Querulous Curs: Early Modern Malcontentedness

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2018

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Word count: 78,618
Abstract

This thesis analyses and revises the concept of malcontentedness in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century literature, to argue that rather than simply designating a stock dramatic figure as held by previous scholarship, ‘malcontent’ is a broad, discursive category that has destabilising effects in early modern literature and culture. I demonstrate that malcontentedness involves a specific harsh, satirical, and self-consciously performative linguistic style or mode, and analyse the appearance of this mode in drama and verse satire. I show that malcontentedness emerges in texts in stylistic, tonal, and structural ways, as well as through character. This approach allows me to explore the production of the malcontent as a subject position that makes possible the articulation of discontent with social conditions, and also to analyse the ways in which those previously excluded by the stock figure approach – namely, women – are able to appropriate elements of the malcontent discourse in order to critique the patriarchal systems in which they are held.

I consider the ways in which a range of early modern literary texts express and explore malcontentedness; those studied in most detail include John Marston’s *The Malcontent*, and collections of verse satires, Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *The Winter’s Tale*, and John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*. Closely analysing these texts from the perspective of malcontentedness reveals that their writers used the malcontent discourse to engage in the interrogation of apparently fixed categories. Malcontentedness, I argue, destabilises categories of class, nation, and gender. It is produced by cultural anxieties about these areas as subject to change, yet also constitutes a position from which that which is apparently fixed can be critiqued and disrupted. More widely, this thesis demonstrates that malcontentedness interrogates concepts of truth and meaning; I situate malcontented speech alongside other modes of plain, bold truth-telling, and argue that it rethinks those traditions. By combining truth-speaking with self-conscious theatricality, malcontentedness destabilises any sense of the truth as stable or certain. Overall, this thesis argues that early modern malcontentedness functioned as an interrogative force that was used by writers to question and destabilise various aspects of early modern culture. It constitutes a much more important and wide-ranging mode for the articulation of discontent and uncertainty than has previously been acknowledged.
Declaration

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the AHRC and the University of Manchester’s PDS award scheme for funding this project. This thesis could not have been written without the advice, support, and patience of many different people. First and foremost I wish to thank Naomi Baker, for her excellent advice, for always being supportive, and for helping me to become a more rigorous and confident scholar. Thank you also to Fred Schurink, whose insights have been invaluable, as has his encouragement at every stage of the project. It is thanks to Naomi and Fred that I am not finishing this thesis very much more malcontented than I was when I started it. I am grateful to Anke Bernau for her kindness, advice and support, and to Tom Lockwood at the University of Birmingham for his encouragement during my MA and for first introducing me to John Marston’s poems. It was Mareile Pfannebecker’s teaching and mentoring at undergraduate level that made me want to carry on reading and writing about early modern literature, and I am very grateful for her continuing support and friendship. Thank you also to everyone in the Graduate School office (Amanda, Andy, Julie, Jo, and Rachel) for all of their help.

Thank you to my friends: Zoe Gosling, Elizabeth Harper, Becky Kocerhan, Kat Lowe, Robin Reynolds, and especially Katie Craven, for keeping me sane and reminding me that there is much more to life than old books. The same to my fellow members of ‘Martin’s Army’ (Lizzie, Lucy, Sarah and Chloé) – I love and miss you guys. Laura Swift, Şima İmşir, William Simms, Lucy Burns, Joe Morton, Gemma Moss, Anirudha Dhanawade, Eva Mosser, Julie Casanova, and Tristan Burke have all also made both Manchester and academia a much more enjoyable place to be during the last few years than it would have been otherwise. I am especially grateful to Zoe, Elizabeth, Anirudha, Tristan, and Tessa Dickinson for proofreading sections of my thesis. Finally, thank you to my family, my sisters Sally and Kate, and my parents John and Tessa, for everything that they have done to support me, and for their continuing love and encouragement.
Note on Citations

I have modernised spelling by changing i to j and u to v (and vice versa), but have otherwise retained the original spelling and punctuation of material quoted, unless otherwise noted.

Unless otherwise indicated, references to works by William Shakespeare, excluding Hamlet, are to The Norton Shakespeare, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and others, 2nd edn (London: Norton, 2008), and are given after quotations in the text.
None loathes the world so much, nor loves to scoff it,
But gold and grace will make him surfeit of it.

— George Chapman

The subject of this thesis is the concept of malcontentedness that emerged in the literature of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. More than simply a stock dramatic or social character type, I argue that 'malcontent' in literature is a style, mode, and attitude, and produces a subject position that provides a way of experiencing, negotiating, and intervening in social conditions perceived to be in some way unjust or lacking. Malcontentedness typically involves a cynical, bitter, and discordant linguistic tone, dissociation from society, a tendency to rail against that society or ‘the age’ in satirical invective, and, when associated with a specific individual, a feeling of neglected personal merit or frustrated ambition. In early modern culture malcontentedness appears multiple and amorphous, and can be difficult to limit to a stable, clearly demarcated set of characteristics. Contradictory elements are often present in a single text or character. It is an alienated condition that stems from social pressures, yet is often also represented as a fashionable affectation. It announces its difference from society, yet also relies on society for its existence: malcontent characters are strangely liminal, outsiders who are somehow inside, or insiders who are somehow outside. To follow the formulation applied to George Chapman’s malcontented soldier Bussy D’Ambois in the play to which he gives his name, malcontents loathe the world at the same time as they long for its rewards; malcontented voices claim to speak the truth about the corruption and vice that they perceive around them, yet more often than not they are embedded in corruption themselves. Whilst on the one hand their truth-telling is motivated by an ostensible desire for reform, on the other hand, and often simultaneously, it comes from an impulse to disrupt and disorder. Despite this association with truth, moreover, malcontentedness is consummately performative and is derided by its critics as disingenuous. An insistence on plainness and a mistrust of ornate speech forms links malcontentedness with the aesthetics of Protestantism, but its associations with theatricality and foreign travel hint at potential Catholicism; it

1 George Chapman, *Bussy D’Ambois*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke (London: Methuen, 1964), I. 1. 52-53. Further references are to this edition, and are given after quotations in the text.
combines melancholia with anger and political dissent; it is a mode generally associated with men, yet which also exposes a perception of gender as dangerously fluid.

Chapman’s Bussy effectively conveys the contradiction involved in malcontentedness. In the first scene of Bussy D’Ambois, ‘discontent with his neglected worth’ (I. 1. 47), he has removed himself from worldly life to a ‘green retreat’ (I. 1. 45): he ‘neglects the light, and loves obscure abodes’ (I. 1. 48). An impoverished soldier and ex-scholar, Bussy’s service has gone unrewarded, and in an attempt to regain control of his disaffected social condition and instil himself as an acting subject rather than a passive victim of neglect, he rejects the world that has rejected him, enacting a literal self-marginalisation. In the soliloquy that opens the play, Bussy sets up a radical dichotomy in which ‘Who is not poor, is monstrous’ (I. 1. 3): poverty is virtuous and truthful, and wealth associated with vice and deception, in a world in which, as the malcontent sees it, ‘Reward goes backwards, Honour on his head’ (I. 1. 2). When the King’s brother, the scheming Monsieur, attempts to lure Bussy back to court in the hope that advancing him will further his own ambitions, Bussy responds that the court is an ‘enchanted glass’ (I. 1. 85), beautiful yet devilish, a mirror in which men ‘practise juggling’ and learn to ‘flatter great Lords’ (I. 1. 87, 91).

Monsieur’s prediction that Bussy is ambitious for position and wealth despite his professions to the contrary and will in fact ‘take | Fire at advancement’ (I. 1. 49-50), however, proves apt, and by the end of the scene he has accepted a thousand crowns from Monsieur in exchange for his service. Although Bussy claims that he will ‘bring up a new fashion | And rise in Court with virtue’ (I. 1. 125-26), after his arrival there this declared reformative purpose seems to vanish. Instead, he proves wildly transgressive: he embarks on an adulterous affair with an influential court lady, challenges courtiers to duels, and even conjures spirits. He describes himself as a satirist, a ‘hawk’ (III. 2. 36) that will seek out hidden vice, yet what he claims about himself is at odds with his behaviour. Bussy appears as both the malcontented outsider who has rejected courtly life, and an insider, who engages in courtly corruption with abandon. He disparages wealth and fine clothing in speech, but embraces them in deed. For those around him he is an upstart whose ‘blunt behaviour’ (I. 2. 74-75) threatens social hierarchy. He makes visible the contradictory position of the malcontent, who simultaneously desires and loathes the world that has rejected him, and who claims to reveal the truth about society’s corruption at the same time as engaging in it.
I aim to embrace rather than reduce or resolve the multiplicity and contradiction of the malcontent category, and in doing so, take a revisionist approach. This thesis challenges the traditional conception of the malcontent as a stock figure, and contends instead that malcontentedness should be understood in broader terms, as a cultural discourse in circulation in the decades surrounding the turn of the seventeenth century. By this, I mean a loose collection of linguistic patterns, attitudes, beliefs, and modes of behaviour, which taken together constitute the malcontent discourse, and which produce the malcontent as a subject position through which individuals are able to negotiate and articulate the experience of lack or oppression. This new approach to the topic sheds light on a number of previously underexplored areas. It permits the analysis of texts themselves, as well as individual characters, as malcontented: in tone, style or structure, for example. It also allows the consideration of those conventionally excluded from the category as it appears in existing criticism. It enables a discussion of the topic that moves beyond the identification and categorisation of individual malcontent characters in drama; this thesis undertakes an extended exploration of the causes, effects and functions of malcontentedness as a broader discourse, both in specific literary texts and more widely.

Though a reaction to marginalisation, malcontentedness, I argue, is central to the theatrical and literary culture of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. In early modern writing, malcontentedness is an excessive, even chaotic linguistic presence, and points to a greater interest on the part of early modern writers in the dissolution of stable categories and ideas, and in self-conscious questions about the form and function of the literary text, than has been previously acknowledged. Malcontentedness makes clear the extent to which writers were immersed in both local social and political critique, and also in wider religious and philosophical questioning of concepts of truth and meaning. The malcontent discourse is liminal, situated on the borders of rank, nationhood, and gender. On one level, it expresses anxiety that categories such as ‘noble’, ‘English’, and ‘male’ are unfixed and labile, but at the same time, it signals the potential for moving between categories and across borders in productive ways which make possible the articulation of discontent with that which is apparently fixed and unchanging. Malcontentedness, this thesis demonstrates, functions as an interrogative, deconstructive force. It is a response to uncertainty and doubt about transformations in knowledge, society, politics, and religion, yet foregrounds, rather than resolves, that

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2 Existing scholarship on the malcontent is reviewed in detail on pp. 23-26.
uncertainty, and uses it to disrupt. If everything is unstable, it asks, then how are concepts like truth, or meaning, to be located or understood?

**Political Faction to Theatre: The Meanings and Development of Malcontentedness**

In 1588, William Rankins described a type of person that is ‘never content (either with what fortune hath lent them) or their estate holdeth above their deserte’. These perpetually discontented people are known by a ‘newe founde name, wherein a generall price is taken’: they are, to use Rankins’s original spelling, ‘Male-contents’. Malcontent was indeed a ‘newe founde name’; the word is first recorded as being used in English in 1575, and usage increased relatively quickly over the next ten to fifteen years. I wish to begin, however, by discussing the meaning not of ‘malcontent’ but of ‘content’. The word ‘malcontent’ implies some kind of deviation from contentment; but what did it mean to be contented in the early modern period? The earliest definition provided in the *OED* for the adjective ‘content’ is, ‘Having one’s desires bounded by what one has (though that may be less than one could have wished); not disturbed by the desire of anything more, or of anything different’. Contentment, this implies, involves containment: it means being satisfied with what one has, and it renders desire undisturbing. Work by Paul Joseph Zajac has drawn out the early modern understanding of contentment as designating ‘an affective state that holds the individual together. A condition of satisfaction and self-restraint, contentment provides a fortification against fortune and a means of moderating the potential for self-dispersal’. Indeed, Edward Smyth’s dedicatory epistle to his 1592 translation of Jean de L’Espine’s treatise on ‘the Tranquilitie and Contentation of the minde’ describes contentment as an ‘impregnable fortresse […] against the fierce assaultes of frowarde fortune’, and a ‘haven, wherein everie one should harbour himselfe from th[e] tempestuous rage of his owne distempered humours, and […] all the violent passions wherewith we are tossed’. Early modern contentment is a restrained condition that defends the self from external

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4 Ibid.
5 ‘content, adj. 2 and n. 4’, *OED Online*.
contingencies of fortune and from the destructive effects of the passions. As Zajac notes, contentment designates a fortress-like self that is contained and held off from the external world, yet which at the same time is defined through its relationship with that external world: ‘inwardness is established in relation to external goods, material conditions, and other selves’.8

‘Discontent’ refers to the absence of contentment (the ‘dis-’ prefix indicates reversal or negation). Given the early modern meanings of ‘content’, it involves dissatisfaction with one’s external goods and material conditions, and also being somehow uncontained or disturbed: it suggests a self that is subject to external forces, disordered humours, and excessive passions. ‘Malcontent’ is close in meaning to ‘discontent’ – the Italian malcontento translates literally as discontent, for example – and retains these implications, but the two are not synonymous. The ‘mal-’ prefix indicates that what follows it is in some way ill, wrong, or improper, as in words such as ‘malformed’ or ‘maladapted’. ‘Malcontent’, this implies, is more active than ‘discontent’; it involves an ill-willing, hostile relationship with contentment, perhaps an active refusal of it. Where contentment is a relationship with the world characterised by restraint and satisfaction even in adversity, malcontentedness implies that there is something disordered, perhaps even diseased, in the way in which the outside world is perceived and experienced. The clergyman John Carpenter’s 1597 A Preparative to Contentation claims that discontent is widespread amongst the English population – ‘so many of them […] are never contented with whatsoever good thing the Lord God in his mercie enricheth them’ – however it is the ‘mal-contented Papists’ that actually constitute a significant threat to English stability and sovereignty: ‘reteining in heart their inveterated malice against the Religion, government, and the state of Caesar, they do with Brutus and Cassius contrive shrewd matters’.9 Malcontentedness is not simply being ‘never contented’, but means deliberately and actively refusing contentment to an extent that threatens national stability; it is an affective state that signals excess and disorder, and also a way of acting and speaking in relation to the external world.

