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humanisme

From the Theatre in Montaigne to the Philosophy in Shakespeare – the many-sided Skepsis

*Du Théâtre de Montaigne à la Philosophie de Shakespeare : plusieurs facettes de
la Skepsis*

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FROM THE THEATRE IN MONTAIGNE TO THE PHILOSOPHY IN SHAKESPEARE – THE MANY-SIDED SKEPSIS

Rui Bertrand ROMÃO

This paper includes two parts. In the first one I try to show that not only theatre is of the utmost importance for Montaigne as theatricality forms a prominent dimension of the *Essais*, revealed for instance in the scenographic conception of the framework of the book and in the way theatrical devices are assimilated in the *Essais*. In the second part, I consider a comedy of Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, a play most likely written after Shakespeare's reading of Florio's translation of the *Essais*, as an example of a philosophical play that shows traces of Ancient sceptical themes, processes and problems.

Du Théâtre de Montaigne à la Philosophie de Shakespeare: plusieurs facettes de la Skepsis *Le point de départ de cette communication se place dans l'entrecroisement de deux considérations : celle de l'assimilation de dispositifs théâtraux dans les Essais de Montaigne ; et celle de l'édification par Shakespeare, tout au long de ses pièces et poésies, d'une philosophie personnelle, dans laquelle convergent lectures et influences de la plus grande variété. Cet entrecroisement nous permettra de voir comment se développe chez les deux auteurs un scepticisme éclectique, déterminé d'une façon propre et spécifique chez l'un et chez l'autre, et d'étudier et comparer ces développements.*

Montaigne not only greatly enjoyed theatre, both ancient and contemporary, especially neo-Latin tragedies and Italian comedies, even having been, in his schooldays, an amateur actor, as his taste for drama is somehow transmitted to his writing and, I venture, absorbed into the new genre of “*Essay*”. As for Shakespeare, it is possible to find throughout his plays and poetry, if not exactly the proper delineation of a determined philosophy, more or less easily identifiable, at least the handling of many philosophical problems, themes and ideas, as well as the traces of several philosophical influences and readings. In both authors, it is arguable that a kind of eclectic Scepticism can be seen developing through their respective works, though in quite different ways. The main purpose of this paper is, precisely, to show a way of conceiving how Montaigne and Shakespeare share this kind of philosophical inclination by highlighting its reflection in an aspect of the work of each author which bears traces of the genre mainly cultivated by the other and immediately associated with him. Thus, saying it straightforwardly and clearly but perhaps too simplistically, I shall here consider Montaigne as a sort of playwright and Shakespeare as something of an essayist,

the works of both exhibiting a deep concern with sceptical problematics and procedures and with Scepticism, in general.

I

When I speak of conceiving Montaigne as a sort of playwright, I do not mean that it is possible to imagine he really wrote the whole or even some of the chapters of his book as a dramatist, having recourse to a somewhat comparable array of literary and showman techniques, or that the *Essais* should be read as transfigured plays. What I mean is something else: that the theatricality is a greatly relevant dimension of the *Essais*, the theatre even providing a significant model to the conception of the *Essais* as a literary genre and that its influence (let us name it so) can be seen in somehow incorporated into Montaigne's writing³⁷⁴.

Allusions of various kinds to theatre, both in Antiquity and in modern times, quotations from plays, namely by Terence and Plautus, among others, and considerations upon several aspects of the dramatic art including words of defence and praise, are quite frequent in the *Essais* and immediately reflect an unfaltering love for theatre. The same love is also patent in Montaigne's *Journal de Voyage*, where we learn that he watched, and appreciated theatrical performances in Bologna and Pisa (Montaigne 1992, 77, 188) and that in a printer's shop in Florence he bought some eleven comedies (Montaigne 1992, 187).

