THE 'DRUG' OF DECONSTRUCTIVE AMBIVALENCE IN THOMAS MIDDLETON'S JACOBEAN REVENGE TRAGEDIES

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Abstract

Jacques Derrida's discussion entitled 'Plato's Pharmacy' in *Dissemination* (1972; 1981) of the birth of writing from Plato's *Phaedrus* (c. 375-365 BC) concentrates upon the inherent ambivalence of language, the inevitable epistemological dichotomy between word and object, signifier and signified. The *différance* he notes in the Platonic lexis *pharmakon*, meaning both remedy and poison, illustrates the temporality and infinite deferral of meaning which postpones presence and liberates interpretation to endless successive readings. By following the chain of linguistic significations that refuses to site the locus of meaning purely within a particular text, Derrida links the *différance* of *pharmakon* with the ambivalent characteristics of the *pharmakos*, the scapegoat, which like the Platonic text, possesses both insides and outsides. In *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), Girard argues that such a theoretical framework can be discovered in the equivocal textuality of tragic drama, this being the pervasive ambiguity of the cathartic genre. It is my contention that these deconstructive processes are clearly perceived in the sub-genre of 'revenge tragedy', and in this article I tease out the ambivalent *presence* of the poison/cure dialectic in three Jacobean revenge tragedies by Thomas Middleton: *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607)[1], *Women Beware Women* (c. 1621), and *The Changeling* (1622, with Rowley).

Keywords: ambivalence, pharmakos, deconstructive processes, poison, cure.

1.0 Deconstructing Plato's Pharmacy

Through the analysis of the terms *pharmakon* and *pharmakos* in his essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', the French post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida is examining the fundamental tenets of the deconstructive process. The Greek word *pharmakon* can mean both remedy and poison – seemingly antithetical terms – as well as medicine, philtre, or merely drug. Plato uses the word in different ways, seemingly aware of the fluidity of its 'meaning', which is usually guided by the context of the passage. In a passage from the *Phaedrus* the *pharmakon* is identified with the written word, with textuality itself:

> You must forgive me, dear friend, I'm a lover of learning, and the trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. Yet you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out (*dokeis moi tes emes exokou to pharmakon heurekenai*). A hungry animal can be driven by dangling a carrot or a bit of greenstuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me speeches bound in books (*en bibliois*) I don't doubt you can cart me all around Attica, and anywhere else you please (Plato, 1973, p. 230 d-e).

[1] I will not make comment on the authorship question of *The Revenger's Tragedy* in this article.

In Plato's account the text itself becomes ambivalent, a *pharmakon*, a poison and a cure. It is denoted as subversive, something that is seductive due to the deferred nature of its semiotic referent, its very polysemy. However, this chain of significations that exists within the lexis *pharmakon*, within the text, is often obscured from view. The linguistic operations constitute a chain of signification within the *pharmakon* that reveals an element of play between words, their signifiers, and the signified. Those threads can never all be located in the present, but form a "logic of *play*" (Derrida, 1981, p. 64) that functions within and between the textual traces one perceives. With reference to the *pharmakon*, being both a cure and a poison, the interplay between the opposing values reveals the heterogeneous nature of textuality that constitutes the basis of reading:

> It is in the back room, in the shadows of the pharmacy, prior to the oppositions between conscious and unconscious, freedom and constraint, voluntary and involuntary, speech and language, that these textual 'operations' occur (Derrida, 1981, p. 129).

However, this textual chain cannot be circumscribed within the lexicon of one specific collection of words that we denote a 'text'. A chain of signification is not bounded by the artificial constraints of presence, but is composed by the forces of association which to varying degrees link the words 'actually present' on the page with a diverse number of other signifiers. This connection between absent and present words, whether syntactic or semantic, destroys the notion of an autonomous, self-contained and denotive text, complete and independent within its own compositional boundaries. The absent is also present, although to a different degree, and what is 'inside' a text is not completely severed and distinct from what is 'outside' of it. These forces of linguistic association link together absent and present signifiers within the lexicon, exploding the traditional concept of textuality and infinitely expanding the potentialities of 'meaning'.

Accordingly Derrida connects the Greek word *pharmakos*, which is absent in Plato's *Phaedrus*, with the present word *pharmakon*. *Pharmakos* denotes a scapegoat, "the evil and the outside, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city – these are the two major senses of the character and of the ritual" (Derrida, 1981, p. 130). In fact the *pharmakos* is an incarnation of the *pharmakon*, for it embodies the ambivalence of both poison and cure within the revelation of its effects. The scapegoat partakes in a ritual which involves the cleansing of the body politic by his encapsulation of the endemic evil. Such a ceremony is the Passover festival in *Exodus* Ch. 12, where the Angel of the Lord killed the firstborn of the Egyptians outside the boundaries of the Israelites, possessing the latter with both a cure (liberation – for which God was venerated), and fear (as the destroyer of evil). Derrida cites a more precise example from antiquity: "The Athenians regularly maintained a number of degraded and useless beings at the public expense; and when any calamity, such as plague, drought, or famine, befell the city, they sacrificed two of these outcasts as scapegoats" (Derrida, 1981, p. 133). Thus the *pharmakos* represents the evil that has infected the inside of the community, and is hence removed outside and sacrificed as a purge, a catharsis. The scapegoat's meaning is constituted both by his position within society and beyond it. The ritual examines the confines of the inside and outside, internal and external evil, and functions as both a cure and a poison. The nature of the sacrificial scapegoat is such that he is protected and honoured within the boundaries

of the community, and then feared and destroyed beyond the societal confines as the incarnation of evil: "Alarming and calming, Sacred and accursed. The conjunction, the 'coincidentia oppositorum', ceaselessly undoes itself in the passage to decision or crisis," (Derrida, 1981, p. 133). As such the *pharmakos* appears as both godlike and sinful, and the ritual as both illegal and legitimate.