In order to provide a broad representation of early modern understandings of malcontentedness, I have used the corpus linguistics tool CQPweb to carry out a corpus survey of instances of ‘malcontent’, along with variant forms and derivatives, occurring in texts published between 1570 (the beginning of the decade in which the word is first

8 Zajac, p. 313.
used in English), and 1642 (the year that marks the outbreak of the Civil War and the closure of the public theatres), and digitised in Early English Books Online (EEBO). This is something of an imperfect picture given that no attention is paid to oral culture, and EEBO does not include manuscripts, but it nevertheless gives a sense of the wide linguistic field relating to malcontentedness in the broad period in which this thesis is interested. A decade by decade survey (Table 1) shows a rapid increase in instances of ‘malcontent’ and associated forms after the word enters English usage in the 1570s. Usage rises dramatically, reaching a peak between 1600 and 1609, before occurrences drop off and level out, demonstrating a reduced yet steady interest in the term from 1610 to 1639.

**Table 1** Occurrences of ‘malcontent’ and associated forms in digitised texts, 1570-1639

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Occurrences of ‘malcontent’ and associated forms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1570 – 1579</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>1580 – 1589</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>1590 – 1599</td>
<td>266</td>
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<td>1600 – 1609</td>
<td>414</td>
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<tr>
<td>1610 – 1619</td>
<td>170</td>
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<td>1620 – 1629</td>
<td>125</td>
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<tr>
<td>1630 – 1639</td>
<td>110</td>
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</table>

The earliest uses of the term demonstrate that the disruptive potential that I argue is central to malcontentedness is present in the earliest origins of the word as used in English. Recent work by Lucia Nigri explains that while the French *malcontent* and Italian *malcontento* were current for approximately two hundred years before the appearance of the word in English, that appearance stems not from the influence of these languages on English, but from civil wars and rebellions in France and the Low

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10 I used CQPweb to carry out a survey of EEBO, capturing the derivative forms and variant spellings of ‘malcontent’ with the command ‘mal*content*’, in which the first asterisk captures variant spellings such as ‘malecontent’ or ‘mal-content’, and the second captures any suffix, including ‘malcontents’, ‘malcontented’, ‘malcontentment’ etc. CQPweb is a corpus linguistics tool developed by Andrew Hardie at Lancaster University. For more information, see Andrew Hardie, ‘CQPweb - Combining Power, Flexibility and Usability in a Corpus Analysis Tool’, *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 17. 3 (2012), 380-409.
Countries in the 1570s. On 8 March 1574, the English Ambassador in Paris wrote to the Lord Treasurer about a new faction of noblemen in the French Wars of Religion, who ‘call themselves “les Malecontents”’. The same group are mentioned in the 1576 English translation of Jean de Serres’ commentary on the Wars of Religion:

newe bandes of newe men in the country of Poictou, which called themselves Politikes and Malcontentes: of the which some professed that they sought the reformation of the realme; other some the revenge of their parentes and kinsmen which were slayne in the furies on Saint Bartholemew’s day.

The faction was made up of discontented French noblemen (mostly Protestants, but also some moderate Catholics), who, led by Francis, Duke of Alençon (later Anjou), aimed to eradicate the influence of the House of Guise. There is a tension in Serres’ text between the desire for ‘the reformation of the realm’ and a desire for vengeance for the St Bartholemew’s Day massacres, and this tension points forward to seventeenth-century dramatic malcontents like Bussy D’Ambois, or Malevole, the title character of John Marston’s _The Malcontent_, who express similarly contradictory aims. According to Mack P. Holt, the faction consisted mostly of ambitious young nobles who ‘were trying to promote themselves at court’, and this further signals the relationship of this group to the later dramatic malcontent category, which also typically includes ambition, usually unfulfilled, for promotion or preferment.

The French Malecontents appear to have influenced a second political faction, involved in the revolt against Spanish rule in the Low Countries a few years later. As Nigri notes, a poem by Thomas Churchyard dated to 1579 refers to ‘The Pater Noster men, or Mal content’, a group of Catholic Walloon soldiers, initially part of the anti-Spanish alliance, who turned against their Protestant allies due to the Protestant persecution of Flemish Catholics. The group appears again in John Stubbes’ pamphlet from the same year, _The discoverie of a gaping gulf_. Stubbes uses the Malcontents to represent the threat of a possible union between Elizabeth I and, again, the Catholic Duke of Anjou, who was then based in Flanders and who Stubbes claims was supported by the Walloon Malcontents. Anjou is used to conflate the two factions;

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Stubbes writes that he ‘joynd hymselfe with the Malcontents eyther in Fraunce or in the lowe conntryes’. For Stubbes’ purposes the identity of the specific group is less important than the threat to English stability and Protestant national identity that ‘malcontent’ already appears to represent. The word has its roots in sedition, rebellion, and political discontent in early modern Europe, and this etymology reveals that from its initial emergence ‘malcontent’ is associated with political marginality and opposition to the status quo, along with courtly ambition and revenge, all of which are emphasised in later depictions. In addition, this etymology demonstrates that there is a degree of foreign otherness encoded into the word ‘malcontent’ itself, an otherness that reappears in later texts where malcontentedness is often portrayed as threatening due to its associations with foreign travel.

While the earliest occurrences of ‘malcontent’ and its variant forms in English texts tend to refer to the two factions mentioned, usage of the word quickly became much broader, and, as shown in Table 1, above, increased rapidly. During the final fifteen years or so of the sixteenth century, and into the seventeenth century, ‘malcontent’ is often used relatively loosely, either as an adjective synonymous with ‘discontented’ (albeit most commonly in political contexts) or as a noun, to describe an individual who is in some way discontented with society, his or her own situation, or those in power, and who speaks out about that discontent. The 1584 tract _Leicester’s Commonwealth_, for example, describes ‘so many melancholic in the Court, that seem malcontented; so many complaining’, and a treatise against treason and rebellion by Michael Renniger, published in 1587, refers to ‘frowardnesse, perversenesse and uncontentment, such as is in malecontentes, mislikers and murmurers against the Prince and estate’. In the twenty-first century, ‘malcontent’ is generally used in a relatively similar sense; outside of literary scholarship it most commonly refers to political discontent, particularly that seen as for some reason unwarranted or destabilising.

16 John Stubbes, _The discoverie of a gaping gulf whereto England is like to be swallowed by another French mariage_ (1579), fol. D4v.
During the 1580s, however, a more precise meaning of ‘malcontent’ also began to develop. The first piece of English drama in which the word appears is John Lyly’s 1584 play *Sappho and Phao*. The marginal character Pandion is called a ‘male content’ by the court lady Ismena. Pandion has recently joined the court at Syracuse, having been at university in Athens, and he criticises it as a deceptive place, full of ‘flatterers’ (I. 2. 51). A courtier’s life, he states, is ‘a labour intolerable for Pandion’, his reason being that ‘it is harder to shape a life to dissemble, than to go forward with the liberty of truth’ (I. 2. 31, 33-34). Although he appears only briefly, Pandion has much in common with the more fully developed malcontent characters found in later plays: he comments satirically on court life from the margins, he is a scholar (the links between malcontentedness and the so-called ‘alienated intellectual’ are discussed later in the Introduction), and he aligns himself with truth as opposed to flattery or deception. Less than ten years after the arrival of the word ‘malcontent’ in the English language, a preliminary version of the dramatic malcontent character appears on the early modern stage, associated with a specific set of ideas including marginality, satire on the court, alienation, and truth-speaking.

After Pandion there are no dramatic characters as patently malcontented until 1599. In the intermediary years, the malcontent as a specific social type or position is more fully fleshed-out in prose writing and verse satire: portraits of the malcontent as a specific social type appear in texts by writers including Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, Everard Guelpin and John Marston. Generally hostile, such accounts combine the ridicule of malcontentedness as a fashionable affectation with fear that it represents a genuine social threat. The malcontent’s disruptive potential for rebellion is emphasised, and malcontentedness is attributed a threatening foreignness: Lodge personifies sedition as a malcontent, a traveller who returns from overseas ‘with seditious books, false intelligences, and defamatorie Libels, to disgrace his Prince, detract her honourable counsel, and seduce the common sort’. He focusses on the disruptive effects of the malcontent’s speech, noting that he is ‘well spoken’ and that he ‘draws discontented Gentlemen to conspiracies’; malcontentedness here seems to have the dangerous potential to spread from person to person like a contagious disease, in the same way as the usage of the word spreads in the final decades of the sixteenth

Writers also describe the malcontent’s fashionably careless style of dress: Sir John Harington’s *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* refers, for instance, to ‘a perfit mal-content, viz. his hat without a band, his hose without garters, his wast without a girdle, his bootes without spurs, his purse without coine, his head without wit’.

Other accounts specify the black colour of the malcontent’s clothing: Everard Guilpin describes a malcontent who is ‘Suited to those blacke fancies which intrude, | Upon possession of his troubled breast’. This black clothing signifies the black colour of the malcontent’s melancholic humour, and indeed, malcontentedness and melancholy often go hand in hand.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the malcontent was firmly established in the early modern cultural imagination. Versions of the type, in fact, appeared regularly in the compendiums of satirical characters that were popular in the first few decades of the century. Whilst only Joseph Hall includes the ‘The Malcontent’ by name in his 1608 *Characters of Virtues and Vices* (the malcontent is, of course, a vice), portraits can also be found in the 1614 collection of characters attributed to Thomas Overbury, where the type appears as ‘A Distaster of the Time’, and in John Earle’s 1628 *Microcosmography*, as ‘A Discontented Man’. It is in the theatre, however, that malcontentedness had the greatest impact. There are too many early modern dramatic expressions of malcontentedness to list here, but to take a particular year, 1599, as an example, malcontented characters in plays thought to have been produced this year include, in works by Shakespeare, Jaques (*As You Like It*), Don John (*Much Ado About Nothing*), and Hamlet, as well as Macilente from Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humour*, and Feliche, a minor malcontented character from Marston’s *Antonio and Mellida*. The malcontent in drama is generally afforded a more nuanced and often more sympathetic portrayal than the malcontent in late sixteenth-century prose and verse satire, perhaps because in drama malcontents speak, whereas in prose and verse texts they are more commonly only spoken about. While the characters listed above can all, to some extent, be designated versions of the malcontent figure, there is a clear difference from the satiric portraits of the malcontent as a social type; as I explain below, these dramatic

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21 Ibid., p. 23.
characters might be better classed as explorations or expressions of a broader malcontent discourse.

**Malcontentedness in Context: Thwarted Aspiration and Social Disorder**

There was less than twenty-five years, then, between the first recorded appearance of ‘malcontent’ in English, and the emergence of malcontentedness as an established category on the stage. Why did the malcontent capture the imagination of writers and audiences so quickly and so vividly at this specific historical moment? What was it about England in the years surrounding the turn of the seventeenth century that made malcontentedness a matter of cultural concern? It is a truism to describe any historical period as characterised by social change, yet there is nonetheless evidence for an intensification of both perceived and actual social disorder during the final ten to fifteen years of Elizabeth I’s reign. Historians generally agree that the 1590s especially were defined by ‘extraordinary economic, political, and social tensions’; such tensions provide some possible answers to these questions.24

The ageing and childless queen’s refusal to appoint an heir engendered political uncertainty and instability during the final years of her reign, and it is likely that this played a role in creating a culture of resentment at court and amongst the elite, something which certainly contributed to the contemporaneous emergence of a discourse of malcontentedness. Court vacancies were left unfilled, with many offices in the hands of a select few, something that led to accusations of factionalism. In a text that details his protracted search for employment, Thomas Wilson complained that,

> [the privy councillors] will suffer fewe to rise to places of reputation that are skilful or studious in matters of policy, but holde them lowe and farre off soe that the greatest politicians that rule most will not have about them other then base penn clerkes, that can do nothing but write as they are bidden, or some meccanicall dunece that cannot conceive his Master’s drift and polices.25

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As well as refusing to fill vacancies in the Privy Council, or allotting them to the so-called ‘penn clarkes’ favoured by the Cecils, Elizabeth declined to use peerages as rewards; ‘the dynamic political issue’ of the day, Guy maintains, was ‘the unsatisfied ambition of the courtiers and military commanders who sought promotion during the long war with Spain and remained unrewarded’. 26 The frustrations met with by Elizabeth’s favourite, the Earl of Essex, are symptomatic of her declining generosity and the disaffection that it kindled. An ambitious aristocrat, repeatedly thwarted in his campaigns for promotion for himself and his followers, Essex certainly evokes the frustrated ambition of the theatrical malcontent, and Alexandra Gajda describes him in these terms, writing that ‘his critics, in powerful positions in the government, increasingly suspected him to be a dangerous, destabilising malcontent, who might aspire to more than the role of a subject’. 27 We might compare, for example, The Revenge’s Tragedy’s Vindice, an impoverished nobleman whose means do not match his birth. Essex’s attempted coup and subsequent execution echoes the anxiety in contemporary depictions of the malcontent, that discontent might boil over into open rebellion, and Francis Bacon predicted just this, apparently advising the queen that ‘to discontent [Essex] as you do and yet to put arms and power into his hands, may be a kind of temptation to make him prove cumbersome and unruly’. 28

While James VI’s succession did bring about a renewal in patronal generosity, the inevitable disruption caused by the change in regime, combined with the culture of favouritism in the Jacobean court, resulted in what has been referred to as a ‘dysfunctional patronage system’ which involved inevitable disappointment. 29 James’s absolutist style of rule, moreover, along with the presence of the predominantly Scottish nobles brought with him from Scotland, led to increasing mistrust of the court and courtiers in the early seventeenth century, something reflected in the malcontent’s

29 Burnett, p. 339.
diatribes on court deception.\textsuperscript{30} It is no surprise, then, that the literary obsession with malcontentedness, which is in part a response to disappointment, continued into the early Stuart period; it had political parallels in the courts of both of the monarchs in power when the discourse was at its height.

Frustration characterised literary as well as political spheres during the final years of the sixteenth century. Literary patronage was in decline; despite a multitude of dedications, actual monetary reward for writers was rare. In 1598 Richard Barnfield lamented that ‘\textit{Bounty} is dead, and with her dide my joy’, and John Lyly, in a petition to the queen, complained, ‘Thirteen years your Highnes Servant; Butt; yett nothinge […] A thowsand hopes, butt all, noethinge; A hundred promises butt yett noethinge’.\textsuperscript{31} This situation meant that literary success and financial stability could be difficult to establish. While detailed biographical discussion of authors is beyond the scope of this thesis, Mark Thornton Burnett has argued that the careers of Chapman and Marston were marked by disappointment, and that both writers’ immersion in the malcontent discourse can be understood as responding to an environment in which ‘the acquisition of privilege and recognition appeared an increasingly unlikely prospect’.\textsuperscript{32} The preoccupation with malcontentedness on the part of early modern writers might to some extent, therefore, constitute engagement in an imagined independence from the constraining systems of patronage and publishing in which they were held.