At the end of one of the chapters of the *Essais* where theatre's presence is more evident (I, 26 – "De l'Institution des Enfants"), in the 1588 couch of the text, we find a famous digression where, invoking his own example and that of French Princes, Montaigne defends acting as an activity becoming well-born children. He hints at its pedagogical virtues and formative importance, criticises its enemies and argues for the favouring of theatrical companies and of permanent playhouses, from a well-substantiated political and social standpoint (I, 26, 176b-

³⁷⁴ Among the several texts where is studied the relation between the *Essais* and the theatre and Montaigne's taste for the dramatic art, in its varied forms, special references must be made to the following ones: Ehrlich 109-124; Fumaroli, 1994, 151-158; Delègue, 1998, 79-86; Guerrier 34-35, 282-312, 362-374, 412-424.

177b)³⁷⁵. It must be recalled that some lines up, and in the 1580 text, Montaigne, speaking of himself as a young reader, had mentioned Latin and Italian comedies as one of his passions then (I, 26, 175a). The whole passage is of particular interest for us for revealing in the space of few lines, and along several couches of the text, the threefold nature of Montaigne's experience of Theatre, acquired soon in his life: as an actor, as a spectator and as a reader. Without this rich and varied knowledge it is for us difficult to imagine that the elements of theatricality in the *Essais* would be so abundantly expressed and so clearly understandable as they are.

The more outstanding features of that theatricality, which also can be seen functioning as, in a way or in the other, interwoven into a formal dimension of the *Essais*, seem mainly to be the following: the scenographic conception of the framework of the book; the extensive use of images and metaphors related to theatre throughout the text; the incorporation in it of an internalised principle of dialogical dramatisation and the constant utilisation by its author of expressive techniques linked to theatre as communication, including stylistic means connoted with dramatic *mimesis*.

Even those who are not favourable to the interpretations of the *Essais* that emphasise its order cannot elude the possibility of seeing in it, if not a very rigid formal architecture (just like, for instance, the one sketched by Daniel Martin in his brilliant studies and based on the conjunction of mnemonics with mythology – see Martin 5, 32-34, 64-79) at least some sort of architectural framework, certainly complex and difficult to fully understand in its determinacy, but nonetheless firm and solid enough. We should indeed give some consideration to Montaigne's having, from edition to edition of the *Essais*, maintained unaltered its division into chapters, in spite of all his constant additions, for he had the care of creating a new and supplementary third book to be added to the former two when in 1588 he published entirely new chapters, originating what would become the definitive skeleton of his book. Thus grew the work, it enlarged and it developed, without any of the main parts of the building, once raised, having its original plan or façade altered. If we want to conciliate this firm architecture with the openness of the form of the *Essais* and the

³⁷⁵ All references to Montaigne's *Essais* in this article are given according to Villey-Saulnier's edition (Montaigne 1965).

flexibility of its writing, perhaps the image of a theatrical and scenographic space would be the more adequate one. It is for us possible to conceive of the scenic functionality of such an architecture as a space where the fixed elements, articulated in an illusionist fashion according to perspective principles, form a sort of three-dimensional framework (presenting to the reader/spectator heads of chapters denoted numerically, related to each other by disposition and ordering, content, and meaning and symbolic value) with strong classical references. This framework encompasses the stage where the performances take place, its variable scenic background adapting itself to the diversity of stories, characters, speeches, arguments, images, opinions and ideas there presented and developed, the protagonist Montaigne playing several parts and functions and going from one place to the other in and off the stage.

The image of the Theatre I have here in mind is a contemporary architectural masterpiece of the ending sixteenth century, the Olympic Theatre in the town of Vicenza (*Teatro Olimpico di Vicenza*) due to Andrea Palladio, whose construction, we are told (Schiavo 97), began curiously and by sheer coincidence on the 28th February, 1580, that very significant day in Montaigne's life, his 47th birthday and the eve of the day printed in the foreword "To the Reader" in the *Essais*. The most remarkable part of the Olympic Theatre can be considered perhaps the backstage-screen (*frons scenae*) with its three-ordered façade including an evocation of Roman triumphal arches and the background perspectives by the "scene-designer" Vincenzo Scamozzi. Of course, this remains an analogy, but it has the quality of providing a plausible model for the relation between the architectural building of the *Essais* and its openness of form, linked with the peculiarity of the essayistic text.

