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Baroque equivocation: Shakespeare's All's Well that Ends Well

*The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.
Shakespeare, All's Well That Ends Well (IV, 3, 68-9).*

*Nothing was more natural than that these things should be the
other thing that they absolutely were not.*

Henry James, The Turn of the Screw (327).

Sophie Menoux
University of La Réunion¹

Nowhere better than in Shakespeare's problem plays can one understand the baroque and its reliance on intermediate, liminal experience and language. *All's Well That Ends Well* (1603-04), contrary to the promises of simplicity and happiness stated in the programmatic title, is indeed a perfectly dazzling example of the interplay of nature and artifice, truth and lies, paradoxes and truths, life and death, desire and taboos characteristic of the in-betweenness, the liminality of baroque imagination. Baroque aesthetics can be described as an aesthetics of the web, of interwoven patterns, relying on interlacing, intertwining, twisting, gnarling distortions and generalised duplication, to such an extent that language itself, in its very search for univocal definitions of commonly accepted notions (virtue, love, modesty, honour for example) functions as a mask, a screen. This indeed foreshadows the modernist (and even post-

¹ Université de La Réunion, 15, av. René Cassin, 97715 Saint Denis Messag CEDEX 9 (France).

modernism) playful reversals of perspectives, overlappings of limits, passages from internal to external realms, from life to death, from plenitude to emptiness; those passages themselves are reversed, as is shown in structural and stylistic devices akin to *trompe-l'oeil* or anamorphosis: frames are warped and overflowed by the irruption of physical desire, the emergence of drives and instincts hardly contained within the framework of the Morality play or the original *novella* by Bocaccio.¹ Indeed, what is striking is the plasticity and reversibility of life and social values.

All's Well That Ends Well no doubt appears as a superlatively baroque play, indebted to the tradition of euphemism and conceits, a tradition that heavily relies on (sometimes artificial) chiasmatic structures and oxymora. The very first line of the play testifies to this, based as it is on the reversal of words, meant to trap language in a network of ambiguities and antitheses. "In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband," (AW, I, 1), the Countess says, striking the peculiar, paradoxical note of this strange play, since it conjures up both images of delivery and burial, birth and death, beginning and end, mirth and grief. Quibbles and puns here are not merely grotesque and funny; they are only some of the numerous examples of the generalised equivocation and duplicity of language when it is based on the exhibition of doubling and duplication processes. Featuring a character called Parolles ("Words") who is described as "an equivocal companion" (V, iii, 246), the play thus questions the nature and function of language itself.

Equivocation first refers to the linguistic meaning of words, its closest synonym being "ambiguity of expression," *double-entendre*, prevarication, evasion and quibbling. In other words, to equivocate is to say one thing and mean another by using expressions susceptible of a double meaning, especially with a purpose to mislead.

The duplicity of such duplication calls for a questioning of communication on the theatre stage, a reflection on the nature and function of jokes, of the comic, of humour in baroque plays like *All's Well That Ends Well*. The comic and language are to be examined in their relation to the Unconscious as defined by Freud in his essays on jokes (Freud: 1905) and humour (Freud: 1927). This

¹ It is a well-known fact that Shakespeare's source here was the adaptation by William Painter in his *Palace of Pleasure* (1566, 1569 and 1575) both of the ninth novel of the third day in Bocaccio's *Decameron* and its French version by Antoine le Maçon.

relation conditions the structuring of the multi-layered significance of the play, the Shakespearean opposition of appearances as opposed to hidden, real motives, being somehow unified thanks to its baroquely oxymoronic themes.

Equivocation also structures characterisation, since the portrayal of personalities, on the theatre stage, cannot be separated from their linguistic and bodily expression. Equivocal expression is of course particularly relevant to *ambivalent* characters. Besides, equivocation also structures the plot itself, and contributes to the highly *ambiguous* aspect of this "problem play." Equivocal situations function as a screen blurring and filtering communication with the audience. The process of unveiling is achieved thanks to the very action of veiling, the discovery of truth in its crudest form (desire) is achieved through disguise.