The historian Mark H. Curtis used the culture of disappointment that I have been describing to outline a contemporary social type, which he termed the ‘alienated intellectual’.\textsuperscript{33} Curtis’s central thesis is that an increase in university enrolments in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, along with a decrease in the availability of both state and church offices, resulted in a surplus of highly educated young men for whom there were not sufficient positions, and who became disaffected and potentially rebellious due to frustrated ambition. The view that scholarship was more likely to lead to penury than preferment was indeed commonplace in the period. The anonymous

\textsuperscript{30}Fulke Greville is one possible example of Jacobean political malcontentedness; his work \textit{A Dedication to Sir Philip Sidney}, likely written c. 1613, includes implicit criticism of James I’s government, often through comparison with Elizabeth. See \textit{The Prose Work of Fulke Greville, Lord Brookes}, ed. by John Gouws (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. xvi.


\textsuperscript{32}Burnett, p. 339.

play *The Return from Parnassus*, for example, stages the struggles faced by two scholars in finding employment after university. Study, one of these scholars laments, 'noughte els to us doth gaine, | But onlie helps our fortunes to there waine'.

This situation has obvious parallels with malcontentedness, particularly given that a number of dramatic malcontents are also said to have been university students, including Hamlet, Bussy, and Lyly's Pandion. Curtis' model is somewhat limited when applied to individual characters (as my discussion of *The Duchess of Malfi*'s Bosola in Chapter Three demonstrates), yet it is clear that the frustration and disaffection involved in malcontentedness does indeed respond and contribute to this wider culture of thwarted aspiration.

More broadly, the potential for rebellion and sedition with which malcontentedness was associated can be linked to widespread social unrest in the 1590s. England's war with Spain, along with costly military campaigns in the Low Countries, France, and Ireland led to sharp increases in taxation which, combined with a series of poor harvests and resultant increases in grain prices, led to growing levels of poverty and vagrancy, all against the broader backdrop of long-term population growth.

Contemporary records and modern historians show that this strained socio-economic situation led to widespread discontent. There were riots and rebellions throughout the decade. In 1595 in London, for example, apprentices rioted on Tower Hill in protest against poor conditions; anti-authority feeling appears to have been on the rise. In certain guises, the malcontent on the stage appears as of lower or indeterminate rank, and rails against the injustices meted out by those in power: John Webster's malcontent Bosola, for instance, complains that the service of the truly deserving, such as soldiers, goes unrewarded by the powerful.

Malcontentedness on one level appears an expression of elite anxieties about the threat of popular revolt (in the hostile depictions by writers like Nashe and Lodge, for example). Yet at the same time, the evident popularity of malcontent characters with theatre audiences suggests that the malcontent appealed to those themselves affected by social pressures; perhaps the malcontent

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34 *The Three Parnassus Plays (1598-1601)*, ed. by J. B. Leishman (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1949), p. 140. Robert Burton described the same situation in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: the scholar, he writes, 'hath profited in his studies, and proceeded with all applause: after many expenses, he is fit for preferment; where shall he have it?  He is as far to seek it as he was (after twenty years' standing) at the first day of his coming to university.' Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Holbrook Jackson (New York: NYRB, 2001), First Partition, p. 306.


represented a fantasy of the linguistic defiance of authority and social constraint for those with no outlet through which to express their grievances.

The apparent increase in xenophobia during the final years of the sixteenth century might also play a role in the formation of the malcontent discourse. John Guy has argued that England’s involvement in wars on the continent, along with residual post-Reformation anti-Catholicism, worked to sharpen national identity so that increasingly “‘nationhood’ became defined in terms of English culture and law.” Anti-Catholic feeling was indeed heightened during the final quarter of the century by the excommunication of Elizabeth by Pope Pius V in 1570, by fears of invasion by Catholic Spain, allied with Rome, and by foreign-sponsored Catholic plots against the State. As analysis of the word ‘malcontent’ demonstrates, the concept originates in the foreign conflicts in which England was involved, and in later iterations of the discourse malcontents are often also travellers, associated with a foreignness perceived as threatening to English nationhood. While malcontent characters are rarely designated as Catholic directly, the association with travel, and the fact that they appear so regularly in the Italian settings of revenge tragedy, suggests that the malcontent discourse might point implicitly to contemporary concerns with the foreign Catholic threat.

England at the end of the sixteenth century, then, seems to have been characterised by an atmosphere of disillusionment, to which thwarted political and literary aspiration, social unrest, instability, and latent xenophobia, all contributed, and malcontentedness not only emerges out of this atmosphere, it plays a part in producing it. The writer and satirist Joseph Hall is reported to have lectured on the topic ‘mundus senescit (the world groweth old)’ whilst at Cambridge during the 1590s, and perhaps the pessimism involved in malcontentedness fed into a general feeling of fin de siècle: a sense that at the conclusion of the century the world, like the queen, was indeed growing old. While malcontentedness can also be located within ongoing continental religious and philosophical debates – in later sections of the thesis I argue that it draws on a post-Reformation concern with plain speech and truth-telling, and also on the renewed interest in philosophical scepticism in this period – it is the combination of the more local factors described that explains both its emergence in England at this specific

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historical juncture and the extent to which it captured the imaginations of English writers and audiences.

Stock Figure versus Discourse

On the basis of many of the early modern texts mentioned thus far, it would seem unsurprising that in existing scholarship the malcontent has been treated predominantly as a stock figure. The typological portraits in satiric texts and compendiums of characters do indeed construct the malcontent as a specific social type, inevitably male, and easily recognised by his melancholy countenance, politically tendentious railing, sense of neglected merit, and black or disarrayed clothing. Thomas Nashe wrote that London’s streets were ‘pestered’ with versions of the figure.\textsuperscript{39} The understanding of the malcontent as an exaggerated version of a contemporary social type, depicted on the stage and in satire, has been repeated in the majority of the literary criticism published on the topic, much of which was produced before 1970. The earliest piece of modern criticism on the subject, by Elmer Edgar Stoll, was primarily interested in the identification of specific malcontent characters in drama, and argued that the malcontent type is characterised by a combination of satirical railing and ‘an exacerbated form of melancholy’.\textsuperscript{40} Work by Z. S. Fink, Theodore Spencer, Lawrence Babb, J. B. Bamborough, and Bridget Gellert Lyons expanded on that of Stoll, and similarly approached the malcontent primarily as a literary stock figure. Using Shakespeare’s Jaques as his main example, Fink argued that the malcontent on the stage was influenced by a contemporary social type, the gentleman traveller corrupted by foreign, especially Italian vice. He emphasised the political threat posed by the malcontent: his discontent threatened to develop into ‘an active cankered viciousness’, dangerous to both state and church.\textsuperscript{41} The majority of the rest of the twentieth-century scholarship published on the figure treats the malcontent simply as a subtype of the melancholic. Studies of melancholia by Babb, Bamborough and Lyons each include a chapter or section on the malcontent, and there is a tendency on the part of these critics to use

\textsuperscript{40} Elmer Edgar Stoll, ‘Shakespeare, Marston, and the Malcontent Type’, \textit{Modern Philology}, 3. 3 (1906), 281-303 (p. 284).
‘malcontent’ and ‘melancholic’ interchangeably. 42 Babb, for example, outlines four key types of malcontent: the ‘traditional’ malcontent with a sense of neglected superiority, the ‘melancholy villain’, the ‘melancholy cynic’, and the ‘melancholy scholar’. 43

After around 1970 there are fewer critical studies of the malcontent, perhaps due to the rise of poststructuralist theory, which would seem at odds with a critical approach that aims to explain literary characters in relation to a stock social type. That said, two recent books on the malcontent, James R. Keller’s *Princes, Soldiers and Rogues: the Politic Malcontent of Renaissance Drama* (1993), and Julia Lacey Brooke’s *The Stoic, the Weal & the Malcontent* (2013), continue to use the stock figure approach, though go further in their explorations of the subject than the earlier scholarship. Keller responds to earlier criticism by attempting to disentangle the malcontent from melancholy and treat the figure instead as a representation of political disaffection. The study takes frustrated ambition and political displacement as the malcontent’s defining characteristics, and thus historicizes the figure, reading the malcontent as ‘a product of the political and social institutions of the time’. 44 This is certainly true, but the majority of Keller’s study is concerned less with the malcontent’s relationship with and effect on those institutions than it is with describing and identifying different categories of malcontent: the malcontent soldier, the malcontent villain or rogue, and the malcontent prince, for which Essex is said to be a paradigm.

Brooke, like Keller, attempts to pin down the malcontent more thoroughly than previous scholars. She argues for the influence of other stock types, such as the fool, the vice, and the melancholic, on the malcontent, and also distinguishes between those dramatic characters that are ‘born’ malcontents, and those that become malcontents over the course of the play. Yet Brooke also begins to consider the possibility that malcontentedness might not be limited to character; she suggests briefly that the early modern theatre itself might be considered malcontented in its potential for the presentation of unorthodox, potentially threatening ideas to a hierarchically diverse

43 Babb, pp. 84-97.
44 Keller, p. 12.
audience. Brooke’s position is very broad; she holds that just as malcontents in drama are often rebellious and subversive, and comment satirically on their surroundings, early modern plays themselves are also potentially subversive, and might be interpreted as offering political commentary. While this constitutes something of an oversimplification of the malcontent discourse (it involves more than just political critique), Brooke’s study points towards the possibility of reading the malcontent as something which surfaces in early modern literature in various ways, rather than only as a stock type.

The stock figure approach to malcontentedness is in some respects useful. There are instances in early modern writing when the malcontent is indeed presented as a character type, and the scholarship discussed in this section has been invaluable in forming a picture of the malcontent as a distinct category, associated with a discrete set of characteristics, and related to, yet different from, discontent and melancholy. My contention, however, is that work that considers the malcontent as no more than a stock figure does not go far enough. The focus on definition and identification in this work can lead to reductive critical disputes about what characteristics count as malcontented, and about whether or not certain characters fit the model. There is a tendency on the part of critics to pigeonhole characters into narrowly conceived definitions of the type, and therefore to erase the complexity and contradiction of both those characters and malcontentedness itself. Stoll, for example, took the self-representation of the malcontent as the sole honest individual in a corrupt court at face value; a villainous character like Iago, he insisted, cannot be considered a malcontent.46 The possibility that Iago might make use of elements of malcontentedness in order to portray himself as honest, or that malcontentedness might involve a conflict between impulses towards honesty and villainy, is not considered. Keller’s position is similarly reductive. He argues that all so-called ‘malcontent princes’ are conservatives that desire the restoration of an older order; Marston’s Malevole and Shakespeare’s Hamlet are therefore read as entirely conservative, despite the politically dangerous, even socially radical implications of their malcontented speech.

This thesis contends that a revision of existing critical approaches to the malcontent is required. It aims to find a way in which to discuss malcontented characters and to maintain the malcontent as a discrete category, but also to think about malcontentedness in broader terms, as something complex and contradictory, which

writers and texts utilise, explore, and interrogate in various ways. There are a small number of critics whose work on the topic has started to point in this direction, though thus far no extended studies of malcontentedness as opposed to the malcontent as a stock figure. Brooke, as mentioned, suggests that there could be a level on which texts as well as characters might be read as malcontented, and Jonathan Dollimore’s very brief discussion of the malcontent in Radical Tragedy emphasises the contradiction which I agree is inherent in the category. For Dollimore, the malcontent is,

at once agent and victim of social corruption, condemning yet simultaneously contaminated by it; made up of inconsistencies and contradictions which, because they cannot be understood in terms of individuality alone, constantly pressure attention outwards to the social conditions of existence.47

Mark Thornton Burnett’s chapter on the malcontent from 2002 also draws near the kind of approach aimed at by this thesis. It explores the malcontent not only as a character type, but as a method of dealing with the experience of displacement, ‘a means by which the experience of rejection, and the entertainment of unorthodoxy, could be addressed and negotiated’.48 Though not stated explicitly, Burnett’s argument implies that one approach to the malcontent might be as a model for identity open to those forced into a marginal position by social pressures, and which provides a place from which to be recognised and to speak out against the institutional structures that constrain them.

Expanding on Burnett’s suggestion that the malcontent is a model for identity rather than just a stock figure or affected pose, as well as Brooke’s hint at the possibility of a broader textual or theatrical malcontentedness, and Dollimore’s emphasis on contradiction and social formation, I propose that malcontentedness should be conceptualised as a specific cultural and social discourse in circulation in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In this, I draw on the work of Michel Foucault, who developed the concept of discourse as a body of social knowledge, specifically, the ways in which ‘in any given historical period we can write, speak or think about a given social object or practice (madness, for example)’.49 Foucault writes that ‘whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings,

48 Burnett, p. 337.
transformations), we will say [...] that we are dealing with a discursive formation; discourse determines the categories of meaning by which statements are accepted as knowledge, and therefore refers to the ways in which knowledge is produced, organised, and constituted within a social field, as well as the specific behaviours or social practices, power relations, and subject positions that are contained within that knowledge. More than simply a way of producing meaning, discourses are also forms of power which constitute, and govern, individual subjects: ‘discourse’, Foucault writes, ‘is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized’. In any given society there are numerous competing discourses, some of which become dominant, and others of which are marginalised, but which might offer a position from which dominant discourses can be challenged or resisted.

The discourse of malcontentedness that developed in the late sixteenth century is constituted by the various statements and texts through which malcontentedness is understood, written, or spoken about. This discursive field (demonstrated imperfectly by the corpus search of EEBO discussed earlier in this introduction) produces ‘malcontentedness’ as a body of social knowledge, and ‘malcontent’ as a subject position that involves various speech patterns, behavioural modes, and relations with social institutions. The discursive approach to malcontentedness is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it enables analysis of the different ways in which texts produce, express, and explore a malcontent discourse in broad ways, as well as, or instead of, simply including individual malcontent characters. Secondly, it makes it both possible and necessary to consider who is permitted access to the malcontent discourse, and who and what it excludes: as Foucault writes, in ‘the analysis of the discursive field […] we must […] establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes’. With this in mind, the fourth chapter of this thesis explores the extent to which the malcontent discourse is gendered. Thirdly, the malcontent subject position involves a mixture of constraint and resistance to constraint that can be better understood through Foucault’s conception of discourse as involving both the exertion of power and resistance to it:

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52 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 28.
We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart.\textsuperscript{53}

The malcontent discourse constitutes the malcontented subject as marginal to political and social institutions, yet at the same time malcontentedness is threatening and disruptive; it is a position from which those institutions can be questioned and destabilised. Malcontentedness is simultaneously the site of constraint and dislocation by social institutions and systems, and of attempted resistance and opposition to those systems; it is produced by the exertion of institutional power, yet also involves self-fashioning on the part of malcontented subjects in order to resist that power.