Among the references to theatre made by Montaigne I have previously alluded to, those which seem more important to my purpose are the images related to theatre that include first of all what has been called the "role-playing metaphor" (Levine 287). While some seem perhaps no more than incidental observations or notes (even then possibly significant, all the same), the vast majority of them are as relevant as revealing. I will recall briefly the most important passages in which they occur.

One of the most striking uses of that kind of imagery is the crucial and central passage of the chapter “Qu’il ne faut pas juger de nostre heur, qu’après la mort”, where Montaigne, speaking of the saying by Solon that serves as the title of the chapter, produces its interpretation in alternative to the one that stresses human dependence on Fortune’s tides and vicissitudes. What is at issue, for him, in that maxim is, really, the spiritual fortitude of a philosopher, which can only be attributed to someone *post-mortem*, that is to say, after the final test to the sage’s behaviour that is death itself. To express his idea Montaigne recurs to a variant of the classical commonplace by which life is compared to a drama of which in the last act supervenes death, man taking off his actor’s mask:

Ainsi se peut prendre avec raison ce bon advis de Solon. Mais d’autant que c’est un philosophe, à l’endroit desquels les faveurs et disgraces de la fortune ne tiennent rang ny d’heur, ny de mal’heur; et sont les grandeurs et puissances, accidens de qualité à peu pres indifferente: je trouve vray-semblable qu’il aye regardé plus avant, et voulu dire que ce mesme bon-heur de nostre vie, qui dépend de la tranquillité et contentement d’un esprit bien né, et de la résolution et assurance d’une ame réglée, ne se doive jamais attribuer à l’homme qu’on ne luy aye veu *jouër le dernier acte de sa comedie*, et sans doute la plus difficile. *En tout le reste il y peut avoir du masque*: ou ces beaux discours de la Philosophie ne sont en nous que par contenance; ou les accidens, ne nous essayant pas jusques au vif, nous donnent loysir de maintenir tousjours nostre visage rassis. Mais à *ce dernier rolle de la mort et de nous*, il n’y a plus que faindre, il faut parler François, il faut montrer ce qu’il y a de bon et de net dans le fond du pot... (I, 19, 79a-80b, my emphasis)

The last part of one’s life is also the one where the actor may reveal himself a philosopher. The theatre here is thus implicitly compared to the tribunal of posterity.

Another well known variant of the same comparison of life to drama appears in the chapter, “De l’inegalité qui est entre nous”, where reference is made to a parallel between sovereigns and players who perform princely roles, royal pomp functioning as a scenic artifice that dazzles and confounds the spectators. Backstage, the masks falling off, both groups of comedians that looked unequal on stage become equal in their vileness and misery:

Car, comme les joueurs de comedie, vous les voyez sur l’eschaffaut faire une mine de Duc et d’Empereur; mais, tantost apres, les voylà devenuz valets et crocheteurs miserables, qui est leur nayfve et originelle

condition: aussi l'Empereur, duquel la pompe vous esblouit en public, [...] voyez le derriere le rideau, ce n'est rien qu'un homme commun, et, à adventure, plus vil que le moindre de ses subjects. (I, 42, 261a)

In II, 36, “Des plus excellens homes”, the claiming of some connection with Homer’s heroes and stories makes Montaigne extend the comparison to the dimensions of universal History, the comparison acquiring a clear and unequivocal deprecating tone, due to the explicit reference to farce:

N'est-ce pas *une noble farce* de laquelle les Roys, les choses publiques et les Empereurs vont jouant leur personnage tant de siecles, et à laquelle tout ce grand univers sert de theatre? (I, 36, 261a, my emphasis)

In another occasion, in the chapter “Que Philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir” (I, 20, 93a-94a), the comparison is also pursued in a cosmic key, when nature, in a grandiloquent prosopopeia, presents her four seasons as the four acts of her annual comedy, where the world “acts his part” (“joue son jeu”), in a cyclically renewed production:

Et, au pis aller, la distribution et varieté de tous les actes de ma comedie se parfournit en un an. Si vous avez pris garde au branle de mes quatre saisons, elles embrassent l'enfance, l'adolescence, la virilité et la vieillesse du monde. Il a joué son jeu. Il n'y sçait autre chose que recommencer. (I, 20, 93a-94a)

