace perception of the maidservant in the nineteenth century. The domestic servant likewise occupied an uncertain social space, neither a member of the bourgeois household nor a part of the working class. One may think of Célestine's definition of a servant in Mirbeau's *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900): 'un monstrueux hybride humain... Il n'est plus du peuple, d'où il sort; il n'est pas, non plus, de la bourgeoisie où il vit et où il tend...'<sup>3</sup> The bourgeois family saw this ill-defined figure as a potential threat to their lives; she was a feared presence from which they wished to distance themselves.<sup>4</sup> Yet the maidservant was a necessary evil: she had access to the most private details of her masters' and mistresses' lives but she was fundamental to the running of an efficient household and a reflection of its wealth and status.<sup>5</sup> This essential yet feared figure emerges as a new, disobedient maidservant protagonist in nineteenth-century literature, consequently giving rise to a literary genre that I label *le roman de la servante* (the servant novel). These works posit a maidservant protagonist who revolts, seeks revenge and often conceals a hidden, double life.<sup>6</sup> By analysing Slimani's nanny figure alongside Mirbeau's representation of Célestine, a nineteenth-century vengeful maidservant in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, this essay demonstrates how *Chanson douce* constitutes a twenty-first century renewal of this genre; Louise is a twenty-first-century avatar of the literary figure of the rebellious maidservant.

I analyse how *Chanson douce* subverts and transforms a nineteenth-century discourse of fear surrounding the servant figure who characterized *le roman de la servante*. Like the *bonne à tout faire* (the maid of all work), whose role in the household was crucial to its efficient and clean appearance, Louise becomes indispensable to the Massé family if they are to live their lives freely. She voluntarily goes beyond her role as a nanny, gradually taking on multiple duties in their household: cleaning, cooking, reorganizing the family's belongings, mending their clothes, attending parents' evenings and dance recitals. Slowly, Louise infiltrates the household, even sleeping at their apartment twice a week or more. The family gradually feels suffocated by this intense contact with their nanny, consequently distancing themselves from her. Louise revolts against this treatment using various strategies before retaliating in the worst possible way: murdering the children whom she was looking after. I here explore how

<sup>3</sup> Octave Mirbeau, *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 203. '[A] monstrous, hybrid human... it is no longer a part of the people from whom it has left; neither is it a part of the bourgeoisie, among whom it lives and to whom it tends.' All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> See Sarah Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 314, 317.

<sup>5</sup> See Anne Martin-Fugier, *La Place des bonnes: la domesticité féminine en 1900* (Paris: Grasset, 1979), p. 72 for an explanation of how the number of servants in a nineteenth-century household determines its categorization.

<sup>6</sup> My definition of this genre includes, yet is not limited to, Balzac, *La Cousine Bette* (1846); Stendhal, *Mina de Vanghel* (1853 [1829–1830]) and *Lamiel* (1839–42); The Goncourt brothers, *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865); Maupassant, *Chambre 11* (1884); and Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Le Bonheur dans le crime* (1871).



Slimani's nanny echoes certain strategies of revolt used by Mirbeau's vengeful maidservant protagonist, which I read through the theory of revolt provided in Georges Didi-Huberman's recent study, *Désirer désobéir: Ce qui nous soulève, I* (2019). In particular, I apply his four categories of *soulèvement* (uprising): 'gestuel, verbal, psychique ou atmosphérique':<sup>7</sup> '[ne] se soulève-t-on pas avec des pensées, des paroles, des émotions, des gestualités, des formes et des actions [...] ?'.<sup>8</sup> I argue that Louise's use of these different *soulèvements* ultimately transcends that of the nineteenth-century literary maidservant; the nanny's revenge eventually destroys the middle-class family model.

### Reappropriating the Rebellious Maidservant Discourse: The Nineteenth-Century *Roman de la Servante* in the Twenty-First Century

The distrust evoked by the nanny figure in *Chanson douce* echoes similar anxieties embedded in nineteenth-century discourses surrounding the maidservant. The late eighteenth century saw a reorientation of the notions of the family that had implications for how nineteenth-century society viewed its servants. Cissie Fairchild's study of domesticity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries notes that, from 1750 to 1789, 'the traditional patriarchal family was replaced by a more modern, more affectionate, more egalitarian, and more child-centred one'.<sup>9</sup> This consequently meant that servants were expelled from the private sphere of the family as potentially dangerous strangers.<sup>10</sup> As Jacqueline Martin-Huan points out, this was not an issue for the nobles of the Old Regime, who felt a natural distance between themselves and the other classes:

La distance naturelle, que lui conférait sa naissance, permettait au noble d'être familier avec ses gens. Le maître nouveau riche craint le peuple; il sait que seul l'en sépare l'argent qu'il vient d'amasser, et que, par roublardise ou filouterie, on pourrait le lui enlever. [...] Il devient soupçonneux.<sup>11</sup>

This bourgeois anxiety affected how these new masters and mistresses perceived their servants. Their anxious need for dominance came alongside growing concerns about the servant's proximity to the family; servants were a potential threat to class stability, outsiders with the potential to change the status quo.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Désirer désobéir: Ce qui nous soulève, I* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2019), p. 31. 'Gestural, verbal, psychological or atmospheric.'

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305. 'Do we not uprise with thoughts, words, emotions, gestures, forms and actions?'

<sup>9</sup> Cissie Fairchild, *Domestic Enemies: Servants and Their Masters in Old Regime France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Jacqueline Martin-Huan, *La Longue Marche des domestiques en France du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Nantes: Opéra, 1997), p. 26. 'A natural sense of distance, bestowed upon a noble from birth, allowed him to be familiar with his servants. The nouveau riche master fears the people; he knows that it is only his recently obtained wealth that separates him from the lower classes, and that one could take it all away from him by slyness or fraud. [...] He becomes suspicious.'