Discussing malcontentedness as a discourse shows that the category is historically specific and discrete, at the same time as being multiple and contradictory to an extent not permitted by the majority of the existing scholarship on the topic. It demonstrates that malcontentedness is formed socially, in relation to institutions and power structures, and also emphasises that it is primarily expressed linguistically. Rather than simply describe this discourse and identify the texts in which it appears, though, this thesis asks what malcontentedness does. What are the functions and effects of malcontented voices, characters, and texts in early modern literature and culture? How does malcontentedness relate to the wider cultural, social, religious and philosophical concerns of the period? I argue that malcontentedness emerges as a mode of questioning which works to point out the fissures in early modern society. It disrupts the borders of rank, nationhood, and gender, and this disruption is often either achieved through, or placed in tension with, a claim to speak the truth. In the remaining sections of the Introduction I present, first, this malcontented truth-telling, and its location of the category within a specific stylistic tradition, and second, the central tenet of this thesis: that malcontentedness has broadly destabilising effects within early modern culture.

Malcontented Truth-Telling

The malcontent subject position, as said, involves speaking out against social conditions perceived as unfair or lacking. Malcontented voices claim to speak, expose, or represent the truth about those social conditions, and the malcontent’s self-construction as a truth-teller is an area thus far unexplored in scholarship on the topic. Malcontents repeatedly imagine themselves as the sole honest individuals in corrupt and deceptive societies, claiming to speak the truth where others refuse to do so. The first of John Marston’s two collections of verse satires, texts which in the first chapter I argue constitute an extended exploration of the malcontent voice, begins, for example,

I cannot show in strange proportion,  
Changing my hew like a Camelion.  
But you all-canning wits, hold water out,  
Yee vizarded-bifronted-Janian rout.55

Marston’s speaker claims that unlike his masked, two-faced, and undifferentiated ‘rout’ of satiric targets he is exactly what he appears to be. Where the speaker is honest, the objects of his satire dissemble, and this pattern is repeated in multiple malcontented texts: Hamlet, for example says that he ‘know[s] not “seems”’. In fashioning themselves as truth-speaking, malcontented voices create a dichotomy between depth and surface: dishonesty is figured as masking, and truth-telling is figured as exposure. In particular, malcontented speech draws on a long-standing opposition between plain and harsh yet truthful speech forms, and those which are more aesthetically pleasing and ornamented, but deceptive, such as flattery. In The Duchess of Malfi, Bosola asserts that ‘the subtest folly proceeds from the subtest wisdom’, concluding ‘let me be simply honest’ (II. 1. 80-81). Of course, malcontented speech, whilst certainly not flattering and at times incredibly blunt, can nevertheless hardly be described as plain or simple; it is often highly figurative, and rhetorically complex at the same time as it claims to be plain or harsh. It is important to be clear that I am less interested in the actual truth-value of

54 I use the term ‘truth’ in relation to malcontented speech to mean that which is true within a specific situation or set of circumstances, rather than something universal or metaphysical. The malcontent is not a version of the prophet with access to some kind of transcendent ‘Truth’, but a local truth-teller, or at least is constructed as such. This understanding draws on Michel Foucault’s work on the truth-teller in his final lecture series, published as The Courage of Truth, and discussed at length in Chapter Two.
56 William Shakespeare, Hamlet, ed. by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982; repr. London: Nelson, 1997), I. 2. 76. Further references are to this edition, and are given after quotations in the text.
malcontented speech than in the ways in which writers draw on this opposition in order to construct malcontented speech rhetorically as truth-telling.

The use of plainness to designate honesty locates malcontentedness within a tradition of disruptive truth-telling; I propose that malcontentedness draws on the tone of the Protestant Reformation, and especially on that of Martin Luther, whose linguistic style can in turn be traced to both the frank rhetorical style of the apostle Paul and the decorum-breaking public diatribes of the ancient Cynic philosophers. It should be noted, though, that malcontentedness is not a specifically Protestant discourse. The majority of malcontents in drama have no explicit religious affiliation and where they do this is by no means uniform: whilst Hamlet, for example, is educated at Wittenberg, which implies a Protestant connection, the association of malcontentedness with foreign travel, and its frequent appearance in Italianate revenge tragedy, hint more at Catholicism. A 1614 character sketch holds that the malcontent ‘can be of all religions; therefore truly of none’; the marginal and often contradictory malcontent is perhaps symptomatic of a period for which an unambiguous division between Catholicism and Protestantism is too simple a model. Work by Thomas Rist and Alexandra Walsham, among others, has demonstrated that Catholic habits persisted post-Reformation, and this, along with the reforms of the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, shows that despite their radical differences, early modern Protestantism and Catholicism did, in fact, share certain priorities: to quote Walsham, ‘both sought to intensify and spiritualize the piety of the populace and to prune away the dubious accretions and corruptions Christianity was perceived to have accumulated in the course of its entrenchment and institutionalization in the preceding half-millennium’.58

That said, as a movement defined by the radical critique of established institutions, authorities and modes of belief, the Reformation does indeed have something in common with malcontentedness. It has been viewed as a moment of rupture, in which previously held beliefs about the world and the individual’s place within it were thrown into doubt, and on a smaller scale, the malcontent offers similar moments of rupture: outbursts of malcontented social commentary interrupt the commonplace and established to question and oppose convention and authority.

Reformed theology insists on the truth of its doctrine, that the plain Word of God in the Bible is the sole authority in matters of faith, and this belief engendered suspicion about images and symbols. The symbolic role of the priest as mediator, the elaborate ornamentation of churches, and the mysticism and ritual of the Catholic liturgy were, to an extent, stripped away, something which was literalised in acts of iconoclasm. The claims to truth made by the malcontent in later literature are also often imagined as exposure, a similar stripping away of the surface to reveal hidden truth, which to some extent echoes the reformers’ outlook.

In particular, the harsh, railing, and disruptive truth-telling of malcontented discourse recalls the linguistic style of Martin Luther. Luther’s use of invective, and at times obscene, language as a means for attack has been widely discussed. The 1545 treatise Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil, for example, advises that ‘a good Christian, whenever he sees the pope’s coat of arms, should spit and throw filth at it’. The combination of scatology and iconoclasm expressed here has also been observed in the seemingly innocuous Tudor comedy, Gammer Gurton’s Needle, written in the 1550s, but not published until 1575. Robert Hornback claims that ‘this surprisingly cosmopolitan work’s primary anti-papist trope is indeed, following continental models, its scatological representation of Catholic ritual’; he argues convincingly that the play is influenced by a continental Reformation tradition of ‘scatology as anti-papist emblem’ evident in mid-century prints and pamphlets, including Luther’s Against the Roman Papacy. While Gammer Gurton’s Needle is not malcontented in tone, the work of Hornback and other critics demonstrates that, although Calvin was much more

59 The notion that the Reformation was a purely destructive movement that demystified and ‘disenchanted’ the world was put forward by Max Weber in 1930, who wrote that with the Reformation ‘the elimination of magic from the world’ reached its ‘logical conclusion’, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. by Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1958), p. 105; it persisted with Eamon Duffy’s The Stripping of the Altars (London: Yale University Press, 1992). It must be noted, however, that recent scholarship has started to revise this position. Richard Strier, for example, argues against the ‘disenchantment’ view with an account of the miraculous and sacramental vision of nature in the thought of Martin Luther, ‘Martin Luther and the Real Presence in Nature’, Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 37. 2 (2007), 271-303, and Jennifer Waldron uses Protestant discourses around the body to question an ‘antimaterialist’ model of the Reformation, which overstates inwardness and the individual, and misses the ‘material and participatory dimensions of early Protestant belief systems’, Reformations of the Body (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 9.

60 See, for example, Constance M. Furey, ‘Invective and Discernment in Martin Luther, D. Erasmus, and Thomas More’, Harvard Theological Review, 98. 4 (2005), 469-88, and Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Filthy Rites’, Daedalus, 111. 2 (1982), 1-16 (pp. 11-12).


influential in England theologically than Luther, a Lutheran Reformative tone of assault and invective can nevertheless be discerned in certain English text. Luther’s language shares much with a malcontent discourse marked by linguistic assault and grotesque imagery, and I discuss this in more detail in Chapter One; here I wish to focus on Luther’s use of the dichotomy between plain and ornate language on which malcontentedness also draws. Whether or not the writers discussed in this thesis read Luther themselves, when considered alongside his work, the truth-telling of the malcontent can be located within a tradition of plain and harsh speech forms, which disrupt existing authorities, and claim to expose the truth by piercing beneath false surfaces.

In the opening sections of On the Bondage of the Will, Luther refers to his ‘want of eloquence’, and asserts that he is ‘no rhetorician’. In contrast, the writing of Erasmus, to whose On Free Will Luther responds, is ostensibly praised as a ‘lovely, brilliant flow of language’. Luther continues,

But may I ask you, my dear Erasmus, to bear with my want of eloquence, as I in these matters bear with your want of knowledge. God does not give everything to any single man, and we cannot all do everything.

While Erasmus is eloquent, he lacks understanding, and Luther’s want of eloquence therefore implies that he does not. Luther creates a dichotomy in which plain language is more truthful, and has more substance, than eloquence. Erasmus’s ornate language, indeed, is derided as ‘meretricious verbiage’ that hides ‘vile stuff beneath’. The theological basis of this is clear: the use of symbol, image, and ceremony in Catholic worship was thought by the reformers to obscure the plain truth of the scriptures, and so ornate language, even in non-liturgical contexts, is viewed as similarly mystifying. Of course, Luther’s use of this dichotomy should not be taken as an accurate reflection of either his or Erasmus’ linguistic styles. Luther’s claimed ineloquence is rhetorically

65 Ibid., p. 63.
66 Ibid., p. 65.
67 Ibid., p. 63.
68 Any stylistic assessment of Luther, moreover, is complicated by the fact by necessity I am using a twentieth century English translation of a text originally written in Latin, and therefore significantly removed from the original text.
strategic: he aligns himself with the apostle Paul – he cites II Corinthians 11. 6, ‘And though I be rude in speaking, yet I am not so in knowledge’ – and therefore uses a biblical association of plain speech with knowledge and truth in order to discredit Erasmus and claim ‘truth’ for his writing.⁶⁹

Indeed, Luther’s claim to frankness builds on Paul’s rhetorical disavowal of eloquence in favour of plain speech. There are multiple biblical examples of this: ‘Neither stood my word and my preaching in the enticing speech of man’s wisdom, but in plain evidence of the Spirit and of power’ (I Corinthians 2. 4); ‘seeing then that we have such trust, we use great boldness of speech’ (II Corinthians 3. 12); ‘I use great boldness of speech toward you’ (II Corinthians 7. 4); ‘I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak’ (Ephesians 6. 20). The emphasis on the boldness of Paul’s speech in particular can be understood in relation to both the Greco-Roman concept of parrhesia – frank speech or outspokenness – and the ancient Cynics, who were known for their frank, disruptive truth-telling.⁷⁰ Although there are few records of actual Cynic speech or writing, Diogenes of Sinope is recorded as calling freedom of speech ‘man’s most precious possession’, and Philodemus of Gadara wrote in the first century BCE that a chief Cynic tenet is ‘to employ language that is frank and unrestrained’.⁷¹ F. Gerald Downing has argued that Paul is likely to have been received by his auditors as something of a Cynic philosopher, in that he drew on ‘common discourse’ in order to speak in a way that his Gentile listeners would understand, and that this involved several elements that would have been recognisably Cynic.⁷² He refers, for example, to Paul’s ‘coarseness’, citing the references to castration in Galatians 5. 12 and to ‘dung’ in Philippians 3. 8, and also to his ‘constant readiness to scold’, which is compared with the Cynics’ public diatribes.⁷³

Even more pertinent for a discussion of malcontentedness, though, is the fact that both Paul and the Cynics encouraged their followers to defy social codes and

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⁶⁹ The Bible and Holy Scriptures conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament (Geneva, 1560; repr. as The Geneva Bible, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), fol. YY4. I have used a facsimile reprint of the 1560 Geneva Bible for biblical quotations throughout the thesis, unless otherwise indicated, but have modernised spelling. The Geneva Bible, printed in England for the first time in 1575, is the translation with which the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century English literary writers discussed in the thesis are most likely to have been familiar.

⁷⁰ I analyse Michel Foucault’s exploration of the Cynics’ parrhesia at length in Chapter Two. Paul’s parrhesia is discussed further in Chapter Four.


⁷³ Ibid., p. 41.
conventions. Michel Foucault discusses Diogenes’ maxim ‘deface (or alter) the currency’, apparently spoken to him by the oracle at Delphi, and connects *nomisma* (currency) with *nomos* (law, custom), to argue that ‘the principle of altering the *nomisma* is also that of changing the custom, breaking with it, breaking up the rules, habits, conventions, and laws’.\(^{74}\) Cynicism was scandalous: the Cynic philosophers, with their violent diatribes and public display of bodily functions, completely broke with what was traditionally and socially acceptable. Paul also proposed the defiance of custom. ‘There is neither Jew nor Grecian, there is neither bond nor free’, from Galatians 3. 28, calls for the rejection of existing identities, traditions and laws; as Downing writes, by deciding to be ‘neither Jew nor Greek’, the Galatian Christian converts ‘had decided no longer to be bound by many of the laws and customs of either group, dispensing with many of the constraints of both’.\(^{75}\) Much later, Luther draws on this sense of disruption and upheaval – he cites Paul’s enemies’ claim that he ‘subverted the state of the world’ (Acts 17. 6) – and argues that the truth that he himself speaks is,

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\text{[S]o crucial and fundamental that it ought to be maintained and defended even at the cost of life, though as a result the whole world should be, not just thrown into turmoil and uproar, but shattered in chaos and reduced to nothingness.}\]

76 The disruption of that which came before is crucial to the Reformation, which can certainly be viewed as a moment of ‘turmoil and uproar’, and in order to justify this Luther uses Paul as a parallel: just as Paul, by spreading Christ’s message, disrupted the laws and customs of the Jews and Hellenes, Luther, by spreading the message of the Reformation, disrupts the customs of the Catholic Church.

Malcontented truth-telling also promises disruption, and indeed, in early modern writing there are clear parallels between the linguistic modes of Luther, Paul and the Cynics, and that of the malcontent. In Chapter One I trace the stylistic similarity between Luther and Marston’s use of excrement imagery and depiction of deceptive surfaces, and in Chapter Four I suggest that *The Winter’s Tale*’s Paulina draws on both malcontented and Pauline speech forms. In Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, which I do not have the space to consider in this thesis, both Timon and Apemantus are, in different ways, both malcontented and versions of the Cynic philosopher, and the


\(^{75}\) Downing, p. 18.

\(^{76}\) Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, p. 90.
The recurrent use of dog imagery for malcontents suggests a further connection given that the Greek for Cynic, *kynikos*, translates literally as ‘dog-like’.