2.0 Analytic Potential of Anthropological 'Scapegoat' and Literary 'Medicine' for the Interrogation of Tragedy

Yet this is also a cathartic effect. Tragedy invokes a *pharmakos*, a displaced 'other', a poison and a cure, who as a scorned and denigrated replacement is rejected by society and sacrificed as a remedy of its ills, but who also as a cult-figure, transforms the community through his death to harmony. Such *pharmakoi* are endemic in the Western tradition of tragic eponymous protagonists, dating from Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in ancient Greece, through to the English Renaissance with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and, as I will discuss in this paper, the three great tragedies by Thomas Middleton. As such dramatic Tragedy is a ritual – a ritual of death. These threads of Platonic *pharmakon*, Derridean *pharmakos*, and Tragedy as Cathartic ritual are drawn together by the eminent literary critic René Girard in his anthropological study of the origins of human culture. Having argued that the Platonic *pharmakon* functions akin to the *pharmakos*-figure, Girard concludes that the literary catharsis of tragic drama imitates the scapegoat ritual inherent within all human culture:

> Plato's pharmakon is like Aristotle's katharsis. And whatever their philosophic intentions may have been, it was their literary intuition that led these two men to select terms that seem suggestive but the full pertinence of which may have escaped them. In both cases the metaphor is used 'innocently', in the sense that the misapprehension that characterizes all sacrificial ceremonies is innocent. In discovering, as we believe we have done, that these metaphors and their respective objects conceal the same process, we have in effect discovered that the metaphoric displacement ultimately alters nothing. Behind the various metaphors a scapegoat effect can always be discerned (Girard, 1979, p. 312).

Thus we have found that many of these metaphorical terms possess the same effects, or at least, that tragedy and the idea of a composite scapegoat, a *pharmakos/pharmakon*, are closely bound. But it is within the literary genre of revenge tragedy that I believe one perceives these processes functioning most clearly. As noted above, Orestes in Aeschylus' trilogy the *Oresteia* embodies this protean identity through his agonising decision to avenge his father Agamemnon's murder by killing his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, for which he is punished and driven mad by the avenging Furies. Orestes is hence both a cure (avenger of patricide) and a poison (committer of matricide), a figure both inside (family member) and outside (absent innocent child) of the central action, performing a ritual of cleansing (revenge) only to embody evil as the punished scapegoat (purging the dynasty and city). A similar process is discernable in the patricide/matricide dilemma of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and as a tragic *pharmakos*/*pharmakon* composite figure the Danish prince is himself ultimately sacrificed in a bloody ritual of cleansing. As famous

literary exempla of revenge tragedy much has been written upon these plays, but it is in three revenge tragedies of Thomas Middleton (and his co-writers) that I wish to tease out these processes.

2.1 Pharmakos/Pharmakon and *The Revenger's Tragedy*

In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, published anonymously in 1607, one finds that the central protagonist Vindice embarks on a career of revenge that he pursues throughout the play, until finally he is condemned by the free confession of his own acts. The play world is staged in Italy (a proverbial locus of moral corruption for Jacobean Englishmen)[2] and is shown to be endemic with evil, although a sub-plot redeems the drama's atmosphere from universalised pessimism. I wish to argue that one can deconstruct the play's structure and language to discern the three-fold processes of a *pharmakos/pharmakon* dialectic, a complex scapegoat ritual, and an infinite deferral of closure. Vindice appears as a *pharmakos*, a scapegoat, who is ambivalent in his effects, his position, his role, and his tragic status. He possesses a locational equivocality, belonging neither to the Court nor to the country, but moves freely and nimbly within and between the two. In his role as Hippolito's brother he holds himself deliberately aloof from the patronage-sphere, asking 'How go things at Court?' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 7; I, i, 51), and watching the Ducal procession that initiates the play in a detached and objectified disposition. Disguised as Piato, Vindice becomes one with the Court world by his overt appropriation of the prevalent manners, lechery, and mercantile pandering. His linguistic parody of the base servant-knave who lusts with and for his master engenders for him a surrogate position within this world. Lussurioso, the Duke's sexually licentious son, replies to Piato/Vindice: 'So, thou'rt confirmed in me / And thus I enter thee' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 22; I, iii, 87-88), clearly thereby embodying a substitute role (through an overtly sexual pun), and revealing his true position as inherently ambiguous:

> VIND: What brother, am I far enough from myself?
> HIPP: As if another man had been sent whole
> Into the world and none wist how he came.
> VIND: It will confirm me bold – the child o' the Court;
> Let blushes dwell i' the country.
> (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, pp. 18-19; I, iii, 1-5)

To his mother and sister, Vindice appears as a typical 'slave' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 25; I, iii, 179), a base member of the court, whose position there is not due to his nobility but to his servility, and as such is a fringe and utilitarian element. Before his family he "will apply myself / Unto the self-same form, forget my nature, / As if no part about me were kin

[2] For a specific study of the socio-political meaning of the locus of Italy in Middleton's revenge tragedy, see Bruzzi, Zara, & Bromham, A. A. (1993). 'The Soil Alters: Y'are in Another Country': Multiple Perspectives and Political Resonances in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. In Michele Marrapodi, A. J. Hoenselaars, Marcello Cappuzzo, & Santucci, F. Falzon (Eds.), *Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama* (pp. 251-71). Manchester: Manchester UP.

to ‘em,” (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 25; I, iii, 181-83) thus denying his natural identity and procreation. The second role that Vindice plays for Lussurioso is 'himself' – although of course there is no such essentialist construct – or rather he is known as Vindice but yet he appropriates a foreign 'apparel' and 'tongue' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 76; IV, ii, 23, 26). He thus professes to be a countryman who 'Keeps at home, full of want and discontent' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 73; IV, i, 47), and yet we have seen him already active within the Court in which he is completely at ease and where he has earned his keep. Yet Lussurioso exclaims that 'There’s hope in him, for discontent and want / Is the best clay to mould a villain of' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 73; IV, i, 48-49), despite it being apparent that the source and residency of villainy is the Court and not the country.

Accordingly Vindice is presented as an inside and outside figure, one who belongs and yet is also an impostor both within and beyond the Court. Even his 'true' character appropriates a disguise, and his protean roleplaying presents him as a strangely objectified 'presence' in a solipsistic world. He belongs to neither environment, nor to any individual, not even to his brother Hippolito who asks, “Why may not I partake with you? You vowed once / To give me share to every tragic thought” (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 58; III, v, 5-6). Vindice appears as the *pharmakos/pharmakon*, is not closed in upon himself with an inside and an outside, but is affected by the whole lexicon of which he is a part. He both belongs and is excluded, he is appropriated and repudiated, and we conclude that he has no inherent essence, for even his actions appear as one with the other Courtly characters who are all infused and infected (*pharmakon/pharmakos)* with the pernicious atmosphere of their environment:

> The 'essence' of the pharmakon lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no 'proper' characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a substance (Derrida, 1981, pp. 125-26).

The central ambivalence of Vindice’s actions is due to his desire to purge the Court of corruption, yet in so doing he saturates it with murder, the very action he is repudiating. He thus embodies the equivocal nature of the *pharmakon*, both a poison and a cure, for the process of purification is also a production of the disease. Vindice starts in Act one Scene three seeking revenge on the Duke, and he murders him in Act three Scene five. In Act two Scene two he commits himself to kill Lussurioso, which he fulfils in Act five Scene three. He also murders three lords in the last Scene, helps condemn a noble – '[Aside] You’ve sentenced well' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 98; V, i, 127), and promotes the general machinations of the other malignant courtiers. Yet Vindice also claims to be a purger, a true redresser of wrongs, an Hippolito from Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) – the early influential model for Elizabethan revenge tragedies - or Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, who are 'authorised' by the dramatic sentiment of the play to seek revenge:

> VIND: Now to my tragic business. Look you brother,
> I have not fashioned this only for show
> And useless property, no – it shall bear a part
> E’en in it own revenge. This very skull,
> Whose mistress the duke poisoned with this drug,
> The mortal curse of the earth, shall be revenged

In the like strain and kiss his lips to death.
As much as the dumb thing can, he shall feel;
What fails in poison we'll supply in steel.
HIPP: Brother I do applaud thy constant vengeance,
The quaintness of thy malice, above thought.
(*The Revenger's Tragedy*, pp. 61-62; III, v, 98-108)

Herein one sees the literalisation of the metaphor, the embodiment of the abstract, the linguistic interplay between *pharmakon/pharmakos* transformed into the tragic actuality of vengeance. Vindice conducts his 'tragic business' (p. 98) of 'revenge' (p. 101) by administering his cure or *pharmakon* through the 'drug' (p. 102) of 'poison' (pp. 102; 106) placed upon the lips of his mistress, herself also poisoned 'In the like strain' (104). Vindice is both a symbolic and a literal *pharmakon*, administering a cure through the drug of a metaphoric and literal poison, 'the duke poisoned with this drug' (p. 102) by the lips of the 'mistress the duke poisoned' (p. 102). Hippolito's response reveals the poison in Vindice's remedy, 'The quaintness of thy malice' (p. 108), which indicates the mixed metaphorical nature of the *pharmakos*, the conjunction of opposites, the scapegoat who effects a cathartic purge by incarnating the corrupting evil of his object. In Girard's discussion of the scapegoat ritual of the *pharmakos* he argues that 'the sacrificial act appears as both sinful and saintly, an illegal as well as legitimate exercise of violence' (Girard, 1979, p. 20). There is a displacement of violence upon a surrogate victim who is initiated into the violence of the play-world in order to be expelled beyond it along with the malignancy which he has come to embody:

VIND: are we not revenged?
Is there one enemy left alive amongst those?
'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes.
(*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 109; V, iii, 110-12)

Girard argues that ritual and violence are inseparable. The masque that concludes the final Act of *The Revenger's Tragedy* presents a traditional motif of vengeance[3] - Supervacuo (the Duchess's 'idiot' son) acknowledges as much by sagely arguing: "A masque is treason's licence:…/ 'Tis murder's best face, when a vizard's on!" (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 100; V, i, 177-78). It is a ceremony of death, and is the authoritative embodiment of pernicious disguise that Vindice has been role-playing throughout the drama. Lussurioso exclaims that "Those in the masque did murder us" (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 107; V, iii, 70), and of course he is both correct and incorrect, deceived and yet perspicacious. Once again, reality is ambivalent, just as language is equivocal. Indeed, this Jacobean drama reveals the same semiotic *différance* as Derrida unearthed concerning the *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus*. At the moment of his death in the play the Duke is shown by Vindice the poisoned skull of his mistress through which the revenger has effected his

[3] Arguably the most famous example of a play within a play, or a masque within a drama, which functions as a motif of vengeance, is the Mousetrap enactment in Act three Scene two of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603). For a general study on this subject in English Renaissance drama consult Ide, Richard S. (1981, Aug.). Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy and the Providential Play-within-a-Play. *Iowa State Journal of Research,* 56 (1), 91-96.

cure: “View it well; ‘tis the skull / Of Gloriana, whom thou poisonedst last”; to which the Duke replies: 'Oh ’t’as poisoned me!' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 63; III, v, 148-50). Here one can see the ambiguity between poison and cure. The Duke used poison to kill Gloriana paradoxically as a remedy for his lust. However, poison is also used by Vindice upon Gloriana to kill the Duke, and thus fulfil Vindice’s desire for revenge.[4] It is reminiscent of the deadly poison hemlock that Plato calls a *pharmakon* in *Phaedo*, which is transformed by the text to be both a poison which literally kills Socrates while simultaneously being a cure which enables Socrates to perceive the reality of the Forms upon death (Derrida, 1981, p. 126-27). In Middleton’s play the mother Gratiana exclaims to her daughter Castiza “Oh see, I spoke those words, and now they poison me” (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 92; IV, iv, 137), and is chastised for her 'infect persuasions' (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 91; IV, iv, 129) that both poison and cure the family’s hopes for advancement. Language is thus a *pharmakon*, an ambivalent tool, a remedy and a poison, which has no intrinsic value beyond the play of its own textuality.

Also noticeable within *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is an infinite deferral of closure. The original act of revenge was the death of the Duke, and this is accomplished in the third Act. However, Vindice is committed to kill Lussurioso by Act two, and is implicated in the defence of his sister’s honour and achieving his mother’s 'redemption' throughout the middle acts. Act five sees the death of Lussurioso, all the major conspirators, as well as Vindice and Hippolito. Girard argues that revenge is an interminable process – unless some transcendent quality pervades the ceremony transforming it into a sacrificial rite. In the play Antonio the nobleman perceives this endless continuity of violent retribution, retorting to the murderers (who are claiming that they are simply the punishers of crime, the purgers of poison effecting a cure): “You that would murder him would murder me!” (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. 108; V, iii, 107), hence revealing the self-orientated protection of authority as the paramount priority rather than the restitution of justice with the punishment of wrongdoing.

2.2 Pharmakos/Pharmakon and *Women Beware Women*

Thomas Middleton’s Jacobean tragedy entitled *Women Beware Women* was performed probably in 1621 and has a more complex and diffused structure than that found in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, with no single character to unite the action but a pervasive tragic atmosphere descending to a massive purgatorial denouement. Bianca is habitually perceived as the most central character, with the play’s title suggesting a concentration upon the inadvertent betrayal of Bianca by her mother-in-law in the main plot, and Livia’s deception of her niece Isabella in the subplot. Once again one can trace the effects of the *pharmakos/pharmakon* through the play’s structure and language, revealing the textual ambivalence and semantic equivocation apparent in the tragic genre of literature. Bianca’s position within the play is constantly changing, and is never truly stable. Her role is continually equivocal, never belonging entirely either to herself, her husband Leantio, or

[4] See Gottlieb, Christine M. (2015, Spring). Middleton's Traffic in Dead Women: Chaste Corpses as Property in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Lady's Tragedy*. *English Literary Renaissance* 45 (2), 255-274 for a study of the relationship between female chastity, sexual violence, and poison in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*.

her lover the Duke of Florence, and being neither of the bourgeois or the working class. She possesses no 'substance', no immutable position, and even the attributes which control her destiny – beauty and virtue – are inherently transient and subjective. Bianca is a member of a rich Venetian family, a stranger to necessity who "could wrangle / For what I wanted when I was two hours old" (*Women Beware Women*, 1975, p. 76; III, i, 57-58). The play opens with the revelation of her elopement, the rejection of paternal authority and conventional respectability in favour of sexual liberation beyond the confines of societal restraints. This is a fundamentally ambivalent position, being neither single nor married, neither socially respected nor criminally condemned.[5] Bianca marries Leantio, but she does not live with her husband (apart from when on their honeymoon, which is itself another liminal phase), appearing as married and yet deserted, possessing a mother-in-law but no spouse. She has also abandoned her bourgeois contentment, and has entered a life of need, desire, resentment, containment, and work: "Must I live in want, / Because my fortune matched me with your son?" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 75; III, i, 45-46).