The class war produced by the French Revolution only exacerbated these fears surrounding the servant, introducing and complicating the idea of possible equality between master and servants.<sup>12</sup> In the nineteenth-century imagination, masters were fearful of the maidservant as a purveyor of putridity and contamination who could potentially steal from them or kill them in their sleep.<sup>13</sup> These insecurities added to the bourgeois desire to distance themselves from their servants.<sup>14</sup> Mirbeau's fictional maidservant, Célestine, explicitly describes this distrust: 'nous avons la conscience des suspicions blessantes qui nous accompagnent partout', with anxious masters and mistresses locking doors and drawers, marking bottles and counting food supplies to prevent the maidservant from stealing.<sup>15</sup> According to Célestine, this mistrust emerged immediately after her second day at work: Madame had 'des yeux d'avare, pleins de soupçons aigus et d'enquêtes policières...'.<sup>16</sup> Célestine is thus one example of how bourgeois suspicions about servants were embodied by the new protagonist of an emerging nineteenth-century genre: *le roman de la servante*.<sup>17</sup> These maidservant protagonists disrupt the bourgeois order around them, seeking to assert their autonomy through different strategies of revolt.

Concerns about servant corruption also related to the maidservants who took care of the children.<sup>18</sup> As Andrew J. Counter points out, the nineteenth century saw servants as scapegoats for vice in the bourgeois home, blaming them for contaminating bourgeois children with *mauvaises habitudes* (bad habits/examples), such as sexual knowledge.<sup>19</sup> For her part, Fairchilds argues that certain servants also took 'psychic revenge for the mistreatment they themselves had experienced' by abusing the household's children.<sup>20</sup> This violence was committed with the understanding that, unlike the masters and mistresses,

<sup>12</sup> Fairchilds, p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Yee, *The Colonial Comedy: Imperialism in the French Realist Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.145–46 makes a similar point about the nineteenth-century maidservant being the 'disturbing meeting point of the bourgeoisie' with dirt and sexual debauchery. This is also observed in the analysis of nurses, nannies, governesses, prostitutes and servants in Victorian England by Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 48. See also Susan Yates, *Maid and Mistress: Feminine Solidarity and Class Difference in Five Nineteenth-Century French Texts* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 74–76.

<sup>14</sup> See Fairchilds, pp. 38–60 for the methods that masters and mistresses used in order to keep servants at distance.

<sup>15</sup> Mirbeau, pp. 315–16. '[W]e are aware of the hurtful suspicions that follow us everywhere'.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45. '[O]f a miser, full of bitter suspicions and police enquiries.'

<sup>17</sup> Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 196 also recognizes that there has been a creation of an "anti-maid's discourse," set up by, among others, Zola, Maupassant and Mirbeau as an antidote to the saccharine, orthodox model' of the loyal maidservant. Examples of this loyal servant are: Balzac, *Pierrette* (1840); George Sand, *Jeanne* (1844); Lamartine, *Geneviève: Histoire d'une servante* (1851), an early inspiration for Flaubert's *Un cœur simple* (1877) and Maupassant, *Une vie* (1883).

<sup>18</sup> For example: *la bonne d'enfant* (nanny), *la nourrice* (wet nurse), *la gouvernante* (governess), *l'institutrice* (teacher) and *la bonne à toute faire* (maid of all work).

<sup>19</sup> See Andrew J. Counter, 'Bad Examples: Children, Servants, and Masturbation in Nineteenth-Century France', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 22. 3. (2013), 403–25.

<sup>20</sup> Fairchilds, pp. 207–08.

children would be too weak to fight back. This abuse included violence and neglect through starvation.<sup>21</sup> Nineteenth-century judicial documents also indicate that female servants were the most prominent social group found to have committed infanticide, a fact that frightened masters and mistresses when considering the safety of their children.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, maidservants are featured committing infanticide in a number of works of *le roman de la servante*.<sup>23</sup> By centring the narrative on a killer nanny protagonist who commits various *soulèvements* against her employers and their children, Slimani recontextualizes and updates these fears of a dangerous servant figure in the twenty-first century. With its detailed representation of Louise's absurd methods of rebellion, the narrative centres on the maidservant avatar's psychotic behaviour and violence. The reader is left feeling uncomfortable, with Louise's *soulèvements* acting as a marker of her unstable mind.

### The Nanny Revolt: Strategies of *Soulèvement*

Like the nineteenth-century maidservant who relied on her masters and mistresses for her welfare (income, food, water, clothing and shelter), Louise lacks education, money and family support and is therefore dependent on her employers.<sup>24</sup> She relies on the Massés for her livelihood, as well as their home for her physical and mental wellbeing. She secretly showers in their home when her shower is broken, and invades the Massés' apartment when they are on holiday in order to feel closer to them. Louise's job thus provides her with a nest; her various strategies of revolt provide her with a means to defy this subordinate situation and gain a sense of power. The nanny's inferiority in terms of her class and subordinate role in the employer-employee relationship paradoxically provides her with the strength she requires to revolt. This corresponds with Didi-Huberman's theory that

lorsqu'il se soulève (ou même: pour qu'il se soulève), un peuple part toujours d'une situation d'*impouvoir*. Se soulever serait alors le geste par lequel les sujets de l'*impouvoir* font advenir en eux — ou survenir, ou revenir — quelque chose comme une *puissance* fondamentale.<sup>25</sup>

This paradox of Louise's power originating from her state of subordination recalls the 1933 case of the Papin sisters, two maidservants who murdered their employers. It is arguably Louise's oppressed existence as a servant, similar to that of the Papin sisters, that causes her heightened emotions of hostility and

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See Apter, p. 198 and McBride, p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> See Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Une histoire sans nom* (1882); Zola, *Pot-Bouille* (1882); Maupassant, *La Mère aux monstres* (1883) and *Rosalie Prudent* (1886).