On the most apparent level, then, equivocation is just another name for the numerous puns and quibbles which pepper the play. All dictionaries define quibbles as plays on the polysemy of words. A quibble, or joke, enacts both a *condensation* (because, like all figures of speech, its efficiency depends on its skilful economy of means and of affects) and a *substitution* of signifiers. In its elaboration, the quibble shifts the stream of thought by shifting the psychological stress from the initial theme to a different, more revealing theme. Let's remember that jokes are superlatively theatrical, since, again according to Freud, the presence of onlookers (here the audience) between the addresser and the addressee is necessary. Yet, if the condensation of meaning generates a comical effect for Shakespeare's contemporaneous audience, it obliges contemporary readers to resort to editors' notes: there starts imperfect communication. The audience, it must be noted, functions as a "third person," both present (on the level of narration) and absent (from the plot or narrative) and yet structurally essential to the play as an aesthetic artefact. Indeed, the audience is alternately summoned or dismissed, conjured up or conjured away, subjected to — and, ultimately, the victim of — a kind of "*fort-da*" game between the agencies involved in such communication. Indeed, equivocation interferes with communication, except in two cases: firstly, Helena's soliloquy in Act I, which dispels any equivocation as to her inner motives; then, the scene staging Parolles taken in by the Moscovite language of his pseudo-torturers: at that point, the audience and the soldiers are "in the know" (it's *fake* Moscovite). These are rare, genuine moments of comedy, at the expense of the character. Yet these two counter-examples are not sufficient to compensate for Shakespeare's blurring tactic:

equivocation generally deprives the audience of the power to master plots and meanings.

Moreover, as Freud showed, because of their preconscious/unconscious status,¹ jokes are either hostile, aggressive, or obscene (death, sex and power are at stake). Then their aim can be reached, *i. e.* a discharge of psychic excitement and a yield of pleasure obtained through a triumph over inner inhibitions, thanks to the elaborate tricks of double-faced, Janus-like wit.² In other words, in order to "evade the compulsion to suffer," jokes, the comic and humour enact "the rejection of the claims of reality and the putting through of the pleasure principle [that] bring humour near to the regressive or reactionary processes. . ." (Freud, *Humour* 428-29). The comic is thus based on disguise, masks, masquerades, and theatrical space appears as a transitional area (Winnicott: 1971), or "l'autre scène" as defined by Octave Mannoni (Mannoni: 1969).

All's Well That Ends Well stages three expert manipulators of language: Helena, Parolles and the Clown, all of them conscious linguistic technicians, overtly "playing" on words, generating a number of comical purple patches which are most revealing as to the social, conventional use of language. Among these purple patches, the famous "virginity dialogue" between Helena and Parolles (I,1) in which virginity is associated with the semantic fields of trade and war. Helena is boldly (and bawdily) urged to use virginity strategically, as the military lexicon shows, and to make profit out of its investment, as the mercantile vocabulary shows. Both treatments, both semantic fields, are indeed far from the traditional association of virginal maidenhood to modesty, honesty and virtue. Yet, by providing a third element in the quibble, her strategic (realistic) dilemma still appears as "honourable:" the use of one's virginity is in fact to be thought of as a necessary evil, a corollary to motherhood. This shows the complexity of the dilemma facing womanhood, a dilemma which is not so easily solved on the level of "reality" in Helena's case. Language here seems to provide a stage within the stage on which to experiment forbidden acts...

¹ "As regards the origin of jokes, I was led to assume that a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision" (Freud, *Jokes* 223). "A joke is thus the contribution made to the comic by the unconscious" (270).

² "... the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions with a jest" (Freud, "Humour" 428).

The conventional definition of honour as linguistically linked either to one's military glory, one's chastity, or one's reputation, finally reveals the absurdities of purely social conventions, since the word "honour" itself can be understood in several opposed meanings. The self-destructive ideal of chastity, defined as the preservation of virginity, is contrary to the ideal of motherhood (loss of virginity). This seems to imply that the preserver of social order is also the prompter of revolt against nature's determinism. Indeed, virginity is finally to be understood as a blank space, representing the virtualities inherent in nature, a meaning brought out by the potentialities of words and later of plot and subplots. This of course epitomises Shakespeare's baroque talent for enhancing the self-destructive ambivalence of words and things.