The famous chess scene in Act two Scene two illustrates the ambivalence of Bianca's position. She is married and yet unprotected, and is constantly referred to as 'stranger', an equivocal and crucial word in this play. The scene is staged as a seduction, with Guardiano 'softening her up' with erotic paintings in preparation for the Duke's embraces, and yet in fact it is clearly a rape. It is an exercise of power by the bourgeoisie upon the working class, and it is Bianca's socially ambivalent position that makes this so easily possible. She becomes the Duke's mistress – once again a socially unacceptable marginalised role with no security, position, or substance – neither a wife nor a woman, but a sexual object to be bought, maintained, and hidden from general consumption. Finally Bianca the wife of Leantio becomes the Duke's betrothed and we perceive her —and the play is insistent that we 'view' Bianca voyeuristically—in that liminal stage as neither married nor single (despite the Duke saying "Her husband dies tonight" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 133; IV, i, 271)), wife nor mistress (the Duke has "vowed / Never to know her as a strumpet more" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 133; IV, i, 268-69)), bourgeois nor mercantile:

> The path now
> I tread is honest, leads to lawful love,
> Which virtue in her strictness would not check.
> I vowed no more to keep a sensual woman:
> 'Tis done, I mean to make a lawful wife of her.
> (*Women Beware Women*, p. 148; IV, iii, 28-32)

Bianca is thus ontologically, materially, and locationally ambivalent. In most of Middleton's plays the discovery of the semantic meaning of names through etymology or translation is highly pertinent, and the Italian 'Bianca' is particularly equivocal, suggesting 'pure' or merely 'blank', a tabula rasa to be written upon by all and sundry. She is another inside/outside character who belongs to no-one, nothing, and nowhere: even her mother-in-

[5] This is a liminal position that is commonly scrutinised and condemned in literature; for instance the case of Lydia Bennett's elopement with Mr Wickham in Chapter forty-six of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

law states that "she's a stranger" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 58; II, ii, 219), a categorisation to which Bianca herself concurs: "And I a stranger" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 69; II, ii, 430). The *pharmakos* is again present in the text, the equivocal figure who belongs neither inside nor outside of society, the scapegoat who belongs to no-one and possesses nothing. Bianca is both venerated and hated, worshipped in Act one by Leantio for her beauty, 'that treasure' (*Women Beware Women*, p. 6; I, i, 14), while she remains an innocent receptacle to embody and be 'bold with death and deeds of ruin' (*Women Beware Women*, p. 64, II, ii, 351), and then despised and rejected as a bestial 'other':

> Why, here's a sin made, and ne'er a conscience put to't;
> A monster with all forehead, and no eyes.
> Why do I talk to thee of sense or virtue,
> That art as dark as death?
> (*Women Beware Women*, p. 124; IV, i, 92-95)

Bianca is also a *pharmakon*, a poison and a cure. Livia is begged by her brother Hippolito to assist him to their niece Isabella's bed, and she agrees to help him to this 'forbidden' act by a "minister [of] all cordials" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 36; II, i, 47-48), espousing the reductive duality of the *pharmakon* itself: "Love, thou shalt see me do a strange cure then, / As e'er was wrought on a disease so mortal, / And near akin to shame" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 37; II, i, 50-52). Thus a 'cure' is defined as the satisfaction of an immoral sexual desire, and this is precisely what Bianca's rape secures for the Duke, and is described in metaphorical terms:

> Strive not to seek
> Thy liberty, and keep me still in prison. {*Draws her arms round him*}
> I'faith you shall not out, till I'm released now;
> We'll be both freed together, or stay still by't;
> So is captivity pleasant.
> (*Women Beware Women*, pp. 63-64; II, ii, 329-33)

However, this cure, this act of liberty, this release from bondage, is for Bianca a poison, a destruction of moral and physical health: "Yet since mine honour's leprous, why should I / Preserve that fair that caused the leprosy? / Come poison all at once" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 69; II, ii, 424-26).