<sup>24</sup> See Maza, pp. 9–10 and Fairchilds, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Didi-Huberman, p. 48. '[W]hen a nation rises up, (or even: in order for it to rise up), it always starts from a state of powerlessness. To rise up therefore would be an interior gesture by which powerless subjects bring about — or arise, or amount to — something of a fundamental power.'

bitterness taking the form of different *soulèvements*. The Papin Sisters' murders highlighted the horror behind a maid's capacity to rise up, and the case had broad cultural resonance across French literature and cinema.<sup>26</sup> These texts and films seem to have paved the way for the disturbing narrative and extreme violence found in *Chanson douce*. Slimani moves beyond *le roman de la servante* and the Papin-sister-inspired text/film, transforming the murderous servant in the bourgeoisie home into a twenty-first-century nanny in a *bobo* (bourgeois bohème/boho) apartment. Her unsettling descriptions of Louise's psychological state modernizes the fears central to *le roman de la servante*.

Louise's manipulation of the household's atmosphere through her facial expressions and silence allows the nanny to revolt against her situation of powerlessness. She alters the safe setting of the home into one of terror. Louise demonstrates Didi-Huberman's fourth category of revolt, atmospheric:

Le regard noir de Louise était traversé par un orage. Ce soir-là, la nounou est partie sans dire au revoir aux enfants. Comme un fantôme, monstrueusement discrète, elle a claqué la porte [...].<sup>27</sup>

As Louise's construction of her identity depends on her job, any threat or insult to that position causes her to revolt. Her glare fills the mother, Myriam, with guilt and dread, unable to understand the sudden change in atmosphere as Louise avoids contact with her. Mirbeau likewise describes the ghost-like presence of Célestine: 'je m'habitue à glisser mes pas, à "marcher en l'air" [...] je me fais, à moi-même, l'effet d'un spectre, d'un revenant'.<sup>28</sup> Represented as ghosts, Louise and Célestine embody the spectre's powerful capacity to slip in and out of the home without a trace. Their invisibility intensifies the fears around the servant and the nanny as strangers who threaten to disturb and derail the safe space, or atmosphere, of the home. Célestine's masters and mistresses intensify their maidservant's silence by forbidding her to speak to them. Mirbeau describes how this silence personally affects the maidservant: '[c]e qui est terrible dans cette maison, c'est son silence. Je ne peux m'y faire...'.<sup>29</sup> Like her nineteenth-century counterpart, Louise is gradually silenced by the Massés; they avoid all communication with their nanny, separating themselves from their employee. Yet Louise's dreaded silent presence seems to have contaminated the entire apartment: '[l]es silences et les malentendus ont tout infecté. Dans l'appartement, l'atmosphère est plus lourde'.<sup>30</sup> This change in atmosphere is heightened by both the actions of the nanny and her employers.

<sup>26</sup> See Rachel Edwards and Keith Reader, *The Papin Sisters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Slimani, p. 138. 'A storm flickered behind Louise's dark glare. That evening the nanny left without saying goodbye to the children. Like a ghost, monstrously discreet, she banged the door shut behind her [...]', *Lullaby*, p. 110.

<sup>28</sup> Mirbeau, p. 204. 'I am used to gliding as I walk, "walking on air", I feel like a ghost, a spectre.'

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 'What is awful in this house is the silence. I can't get used to it.'

<sup>30</sup> Slimani, p. 198. 'The silences and misunderstandings have infected everything. In the apartment, the atmosphere grows heavier.', *Lullaby*, p. 165.

Myriam ‘lui parle du bout des lèvres, lui donne des instructions précises’,<sup>31</sup> echoing Célestine’s mistress who also alters her behaviour toward her servant: ‘sa voix si douce, au début, si camarade, prenait maintenant un mordant de vinaigre. Elle me donnait des ordres sur un ton cassant... rabaisant...’<sup>32</sup> Both employers change their tone of voice, removing any sign of friendliness and affiliation. They consequently push Louise and Célestine to the peripheries of their homes, degrading them to mere providers of a service.

When Louise feels deprived of purpose, alone in her poor and decrepit apartment, her anger rises:

Quand elle ouvre les portes de son studio, ses mains se mettent à trembler. Elle a envie de déchirer la housse du canapé, de donner un coup de poing dans la vitre. Un magma informe, une douleur lui brûlent les entrailles et elle a du mal à se retenir de hurler.<sup>33</sup>

Slimani describes the feeling of a burning magma penetrating Louise’s insides when the nanny becomes faced with the unsuccessful reality of her life. She draws comparison between the two worlds. This anger can be read through Didi-Huberman’s theory of how ‘gestes de soulèvements se voient menacés de l’intérieur’,<sup>34</sup> through a process he labels *tourner vinaigre*: ‘[l]e vinaigre, comme son nom l’indique, est un “vin aigri” par la production d’acide acétique. Il connote l’affliction’.<sup>35</sup> The nanny’s loneliness and her oppressive position as a servant rather than as a family member, augment her bitterness. Célestine describes a similar sense of frustration with her lonely life as a servant: ‘[l]a solitude, ce n’est pas de vivre seule, c’est de vivre chez les autres, chez des gens, qui ne s’intéressent pas à vous, pour qui vous comptez moins qu’un chien’.<sup>36</sup> Slimani transports this bitterness into the twenty-first century by focusing her narrative on Louise’s unstable mental health. The nanny’s violent thoughts reveal a method of internal revolt which relate to Didi-Huberman’s category of *soulèvement*: *les pensées* (thoughts). At first, Louise’s thoughts seem to echo those of Célestine, whose heightened emotions of hostility towards her mistress cause her to revolt through violent thought: ‘[m]algré ma douleur, je l’aurais giflée...’<sup>37</sup> Yet Slimani’s narrative goes beyond Mirbeau’s description by emphasizing the ‘evil’ voices in Louise’s mind:

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. ‘speaks to her in a clipped voice, giving her precise instructions.’, *Lullaby*, p. 165.