Another verbal purple patch, the equivalent of Helena's meditation on virginity, appears in Act III, Scene 2 with the Countess's meditation on virility, in relation to Bertram and the war.

... if he run away, as I hear he does;
The danger is in standin' to't; that's the loss of men,
Though it be the getting of children. (39-41)

The ambiguous puns on the war-love theme partake of the general death-life oxymoronic theme. The bold definition of masculine honour as associated with sex and death is again uncomfortably revealing and, literally, *ob-scene*: as if the silhouette of death could be seen lurking behind the curtain of the alcove: this association functions as a reminder, and discreetly constitutes a *memento mori* akin to Holbein's anamorphic oblong skull in *The Ambassadors* (1533).

In fact, in those instances, the comic does not allow a complete discharge of psychic excitement; as a consequence the audience is left with an uncanny feeling of uneasiness. Indeed such equivocation unearths the organic links between life and death and the fact that woman's identity is inevitably to be gained by undergoing the predicaments of painfully organic rites of passage (from childhood to maidenhood, to womanhood, and motherhood). This (outrageous?) insistence on an issue usually veiled under the tame game of social conventions (coyness, *amour courtois*) points to something obscene. This *ob-scene* element is the fact that violence and death are inherent in women's identity quest (Helena's, the Countess's), in the same way as the sexual act is

here considered as a rape... of Bertram: such is, perhaps, the most difficult "problem" at the core of this problem play.¹

Another famous joke in *All's Well That Ends Well* is the Helena-Parolles dialogue based on a pun on the equivocal expression "under Mars." The comic effect depends on the pronunciation, on the shift of the stress, to be placed either on "under" or on "Mars:" this perfectly epitomises the fact that language is constantly liable to reversals.

HELENA: Monsieur Parolles, you were born under a charitable star.

PAROLLES: Under Mars, I.

HELENA: I especially think under Mars.

PAROLLES: Why under Mars?

HELENA: The wars hath so kept you under that you must needs be born under Mars.

PAROLLES: When he was predominant.

HELENA: When he was retrograde, I think rather. . . . You go so much backward when you fight. (186-197)

Such quibbling underlines the non-committal aspect of popular wisdom, which is in fact suitable to any end. Gnomic sentences, the expression of commonplace "realism," appear only so as to be parodied: an ironical counterpoint is almost systematically provided by jesters like the Clown, Parolles or Lafew.

Similarly, the Clown's pun on "well" ("Tis not so well, madam" Clown, I,3) brings to light the equivocal quality of phatic language, again a social convention used to convey general sociability rather than to communicate specific meaning. This pun is continued in Act II, Scene 4 ("Is she well?") with Helena and the Clown debating the Countess's immediate situation ("not well").

HELENA: Is she well?

CLOWN: She is not well, but yet she has her health; she's very merry, but yet she is not well. (1-3)

¹ A timid recognition of the violence of Helena's seduction can be found in G. K. Hunter, Introduction to *All's Well That Ends Well* (London: Methuen, 1983), xli: "... Bertram's immature nature (unimproved by art) is unfairly forced by Helena and the King into responsibilities for which he is not yet prepared — thus he is married off without ever having 'had his fling.' Nature may truly be said to be violated if forced to produce fruit before time has matured it — but this point does not receive any clear emphasis in *All's Well*" (my italics).

The same metalinguistic comment on normally meaningless phatic language occurs (II,2) with the Clown's ejaculation "O Lord, Sir!" (l. 48). Indeed, this phatic expression is defined as an "answer that'll serve all men:" it is equivocal and void enough to fit any awkward question or situation. Here, throughout the scene, the Clown uses it successively as a reaction to embarrassing questions, then as an answer to a declaration of love, and finally as a propitiatory formula against the Countess's threats.¹ Ironically enough, the Clown's glib tongue is defeated by his body's reactions when menaced with whipping. In those cases, intended as comical though they are, humour capitalises on the undecidability of the significance of a situation in which the audience is involved as much as the locutors themselves.

Similarly to Bertram's, Parolles' ironic recantation of his own name is to be picked up, too: "I love not many words" (III, 6). This recantation obviously contradicts the "manifold linguist's" character. This pun on Parolles' name is recurrent throughout the play; it crops up again in Act IV, scene 5, with the additional pun on "beg" (which implies that language evinces economic power: "La parole est d'argent mais le silence est d'or," as the French saying goes.)