Yet paradoxically Bianca soon comes to relish this poison, this cure, as she rejects Leantio and seemingly genuinely falls in love with the Duke. This poison is a virtue, and her adulterous lust with the Duke is her fulfilment. However, the ambiguous non-essence of the *pharmakon* cannot be circumscribed and its ambiguity grows. Hippolito, being deceived by the proposed marriage between his sister Livia and the nobleman Vincentio, plans to kill the problematic lover Leantio "'to purge the air / Of this corruption, fear it spread too far, / And poison the whole hopes of this fair fortune." (*Women Beware Women*, p. 134; IV, ii, 14-16). Bianca also wishes to commit murder, to remove a problem person, for the Cardinal threatens to prevent her marriage to the Duke, likewise to "poison the whole hopes of this fair fortune." The metaphor of the *pharmakon* becomes literal as Bianca attempts to poison the Cardinal, yet the *pharmakon* is forever ambivalent, and it is the betrothed Duke who

mistakenly drinks the philtre, the medicine, the poison, the cure. As in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Hamlet* this Aristotelian 'peripeteia' or reversal of fortune takes place during a masque, the ritual of death commonplace in revenge tragedy.[6] The poison kills the beloved and not his despised brother, the temporal Duke instead of the spiritual Cardinal, for "Oh with the poison / That was prepared for thee, thee, Cardinal!" (*Women Beware Women*, p. 166; V, ii, 190-92). A tragedy is invoked, a purge of the sick play world, poison and cure forever intermingled, such that Bianca - in an perverse re-enactment of Vindice's remedy of the Duke's fatal kiss of Gloriana's poisoned lips in *The Revenger's Tragedy* – takes revenge upon herself by kissing the lips of her oxymoronic beloved victim: "Accursed error! / Give me thy last breath, thou infected bosom, / And wrap two spirits in one poisoned vapour" {*Kisses the Duke's body*}' (*Women Beware Women*, p. 166; V, ii, 192-94). The *pharmakon* proves to be interminable, paradoxical, uncontrollable, transcendent:

> That Providence that has made ev'ry poison
> Good for some use, and sets four warring elements
> At peace in man, can make a harmony
> In things that are most strange to human reason.
> (*Women Beware Women*, p. 25; I, ii, 179-82)

Due perhaps to the diffused structure of *Women Beware Women* which lacks a single central protagonist, one perceives a number of *pharmakoi* or scapegoats. One such figure is Leantio, who is an inside/outside liminal entity who is sacrificed to purge the dramatic arena. The play's main plot has a source in the Old Testament book of *The Second Book of Samuel* chapters eleven and twelve – the famous story of King David's illicit desire for Bathsheba. David perceives Bathsheba, who was married to the absent Uriah the Hittite, and lusted after her. He sent for her, slept with her, and sent her away. But it became necessary to remove Uriah, the undesirable supplement, and David arranged for him to be murdered in battle, and afterwards David marries Bathsheba himself. This biblical source text presents the same plot elements as found in *Women Beware Women*, the same necessity to purge the evil of his sexual lust by the death of the offended individual, the husband, and the identical voyeuristic treatment of the female body as the object of lust: "…from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon'," (The Holy Bible, 1977, p. 11: 2). In Middleton's tragedy Leantio is the scapegoat; he continually enters and leaves the Court, being both a factor and a fort commander, and while within the patronage circle he is recognised and rewarded: "All preferment / That springs from sin and lust, it shoots up quickly…" (*Women Beware Women*, pp. 92; III, iii, 47-48). However, Leantio is rejected and removed from Court, the inner body, and becomes the embodiment of the lust and corruption that permeates that place, and he must be sacrificed as a diseased cathartic scapegoat to cure the Court:

> HIPP: I'll imitate the pities of old surgeons

[6] For a recent study of the masque as a locus for violence in *Women Beware Women*, see Kolkovich, Elizabeth Zeman (2014). 'Drabs of State Vext': Violent Female Masquers in Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. In Mara R. Wade (Ed.), *Gender Matters: Discourses of Violence in Early Modern Literature and the Arts* (pp. 295-306). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

To this lost limb, who ere they show their art
Cast one asleep, then cut the diseased part.
So out of love to her I pity most,
She shall not feel him going till he's lost,
Then she'll commend the cure.
DUKE: The great cure's past;
I count this done already. His wrath's sure,
And speaks an injury deep;
(*Women Beware Women*, pp. 128-29; IV, i, 171-78)

Leantio is thus 'lost' – damned and irrecoverably defiled by sin – and as such he must be severed from the main body as a restorative to that. He is a 'limb' that must be removed because it embodies and contains all the sickness of the whole body, and its sacrifice sanctifies the survival of the whole. Once again the scapegoat ritual of the *pharmakos* is indistinguishable from the poison and cure dialectic of the *pharmakon*.

2.3 Pharmakos/Pharmakon and *The Changeling*

Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's play *The Changeling* possesses a linear plot controlled by the behaviour and ensuing psychological development of two central characters. De Flores, homonymically the 'de-flowerer', is both a *pharmakos*, a scapegoat[7], and a *pharmakon*, a poison and a cure, an inside and an outside, a semiotic equivocation. Beatrice Joanna, as the early Seventeenth-century nomenclature suggests[8], is also inherently contradictory, reflecting the antitheses of virtue and vice, purity and filth. She is the driving force behind the plot, and as such both includes and excludes others from the centre of concern. Each time that Beatrice believes that she can control and direct her destiny, a problem arises, and the restitution of these difficulties always involves the supplement of third individual. As her problems usually concern the removal of an undesirable individual, there is an element of triangularity, a series of tripartite relationships that deconstruct, the addition of a supplement to facilitate a subtraction. It is Beatrice's inability to control her destiny that engenders her need for an 'other' who will in turn

[7] For an entirely different perspective upon the concept of the scapegoat in *The Changeling*, see Stockton, Sharon (1990, Fall). The 'broken rib of mankind': The Socio-political Function of the Scapegoat in *The Changeling*. *Papers on Language and Literature*, 26 (4), 459–77.