<sup>32</sup> Mirbeau, p. 300. ‘her original softly spoken, friendly voice became an acidic bite. She gave me orders with a forceful, degrading tone.’

<sup>33</sup> Slimani, pp. 95–96. ‘When she opens the door to her studio flat, her hands start to shake. She wants to tear apart the sofa’s slipcover, to punch the window. A sort of shapeless, painful magma burns her insides and it takes an effort of will to stop herself screaming.’, *Lullaby*, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Didi-Huberman, p. 129. ‘[G]estures of uprising are threatened from within’.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. ‘*To turn sour*: [v]inegar, like its name indicates, is a “bitter wine” through the production of acetic acid. It connotes affliction’.

<sup>36</sup> Mirbeau, p. 136. ‘Solitude is not living alone, it is living with other people who take no interest in you, for whom you count for less than a dog’.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 105. ‘Despite my pain, I would have slapped her across the face.’

*'Il faut que quelqu'un meure. Il faut que quelqu'un meure pour que nous soyons heureux.'* Des refrains morbides bercent Louise quand elle marche. Des phrases, qu'elle n'a pas inventées et dont elle n'est pas certaine de comprendre le sens, habitent son esprit.<sup>38</sup>

Louise does not believe these voices have been invented in her mind, refusing to take ownership over them. Her lack of control over these voices demonstrates her unstable mental health. Unlike Célestine, who seems to control her violence by choosing to commit theft, Louise acts upon her violent thoughts through murder. She therefore exemplifies Didi-Huberman's theory that '[o]n ne refuse, on ne désobéit, on ne se révolte, on ne soulève pas sans violence, à quelque degré que ce soit'.<sup>39</sup>

Murder, is not, however, Louise's only physical act of revolt against her employers. Earlier in the novel, Louise feels humiliated by her employers when she is reprimanded for feeding the children out-of-date food. She is obsessed with not seeing food go to waste, a reflection of her compulsive behaviour. Considering her employers as selfish *bobo* consumers, Louise seeks revenge through a strange and disturbing action, or to use Didi-Huberman's category, a *geste* (gesture) of revolt, by placing a stale chicken in the centre of their kitchen:

Là, au centre de la petite table où mangent les enfants et leur nounou. Une carcasse de poulet est posée sur une assiette. Une carcasse luisante, sur laquelle ne reste pas le moindre bout de chair, pas la plus petite trace de viande. On dirait qu'un vautour l'a rongée ou un insecte entêté, minutieux. Une mauvaise bête en tout cas.<sup>40</sup>

Louise washes the carcass with soap and positions it in the middle of the table as a trophy of the success of her rebellion. Slimani builds suspense by leaving the horror of the chicken carcass until the second sentence. It consequently shocks the reader on account of its incongruity; the carcass is expected to be in the garbage and yet it is placed in the middle of the table, spotlessly gleaming. It stands as an omen of death, foreshadowing Louise's killings whilst at the same time representing a symptom of the nanny's psychosis. Taking place in the heart of the employer's house, Louise's revenge symbolizes how the nanny, in the manner of her nineteenth-century counterpart, occupies the middle of the home with the power to destroy, disturb and derail family life. The rotting carcass also represents the idea of the maidservant as the bringer of disease and vice into the nineteenth-century home.<sup>41</sup> Read in light of this nineteenth-

<sup>38</sup> Slimani, p. 230. *'Someone has to die. Someone has to die for us to be happy.* Morbid refrains echo inside Louise's head when she walks. Phrases that she didn't invent — and whose meaning she is not sure she fully grasps — fills her mind.', *Lullaby*, p. 193.

<sup>39</sup> Didi-Huberman, p. 183. 'We do not refuse, disobey, revolt, or rise up without some sort of degree of violence'.

<sup>40</sup> Slimani, p. 175. 'There, in the middle of the little table where the children and their nanny eat. A chicken carcass sits on a plate. A glistening carcass, without the smallest scrap of flesh hanging from its bones, not the faintest trace of meat. It looks as if it's been gnawed clean by a vulture or a stubborn, meticulous insect. Some kind of repulsive animal, anyway.', *Lullaby*, p. 145.

<sup>41</sup> See Apter, p. 192 and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the*

century discourse, the fears that Myriam expresses after this carcass scene could just as easily have applied to a rebellious nineteenth-century maid: '[e]lle se dit qu'elle est folle. Dangereuse peut-être. Qu'elle nourrit contre ses patrons une haine sordide, un appétit de vengeance.'<sup>42</sup>

Moving beyond *le roman de la servante* literature, Slimani's novel explicitly evokes the mental health of her maidservant avatar. She describes Louise's deterioration into madness which impacts the nanny's methods of revolt. While *Chanson douce* echoes certain nineteenth-century anxieties surrounding servants, Slimani elects to transform and renew these anxieties in a twenty-first century context, where violence, loneliness, anger and madness are intertwined in the most diabolical way.

*Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 48, who explain how the maid was connected to disease in the bourgeois imagination.

<sup>42</sup> Slimani, p. 185. '[S]he thinks the nanny must be mad. Maybe dangerous. That she nurses a sordid hatred for her employers, an appetite for vengeance.', *Lullaby*, p. 154.