PAROLLES: I beseech your honour to hear me one single word.

LAFEW: You beg a single penny more. . . .

PAROLLES: My name, my good lord, is Parolles.

LAFEW: You beg more than one word, then. (36-39)

Now the list of puns and quibbles would be almost endless; interesting because of their revealing role, they are even more so when the dimension of mystery is added to them, when they become riddles. Riddles, enigmas, halfway between equivocation, prevarication and evasion, also stem from a play on the polysemy of words, and conceal and disclose, veil and unveil deeper meanings and motives. The cryptic first line offers such a quibble, on the serious mode, and is significant on three levels: the association of death and birth, that of son and husband (suggestive of incest), that of a chiasmatic relation between the two males (the birth of one entails the death of the other). Moreover, it points to one of the most striking intuitions of the Elizabethan dramatist, namely the conflict between fathers and sons, parents and children, a conflict structurally pregnant in the whole play. Ironically, death is once more *ob-scene*, yet structurally central,

¹ "Do you cry 'O Lord, Sir!' at your whipping, and 'spare me not'?" II, 2, 48.

since, as D. Vasse has shown, children must accept — and identify with — their fathers as mortal beings in order to accept their own mortality.¹ The end of the play accordingly culminates in the emergence of life out of death.

Dead though she be she feels her young one kick.
So there's my riddle: one that's dead is quick. (V. iii. 296)

Women in this play, especially Helena and Diana, thus express themselves mainly through riddles and conceits, since their utmost concern is that of physical desire. The virginity dialogue makes it clear: Helena's language and role are superlatively characterised by equivocation. This is also very clear in Act I scene 3, with her sibylline self-portrait: "... riddle-like [she] lives sweetly where she dies" (II. 211/12). Using language as a "chevril glove,"² she embodies the plasticity of femininity, capable of virile and dynamic action when it is needed (as Helena), passive and compliant, malleable when it is necessary (as Diana — her *Doppelgänger*). Her first lines express the dialectic relation of appearances and reality: "I do affect a sorrow but I have it too." True emotion (her sorrow because of Bertram's estrangement) will henceforth be disguised under the mask of a different, more acceptable sorrow (her grief at the Count's death).³ The same game of hide and seek will apply later on when her body and her speech are opposed; her looks then betray her emotions, despite her undeniable mastery of language: reticence, retention of information characterise her. In fact, her body is equated with truth, whereas language equates mendacity concealing a truth men have to find out.

PAROLLES: Go to, thou art a witty fool; I have found thee.

CLOWN: Did you find me in your self, sir, or were you taught to find me?
(II, 4, 31-3).

Revealingly enough, riddles are most dense and numerous whenever they are linked to the popular, fairy-tale, romance source of *All's Well That Ends Well*, and the motives of the "fulfilment of a task" and the "healing of the King." The

¹ "C'est par un long processus d'identification à un père reconnu lui-même comme mortel que l'enfant pourra vivre en mortel" (Vasse 137).

² See *Twelfth Night*, III: "A sentence is but a chevril glove to a good wit; how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!" (III, 1, 13-14).

³ To put in in James' words: "nothing was more natural than that these things should be the other things that they absolutely were not" (327).

popular folklore characters (like "the clever wench") even hark back to hagiography whose "simple forms" could be liable to a structuralist approach. This is the case of Helena, whose apparently compliant and submissive character reminds one of Griselda, and whose riddles when she performs the King's cure while evading a real definition of the medicine she has used, are mysterious for the audience. In Act IV, the King himself is taken in by her sibylline expressions about the exchange of the rings: "When back again this ring shall be delivered" (l. 60). The passive voice veils the identity of the performer/trickster of the exchange, Helena in the guise of Diana. At the same time, the stiff and remote incantatory, liturgical tone of the dialogue associated with formal couplets clearly smack of conventional genres such as the Morality play, the Mystery play or, in the field of painting, *vanitas* or *memento mori*.