[8] In an Early Modern context the name Beatrice Joanna was associated with antithetical moral and spiritual values: Beatrice is the pilgrim's guide through Heaven in the third part of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, exemplifying the ultimate purification of (wo-)mankind; while the name Joanna was 'one of the commonest names among servant girls at the time' (Loomba, Ania, 1989, p. 96). *Gender, race, Renaissance drama*. Manchester: Manchester University Press), and suggested moral laxity or even prostitution. In William Power's (1960) well-known interpretation of Beatrice Joanna's name, the name's use is ironic, since, rather than "being 'she who makes happy' (Beatrice) and 'the Lord's grace' (Joanna), Beatrice-Joanna brings misery upon her father and her husband, death to De Flores and to the man she was to marry, moral destruction and death to Diaphanta, and to herself death and (as at least she thinks) damnation." (Middleton's Way with Names. *Notes and Queries*, 7, 26-29, 56-60, 95-98, 136-40, 175-79.).

demand recompense. Hence Beatrice's problem, an unwanted second, necessitates the addition of a supplementary third, which itself becomes an unwanted second, ad infinitum.

Beatrice begins the play betrothed to Alonzo, but he soon develops into an unwanted addition when she perceives a superior replacement: "Sure, mine eyes were mistaken: / This was the man was meant me," (*The Changeling*, p. 9; I, i, 83-84). However, she is constitutionally unable to act herself, hiding even from her own comprehension behind a façade of purity, the 'Beatrice' predominating over the 'Joanna'. This passive helplessness necessitates a supplement to effect a cure, and this cure is itself a poison, described synecdochically by Beatrice in the form of the Edenic snake: "Murder I see is followed by more sins. / Was my creation in the womb so curst / It must engender with a viper first" (*The Changeling*, p. 69; III, iv, 163-65)? The *pharmakon* consists of both a supplement and a subtraction, a cure and a poison. De Flores is the supplement who subtracts Alonzo from the tripartite due to the betrothed's sexual claims on Beatrice, but leaving Beatrice with a further problem – the sexual demands of De Flores himself. However, as the supplement De Flores cannot be transcended, and accordingly Beatrice has bound herself to an unsuspected third by the removal of an unwanted second, as is made clear to her by De Flores as he demands the recompense of Beatrice's warm body for the 'deed' of Alonzo's cold body[9]:

> …settle you
> In what the act has made you; y'are no more now.
> You must forget your parentage to me:
> Y'are the deed's creature; by that name you lost
> Your first condition; and I challenge you
> As peace and innocency has turned you out
> And made you one with me.
> (*The Changeling*, p. 68; III, iv, 134-40)

This triumvirate of subject, supplement and subtraction manifests itself throughout the play's structure. The presence of the *pharmakon* is universal, the interaction of poison and cure interminable. Later in the plot Beatrice is once again presented with a problem: this time it is her newly-wed husband Alsemero and his demand for a virginal bride. She turns to her maid Diaphanta as her virginal supplement, who also becomes an actual physical substitute – once again the metaphor is made literal – "Because she lies for me" (*The Changeling*, p. 74; IV, i, 82). Yet this supplement will not accept the temporary nature of her supplementarity, instead usurping Beatrice's role as the genuine subject. Accordingly Diaphanta becomes a *pharmakon*, embodying the duality of the poison/cure conundrum, the physical solution to Alsemero's crude virgin-test, yet 'no remedy… This strumpet serves her own ends, "tis apparent now" (*The Changeling*, pp. 97, 95; V, i, 28, 2). This precipitates Beatrice to intervene once again to control her own love-life, and once again she can only function through the intermediary De Flores to remove the self-inflicted cancer Diaphanta.

[9] For a Socio-historical analysis of Beatrice the victim's collaboration with her rapist De Flores, see Burks, Deborah G. (2001). 'I'll Want My Will Else': *The Changeling* and Women's Complicity with their Rapists. In Stevie Simkin (Ed.), *Revenge Tragedy* (pp. 163-89). Basingstoke, England: Palgrave.