# Oaths and *Exuviae*: Echoes of Credit in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

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*Abstract.* Humans are constantly losing pieces of themselves to the world: hair, skin, teeth, breath. Social anthropologist Alfred Gell calls these lost pieces *exuviae* and contends they are evidence of humans' innately 'distributed personhood'. Although for Gell, *exuviae* are physical, I argue that certain types of language — particularly oaths and promises — are fundamentally linked to personhood and can attain exuvial status. These forms of language constitute what John Kerrigan calls 'binding language' and function as echoes of those who swear them. Such echoes were particularly important in the economy of early modern England, where exchange was conducted primarily through rhetorical cultivation of reputation and credit rather than hard coin. Oaths could be trusted precisely because of what they echoed: the honour and reputation of the individual who swears. In Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the line between physical and verbal *exuviae* is blurred in the highly rhetorical political economy of the play. The 'voices' of Rome, the plebeians, have the power to produce powerful binding language by echoing Coriolanus' actions as a soldier, putting their 'tongues into [his] wounds' to speak for them and commodify them. These echoes of the physical body conceptualize anxieties about dismemberment and dissembling generated by *exuviae*. When asked to expose his wounds to the people in exchange for their voices, Coriolanus risks allowing them to construct their own symbolic and economic understanding of his injuries and identity; in commodifying and trading in echoes of his body, he risks becoming signified and constructed by his wounds alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Humans are constantly losing pieces of themselves to the world: hair, skin, teeth, breath. Some of these objects are lost or removed intentionally, others less so. Regardless of whether these objects are shed deliberately, in some sense they echo the person to whom they belong. In *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Alfred Gell calls these lost pieces *exuviae* — that which is stripped down, drawn, or taken off the body, but remain associated with the individual who lost them, an echo of that person.<sup>1</sup> The spread of these *exuviae* constitute

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 97.



Gell's theory of 'distributed personhood': namely, that individuals are not contained exclusively within their physical form.<sup>2</sup> Gell suggests that *exuvia* are mimetic, and that having access to the image of someone is comparable to having access to a physical part of them.<sup>3</sup> In a lecture on *exuviae* in the poetry of John Donne, Jason Scott-Warren draws on Donne's 'A Valediction of my Name, in the Window' as an example, a poem in which Donne scratches his name on the glass and imagines it to be a part of himself: '[m]y name engraved herein | Doth contribute my firmness to this glass [...] | As all-confessing, and through-shine as I'.<sup>4</sup> Although for Gell, *exuviae* are physical objects, immaterial *exuviae* such as names, breath, and language can also function as a shadow of the being that created them. Language as expressed oaths and promises, which are innately tied to the person who swears them, has a particularly exuvial nature. As Caroline van Eck argues, the best forms of language manifest the physical, ultimately resulting in an illusion of life or imitation of the thing that language represents: '[i]f successful, speech appears to dissolve into what it describes'.<sup>5</sup> Oaths and promises constitute what John Kerrigan calls 'binding language', language that is specifically tied to the individual and functions as echoes or remnants of those who swear them.<sup>6</sup> Such echoes were particularly important in the economy of early modern England, where exchange was conducted primarily through rhetorical cultivation of reputation and credit rather than hard coin. Oaths could be trusted precisely because of what they echoed: the honour and reputation of the individual who swears.

### Echoes & Economics

The economy of early modern England was built on echoes of personhood. Coins were one of the most powerful ways of distributing personhood in early modern England and embody the transactional nature of exchange both in the literal and metaphysical sense. During the first few years of the reign of Henry VIII, the King continued to mint coins with his father's image on them, trading on his father's rule and reputation to produce *exuvia* that acted as a guarantee of the value of the coins.<sup>7</sup> However, as his reign continued, Henry VIII raised money by minting new coins that were made of base metals mixed with a little silver or gold, circulating them at the same face value as solid silver and gold coins.<sup>8</sup> This debasing of England's coinage raised an enormous amount of

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Scott-Warren, 'Exuviae: Distributing the Self in Images and Objects', at 'The Exuvial Renaissance' seminar, University of Cambridge, 12 April 2018; John Donne, *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*, ed. by Theodore Redpath (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 185.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2015), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Pickthorn, *Early Tudor Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 389.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Butcher, *Debasement: Manipulation of Coin Standards in Pre-Modern Monetary Systems*

money for Henry VIII's military ventures, but had adverse long-term effects. Individuals began to hoard older coins with a higher content of precious metal, leaving only the debased currency in circulation.<sup>9</sup> Abroad, foreign bankers and vendors refused to accept English coinage and insisted on payment in gold.<sup>10</sup> Both practices created a gold shortage at home, making it harder to source gold for minting new coins and for making foreign transactions. This debasement of coinage continued under Edward VI and Elizabeth I. Despite the eventual reintroduction of trustworthy coin, as Craig Muldrew has argued, credit remained 'the central mediating factor [of the economy]'.<sup>11</sup>

As such, many households and merchants began to conduct business primarily through elaborate networks of credit which were established through mutual trust and agreement.<sup>12</sup> "Credit", from the Latin *creditus*, was used colloquially to mean honesty, trust, and reliability, but by the end of the sixteenth century this term increasingly used synonymously with 'reputation' and 'borrowing power'.<sup>13</sup> In business transactions as well as general exchange, credit was established through trust in the individual; a Sussex shopkeeper recorded in his diary in 1573, 'the greatest part of trade is trust'.<sup>14</sup> Such trust was frequently established through verbal exchange, wherein credit was cultivated by the community's interactions with an individual and witnessing one's behaviour. This view of social interaction as part of the economy itself is intensified on stage, which is itself a series of exchanges between characters, actors, and the audience. Lars Engle has argued that Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote 'social interaction as [...] a diffuse network of discursive transactions which hang together according to humanly established (and thus mutable) patterns of exchange'.<sup>15</sup>