The differences between malcontentedness and this tradition should also be emphasised, however. While the malcontent’s truth-telling is located within the secular, temporal realm, and relates to specific societies and individuals, Luther and the reformers are concerned with what they see as ‘a solemn and vital truth, of eternal consequence’: that of God and his relation to humanity.\(^77\) The same can be said of Paul’s spreading of New Testament truth. The reformers aimed to pull down one authority and replace it with another, not to destabilise or eradicate authority, whereas malcontentedness often involves pleasure in the creation of general and undifferentiated disorder for its own sake. Joseph Hall compares the malcontent to a Catherine-wheel which ‘flies out on all sides’, for example, and Marston’s satires present no better alternative to the corrupt and degraded society that they portray.\(^78\)

The association between malcontentedness and truth-telling is made more complex by the performativity involved in the malcontent discourse. As I discuss later in the thesis, malcontentedness often involves the use of disguise, or the self-conscious performance of a role. Malcontented speech, despite its claims to plainness, is typically rhetorically complex and layered with irony. In fact, the same is true of the tradition that I have highlighted. In Chapter Two I discuss the way in which truth for the Cynics is a way of life rather than a written record, and therefore to some extent always enacted, indeed, performed for an audience of onlookers. Paul, too, engages in what Downing describes as an ‘ascetic performance’ through which he demonstrates the truth of his claims.\(^79\) The self-conscious theatricality that malcontentedness often involves, though, actively reveals the connection between performance and truth, and the malcontent discourse can therefore be used to highlight the same connection in the tradition outlined above. It reconceptualises, or redefines, the notion of the ‘plain truth’, or more precisely, demonstrates that the ‘plain truth’ is always already constructed and performative. By locating truth with performance, moreover, malcontentedness demonstrates it to be unstable: if the truth is associated with potentially slippery performed surfaces, then how are we to be certain about what is true and what is not?

\(^{77}\) Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, p. 90.  
\(^{78}\) Joseph Hall, *Characters of Virtues and Vices* (1608), in *A Book of ‘Characters’*, ed. by Aldington, pp. 53-93 (p. 78).  
\(^{79}\) Downing, p. 44.
Its complex relationship with ‘truth’, then, is one of the many levels on which malcontentedness acts in disruptive ways in early modern culture.

‘Discord to malcontents is very manna’

A number of early modern texts figuratively associate malcontentedness with ‘discord’, a musical term used primarily to refer to a lack of harmony between notes, but also to ‘disharmony or disagreement between people’, and more generally to ‘a jarring or unharmonious effect recalling or likened to that of a discord in music’. Malcontented characters are discordant; they ‘jar’ with, or refuse to harmonise with wider society. In Thomas Middleton’s The Revenger’s Tragedy, for example, the malcontent Vindice is said to ‘jar’ with the rest of the court. Shakespeare’s Jaques, similarly, is described as ‘compact of jars’ (As You Like It, II. 7. 5), and excludes himself from the play’s harmonious ending, saying that he is ‘for other than for dancing measures’ (V. 4. 182). Hamlet is compared to ‘sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh’ (Hamlet, III. 1. 160), and this final example points towards the malcontent’s mental disorder; often melancholics, malcontented subjects suffer from an imbalance or disharmony in the humours. In The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare makes an implicit connection between discord and the kind of insidious rebellion with which in hostile portraits the malcontent is often connected:

The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils. (V. 1. 83-85)

In Marston’s The Malcontent, Malevole declares that ‘discord to malcontents is very manna’, and this gleeful proclamation demonstrates that although in certain iterations malcontentedness might appear (and occasionally is) morally conservative, aimed at the restoration of an older, idealised order, and the eradication of perceived corruption, at

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80 ‘discord, n. 1a and 3b’, OED Online.
the same time, it delights in the production of disorder and chaos for its own sake. Malevole’s ‘highest delight’, we are told, is to ‘procure others’ vexation’ (I. 2. 22).

The discord metaphor signals the disorder that this thesis argues is central to malcontentedness. I have explained that malcontentedness involves a disordered affective state – it is an active refusal of the self-containment offered by contentment and is associated with the imbalanced humours of melancholia – and that it is produced by contemporary social and political disorder. This thesis argues, however, that malcontentedness also has disordering effects in early modern literature and culture.

The malcontent is a ‘querulous cur’ with a ‘lawless tongue’, or ‘the spark that kindles the commonwealth’; malcontented speech has disruptive effects: it breaks decorum, and threatens social order.

The destabilising effects of malcontentedness are particularly pertinent with regard to categories of rank and nation. Malcontents are often either social upstarts – William Rankins writes that ‘[their] calling is far inferiour to their inordinate living, to their sumptuous shew in attire […]’, and to the proude advancement of their iowe estate’ – or displaced noblemen: both The Revenger’s Tragedy’s Vindice and The White Devil’s Flamineo, for example, become impoverished after the deaths of their fathers, and are malcontented at least in part due to the social displacement that this entails. The hierarchical indeterminacy of the malcontent position is also often represented by bastardy: Spurio from The Revenger’s Tragedy, Much Ado About Nothing’s Don John, and Troilus and Cressida’s Thersites are all both bastards and malcontented.

Not only does malcontentedness blur the lines that distinguish social ranks, though, in its association

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83 Hall, Characters, p. 79; John Earle, Microcosmography or A Piece of the World Discovered in Essays and Characters (1628), in A Book of Characters, ed. by Aldington, pp. 191-260 (p. 196).

84 Rankins, p. 8. Malcontentedness is often closely connected with the category of the ‘tool villain’ or hired assassin: such characters are dependent on the whims of a patron for their living, and malcontentedness constitutes an attempt to deal with that constraint. See Martin Wiggins, Journeymen in Murder: The Assassin in English Renaissance Drama (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 152-53.

85 Alison Findlay explains that in a society structured on the basis of patriarchy, bastards, the products of female transgression, are always outsiders, ‘without a name or a place in the social structure, outside its values and norms, deviant’, Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 1. Both bastards and malcontents, in fact, respond to their marginalisation by proclaiming their difference as a means for self-definition. Don John, for example, insists on his difference from his legitimate brother, and refuses to harmonize with society: ‘I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any’ (Much Ado About Nothing, I. 3. 21-23). He uses the plain language of malcontentedness in order to implicitly assert his independence from the world from which, due to his illegitimate status, he is estranged.
with foreignness (present in the etymology of the word itself) it disrupts national boundaries. In early accounts, malcontentedness often goes hand in hand with travel, so much so that critics Z. S. Fink and Sara Warneke discuss the malcontent traveller as a specific early modern type. Hostile portraits present malcontentedness as foreign, a vice that Englishmen pick up during travel and bring home with them, to the nation’s detriment. Thomas Nashe, for example, derides the malcontent’s affected ‘Italionato’ speech, his laments about ‘the barbarisme of his own Countrey’, and his empty threat to go ‘where he should be more accounted of’. Neither fully foreign nor, given their pollution by foreign vice, fully English, malcontents represent a threatening hybridity. The malcontent blurs the division between that which is other and that which is familiar, and the combination of fear and ridicule that the type elicits in commentators speaks to its hold over the popular imagination.

More widely, this thesis demonstrates that malcontentedness deconstructs broader dichotomies between surface and depth, truth and deception, and inside and outside. The contradictions involved in the malcontent discourse place it at the thresholds of such oppositions: malcontent voices claim independence from corrupt societies yet are typically immersed in that very corruption; they claim to pierce beneath surfaces and expose hidden truths, yet are often disguised or performing; malcontented truth-telling seems to offer knowledge and certainty, yet also registers discord and uncertainty. This is matched by a theatrical liminality: in drama, malcontented characters are often aware of their roles as actors, and speak in asides to the audience; they seem to cross the barrier between play and audience, thereby exposing the artifice of the theatrical performance.

This thesis provides a revision of the existing critical consensus on the malcontent as a stock character type, and examines the destabilising, interrogative, and often vexing effects of malcontentedness as a discourse in early modern literature and culture, through the close analysis of a range of texts. Each of the four chapters explores malcontentedness from a different angle. The first chapter argues that malcontentedness is the keynote of the collections of verse satires produced by John Marston in the 1590s. Marston satirises malcontentedness, particularly through the figure of the discontented traveller, and the chapter therefore includes some extended

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87 Nashe, Pierce Penilesse, fols B2r, B2v.
discussion of the relationship between malcontentedness, foreignness, and the potential for sedition. More significantly, though, I read Marston’s satires themselves as stylistically malcontented, in their insistent claims to difference and to represent truth, and in their tonal bitterness and self-consciously harsh and discordant style. Beginning with the verse satires serves to elucidate a key tenet of the thesis: that malcontentedness emerges in early modern writing in broad, stylistic ways, rather than solely through dramatic character; my work differs from previous scholarship in that rather than suggest that the satires are voiced by a persona similar to the malcontent figure, I undertake a wider exploration of the satires’ discursive engagement with malcontentedness.

The defining feature of the verse satires’ malcontentedness, I argue, is an impulse to chaos. The vice that the satires target (especially that of those in the upper echelons of society), is represented as excessive beyond all possibility of reform, and this excess is mirrored by the satires’ disordered and excessive invective style. The effect of this is to elide the asserted difference between the satirical speaker and the world that he attacks, thereby pointing to the malcontented stance of difference as always constructed and performative. Chapter Two builds on this by exploring the metatheatrical excess of Marston’s *The Malcontent* and Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, two plays which, again, not only channel the malcontent discourse through their central characters, Malevole and Vindice, but can be read as wider textual expressions of malcontentedness. In this chapter my focus shifts to an explicit consideration of the performativity involved in malcontentedness, and of the ways in which that performativity interacts with the malcontent’s claim to speak the truth. My discussion of *The Malcontent* proposes that Malevole’s socially destabilising truth-telling is only permitted by the fact that he is explicitly and self-consciously performing a role. In *The Revenger’s Tragedy* performance is also made the vehicle for truth-telling, in that the play’s constant metadramatic references reveal the truth about Vindice as performer, and the play as performance. In a broader sense, the chapter demonstrates that at the same time as malcontented voices claim to pierce beneath false surfaces to reveal the truth that they hide, malcontentedness also shows truth to be located in the performed and the theatrical. In this, I argue, malcontentedness echoes the parrhesia of ancient Cynicism: the Cynics, I show, also represented truth through performance.
This association of truth with performative surfaces (which are unfixed and subject to change), rather than with hidden depths, conceptually destabilises it, and makes it fundamentally uncertain. I pursue this further in Chapter Three. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, I argue, are malcontented in their foregrounding of the obscure and the uncertain, an effect that works both through individual malcontent characters and more widely. I use these plays to demonstrate the close connections between the malcontent discourse in English literature, and the rise of philosophical scepticism on the continent. In the same way as the sceptical philosopher, the plays reject certainty as a possibility, and to quote Bosola, take ‘another voyage’ (*The Duchess of Malfi*, V. 5. 105) towards the uncertain and unstable. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare provides multiple possible versions of the truth. We are presented with competing explanations of the central character’s ‘mystery’ (III. 2. 357), for example, none of which can be accepted with any certainty, and which I suggest function to set up a sort of trap: the play consciously invites interpretation, offering the possibility of access to knowledge of the truth, yet at the same time forecloses that access. Certainty is similarly rejected in *The Duchess of Malfi*, both by its presentation of a series of opaque characters with apparently secret inner lives to which the audience is never given access, and in the play’s structure; the malcontented text is like a ‘mist’ or ‘wilderness’ in which, like the Duchess, we have ‘nor path nor friendly clew’ (I. 1. 359, 360) to guide us.

I finish by proposing that the discursive approach taken by this thesis makes it both possible and necessary to analyse the extent to which the malcontent discourse is gendered. In some ways this final chapter departs from those that precede it in that it turns away from wider philosophical questions about truth and knowledge towards the social and material conditions of existence in which any claim to speak truth or have knowledge is grounded. Yet at the same time, my discussion in Chapter Four is continuous with that in previous chapters, in that I demonstrate that the binaries that malcontentedness explores and dismantles, between truth and deception, depth and surface, native and foreign, for example, are always also gendered. Malcontentedness, I argue, engages with gender binary in the same way as with these other binaries: it interrogates it, eliciting anxiety but also possibility. I demonstrate that the perceived inferiority involved in the malcontent’s socially indeterminate position engenders anxiety in the male malcontented subject about potential feminisation, thereby exposing gender roles as fragile and unstable. Yet this instability, I suggest, also works in the opposite direction, and makes it possible for writers to draw on malcontentedness in
their representations of women. Concentrating on Vittoria, from Webster’s *The White Devil*, and Paulina, from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, I argue that these women turn the discontented truth-telling involved in the usually masculine malcontent discourse against the patriarchal structures out of which the discourse emerges.

This final chapter demonstrates neatly the extent to which this thesis widens the critical field in relation to the early modern malcontent. It shows that taking a revisionist approach which treats malcontentedness as a discourse rather than as a stock figure provides opportunities to reconsider canonical early modern literary texts from a new perspective, and to explore the ways in which writers drew on malcontentedness in tone or style, or used elements of the discourse in their representation of subjects that have, up until now, been excluded from the category. The thesis demonstrates that malcontentedness functioned as a disruptive force in early modern culture, and can therefore be understood as a key part of the wider questioning and destabilising of previously established categories and institutions that occurred in this period; malcontentedness infiltrates and asks questions about social hierarchy, nationhood, gender, truth, and knowledge. In the broadest sense, malcontentedness is symptomatic of humankind’s shifting sense of its place in the universe. The Pythagorean concept of the *Musica Universalis*, or the ‘music of the spheres’, still influential in the Renaissance, indicated that the universe was harmonious and ordered in a way that corresponded to the harmony of the soul and body. Malcontentedness, though, is discordant rather than harmonious, and therefore suggests the possibility that humankind might be excluded from this cosmic order, detached from its privileged position at the centre of the universe. The malcontent discourse, I aim to show, interrogates concepts of harmony and order.
Chapter One

Excess and Disorder in John Marston’s Malcontented Verse Satire

The final years of the sixteenth century saw a rise in both literary uses of ‘malcontent’ and malcontent characters in drama. At the same time, a new mode of angry, assertive, and accusatory formal verse satire, typically written by young, educated, and apparently disaffected gentlemen, exploded onto the literary scene. This is no coincidence: the verse satire of the 1590s, in particular that of the poet and playwright John Marston, is itself malcontented. The fiercely independent stance adopted by Marston’s speakers, the persistent use of linguistic violence and grotesque imagery, and a general discontent with the world as unfair and hypocritical, marks Marston’s satires out as explorations and expressions of the early modern malcontent discourse. John Donne, who himself wrote satire during the 1590s, preached in a 1627 sermon that in deriding the age as diseased, the satirist risks creating the very disease s/he means to cure: ‘we cry out upon the illnesse of the times’, he writes, ‘and we make the times ill’. This chapter proposes that the malcontented truth-telling of Marston’s satires does indeed ‘make the times ill’. Their excessive, discordant style constructs a chaotic and skewed vision of the world as a place in which humankind is utterly abject, and reform is futile. The satires demonstrate the impulse to disorder with which malcontentedness in the period is more widely associated; Marston’s satires reveal malcontentedness as a disruptive, distorting force in early modern culture.