The image of mask, frequent in the *Essais*, referring either to the opposition between interior and exterior or to the opposition between being and seeming, or to both, is some times employed for itself, independently from a theatrical context. However its connotations with theatre remain always altogether explicit and clear. One of the more noted of these uses occurs in “De mesnager sa volonté”, in a passage with clear political resonance, where Montaigne after quoting the famous fragment attributed to Petronius (“fere totus mundus exercet histrionem”) in a hyperbolic variant (“Mundus universus exercet histrionem”) treats the idea of role playing, crossing it with other related new images, in the context of the contrast between public life and private life, which, he sustains, must remain distinct and apart from each other (III, 10, 1011b-1012b).

Elsewhere, in the precedent chapter, “De la vanité”, in another much quoted text, to emphasise the ridicule and fatuity of human

condition and above all of his conceit and his pretensions, Montaigne puts in the mouth of Apollo the words referring to the exposure of man as the fool of a universal farce (III, 9, 1001b): “tu es le scrutateur sans connoissance, le magistrat sans jurisdiction et apres tout le badin de la farce”.

These few examples of theatrical metaphors in the *Essais* may suffice to make clear that for Montaigne the use of theatrical imagery (including role-playing) more than forming mere episodic means of exclusively literary effect expresses a *Weltanschauung* of which theatricality is a fundamental part. That cannot be but quite understandable if we bear in mind that in the *Essais* the reflection on illusion and on the mechanisms of simulation and dissimulation plays such an important role³⁷⁶.

Apart from this imagery, many expressive processes and stylistic devices employed in the *Essais* may also be seen as contributing to its theatricality for their relation to similar processes used in playwriting such as: the use of sudden transitions and the constant creation of manifold surprise effects (which Lino Pertile detected inscribed in the formal conception of the book as a “structure of unpredictability”, “unpredictability in the *Essais*” being “a formal expression of irresolution in the essays” – Pertile 214); the exploration of comic and dramatic effects; the valorisation of the charge of significance of visual elements in several narrative sequences, namely, those related to historical episodes; the use of contrasts as means of accentuating textual dynamics; the conjugation of changes of rhythm in the discursive *tempo* with changes of perspective.

A reference must also be made to the assimilation in the text (as well as in its literary form) of the *Essais* of dialogical methods and characteristics of the genre dialogue and of its inherent principle of dramatisation.

What presents itself as an evident and distinctive trait of the philosophical dialogue, and from the start seems to be quite close to Montaigne’s *Essais*, inheres in the circumstance that the argumentation is established and made through the confrontation between two, or more, personified voices, to each corresponding a particularised attitude, a unique tone and an individual perspective, which can be multifaceted and unstable. Even in “false” dialogues,

³⁷⁶ Cf. Delègue 15-33, 139-164.

those which, being guided in predetermined direction by a dominant character, reduce interlocution to a secondary role, exposition is pursued having in consideration a latent opposition, the virtuality of an adverse positioning or the possibility of objections and divergences which must be anticipated or otherwise faced. In the dialogues where there is a great equilibrium of voices, as well as in those dialogues that obey to the alternation of interlocutors which incarnate or declare antithetical postures, attitudes and theories, the clash of opinions, ideas and viewpoints, forming a zigzagging itinerary, is the most conspicuous element that contributes to confer to the *genre* its formal identity.

Montaigne gives an interior dimension to this dialogical procedure in several ways: transferring it to the inner self; assimilating it to the practice of diachronic commentary; incorporating it as a factor of structuration in an argumentative discourse; fusing it to the textual fabric. The plurivocity, extrovert in the dialogues, thus becomes a fundamental element of the movement proper to each chapter of the *Essais* and a central piece of the multifarious course of the exercise of a *iudicium* that, inscribed in the text, examines, in their variety and through ever changing perspectives, the several subjects he has to deal with.

We can thus discover in the discourse of the *Essais* the integration of elements associated with theatre, coexisting with its use as a centre of thematic proliferation, the use of these elements by Montaigne being in perfect agreement with the philosophical specificity of the *Essais*.