Hence a new triumvirate emerges, with Beatrice as the subject, De Flores as supplement, and Diaphanta as subtraction. Beatrice needs De Flores to preserve the façade of her nomenclature – the Lord's grace and spiritual guide – being 'forced to love thee now, / "Cause thou provid'st so carefully for my honour," (*The Changeling*, p. 98; V, i, 47-48). In time Diaphanta is removed – displaced by a supplement who cures Beatrice's problems albeit that, "The very sight of him is poison to he" (*The Changeling*, p. 81; IV, ii, 98), – and Beatrice is again left the true subject but with a new problem: the increasingly obvious relationship between herself and De Flores, the subject and supplement:

> How comes this tender reconcilement else
> 'Twixt you and your despite, your rancorous loathing,
> De Flores? He that your eye was sore at sight of,
> He's now become your arms' supporter, your
> Lips' saint!
> (*The Changeling*, p. 109; V, iii, 49-53)

Finally both subject and supplement are thrown together, are united by the power of a third – Alsemero. The supplement to the subject is revealed to be the true content of the subject, the reality behind the façade. 'Beatrice' the saint is revealed as 'Joanna' the whore, "beauty changed / To ugly whoredom" (*The Changeling*, p. 117; V, iii, 197-98), and she is coupled with De Flores the factor. 'Beatrice' is merely a substitute for 'Joanna', and is subtracted to leave the thing itself, uniting subject and supplement, Joanna and De Flores:

> Beneath the stars, upon yon meteor {*Pointing to De Flores*}
> Ever hung my fate, 'mongst things corruptible;
> I ne'er could pluck it from him. My loathing
> Was prophet to the rest, but ne'er believed;
> Mine honour fell with him, and now my life.
> (*The Changeling*, p. 115; V, iii, 154-58)

In addition to a structure of supplementarity and subtraction in *The Changeling*, one discovers a pervasive inversion of the meaning of action. Consistently in the play, acts of liberation become processes of incarceration. This is the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*, where a simple direct meaning is established only to be inverted by the uncontrollable ambiguity of language and robbed of its intended semantic effect. Thus Beatrice liberates herself from Alonzo, only to be blackmailed by De Flores; she frees herself from a patriarchal father-figure Vermandero through marriage, only for him to be supplanted by a husband Alsemero; Beatrice confesses to murder to Alsemero, hoping to prove her devotion, yet only achieves her literal incarceration in a closet – ironically the same location in which she'd been freely and illicitly coupling with De Flores; Beatrice escapes condemnation by means of the trick of the alchemy-test for chastity, only to be supplanted from Alsemero's bed by the genuine virgin Diaphanta. The chemical 'truth' prevents Beatrice's exposure of the physical truth, and so one liberation necessitates a further bitter surrender.

Coupled with the ambiguity of the *pharmakon* in *The Changeling*, one also perceives the tragic *pharmakos* figure. De Flores is a scapegoat, being both within Vermandero's household and yet outside the family circle, a subordinate and yet a

controller of affairs, a doter yet a richly idiosyncratic and autonomous individual. As noted above, he is both a cure and a poison in Beatrice's affairs, remedying all her problems and yet fouls her very being. Beatrice first describes De Flores as one whom "They must abandon as a deadly poison / Which to a thousand other tastes were wholesome", to which Alsemero replies, understanding more deeply the paradoxical nature of medicine, "There's scarce a thing but is both loved and loathed," (*The Changeling*, pp. 10-11; I, i, 110-11, 124). Later in the play Beatrice recognizes De Flores' ambiguous nature and specifically the functional value for which she can use him: "Why, men of art make much of poison, / Keep one to expel another. Where was my art?" (*The Changeling*, p. 38; II, ii, 46-47). Tomazo, a Lordly revenger, also perceives De Flores as "most deadly venomous," (*The Changeling*, p. 103; V, ii, 17), and insistently uses the term 'poison' to describe both the nature and actions of De Flores[10]. The disillusioned Beatrice ultimately connects the *pharmakon* De Flores with Satan the tempter, both in the Edenic allusion from Act III of De Flores the viper, and her creation and sins quoted above, and at the dénouement of the play in Act V at her moment of confession:

> I have kissed poison for it, stroked a serpent:
> That thing of hate – worthy in my esteem
> Of no better employment, and him most worthy
> To be so employed.
> (*The Changeling*, p. 110; V, iii, 66-69)

De Flores is both worthy and unworthy, the recipient of love and of hate, and like his symbolic referent the Devil is ontologically and aetiologically ambivalent as both Lucifer, the bringer of light, and Satan, the adversary.

3.0 Conclusion

In conclusion therefore it is apparent in the revenge tragedies of Thomas Middleton that the *pharmakos/pharmakon* dialectic is radically ambivalent, and that this is due to the equivocal nature of language and textuality itself in which stable meanings are perpetually and necessarily deconstructed. Jacques Derrida's dismantling of Plato's myth of the genesis of writing becomes a general revelation of semiotic and semantic dislocation in which the radical ambiguity of the *pharmakon* as both poison and cure is played out. When this post-structuralist critique of language is combined with René Girard's anthropological theory of the *pharmakos* or scapegoat as the sacrificial ritual that underlies Western culture, one is made aware of its analytic potential for the interrogation of literary Tragedy. Akin to Aristotle's concept of *catharsis* - which is commonly interpreted as meaning the purgation of fear and pity - one perceives in tragedy, and in particular in Jacobean revenge tragedy, a dramatization of the sacrifice of the tragic scapegoat figure, who as an inherently ambivalent agent of purgation through revenge – being both inside and outside of society,

[10] See for instance, *The Changeling*, V, ii, 18, 29, 31.

both a poison and a cure, both a supplement and a subtraction - is removed to cleanse the playworld of sickness and restore its health.

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