Just as the exchange of coins reflected trust in a monarch and a nation, the exchange of language in the credit economy was inextricably linked to the individual swearing of oaths and promises of trustworthiness. The physical body itself is echoed in the language of credit, especially as viewed through Karl Marx's economic ideologies:

In the credit system, man replaces metal or paper as the mediator of exchange. However, he does this not as a man but as the incarnation of capital and interest [...] Money has not been transcended in man within

(Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2020), p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Edgar Challis, *The Tudor Coinage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> Pickthorn, *Early Tudor Government*, p. 387.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Sheerin, *Desires of Credit in Early Modern Theory and Drama* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Sandra K. Fisher, *Econolingua: A Glossary of Coins and Economic Language in Renaissance Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> Lars Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3.

the credit system, but man is himself transformed into money, or, in other words, money is incarnate in him.<sup>16</sup>

There had to be some kind of guarantee of the credit of the borrower. The most obvious example of this is in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Antonio's bond with Shylock is based on the merchant's 'credit' but guaranteed by Antonio's physical body, with a pound of his flesh acting as the forfeit on the loan.<sup>17</sup> Recent criticism of the play often reads Shylock's money-lending tactics as barbaric for its guarantee; Brian Sheerin notes the difference between 'good' and 'bad' moneylending: that bent on constructive interdependence and that bent on dismemberment.<sup>18</sup> Shylock's usury is outdated and medievalist, Sheerin argues, because it shamelessly conflates the worth of metal with the worth of human bodies.<sup>19</sup> However, it seems Shylock's moneylending might be more inappropriate for his usury rather than his misunderstanding of values. Marc Shell suggests that unlike Jewish jurisprudence, which specifically prohibits the sale of individuals for money, it is 'Christian jurisprudence' that makes 'life and money commensurable'.<sup>20</sup> Usury was seen to be an 'anti-social activity', one violating what was seen as a necessary and humanizing 'Christian charity and neighbourliness' required in a credit-based economy.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, if Shylock is barbaric for his dismembering of others, he is not alone. The fear of defaulting on one's debts at the turn of the seventeenth century was great; legal recourse could be taken against those who were unable or refused to repay their debts. Though the threat of being sued often frightened the debtor into timely repayment or the renegotiation of terms, those who were unable to repay their debts were often punished. The punishment was inflicted on the body of the debtor, as indicated by the pamphlet '[t]he imprisonment of mens bodys [sic] for debt'.<sup>22</sup> Breaking trust was socially harmful, but if one was indebted beyond his means, that debt could result in physical harm as well.

In the credit economy, contracts and exchanges were sealed through the language of oaths and promises. A seventeenth-century treatise on oaths considers both the religious and legal connotations of swearing, claiming that one who swears 'an Oath of Conscience [...] binds before God vpon paine of periurie [sic]'.<sup>23</sup> The language of swearing invokes both the soul, which answers to God, and the physical body, which answers to human laws. As humans we are present 'not just in our singular bodies'; we are echoed in 'everything in

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, trans. by David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 1038.

<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Drakakis (London: Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, 2011), I. 1. 180.

<sup>18</sup> Sheerin, *Desires of Credit*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Marc Shell, 'The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in "The Merchant of Venice"', *The Kenyon Review*, 1.4 (1979), 65–92 (p. 70).

<sup>21</sup> Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher White, *Of Oathes: Their Obiect, Forme, and Bond* (London: By George Purslowe for Ralph Mab, 1627), p. 23.

our surroundings which bears witness to our existence, our attributes, and our agency'.<sup>24</sup> Of course, not all speech is necessarily exuvial. But swearing is speech that is specifically marked by agency, a promise to do something, whether it take the form of 'oaths, vows, promises, asseverations, legal bonds, gauges, [or] contracts'.<sup>25</sup> Though these terms have various legal and religious connotations, they are all bound by commitment to truth. As John Kerrigan summarily puts it, '[a]ll utterances sworn to or vowed involve a binding of the agent to the truth of what is said'.<sup>26</sup> These promises were meant to generate faith in the speaker; the implied result of a broken oath is that the man who swore it cannot be trusted. Muldrew argues that as Christians, the English saw themselves as the heirs of God's promise to Abraham.<sup>27</sup> Thus, promises sworn — especially those sworn 'by God' — were seen to echo this early covenant and foster 'interpersonal trust' that was critical to both morality and the functioning economy.<sup>28</sup> In swearing or promising something to another, one's honour is at stake — and in early modern England, that honour was bound to one's credit. That binding is as real as a physical bond, as in Bassanio's letter to Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*: '[h]ere is a letter, lady, | The paper as the body of my friend, | And every word in it a gaping wound, | Issuing life blood'.<sup>29</sup> The power and danger of binding language was undeniably clear; in 1606, an Act of Parliament was issued which made it a fineable offence 'in any Stage-play, Interlude, Shew, Maygame, or Pageant, iestingly, and prophanely [to] speake, or vse the holy Name of God' as an oath.<sup>30</sup>

### *Coriolanus*: The Body in Language

In Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (1608), the primary conflict of the play is borne of the exuvial power of language. Although *Coriolanus* is set in Rome and often considered a political play rather than an economic one, the political system in the play is coded in economic terms, operating with a system of credit that reflects similar concerns of credit and value that developed in the latter half of the sixteenth century. In *Coriolanus*, the line between physical and verbal *exuviae* is blurred in the highly rhetorical political economy of the play where the physical body is represented verbally. Language in *Coriolanus* functions in a politically useful and economically utilitarian way, in which credit may be created and destroyed purely through binding language.

In Shakespeare's Rome, the plebeians of the city are defined by their ability

<sup>24</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 97.