II

Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare, though some scholars have contested it in some particular points, can be considered, if not since the end of the eighteenth century at least since a few decades later, as a well established fact. An important aspect of that influence has been recognised by most authors as of a philosophical kind and of more or less clearly sceptical overtones. Apart from influences, even this particular one, it has not been uncommon that in the course of the last century reflection upon Shakespeare's texts and characters has led to what we could call sceptical avenues. Nevertheless, the first time, as far

as I know, that a thorough study, carried on from a strictly philosophical standpoint and mainly focusing on Scepticism, was made of the specific Shakespearean treatment of sceptical problems in one of his plays appeared in the nineteen sixties when one of the foremost American philosophers, Stanley Cavell, published his acclaimed essay on *King Lear*, "The avoidance of love: a reading of *King Lear*", soon followed by other essays by him, most of them collected in his 1987 book *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare*³⁷⁷.

The same year, another distinguished scholar, this time not a well known philosopher, Graham Bradshaw, published a book, *Shakespeare's Scepticism*, quite different from Cavell's but also greatly impressive and, I think, innovative. Other articles and essays by other authors have followed these pioneer works, similarly exploring Shakespeare's links to Scepticism³⁷⁸. As I said at the beginning of this paper, it is my aim to show the essayist philosopher in Shakespeare. I intend to fulfil that purpose by focusing on a Shakespearean play from a point of view centred on philosophical Scepticism.

The play I have chosen to consider is that most commented and controversial "problem play", *Measure for Measure*, which has already been at least twice the proper object of a specific reading privileging its connection with Scepticism. I am referring to the 5th chapter of Bradshaw's mentioned book, "On Tempering Mercy with Justice", where its author within an ethical and political framework develops a conception of *Measure for Measure* as a play exploring "the incompatibility of different absolute values" (Bradshaw 178), and to a very recent article by Lars Engle, "*Measure for Measure* and modernity: the problem of the sceptic's authority".

I belong to those readers of this play whose general impression of it clashes with the mainstream of interpreters and commentators, in that we do not consider it as the bleakest Shakespearean comedy (putting forward an extremely pessimistic view of human nature, so pessimistic and desperate a vision that it would fit better in a straightforward tragedy, and presenting an irredeemable conception of

³⁷⁷ Which, also including now a new essay by the Author on a Shakespearean play, has been published again this year in second edition and with a slightly different title, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*.

³⁷⁸ The last in date of these essays, at least in book size, is the study by Millicent Bell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Scepticism*, published in 2002, which only after completing this paper I took notice of.

justice). That does not mean either that its depths and its grim vision of human nature as well as the *Weltanschauung* underlying it should be ignored or taken for what they never can be taken: light-hearted and quite optimistic. Nevertheless, I would subscribe Raleigh's judgement (Raleigh 166-167): "This world of Vienna, as Shakespeare paints it, is not a black world; it is a weak world, full of little vanities and stupidities, regardful of custom, fond of pleasure, idle and abundantly human". The Vienna of *Measure for Measure* after all does not seem to me the embodiment of "a corrupt cosmos" as Harold Bloom, for instance, considers it (Bloom 358), or a city so corrupted by evil that even the walls are gnawed by some leper, as Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa eloquently describes it (Lampedusa 82): it is a normal commercial city, bustling with life of all sorts and at every level, having its grandeurs and its miseries, including some dissoluteness. The Duke's government brings about license just because he is not despotic and not really an "authoritarian", rather a sage more concerned with meditation and self-knowledge than with ruling his subjects with tight reins. This moderately "positive" view of the life and characters portrayed in *Measure for Measure* is to be considered as perfectly capable of coexisting with the highlighting of Scepticism in it, specially if we have in mind a certain historical kind of philosophical Scepticism, Renaissance Pyrrhonism. That task is after all made easier when we think of the full compatibility of this revival of Pyrrhonism not only with living but even with the cultivation of an extraordinary enjoyment of life as precisely shown by Montaigne and developed throughout the *Essais*³⁷⁹.

Without aiming at presenting here a new reading of this complex play, I shall try only to consider the presence in it of some elements of Scepticism which may throw some light on certain aspects of the play.