Marston produced two collections of poetic satires, both in 1598: in May he published The Metamorphosis of Pigmalions Image and Certaine Satyres, a volume that includes, as well as five satires, an Ovidian erotic poem about the Pygmalion myth, and four months later The Scourge of Villanie appeared, a collection of eleven satires and numerous additional prefatory poems, which by the end of 1599 had gone through three separate editions. These texts formed part of a wider trend for formal verse satire. In the two years between the appearance of Joseph Hall’s collection of satires, Virgidemiarum, in

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1 Some elements of this chapter, in particular the contextual material on the Bishops’ Ban on pp. 64-65, and the point that the satires reveal their own implication in corruption on pp. 75-76, rework material from my MA dissertation, “Playing the rough part of a Satyrist”: Voice and Difference in the Satirical Poetry of the 1590s”, submitted to the University of Birmingham in September 2014.

March 1597, and the Bishops’ Ban of 1599 (a sweeping act of literary suppression that censored a number of individual texts and expressly forbade the publication of further satires), a wave of formal verse satires and epigrams was produced. These satires were confrontational and often vitriolic, and were written by authors including, as well as Hall and Marston, Everard Guilpin, Thomas Middleton, John Davies, and William Rankins. Donne’s satires are also thought to have been circulating in manuscript during this period. The satirists generally target contemporary social ills and vices, represented by exemplary figures with fictitious Latinate names, and the pervasive sense of cynicism and disaffection that characterises much of this poetry can be linked to the late Elizabethan culture of thwarted aspiration and disappointment that I outlined in the Introduction. Arthur Marotti writes that satire in the 1590s was ‘the literary form practised by those whose ambitions were frustrated and who yearned to involve themselves more deeply in the social environments they pretended to scorn’. Like Webster’s Bosola, the malcontent who ‘rails at those things which he wants’ (The Duchess of Malfi, I. 1. 25), the 1590s satirists attack a society that they perceive to be ungrateful and corrupt. Viewed generally, the verse satire and the malcontent discourse respond to the same social context, and voice similar anxieties.

In early modern writing, malcontentedness and satire are, indeed, closely associated. As a social type, the malcontent was treated with hostility, and subject to satire and parody in collections of ‘characters’, and in the prose and verse satire of writers like Thomas Nashe, Joseph Hall, and Thomas Lodge. Yet such accounts also make frequent reference to the malcontent’s own use of satirical speech. Hall writes that, ‘He speaks nothing, but satires and libels’, and John Earle that, ‘His life is a perpetual satire, and he is still girding at the age’s vanity’. George Puttenham’s The Arte of English Poesie unites malcontentedness and satire in a reference to the medieval writer William Langland: ‘He that wrote the Satyr of Piers Ploughman, seemed to have bene a malcontent of that time, and therefore bent himselfe wholly to taxe the disorders of that age’.

Piers Plowman is an allegorical satire, and much milder in tone and approach than that voiced by the later malcontented texts and stage characters analysed in this thesis, yet Puttenham’s reference demonstrates that the categories of satirist and malcontent were perceived as closely interrelated in late Elizabethan England. While not all early

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4 Hall, Characters, p. 78; Earle, p. 197.
modern satire is malcontented in tone, malcontentedness inevitably involves satire. In drama, malcontent characters like Middleton’s Vindice or Webster’s Bosola function in part as satiric spokespeople that cry out against the sins of society. The malcontent Jaques, from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, is simultaneously malcontent satirist and malcontent satirised: he wishes to ‘Cleanse the foul body of th’infected world’ (II. 7. 60) with his satirical speech, but is mocked by the Duke and his lords, who accuse him of hypocrisy: ‘For thou thyself hast been a libertine, | As sensual as the bruitish sting itself’ (II. 7. 65-66).

In this chapter I use Marston’s verse satires to explore the relationship between malcontentedness and satire, and argue that Marston develops a poetic style in which the two are inseparable. Marston’s satires, I propose, are central texts in the formation and expression of the early modern malcontent discourse. As well as satirising the malcontent as a social type, chiefly through the discontented traveller Bruto, the satires are themselves malcontented: in their stance of difference from both native literary tradition and from their satirical targets, in their tonal hostility and bitterness, and in their claim to expose the truth about society and the world. The second half of the chapter argues that the satires’ truth-telling foregrounds disorder, or ‘discord’. The censorship of Marston’s satires under the 1599 Bishops’ Ban shows that they were perceived as potentially threatening by the authorities, a point which I link to Marston’s representation of vice as overwhelming and uncontrollable. Rather than reforming their targets or eradicating vice, the satires expose the world as fundamentally chaotic. Marston’s satirical technique, I suggest, works to disorder and disrupt, and this impulse to discord above harmony or order is also evident in the fact that the speakers openly implicate themselves in the corruption that they attack, which I read as a further instance of truth-telling. Malcontented truth-telling in the satires has deconstructive effects: not only does it distort that which it depicts through its excessive linguistic style, it blurs the structural boundary between the satirist and the satiric object to reveal that difference as fabricated, thus pointing towards satire as a constructed work of art.

**1590s Satire and Satirical Tradition**

In drama, malcontent characters are generally marginal outsiders in corrupt societies, who reject a world with which they feel unable to harmonise, or that they perceive as
having rejected them. The verse satire of the 1590s positions itself in a similar way; like malcontentedness it involves a vehement insistence on independence and difference: from other kinds of contemporary writing and from literary tradition. Just as ‘malcontent’ in the late sixteenth century is a new word and literary category, the verse satire is imagined by its writers as a new and innovative genre. Joseph Hall’s 1597 collection of satires, Virgidiemiarum, the first of the flurry of verse satires published in the late 1590s, begins in audacious fashion:

I First adventure, with fool-hardie might  
To tread the steps of perilous despite:  
I first adventure: follow me who list,  
And be the second English Satyrist.6

By challenging readers to follow in his footsteps and become the second, Hall claims for himself the position of the first English satirist. He constructs his poetic project as a dangerous foray into uncharted territory. Hall is, of course, by no means the first English poet to write verse satire: the native tradition stretches back at least as far as Chaucer and Langland. Yet the fact that this claim is made reveals more than does its questionable veracity; it demonstrates the radically assertive and independent quality of the 1590s satire that does indeed mark it out as new and different from the native tradition that preceded it.

The direct assault and fierce invective that marks these new satires does, however, draw on the biting and vituperative styles of the Roman poets Juvenal and Persius, who in the sixteenth century were generally placed in opposition to the more urbane and balanced Horace; Scaliger wrote that ‘Juvenalis ardet, instat aperte, jugulat. Persius insultat. Horatius iridet’ [Juvenal burns, openly confronts, and goes for the jugular; Persius insults; Horace smiles].7 In The Scourge of Villanie, Marston explicitly aligns himself with both Juvenal and Persius. The title page includes as an epigraph a line from Persius’ ‘Satura I’, ‘nec scompro [sic] metuens carmina, nec thus [sic]’ [poems which have nothing to

fear from mackerel or frankincense]. Marston uses Persius to claim poetic value: the poems of Persius (and implicitly Marston) will not be used as parchment wrapping in cooking, or as packaging. The title of the second satire in the volume is ‘Difficile est Satyram [sic] non scribere’ [It is difficult not to write satire], a quotation from Juvenal’s ‘Satire I’, and in Sourcge, III Marston’s speaker asks whether he should muzzle his ‘satyrick vaine’, and concludes, ‘No gloomie Juvenall, | Though to thy fortunes I disastrous fall’ (Sourcge, III. 193, 195-96), a reference to the uncorroborated tradition that Juvenal’s controversial writing led to his exile in Egypt: here, the writing of satire, like the condition of malcontentedness, is presented as self-imposed exile. Prior to the 1590s, poetic satire tended to favour Horace as a model; William Jones provides examples from Petrarch, Erasmus, Wyatt, and Sidney, and stresses that ‘to invoke Horace as a model was to align one’s work with an ideologically privileged conservative tradition that reached back for centuries’. The turn to Juvenal and Persius in the 1590s, then, although in one sense an adherence to a specific Roman form, is at the same time a turn against the tradition within which the authors cited by Jones were writing.

Yet despite their frequent claims to the contrary, the influence of a long and varied tradition of popular British satire can in fact be discerned in the verse of Marston and his contemporaries. The English verse satire of the 1590s is not the first to use assault as its chief tactic. Mary Claire Randolph discovers an early source of a native English satirical tradition in Celtic maledictory verse; she argues that these first satirists meant to bring actual harm or ‘word-death’ to their targets through curses and incantations. The Celtic satirist, Randolph writes, ‘meant to mutilate the victim’s face so shamefully that, if it were a man, he could hold no high tribal office’. The long tradition of flying, the poetic exchange of insults, examples of which are to be found in classical, Anglo-Saxon, and medieval texts, and which was practiced as a form of public contest by sixteenth-century Scottish poets, provides a further instance of the connection of satire with attack, as do the ‘pulpit satirists’ of the fourteenth century, preachers who ‘took upon themselves [the] work of ventilating and satirizing public

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11 Ibid.
wrongs’. Chaucer’s Pardoner is a version of this figure, and, like the satirists of the 1590s, uses language as a weapon: ‘thanne wol I styngle hym with mye tonge smerte [sharp] | In preching’.

Marston and his contemporaries’ choice of hostile style, and metaphorical construction of satiric language as inflicting physical harm on its victims, is therefore not strictly new, and draws on these existing forms of satiric discourse, as well as on Roman satire. Yet it cannot be denied that the satire of the 1590s is marked by a shift away from that produced earlier in the century. The Horatian style and indirect approach through fable and allegory favoured by poets like Skelton, Wyatt, Spenser, and their predecessors is abandoned in favour of Juvenalian raging and direct attack: Marston imagines satire as a whip with which ‘to scourge polluting beastlines’ (Scourge, ‘Proemium in librum tertium’, 2), Hall writes that ‘The Satyre should be like the Porcupine, | That shoots sharpe quils out in each angry line’ (V. 3. 1-2), for Guilpin satire is ‘the Strappado, rack and some such paine | To base lewd vice’. Whether this poetry is as radically different from the verse that comes before it as it claims to be is less important to a discussion of its malcontentedness than the fact that it presents itself as such. Hall, as mentioned, claims to be the first English satirist, and Marston, too, disavows any debt to either a patron or tradition in favour of his own self-imposed standards, dedicating The Scourge of Villanie to ‘his most esteemed, and best beloved Selfe’. In one of the prefatory poems included within The Scourge of Villanie, the speaker insists on his difference. He sets himself apart from contemporary poets, ‘let others sing as their good Genius moves, | Of deepe desines, or else of clipping loves’ (Scourge, ‘Proemium in librum primum’, 3-4), and rejects the laurel wreath of poetic achievement, represented by Daphne (transformed into a laurel tree in Ovid’s Metamorphoses), in favour of a crown of ‘Blacke Cypresse’ (Scourge, ‘Proemium in librum primum’, 16), a symbol of mourning and a more fitting emblem for Marston’s malcontented verse. This claim to difference from tradition constitutes a self-imposed isolation that anticipates the malcontents of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean stage.

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15 Marston, Poems, p. 94.
Marston’s satires in particular are also insistent about the difference between the satirical, malcontented speaker and his corrupt targets. To some extent, this is typical of satire, a genre which relies structurally on an asserted difference between the satirist and the satiric object. Scholars of the genre emphasise that satire is structured through opposition: Charles A. Knight writes that satire ‘functions to mark and defend boundaries’, and Fredric V. Bogel that it ‘insist[s] on the otherness of the satiric object’. Yet Marston’s satires are unusually insistent and self-conscious about the assertion of difference, packed with references to the practice of writing satire and to the satirist’s relation to his targets. Later in this chapter I suggest that this anxious insistence on difference in fact stems from similarity; the malcontented speaker, like Webster’s Bosola or Middleton’s Vindice, is implicated in what he attacks, and therefore attempts to distance himself. Here, however, I wish to concentrate on Marston’s construction of his speakers as truth-tellers as the strategy by which that difference is established.

In the preface to his 1566 translation of Horace, Thomas Drant writes, ‘The Satyrist loves Truthe, none more than he. | An utter foe to fraude in each degree’. Joseph Hall repeats this connection at the beginning of Virgidiemiarum, setting his truthful satire against the false and malicious envy of his critics:

Envie waits on my backe, Truth on my side:
Envie will be my Page, and Truth my Guide.
Envie the margent holds, and Truth the line:
‘Truth doth approve, but Envie doth repine. (L. ‘Prologue’, 5-8)

Marston, too, on a number of occasions establishes difference through a claim to truthfulness. The satires as a body claim to ‘snarle at those, which doe the world beguile | With masked showes’ (Certaine Satyres, ‘The Authour in prayse of his precedent Poem’, 45-46); this snarling is set against the falsehood of the satires’ targets and is thus constructed as truthful. In Scourge, II the speaker claims to have ‘Lynceus eyes’ and ‘piercing sight’ (Scourge, II. 24). Lynceus is in Greek mythology famed for sight so keen it is said to be able to pierce beneath the earth; the allusion implies that the satirist is able to see beneath disguised surfaces, and recognise the truth of his targets’ corruption.

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17 Thomas Drant, A Medicinable Morall, that is, the two Bookes of Horace his Satyres, Englyshed according to the prescription of Saint Hierone (London, 1566), fol. A4v.
where others cannot. In the first of the *Certaine Satyres*, for example, the braggart soldier Tubrio is attacked for his disingenuousness; his avowed martial prowess is exposed as a facade created through ostentatious clothing: ‘Full twenty falls [fashionable collars] doth make him wondrous brave’ (*Certaine Satyres*, I. 90). The traveller Bruto, similarly, hides negative qualities behind a veneer of false wisdom and assumed superiority. In these cases, as in many others, the satirist calls his targets out on their deception, and reveals that which they hide. The satire of Marston and his contemporaries shares this claim to truth with later stage malcontents. Figures like Malevole, Vindice, and Bosola are also anxious to establish their difference from the courtly societies, populated by flatterers and dissemblers, in which they are situated, and as I discuss in Chapters Two and Three, one of the dominant ways in which they attempt this is by constructing their speech as plain and truthful.