<sup>25</sup> John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, III. 2. 272–74.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Gazzard, 'An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606)', *Review of English Studies*, 61 (2010), 495–528 (p. 495).

to speak and thus exercise their political power. In *Coriolanus*, language plays a critical role in the political and economic landscape, as the power of the plebeians is ‘dependent on their ability to make themselves heard and understood’.<sup>31</sup> The people’s physical bodies are echoed in this power, as they are referred to almost exclusively by their ‘voices’ which they use to demand ‘corn at their own rates’, and as a result are given five tribunes to represent their political and economic interests.<sup>32</sup> These ‘tongues’ of Rome have the power to produce powerful binding language as their voices are required to elect Coriolanus to the position of consul.<sup>33</sup> In order to earn the people’s votes, Coriolanus is required to cultivate his credit and prove his worth, and like the people, echo his physical body in his speech; in this instance, by wearing a ‘gown of humility’ and earning the citizens ‘voices’ by showing his wounds and recounting his deeds in war.<sup>34</sup> His heroic actions are not sufficient on their own, however; the people must then echo Coriolanus’ actions as a soldier, putting their ‘tongues into [his] wounds’ to speak for them and commodify them:

[...] For if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them. So, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful were to make a monster of the multitude.<sup>35</sup>

Even if soliciting the people’s voices is a matter of tradition, in which their rejection would be ‘ingrateful’ and all but impossible, the political economy of *Coriolanus* requires verbal exchange to establish credit and worth. Coriolanus’ wounds cannot speak for themselves, nor he for them entirely; the Roman citizens must interpret them and assign them an agreed value. The cultivation of credit is necessary for political power in Rome, where the meagre ‘price’ of the consulship is for Coriolanus to ‘ask it kindly’, offering the people his wounds and words as *exuvia*; in doing so, shall his ‘lungs | Coin words’.<sup>36</sup> He must request his power from the Roman people and confirm his credit in an economic exchange, but one that is explicitly verbal.

Coriolanus’ problem with the plebeians is that ‘their binding words do not bind’ — that is, the people change their minds and repeal the consulship they vigorously supported in the previous scene.<sup>37</sup> However, for the people, Coriolanus’ violation of trust means that the contract was built on a false understanding of credit. If language can be falsified, so can trust and credit, and Coriolanus acknowledges this counterfeit in his temporary acquiescence

<sup>31</sup> Cathy Shrank, ‘Civility and the City in *Coriolanus*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54.4 (2003), 406–23 (p. 416).

<sup>32</sup> *Coriolanus*, I. 1. 184.

<sup>33</sup> *Coriolanus*, II. 2. 29.

<sup>34</sup> *Coriolanus*, II. 3. 39.

<sup>35</sup> *Coriolanus*, II. 3. 6–13.

<sup>36</sup> *Coriolanus*, III. 1. 79–80.

<sup>37</sup> Kerrigan, *Shakespeare’s Binding Language*, p. 425.

to appeal to the people's voices: 'since the wisdom of their choice is | Rather to have my hat than my heart, I will practice | the insinuating nod and be off to them most | counterfeitedly'.<sup>38</sup> Coriolanus is unable to proffer his heart in his language, as he does not believe such a thing can be done. For him, binding language is about promise and devotion to truth. In this sense he is an ideal candidate to trust, and theoretically a resource for a copious credit. But he is unwilling to make his words *exuviae* of himself; he cannot engage in exchange because he 'cannot imagine, or cannot accept, that there is a way to partake of one another, incorporate one another, that is necessary to the formation rather than extinction of a community'.<sup>39</sup> Words are something shared, given, traded in communication with others, but he fears the possibility of falsehood, the ease of which he demonstrates when asking the people's votes in the marketplace: Coriolanus adopts the voice of a 'harlot' or 'eunuch'; he can abandon himself and his natural disposition in favour of a 'beggar's tongue'.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, what he offers the people is not truly binding language, nor an *exuviae* of himself. The economy of credit is, in a sense, performative, as language established the sociability and negotiation required for credit and commerce. Even in being himself, Coriolanus can merely 'play | The man I am'.<sup>41</sup> However, performing a role of dishonesty and impurity offers a false construction of untrustworthy credit.

The alternative to cultivating credit and productive *exuviae* is dismemberment. In the very opening lines of the play, Menenius' fable of the belly justifies the feeding of the body politic and the subordination of the citizens to the senators, but marks the city of Rome as a dismembered body. In this analogy, the senators are the belly and the citizens are the mutinous extremities — notably the toe. As Zvi Jagendorf remarks, everywhere within the play we encounter deeply physical language, 'legs, arms, tongues, scabs, scratches, wounds, mouths, teeth, voices, bellies, and toes together with such actions as eating, vomiting, starving, beating, scratching, wrestling, piercing, and undressing'.<sup>42</sup> In fact, in the many echoes of the physical body in the play, it is usually in a state of dismemberment. Coriolanus threatens to 'pluck out | the multitudinous tongue' and 'shake [...] bones' from garments.<sup>43</sup> The body of the city of Rome is rebelling against itself; where it should be feeding and sustaining, it is divided, sick, and starving. The citizens are characterized obsessively by their 'voices' and 'tongues', which both elect Coriolanus consul and demand his banishment.<sup>44</sup> Even the people's elected tribunes are physically divided from the people they

<sup>38</sup> *Coriolanus*, II. 3. 101–04.

<sup>39</sup> Stanley Cavell, "Who Does the Wolf love?" Reading *Coriolanus*, *Representations*, 3.3 (1983), 1–20 (p. 19).

<sup>40</sup> *Coriolanus*, III. 3. 72.

<sup>41</sup> *Coriolanus*, III. 2. 16–17.

<sup>42</sup> Zvi Jagendorf, 'Body Politic and Private Parts', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41.4 (1990), 455–69 (p. 458).