One of the most perplexing features of *Measure for Measure*, its disappointing and puzzling ending, may indeed become less disconcerting and baffling if we try to read it through a sceptical perspective. Lars Engle has already tried it but within the scope of an interpretation that almost exclusively valorises the problem of authority and enforcement of social laws and especially of social reform by a sceptical sovereign, seeing thus the ending as "the result of a

³⁷⁹ Cf. O'Brien 115-116.

sceptic's failed experiment in the invocation of an absolute" (Engle 110). The sceptic Engle refers to is Vincentio ("a spiritual son to Montaigne", according to René Galland 356) and his mentioned experiment is the choice of Angelo as a substitute, a prince apparently and decidedly far, by all accounts, from embracing any kind of Scepticism.

Though I accept most of Engle's ideas, my reading of the play somewhat differs from his. The point I shall try to stress is the possibility of seeing here (especially in the ending) at play a confluence of notions and devices that seem much akin to some we can find in Ancient Pyrrhonism, especially in the kind of Pyrrhonism described and explained by Sextus Empiricus. There we have a blend of epistemological issues and practical concerns, that may also be considered a distinctive characteristic of this extraordinary comedy, where the most poignant and dramatic dilemma, the existential and moral dilemma Angelo puts to Isabella, has also consequences concerning belief. Its dramatic impact is enhanced by Isabella, before her first encounter with Angelo, being shown as someone prone to doubt:

Lucio. Assay the power you have.
Isabella. My power? alas! I doubt—
Lucio. Our doubts are traitors,
 And make us lose the good we oft might win,
 By fearing to attempt. (I.iv.76-79)

Even if Isabella solves the dilemma and decides herself proclaiming the supremacy of her chastity over her sisterly love, the preserving of that chastity may only be known to her, others not believing her narrative, or her version of what she would claim had happened, and believing instead Lord Angelo's word, or just his name and fame:

Angelo. Believe me, on mine honour,
 My words express my purpose.
Isabella. Ha! Little honour to be much believ'd,
 And most pernicious purpose! Seeming, seeming!
 I will proclaim thee, Angelo; look for my brother,
 Or with an outstretch'd throat I'll tell the world aloud
 What man thou art.
Angelo. Who will believe thee, Isabel?
 My unsoil'd name, the austereness of my life,
 My vouch against you, and my place i' the state,
 Will so your accusation overweigh,

That you shall stifle in your own report
And smell of calumny. (II.iv.148-160)

Angelo. As for you,
Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true.
Isabella. To whom should I complain? Did I tell this,
Who would believe me? (II.iv.170-172)

Of course, readers and spectators are not here preys to doubt about Isabella's chastity. But they may remain in doubt as to the moral rightness of her attitude, determined by her "self-centred saintliness" (Knight 92). And that doubt is amplified and stressed by Isabella's isolation, by the very circumstance that socially the novice is less believable than the Lord Deputy.

In Act v, when the Duke returns officially to Vienna and Isabella publicly presents her case to him, being believed seems for her something of an obsession, an issue concerning not only justice but even her very mental sanity:

Isabella. O worthy duke!
You bid me seek redemption of the devil,
Hear me yourself; for that which I may speak
Must either punish me, not being believ'd,
Or wring redress from you. Hear me, O, hear me, here! (v.i.28-32)

Isabella. O prince, I conjure thee, as thou believ'st
There is another comfort than this world,
That thou neglect me not, with that opinion
That I am touch'd with madness. (v.i.48-51)

Isabella. even so may Angelo,
In all his dressings, characts, titles, forms,
Be an arch-villain. Believe it, royal prince:
If he be less, he's nothing; but he's more,
Had I more name for badness.

Duke. By mine honesty,
If she be mad, - as I believe no other, -
Her madness hath the oddest frame of sense,
Such a dependency of thing on thing,
As e'er I heard in madness.