**The Malcontent Satirised: Bruto the Traveller**

The insistence of Marston’s speakers on their difference from both literary tradition and their satiric targets, as well their claim to reveal the truth, then, provides a level on which the satires might be considered stylistically malcontented. The word ‘malcontent’ itself, though, appears in the verse satires only twice. The first of these uses, in the second of the *Certaine Satyres*, describes a courtier who appears ‘the perfect image of faire Curtesie’, but is ‘within a haughty malecontent’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 88, 103). The courtier’s malcontentedness stems from ambition combined with the denial of advancement, and draws on the atmosphere of thwarted aspiration and resentment that prevailed during the final years of Elizabeth’s reign. While the courtier ‘hath no promotions livelihood’, he hopes nevertheless that ‘when sunne is set, the lesser starres will shine’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 90, 102), a wish which might refer, in a potentially dangerous move, to the death of the aging queen. Marston’s ‘haughty malecontent’ is a hostile portrait of the social-climbing and ambitious, yet persistently frustrated, malcontent courtier common in the literature and culture of the late sixteenth century.\(^\text{18}\)

Marston’s second use of ‘malcontent’ is more obscure, but similarly hostile. *The Scourge of Villanie*’s ‘Satyre IX’ attacks Joseph Hall. Hall was a satirist, a lecturer in

\(^{18}\) This figure also speaks to the close relationship in early modern culture between the malcontent and the stage Machiavel: both are perceived as ambitious and self-serving, and are parodied in writing from the period. Malcontentedness, though, is also often tied up with a moral ambiguity and uncertainty that is not present in depictions of the stage Machiavel.
rhetoric at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and in the late 1590s, was Marston’s primary poetic rival. After first deriding Hall as an ‘Athens Ape’ (‘Athens’ in this context refers to Cambridge University) and an ‘ill-tutor’d pedant’ (Scourge, IX. 21, 33), the speaker continues,

Now th’Ape chatters, and is as malecontent
As a bill-patch’d doore, whose entrails out have sent
And spewd theyr tenant. (Scourge, IX. 35-37)

This complex image depicts a plague-infected house, the door of which is pasted with bills announcing the infection. The tenants of the house have died, and their bodies have consequently ‘spewd’ forth from the door, a word which, along with ‘entrails’, makes the disease grotesquely material. Both Hall (the chattering ape) and the door are ‘malecontent’, a comparison which has more than one possible interpretation. First, just as the bills on the door declare the infection within the house, the ape’s (or Hall’s) chattering signifies hidden malcontentedness (like that of the courtier in Certain Satyres, II), which in this image is compared to a disease, and therefore recalls the link between malcontentedness and melancholy. Second, the ape’s chattering and the door’s spewing forth of its tenants’ entrails might both be read as metaphors for malcontented railing, in which case Marston is making a negative comment about Hall’s literary style. This second interpretation is telling given that, as this chapter demonstrates, Marston’s own literary style can be labelled as malcontented; it seems that Marston attacks in Hall that which he recognises in his own verse.

Both instances of the term in the satires, then, construct ‘malcontent’ as something negative; the satirist uses the term to attack. Indeed, Marston satirically targets malcontentedness itself under the guise of the traveller Bruto, although without actually using the word:

Looke, looke, with what a discontented grace
Bruto the travailler doth sadly pace
Long Westminster, o civill seeming shade. (Certaine Satyres, II. 127-29)

Z. S. Fink in 1935 discussed Jaques as an example of what he terms the malcontent traveller, a figure influenced by continental fashions for melancholy and dressing in black. Marston’s Bruto fits this model emphatically, and almost certainly influenced Fink’s formulation of the type. Characterised by discontent and melancholy, he paces

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19 Fink, pp. 244-52.
the fashionable districts of London clad in ‘sad colours’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 130), and laments the merit that, like the ‘haughty malecontent’ depicted earlier in the same poem, he perceives as having been neglected:

And now he sighs. *O thou corrupted age,*

Which slight regard’st men of sound carriage,

Vertue, knowledge, flie to heaven againe

Daine not mong these ungratefull sots remaine.

Well, some tongs I know, some Countries I have scene

And yet these oily Snailes respectles beene

Of my good parts. (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 134-39)

Bruto’s foreign travel has given him an inflated sense of self-worth, and he sees himself as possessed of a superiority which goes unrecognised by his peers, the ‘oily Snailes’ who have stayed at home. The idea that the current age is in some way lacking or corrupt is common to multiple instances of malcontentedness; Bosola, for example, echoes Bruto’s resentment: ‘Miserable age, where the only reward | Of doing well is the doing of it’ (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I. 1. 31-32).

The speaker decries Bruto’s professed superiority as false, however, and his discontent as consequently groundless. The actual fruits of Bruto’s travels are not wisdom or virtue, but a catalogue of the bad habits and dangerous tendencies stereotypically associated with each of the locations that he has visited. From Italy, he brings home ‘new paints and poysonings’, and ‘*Venis venery*, from France, ‘Naples poxe, and French-mens dalliance’, from Spain, the ‘lofty lookes’ and ‘Lucifrian pride’ already expressed by Bruto’s high-flown opinion of himself, and from ‘Belgia’ (the Low Countries), ‘theyr deep bezeling’, or heavy drinking (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 144, 146, 150, 152, 153). Bruto appears little more than a patchwork of foreign vice, and his sense of neglected merit, and implicit claim to virtue and knowledge, is thus shown to be unfounded. The speaker asks of him, ‘What art thou but black clothes? Say Bruto say | Art any thing but onely sad array?’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 147-48). Where Hamlet points to inner substance, ‘that within which passes show’, Bruto has only outward semblance, ‘the trappings and the suits’ (*Hamlet*, I. 2. 85, 86) – the black clothes and discontented mannerisms and speech – of malcontentedness.

Bruto can be read as a version of the ‘English man Italianated’ described by Roger Ascham in 1570: a type of English gentleman who ‘by living, & traveling in Italie, bringeth home into England out of Italie, the Religion, the learning, the policie, the
experience, the maners of Italie'.

Ascham worries that English travellers in Italy might arrive home having adopted the Italians’ Catholicism, or worse, atheism, and their taste for Machiavellian political intrigue: ‘a factious hart, a discoursing head, a mynde to medle in all mens matters’. Sara Warneke suggests that during the 1580s and 1590s, ‘the term and concept of malcontent became synonymous with the Italianate traveller’, and Marston’s depiction of the malcontent Bruto as compiled by various foreign vices certainly draws on the same concerns as Ascham, and gives voice to the popular contemporary fear that by imitating foreign ideas, attitudes, and religions, Englishmen would disrupt and pollute the English nation state. Indeed, the word ‘malcontent’ itself encodes foreignness in its etymology, and is associated with both continental political revolt and Catholicism. The threat to English nationhood that a malcontent such as Bruto represents, therefore, can be connected with increasingly rife anti-Catholic feeling in the years leading up to the satires’ publication. This anti-Catholicism was exacerbated by the 1570 excommunication of Elizabeth by Pope Pius V, the alliance of Rome and Catholic Spain in the late 1580s, which threatened to invade England and overthrow its Protestant regime, and by real and imagined foreign-sponsored Catholic plots against the Queen and the court throughout 1580s and 1590s. Nationality, as Michael Neill points out, is ‘imagined as a dimension of difference – something that sets one apart from what one is not’. By placing Bruto’s malcontentedness as a direct result of his foreign travel, and therefore as other, then, Marston’s satire works implicitly to bolster England’s borders and define its Protestant nationhood in opposition to the threat of foreign Catholicism.

The satire’s final line on Bruto, ‘But hence poluted Neopolitan’ (Certaine Satyres, II. 156), places him as foreign, and also perhaps puns on ‘nea-polis’, or ‘new city’: the Neapolitan Bruto is something new and strange. No longer fully English, but also not of any one of the foreign locations that he has visited, Bruto threatens the border between that which is English and that which is other, between the inside and the outside. Marston’s choice of name for his traveller stresses this indeterminacy. ‘Bruto’, though an obviously Italian name, also suggests Brutus, the descendent of Aeneas that, in medieval legend, founded Britain, and became the country’s first ruler. Holinshed’s

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21 Ibid.
22 Warneke, p. 128.
Chronicles treats the Brutus legend as history, and Marston’s readers would likely have been familiar with the story. By giving a figure defined by foreign vice and the rejection of Englishness a name that is so similar to that of Britain’s founding father, Marston emphasises that Bruto has, through foreign influence, been warped and turned against his country, just as the name ‘Brutus’ is distorted into the Italian ‘Bruto’.

Although Marston does not explicitly depict Bruto as politically disruptive, the association with Ascham’s Machiavellian Italianate traveller, as well as his dangerous liminality, suggests an unspoken fear that Bruto’s discontent and ‘Lucifrian pride’ might develop into seditious intent. Lucifer, of course, is the archetypal rebel; Malevole, the often subversive title character of Marston’s The Malcontent is said to be ‘more discontent than Lucifer when he was thrust out of the presence’ (I. 2. 19-20). From this angle, the satirist’s dismissal of Bruto’s malcontentedness as a fashionable affectation, with no serious motive, is an attempt to neutralise the threat to national stability that he represents. This kind of deflationary tactic is common in hostile portrayals of malcontentedness. Everard Guilpin’s 1598 collection of satirical poetry, Skialethia, for example, includes an epigram about a malcontented Inns of Court scholar, ‘Of Pansa’. Various possible reasons are presented for Pansa’s malcontentedness, including the death of his father, and lovesickness, but all are dismissed. The truth of the matter, the satirist asserts, is that, ‘He passing from his chamber through the Court, | Did spoile a paire of new white pumps with durt’.24 Any potential danger to society that the alienated malcontent, who shuns the world ‘Like hate-man Timon in his cell’, might represent, is made ridiculous, and therefore less threatening, by the motive attributed to his discontent.25

The negative portrayal of malcontentedness that we find in Marston’s satires, especially in the depiction of Bruto, is typical of the way in which the category is represented in much of the prose and verse satire of the late sixteenth century. Yet Marston’s treatment of malcontentedness is complicated by the tone employed in the satires. There are, in fact, conspicuous parallels between Bruto’s malcontented speech and the satiric speakers’ laments about the age as corrupt at other points in the satires. In the fifth of the Certaine Satyres, the speaker complains that justice has fled the world: ‘poore Astrea’s fled into an Ile | And lives a poore and banished exile’ (Certaine Satyres, V. 83-84), an image which recalls Bruto’s call for virtue and knowledge to ‘flie to heaven

25 Ibid., l. 5.
again' rather than remain in a world in which they are not appreciated. A satire in *The Scourge of Villanie* bemoans that ‘Honors shade, thrusts honors substance from his place’ (*Scourge*, V. 14), a sentiment which again comes close to Bruto’s claim that in this ‘corrupted age’ true merit goes unrecognized and unrewarded. The voice of the malcontent Bruto, it seems, is shared by the speakers of Marston’s verse satires; the satires are themselves malcontented.

**Marston’s Malcontented Style**

I am not the first to use the word malcontent with regard to the verse satires, though thus far there has been no detailed or extensive account of what exactly makes this poetry malcontented, or what it tells us about the place of the malcontent discourse in early modern culture more widely. R. A. Foakes claimed in the 1970s that ‘Marston himself adopts the stance of a better type of malcontent, the worthy intellectual, undervalued and misunderstood, and so made bitter, who lashes out at the hypocrisy and vice he sees around him’, and more recently Brean Hammond, in a brief discussion of the 1590s satirists, notes that ‘unrealised ambition and attention-seeking are partly responsible for the tone of satire that creates personae similar to the figure of the ‘malcontent’ in contemporary plays’. Mark Thornton Burnett devotes a couple of pages of his chapter on the stage malcontent to Marston’s satires, and proposes that Marston’s use of ‘a persona shot through with testy animosity’ is a response to ‘the unstable equilibrium of his moment’, discerning a version of malcontentedness in what he terms the satires’ ‘quasi-autobiographical echoes of thwarted aspiration’.

This line of argument, that Marston adopts a semi-autobiographical satiric persona that is a version of the malcontent as it appears in drama, simply transposes the conventional notion of the malcontent as a stock type onto the verse satires to suggest that they should be read as spoken by a malcontent: either a persona or the author himself. This

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26 There is, of course, also the possibility that the image of justice ‘fled into an Ile’ is an image of England ruled by Elizabeth I, who was frequently figured as Astraea. Yet it also alludes to Ovid’s description of Justice’s abandonment of the Earth in *Metamorphoses*, I. 149-50, and Davenport argues that it suggests the islands used as places of exile during the Roman Empire: ‘The Roman emperors used the smaller islands of the Mediterranean as places of banishment, and it seems more likely that M. has something of that sort in mind rather than that he is attempting a very awkward compliment to Queen Elizabeth’. Marston, *Poems*, p. 253.


28 Burnett, p. 339.
approach works to an extent; the first poem in the _Certaine Satyres_ volume is signed ‘W. K.’, and the prefatory address to the reader in _The Scourge of Villanie_ ‘W. Kinsayder’, a fact which has led a number of readers to assume that the satires as a body are spoken by ‘a character by the name of W. Kinsayder’.

The notion that the satires are spoken by Kinsayder, and that Kinsayder can be understood as a stable ‘character’, however, simplifies both the malcontent discourse and the texts themselves, and is refuted by close examination of individual poems. As Burnett’s reference to ‘quasi-biographical echoes’ demonstrates, whether the speaking voice is a fictional character named Kinsayder, or an exaggerated version of the author’s personal voice, is difficult to discern: the use of the pseudonym points to the former, but references to Marston’s contemporaries Joseph Hall and Everard Guilpin (in _Scourge_, X, for example), suggest the latter. That the name Kinsayder is in fact a pun on Marston’s name – ‘Kinsing’ is an obsolete word for the castration of dogs, and plays on ‘mar’ (destroy) and ‘stone’ (testicle) – complicates matters further: Kinsayder and Marston cannot be separated. Of course, it could be argued that this implies that Kinsayder is a mask, and that Marston himself is the malcontented speaker of the satires, but although the style which I discuss as malcontented is maintained throughout both volumes, it makes more sense to refer to the satires’ speakers than speaker. Voice in this poetry is fractured, with different speakers and tones discernible even within individual poems. In _Scourge_, VIII, ‘Inamorato Curio’, for instance, there is a shift in tone from frantic railing to philosophical meditation, and also from the voice of the satirist to that of the satire’s primary target, the lover Curio. _Scourge_, VII, ‘A Cynicke Satyre’, is a dialogue between two speakers: Diogenes the Cynic, and Lynceus, a figure from Greek mythology famed for keen sight. ‘Kinsayer’, moreover, is not Marston’s only appellation: he signs the final of the _Certaine Satyres_ as ‘Epictetus’, a stoic philosopher, and at the conclusion of _The Scourge of Villanie_ uses the name ‘Theriomastix’, which translates from the Greek as ‘beast-scurge’, conflating the volume’s title with its writer. While the scope of my discussion does not permit me to analyse these labels in detail, they demonstrate Marston’s experimentation with voice and personae in this poetry; while

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the majority of the voices adopted in the satires are malcontented, to read the satires as spoken by a single persona is an oversimplification.