<sup>43</sup> *Coriolanus*, III. 1. 158–59; 181–82.

<sup>44</sup> *Coriolanus*, II. 2. 138.

represent, as Coriolanus notes: ‘Must these have voices, that can yield them now | And straight disclaim their tongues? What are | Your offices? | You being their mouths, why rule you not their teeth?’<sup>45</sup> The city is divided into ‘tongues’, ‘toe’, and ‘belly’, and the rebellion of these parts against each other leads to a state of war when Coriolanus defects to the Volscis.<sup>46</sup> The body of Rome is dismembered and divided, and the political offices — the ‘mouth’ — cannot adequately control or represent the entire city. Without mutual feeding and nourishment, the body politic will starve.

This possibility of dissembling through language is echoed by the rhetorical dismembering of the protagonist as well as the city of Rome itself. For Coriolanus, credit culture introduces a sense of fragmentation; to him, *exuviae* are disconnected and incomplete. Coriolanus is discussed by others in terms of his individual physical features rather than a cohesive self. The protagonist’s value to others comes largely from his power and reputation as Rome’s greatest warrior, and his wounds are tallied and counted like trophies, echoes of the credit he earned fighting for Rome. Every character in the play is obsessed with Coriolanus’ body, particularly his wounds, and constantly attempts to lay claim to his physical form in some way. The metaphorical division of the body in *Coriolanus* is an example of Gell’s ‘doctrine of emanations’, in which the access to an image is comparable to access to the physical body of a person.<sup>47</sup> Coriolanus’ wounds, to him, denote his prowess and value as a soldier; his body is a practical thing, and his injuries are simply representative of the blows he received, demonstrative of his value as a weapon and his prowess as a soldier. When asked to expose his wounds to the people in exchange for their voices, Coriolanus risks allowing them to construct their own symbolic and economic understanding of his injuries and, he believes, his very identity. Such an exchange is intended only to create the appearance of honesty and trustworthiness. Yet, appearances cannot always be trusted; verbal exchange does not eliminate the possibility of deceit, but neither does it presuppose it. If the best speech dissolves into the thing it describes, Coriolanus’ fear is that others’ speech is not good enough. When Menenius says “the wounds become him”, ‘he refers to their enhancing value, but in the Roman symbolic economy, Coriolanus indeed seems on the verge of “becoming” his wounds’.<sup>48</sup> His value and marketability in the city has become enhanced as a result of his injuries, but: ‘[t]he wounds code the impossibility, and the destructiveness, of philosophy’s appeal to the body as an echo of truth: the symbolic truth of the wounds is their sliding signification, for they serve contradictorily as symbols of valour

<sup>45</sup> *Coriolanus*, III. 1. 43–46.

<sup>46</sup> *Coriolanus*, II. 2. 138; I. 1. 150; I. 1. 143.

<sup>47</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 105.

<sup>48</sup> Cynthia Marshall, ‘Wound-Man: Coriolanus, Gender, and the Theatrical Construction of Interiority’, in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan, and Dympna Callaghan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 93–118 (p. 103).



and of vulnerability, and their meaning can be all too readily manipulated'.<sup>49</sup> Although his wounds provide him social currency and credit, in offering and bartering them for social currency, Coriolanus becomes both dismembered and constructed by his wounds alone.

### Conclusion

Coriolanus finds himself in a double bind, where his effort to retain control over his *exuvaie* results in dismemberment. He might offer the people his hat but not his heart, but in doing so becomes constructed by his wounds alone. For Coriolanus, cohesion seems impossible. Engagement in society requires constant renegotiation and revaluing, a practice which Coriolanus resists. Being bound in a society is being bound in a 'circle of mutual partaking, of incorporating each other'.<sup>50</sup> This mutual incorporation, through verbal and economic transaction, is what allows for the feeding and sustaining of the body politic, but this means one is constantly losing parts of oneself in the world.<sup>51</sup> This uncertainty of possession is reflective of the early modern economy, where the value of currency was not always consistent. In the seventeenth century, 'to coin' meant to produce or mint money, but alternatively, the same term could mean, 'to counterfeit, to plot, to invent'.<sup>52</sup> The increasing reliance on credit as a form of currency meant that *exuvaie* could serve as valuable evidence to establish the truth of an individual's character. However, the early modern theatre routinely demonstrates the way in which these echoes can be distorted to ruin another's reputation, rather than construct it: Iago uses Desdemona's handkerchief and his own insidious narrative to falsely accuse her of infidelity in Shakespeare's *Othello*; the Duchess' brothers use waxworks and stage props to lead her to believe her husband has been murdered in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*; Beatrice manipulates the results of a virginity test by studying Alsemero's private journals in Middleton's *The Changeling*.<sup>53</sup> The shift towards credit meant that *exuvaie* became economic tools as well as echoes of an individual. In a way, they became less trustworthy, too; credit, as established and cultivated by interactions with others, is sensitive to manipulation and distortion. Although during the seventeenth century, ecclesiastical courts often assessed guilt and made their rulings based on 'public fame', credit could also be 'dangerously detachable from fact', and value 'might be conjured by nothing

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>50</sup> Cavell, "Who Does the Wolf love?", p. 16.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Fisher, *Econolingua*, p. 57.

<sup>53</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by E.A.J. Honigmann (London: Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, 2004), III. 3; John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by Brian Gibbons (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), V. 1; Thomas Middleton, *The Changeling*, ed. by Michael Neill (London: A&C Black, 2006), IV. 1.

more than the collective belief in such value'.<sup>54</sup> Rather than improving upon a devalued coin economy, reliance on *exuviae* to cultivate credit seems to create a similar environment of mistrust and confusion of value.

<sup>54</sup> Katherine Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 139; Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, p. 1.