Isabella. O gracious duke!
Harp not on that; nor do banish reason
For inequality; but let your reason serve
To make the truth appear where it seems hid,
And hide the false seems true. (v.i.55-67)

Her word being pitted against Angelo's word, the effort Isabella makes to be believed involves Angelo's virtuous mask falling off and the proclamation of what she claims is the truth. Her conception of truth is, indeed, stated emphatically as an idealised absolute truth, which is most near to the idea of uniform truth that is implicit to most trends of sceptical thought:

Isabella. It is not truer he is Angelo
 Than this is all as true as it is strange;
 Nay, it is ten times true; for truth is truth
 To the end of reckoning. (v.i.42-45)

A supreme irony is, then, that Isabella, complying to the plan devised by Duke Vincentio, when disguised as Friar Lodowick, will publicly defend her truth by proclaiming a lie, that she preferred her brother's life to the keeping of her virginity:

Isabella. and, after much debatement,
 My sisterly remorse confutes mine honour,
 And I did yield to him. (v.i.100-102)

Duke. This is most likely!
Isabella. O, that it were as like as it is true! (v.i.104-105)

A moral dilemma like Isabella's choice is, independently of any connection with philosophical scepticism, an excellent dramatic device. Similarly, there is no need to consider the opposition between seeming and being against the background of the History of Pyrrhonism to explain its function in a play where it is explored. Still, the highlighting of such parallels must not be shunned. After all, sceptical philosophy has some clear and manifest affinities with playwriting. And there are cases, such as, I believe, is the one of *Measure for Measure*, where the accumulation of elements of that sort can seem extremely meaningful. One of those elements may be considered relativism of some sort.

From the viewpoint of the practical side, an important facet of the Pyrrhonist's philosophy resides in the conformity to the observed customs of the place wherein one is, thus accepting them just as mere customs, changeable and interchangeable, not as unquestionable and absolute truths:

Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions – for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These everyday observances seem to be fourfold, and

to consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise. [...] By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad. (Sextus 9)

This position of a relativist sort, if it seems to elude enthusiastic adhesions to beliefs, nevertheless may impart temperance, and promote tolerance and clemency, as well as can be seen as contributing to the improvement and advance of judgement and so to self-knowledge and to the firmness of conscience. The acceptance of others with their faults, rooted on self-knowledge, as a notion that a ruler has to bear in mind in governing a society and in administering justice, is one of the main lessons imparted by *Measure for Measure*³⁸⁰.

For Vincentio, at the end, pardoning is the way, more than performing justice, to substitute it tolerantly, to replace it by clemency and by poetic irony, and above all, by a gift to his subjects, the stimulus for each one of the judged to continue living a different kind of life, more profound and more intense, more meaningful and more internally rich. Social, political and moral reform in this world, if not complemented by an individual reform, reveals itself as unfeasible as the complete enforcement of too severe, too rigid laws, so much so that they seem inhuman and cannot but be bent, when not entirely forgotten and despised. On the other hand, individual reform seems feasible, even if quite difficult for the many obstacles that obstruct its way. And the way of individual reform consists precisely in self-perfecting and in cultivating the art of judgement.

The need of an internal reform in the individual is just one of the predominant themes in the Hellenistic schools of Philosophy, aiming at happiness, virtue, tranquillity of mind, and wisdom. What is here at stake is basically the wish and the will to accomplish an internal metamorphosis leading to those aims. The Pyrrhonist's response to this desideratum seems undoubtedly the most original of all given by those schools, as can be seen in the passage of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (I, 12, 25-26), where Sextus, presenting the aim of scepticism, explains how Sceptics first attained tranquillity of mind through the practice of suspension of judgement:

³⁸⁰ Not very far from this opinion of ours Wilson Knight declares that "the moral of *Measure for Measure*" was that "nobility in man is inextricably twined with 'baseness'" (Knight 83).

we say the aim of the Sceptic is tranquillity in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us. For Sceptics began to do philosophy in order to decide among appearances and to apprehend which are true and which are false, so as to become tranquil; but they came upon equipollent dispute, and being unable to decide this they suspended judgement. And when they suspended judgement, tranquillity in matters of opinion followed fortuitously. (Sextus 10)