Helena, for instance, is doomed to pervert the relation between good and evil, desire and law. Hence her obsessive questions:

[Let's assay our plot, which] Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed
And lawful meaning in a lawful act,
Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact. (III, 7, 44-47)

Diana-Helena once more resorts to a riddle¹ when she tries (V, 3) to advocate the lawfulness of her owning the prince's ring without betraying the secret of her seduction of the prince as Diana. Similarly, she offers a riddle as an explanation to this first mystery: "So there's my riddle: one that's dead is quick," again insisting on the porousness of the limits between life and death, because of their organic link with sex, love, nature. The effect of those riddles is similar to that of Helena's incantations; it endows the play with a fairy-tale quality, a magic spell. Young women play with words and meanings, signified and signifiers as well as with words and bodies, rings and conventions, lust and marriage (the bed-trick; the ring-trick). Equivocation appears then as a means to attain power through a device akin to irony, defined as an unequal distribution of knowledge. The audience too is hoodwinked by the equivocal language stemming from these ambivalent characters.

¹ "He knows I am no maid, and he'll swear to't
I'll swear I am a maid and he knows not" (V, 3).

Ambivalent they are since none of them can be called entirely positive or negative, this refusal to ascribe moral quality being typically baroque. Equivocation indeed amounts to prevarication and evasion of the characters' real motives: love's labour's lust! The interweaving of appearances and reality corresponds to moral indetermination. The play insists on the Parcae image, with their "mingled yarn of good and evil," where one can both act as God and as the Devil,¹ the devil as indeed the prince of darkness, or of disguise.² The female characters' actions are accordingly difficult to assess because of the discrepancy between their accurate, realistic characterisation and the tone, the plot which rather recalls romance, and their mysterious language aiming at blurring the issues. Only through the chinks and crevices of their linguistic tricks once they have been decoded can one apprehend their identity.

True enough, such discrepancies can partly be ascribed to the "stratification" involved in the composition of this problem play at the frontier between two spheres. But we would rather elaborate our analysis in terms of aesthetics: Shakespeare's special outlook on his French sources implies, as in anamorphosis, an ironical deconstruction process. Hence the grotesque (deformed) aspect of a Menippea-like plot endowed with the questioning function of parody. Aren't love and marriage reduced to tricks (a bed-trick and a ring-trick), while the prince's wife herself is described as a trickster?

Finally, on the dramatic level, equivocation is the name of the game too. Let's bear in mind that one sense of the word is to take one thing for another, "to introduce — also remove — trickily or by artificial confusion, to shift, act shiftily." (Webster's Dictionary). The bed-trick and its corollary, the exchange of the rings, is nothing if not that, on a structural level. As for the subplot, it hinges on macro-equivocation too; Parolles reclaims his drum and achieves his own identity through duplicity, treason. Lastly, the link between plot and subplot turns Helena's victory not only into a paradoxical one but also a dubious one.

The bed-trick, first, a conventional device though it is,³ consists — and there is the additional twist to it — in becoming the real wife of her husband, not

¹ **LAFEW (to PAROLLES):** "... dost thou put upon me at once both the office of God and the devil?" (V, 2, 45-46).

² **CLOWN:** "The black prince, sir, alias the prince of darkness, alias the devil." IV, 5, 39-40.

³ It is also added to the plot of *Measure for Measure*. The use of a ring (often, the ring offered by the woman to the man she has lain with) to effect recognition or reconciliation between lovers is a common motif in folk-lore.

"the shadow of a wife, the name and not the thing" (V, 3, 301-302). How? By playing the role of mistress (Diana), or, in other words, by impersonating another woman to become herself. This play within the play, this *mise en abyme*, is an equivocal — and even slightly dishonest — dis-play of Helena's darker self, and of the secret talents of her attractively ambivalent character. Far from being a saintly heroine, she opposes lust to lust while seemingly endorsing a Griselda-like identity: equivocation thus becomes an agent of truth, and in this play of initiation, this "*Bildungs-Theaterstück*," leads to a development of their individual personalities, different from that of their parental figures.