What is here to be emphasised, in this text of paramount importance about the aim of ancient scepticism, is not so much the interrelation of a practical aim with a clear-cut epistemological attitude (interrelation which I have already mentioned as characteristic of Sextian Pyrrhonism) as the process through which this interrelation is expressed and carried on. Its scheme may be put forward in this simple way: desiring to attain an aim and making it their chief philosophical task, some philosophers, who later became known as Pyrrhonists, developed a strategy they thought the only one possible to achieve that aim, and so essentially linked to it, but came to no conclusion, or more precisely to what can be described as a sort of philosophical deadline, an aporetic situation; they thus discovered *epoche*, or suspension of judgement and renounced their previous strategy, and their former aim, but precisely this renouncement led them to what they in the first place had renounced, though this time the aim appeared dissociated from that strategy. In my interpretation, this attainment of the aim (spiritual tranquillity or *ataraxia*) involves an internal change without which it simply would be impossible.

The main point I want now to stress is that a variant of this scheme can precisely be read in *Measure for Measure*.

As I see it, renunciation is one of the fundamental themes of the play: the Duke's renunciation (though provisory) of power, first, and then of spiritual life as a somewhat monastic recluse; Isabella's renouncement, first, of worldly life, then, of her brother's life after being confronted with the dilemma of choosing between it and her chastity, and finally, at the end of the play, to her previous renouncements, when it is suggested she is going to accept Vincentio's proposal; Barnardine's renunciation of life (this more talked about than talkative character sounds, in spite of himself, almost a perfect sceptic as to the practice of a sort of cultivated and unnatural indifference – *adiaphoria*); Claudio's renunciation of family honour; Angelo's renunciation of Mariana (in the action before the play starts),

then of his sexual prudery and austerity of life, when he “harasses” Isabella, and eventually of what seems dearest to him, the strict application of his governing and lawful principles, and his political philosophy.

Nevertheless, the conjunction of all these renunciations could be meaningless as to the parallel with the renunciation’s role in Pyrrhonism we are trying to establish if most of them were not connected to a sort of metamorphosis prompted by a perverse or paradoxical effect device (and, of course, if we could not determine otherwise the presence of any traces of Scepticism in the play). Indeed, it is Barnardine’s indifferent attitude to death and its approaching that prompts Vincentio’s change of mind as to his execution. And this confirms our intuition that, in more than a way, Barnardine unconsciously behaves like a Pyrrhonian for even when he is pardoned he has a most wonderful Pyrrhonic reaction: he remains silent, that is to say, he keeps *aphasia*, which means literally non-speaking, and which whether it is conceived in a more restricted way or in a more general one, is always an important element of Pyrrhonian philosophy. It is Claudio’s renunciation that makes him conform to death, or in Shakespeare’s expression, said by the Duke: “Be absolute for death; either death or life shall thereby be the sweeter” (III.i.5-6). Angelo’s renunciations give density to his character and at the end make him seem a dignified repentant that fully deserves his pardon. As to the renunciations of Isabella and Vincentio, they are interrelated and mingled with what Engle calls the “odd denouement” of the play (Engle 101). In an external dimension, Isabella’s social ascension and her change of status must also be noted. Vincentio discloses itself as someone who, after his retirement and the failure of Angelo’s severe government, reconciles himself with power (now that his has been restored) and with worldly life, remaining soft in dispensing law and enforcing it.

Of course, there are characters incapable of such self-improvement, if I may say so. I am thinking of Lucio, the garrulous bawd. The least we can say is that he is the one most rigorously and ironically punished character in the play. His deserved punishment is so exemplary that it may well provide the best illustration of the title of the play, for he, becoming married to a “punk”, becomes permanently bound to dissoluteness and bawdiness, and losing social status is

reduced to social silence, his two main faults being thus given an emblematic correction.

If we, thus, take in consideration those renunciations and their effects as well as the self-improvement they are connected with, we can look at the ending as not really disconcerting. What must be pointed out is that the Duke, when he returns to power and active life, after his small period of contemplative solitude, experiences not so much the necessity of merely enforcing justice as the necessity of making justice consonant to each citizen's conscience, as if it came out from within them. According to a sceptical art of judgement, justice is then dispensed.

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