The same applies to Parolles and the subplot woven around him. The treason scene (IV, 3) devoted to the "double-meaning prophesier" (97) is strewn with paradoxical oaths (akin to paralipsis): "I'll speak truth," "by my troth," "a truth's a truth," "I will tell true" "he's very near the truth in this." Gradually, indeed, equivocation and riddles evolve towards the revelation of truth. His description of Bertram's letter (204), character and deeds, though cryptic and equivocal, is true. It motivates the Lord's judgement: "He hath out-villain'd villainy so far that the rarity redeems him." Indeed a sort of wisdom is achieved: "being fool'd, by fool'ry [he] thrive[s]." Parolles finally appears as a *Dopplegänger* of the Clown, is redeemed in Lafew's eyes ("thou shalt eat . . .") and even granted food.

Parolles himself acknowledges his own cowardice and the feud between tongue and heart (28-30) until the First Lord bursts out: "This is the first truth that e'er thine own tongue was guilty of" (IV, 1). He goes on: "is it possible he should know what he is and be that he is?", as if knowing he's "false" were enough to make him "true." The equivocation is crowned with Parolles' promise that he will betray them "faithfully" (86-7). The great originality lies in the reversal of treason (adultery) into truth. The link established between them here finally questions both concepts, as well as those related (honour, honesty, modesty). The reversal of virginity, chastity, coyness into seduction turns the manly gallivanting Don Juan into an object of woman's desire under cover of darkness. Hence, unification is obtained through the duplication of beds and rings (wife/mistress), times (day/night), space (Florence/France). Equivocation is finally transcended into acceptance, if not into harmony: "there's a place and means for every man alive,"

the web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good
and ill together; our virtues would be proud if our
faults whipp'd them not, and our crimes would
despair if they were not cherish'd by our virtues. (IV, 3, 68-70)

This typically baroque association of an implicit reference to the Parcae with the notion of a balance of the moral values of good and evil might be the ultimate message of the play, a way of revealing the interplay of vices and virtues, the duplicity of social conventions, since these very conventions are saved thanks to dishonest tricks, buttressed by sheer duplicity of language.

This generalised duplicity/duplication induces a questioning of the notion of truth, especially theatrical truth. Thanks to a language that is used as a tool for communication and yet structured as a disguise interfering, jamming with it, it aims at exposing Janus in all human activities. Shakespeare here displays his remarkable intuition as to the existence of complex relations between jokes, the comic, and humour, with the Unconscious; language itself appears as the ultimate disguise of desire. Yet, conventions themselves, even though they are equivocal, or rather *because* they are equivocal, can be instrumental in the gradual revelation of deeper truths; they can also be instrumental in a paradoxical acceptance of desire and lust. *In fine*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, with its insistence on the respect of social conventions advocated by gnomic expressions and rigidly heraldic portraits and scenes, could be compared to baroque "vanities," like the famous portrait of *The Arnolfinis* (1434) by Jan Van Eyck. The man and wife are seen full-face, they literally frame a convex mirror: space, though ostentatiously devoted to the celebration of fertility, respectability and wealth, is caved in by the elliptic mirror that hollows out this perfect *eikôn* of marriage.¹ In the same way, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, the elliptical shape of the ring dishonestly acquired — a testimony of Helena's questionable though celebrated tricks, and above all of the violently organic link between sex and death — hollows out an ellipsis at the core of the princely picture of blissful married life. Like a subversive *phantasma*, its central scooping-out undermines the conventional relation presented as an ideal *eidôlon*. In fact, equivocation and duplication (of plots, characters, places, and emblematic tokens) result in a decentration of the male hero and a questioning of enclosed spaces (the bed as an emblem of the alcove, the palace as an emblem of power). The folds, pleats, creases (Deleuze: 1988) of the nuptial space are organised around a hollow centre. This heralds the sombre climate of Shakespeare's last tragedies. As the psychoanalytical approach to art and dreams has shown, the baroque game of

¹ In his *Sophist*, Plato distinguished two aspects in the generic term of *eidôlon* (image): the *eikôn* (a faithful, mimetic copy of reality) as opposed to the *phantasma* or evil simulacrum aimed at mistaking the onlooker (235-36).

artifice and distorted perspectives strangely epitomises the processes of condensation, displacement and secondary elaboration of (traumatic) material discovered by Freud in his approach to the comic. Confronted with culture, desire encloses itself into abysmal crypts.



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