The malcontentedness of Marston’s satires, then, cannot be approached in the same way as the malcontent on the stage so often is: as a version of a contemporary stock figure. I wish to propose that the satires are not simply spoken by a malcontent character, but express and explore malcontentedness in a broader way. Not only do they critique and parody malcontentedness, they can themselves be understood as malcontented. Characterised by railing and invective, and often cynical, embittered, and disillusioned, the satires are malcontented in tone, and are marked by the ‘discord’ with which the malcontent in drama is also frequently associated. Tied up with this is the fiercely oppositional stance already discussed; the speakers insist on their independence from both the contemporary literary milieu in which they are situated, and the societies about which they claim to speak the truth.

The satires are cynical, vituperative, and at times misanthropic. Discontent is the dominant emotion; in Certaine Satyres, V the world is a fundamentally unjust place in which the wrong people are rewarded and the sinful escape punishment, ‘Slight scapes are whipt, but damned deeds are praised’ (Certaine Satyres, V. 138). This sentiment is repeated throughout both volumes as the satires construct a vision of a corrupt and debased society populated by at best, foolish, and at worst, dangerous, individuals, the truth about whom only the satirist is willing to speak. Linguistically, the satires are characterised by grotesque imagery and verbal assault. In Scourge, VII, for example, the speaker rails against a courtier,

He that doth snort in fat-fed luxury,
And gapes for some grinding Monopoly
[…]
Mean’st thou that senseless, sensuall Epicure?
That sinck of filth, that guzzell most impure? (Scourge, VII. 32-33, 38-39)

The courtier’s greed and ambition is imagined in animalistic terms: he indulges in ‘luxury’ like a pig rooting in dirt, and waits for a monopoly like a hungry bird with its mouth gaping open for food, a pertinent image given Elizabeth’s increasing parsimony during the final decade of her reign. Not satisfied with deriding his target as bestial, in the second couplet cited the speaker erodes any remaining vestiges of the courtier’s humanity by contemptuously designating him a ‘sinck of filth’, a ‘guzzell’ or gutter for decomposing matter. The use of grotesque imagery of filth, decay, and disease is
common in malcontented speech; we might compare Bosola’s ‘the opinion of wisdom is a foul tetter that runs all over a man’s body’ (The Duchess of Malfi, II. 1. 78-79), or the curse levelled by Shakespeare’s Timon at his flatterers: ‘Of man and beast the infinite malady | Crust you quite o’er’ (Timon of Athens, III. 7. 90-91). The satires are full of this kind of language. The practice of satire is imagined as a ‘sharp Razor’ with which the speaker means to let the world’s ‘infectious blood’ (Scourge, V. 118, 117); rather than curative, however, words are weapons, and Marston’s speakers repeatedly imagine figuratively cutting, beating, and whipping their targets with verse.

In the anonymous play The Return from Parnassus (c. 1601), the scholars Judicio and Ingenioso mock the satiric style of ‘Monsier Kinsayder’, the Marston of the satires:

Me thinks he is a Ruffian in his stile,
Withouten bands or garters ornament.
[…]
Cuts, thrusts, and foines at whomsoever he meets.30

Not only does this description emphasise the linguistic violence of Marston’s brand of satire, it accuses him of indiscriminateness in attack which is reminiscent of hostile depictions of the malcontent, for example Hall’s metaphor of the type as a ‘well-couched fire-work, that flies out on all sides’.31 The notion that Marston’s style is in some way undressed, unornamented by ‘bands or garters’, also echoes the descriptions of the malcontent’s careless clothing in typological portraits: Thomas Lodge writes that ‘You shall always find him [the malcontent] his hat without a band, his hose ungartered’.32 Though the authors of The Return from Parnassus do not connect Marston explicitly with the linguistic style of the malcontent, there are clear parallels between their account of Marston’s writing and the contemporary descriptions of the category: the two, it seems, were received in similar ways.

The stylistic disarray that the Parnassus authors describe also recalls the figurative association of malcontentedness with discord. Malcontentedness involves disharmony and disorder; it is constructed as out of step or out of tune with wider society. In the poem that opens the third section of The Scourge of Villanie, Marston describes his verse as ‘harsh discordant strings’ (Scourge, ‘Proemium in librum tertium’, 5-8), a fitting description of poetry that foregrounds discord in both form and content. The fact that Marston

30 The Three Parnassus Plays, pp. 241-42.
31 Hall, Characters, p. 78.
consistently writes in rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter might on one level be taken as an attempt to order or restrain the satires’ chaotic subject matter. However, the use of harsh invective, grotesque imagery, and frequent metrical disruption undercuts any sense of formal balance, and instead creates the sense that both Marston’s speakers, and his subject matter, are struggling against, and starting to break through, the constraints created by the verse form. In the prefatory poem to the first book of *The Scourge of Villanie*, the satirist figuratively whips his sinfully excessive targets with his verse: ‘Quake guzzell dogs, that live on putred slime, | Skud from the lashes of my yerking rime’ (*Scourge*, ‘Proemium in librum primum’, 19-20), he writes, a line which exemplifies the satires’ ‘harsh discordant’ style. Marston uses stressed monosyllables to disrupt the iambic pentameter, placing an additional stress on the imperatives that open each line (‘Quake’ and ‘Skud’), and this, along with the use of plosive consonants, as in ‘dogs’ and ‘putred’, gives the line itself the ‘yerking [jerking]’ quality of the whip’s lashes. The opening lines of *Scourge*, II contain similar metrical disruption:

I Cannot hold, I cannot I indure  
To view a big womb’d foggie clowde immure  
The radiant tresses of the quickening sunne.  
Let Custards quake, my rage must freely runne. (*Scourge*, II. 1-4)

There are two additional stresses in the first line, on the first and fifth syllables (both of which land on the word ‘I’), and in the second at least one additional stress, on ‘womb’d’. The emphatic repetition of ‘I’ underscores the insistently independent stance of this poetry, and the fact that it is the ‘I’ that disrupts the metre here emphasises that it is the speaker, as well as his targets, that threatens to ‘freely runne’ beyond the metrical bounds of the verse form: the emphasis on the ‘I’, in fact, suggests a degree of self-castigation on the part of the satirist because of this. ‘Rude limping lines fits this leud halting age’ (*Scourge*, V. 18), the satirist at one point asserts, and indeed, the use of formal discord in the satires matches the chaos of the corrupt world that they depict and attack. Both the satires’ targets and the malcontented satirical voices that they employ are excessive and disordered.

The sense that Marston’s speakers in some way rebel against the restraint placed on the satires by the metrical form and rhyme scheme is in part the cause of the stylistic disarray that the *Parnassus* authors pick up in referring to Marston as a ‘Ruffian in his stile’. This contradiction, in fact, is made explicit in the poem ‘*Ad Rithmun*’, or ‘To
Rhythm’ (a word which in this period also referred to rhyme), appended to The Scourge of Villanie. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker appeals,

    Come prettie pleasing symphonie of words,
    Yee well-match’d twins (whose like-tun’d tongs affords
    Such musicall delight,) come willingly
    And daunce Levoltoes in my poesie. (Scourge, ‘Ad Rithmum’, 1-4)

This call for the aesthetic delight and harmony apparently offered by rhyme is undercut, however, first by the uses of the half-rhyme in the first couplet and an imperfect triple-rhyme in the second couplet, and second, by the association of rhyme with the satires’ targets. The poem continues, ‘Come all as easie, as spruce Curio will, | In some court hall to showe his capring skill’ (Scourge, ‘Ad Rithmum’, 5-6). Curio appears a number of times in The Scourge of Villanie as a satirical target: a later satire attacks ‘spruce skipping Curio’ as foolish and affected, ‘His very soule, his intellectuall, | Is nothing but a mincing capreall’ (Scourge, XI. 15, 23-24), and he actually has an entire satire, titled ‘Inamorato Curio’, dedicated to him. The use of Curio to represent rhyme therefore suggests that there is a level of irony to Marston’s call in ‘Ad Rithmum’ for rhyme to adorn his verse. Marston is perhaps not as comfortable with rhyme as the opening to the poem implies. As the poem continues, such associations between the effect of rhyme and the kinds of behaviours targeted elsewhere in the satires become more frequent. Rhyme is described as, ‘Adding a pleasing close, with your deceit | Inticing eares’ (Scourge, ‘Ad Rithmum’, 12-13): like the satires’ targets, whom the speakers aim to ‘unmaske’ (Certaine Satyres, I. 17), rhyme is deceptive, presumably because the ‘pleasing close’ that it offers is contrived, and belies the dissonance that characterises the satires’ subject matter.

By the end of the poem, the speaker’s opinion of rhyme seems to have shifted entirely from that expressed in the opening lines. Marston writes that, ‘Thou to Invention add’st but surquedry, | A gaudie ornature’ (Scourge, ‘Ad Rithmum’, 30-31); rhyme is associated with the kind of falsely attractive and deceptive surfaces that the satires elsewhere attack: fashionable clothing or the use of cosmetics, for example. The speaker concludes that while he will deign to use rhyme if it adds to his poetry’s content, if it does not, he asserts, ‘No title of my sence let change | To wrest some forced rime, but freely range’ (Scourge, ‘Ad Rithmum’, 35-36). Marston appears somehow uneasy with rhyme: there is a sense that he feels constrained to use it, yet associates it with the deceptive surfaces of his targets, rather than with the weightier substance of the satiric
‘truth’ that his poetry aims to expose. The poem’s final move is to address its readers: ‘Yee scrupulous observers, goe and learne | Of Aesops dogge; meate from a shade discerne’ (Scourge, ‘Ad Rithmum’, 37-38). Marston calls on his readers to focus on the ‘meate’ or meaning of his words, rather than being taken in by secondary formal considerations, like the dog from Aesop’s fable that attempts to snatch the reflection of meat from a river, losing the actual meat in the process.

By warning his reader that the formal qualities of the satires come into conflict with their subject matter, Marston, in Ad Rithmum, points explicitly to the formal contradiction and irony that characterises the satires. Elsewhere, self-reflexive lines such as, ‘In serious jest and jesting seriousness | I strive to scourge polluting beastlines’ (Scourge, ‘Proemium in librum tertium’, 1-2), work to confuse the reader’s sense of the speakers’ motives. While on the one hand this line shows that jest and seriousness are in satire not incompatible (a satirist might jest about serious topics or, as in Marston’s attacks on dancing and fencing in the satire ‘Humours’, write seriously about light topics), on the other, it works to frustrate possible attempts by the reader to formulate a single position on the satires. In Scourge, VI the speaker instructs his poetry to, ‘Vexe all the world so that thy selfe be pleas’d’ (Scourge, VI. 112). The act of writing satire, elsewhere apparently motivated by a desire to expose the truth or eradicate corruption, is here purely antagonistic, driven by a pleasure in frustrating the entire world, including, presumably, the reader. The desire to vex, in fact, is a further signal of the satires’ malcontentedness. Pietro’s account of Malevole, in The Malcontent, is strikingly similar: his ‘highest delight’, Pietro claims, ‘is to procure others’ vexation’ (I. 2. 22). Malevole, like the speakers of the satires, takes pleasure in satirical speech not simply due to a righteous desire for reform, but in order to vex, antagonise, and spread discord.

Marston’s satires, then, can be understood as malcontented on the level of tone, through their invective style, use of linguistic assault, grotesque imagery, and association with discord, as well as in their insisted on difference from literary tradition, and from societies imagined as corrupt and deceptive, about which they claim alone to speak the truth. What remains of this chapter examines the functions and effects of the satires’ malcontented truth-telling in more detail, and proposes that it works not to reform or improve, but to disrupt and deconstruct. In the next chapter I argue that Malevole’s truth-telling in The Malcontent is socially and politically disruptive. The external show and
ceremony on which hierarchies are founded for Malevole ‘gilt o’er’ (II. 3. 40) sin and
corruption, and his speech aims, like the satires, to pierce beneath this attractive yet
deceptive surface. Although less subversive than Malevole’s speech in The Malcontent,
perhaps because the verse satire genre offers less scope for the displacement of
potentially radical ideas through character and foreign setting than drama does, the
satires nevertheless also aim to expose the hidden vice of those at the top of society,
and their censorship under the 1599 Bishops’ Ban suggests the possibility that they were
received with suspicion and anxiety by those in power. Yet I also wish to suggest that
truth-telling in the satires is disruptive in a broader sense. Marston repeatedly represents
truth-telling using exposure imagery: the removal of a mask or veil to reveal the plain
truth beneath. By exposing the truth about society as chaotic and disordered the satires
remove this veil, the effect of which is not to eradicate vice but to make it visible; the
satires do not reform the world, but throw it into chaos. The satires foreground discord
in content as well as form, then, on both a socio-political level in their attacks on the
powerful, and more generally in their overall vision of society. In what follows, I treat
these two aspects in turn.

Social Criticism in the Satires and the 1599 Bishops’ Ban

Scholars have suggested that Marston and his contemporary satirists’ concern with
social surfaces, and what, if anything, they hide, represents a response to the fact that,
because of increases in London’s population due to migration, social formations were
changing, with boundaries between social ranks in metropolitan life becoming
increasingly permeable. Lawrence Manley writes that the satire of the 1590s defined
itself as able to ‘establish differences no longer given or apparent in contemporary social
life’; he reads it as an expression of the fear that due to increased social mobility the
visual signifiers of social status were losing meaning, and becoming arbitrary.33 Brean
Hammond makes a similar argument, reading Marston’s satires as an ‘agitated satirical
rejection of metropolitan vulnerability’.34 For these critics, 1590s satire attempts to re-
establish social boundaries by exposing those who disrupt them. While the changing
dynamics of the city are surely an important influence on the satires’ concern with social

33 Lawrence Manley, Literature and Culture in Early Modern London (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1995), p. 372. The repeated attempts to control dress with sumptuary legislation throughout the sixteenth
century demonstrate the extent of this fear.
34 Brean Hammond, p. 71.
signification, and on their representation of vice as something chaotic, which disrupts categories and misleads perceptions, on a political level I read Marston’s satires as less conservative than the arguments of these critics imply. Manley maintains that there is a focus in 1590s satire on ‘upstarts’, low born individuals who disrupt class signifiers and trouble social hierarchies, by wearing the same clothing and moving in the same circles as those of higher birth than themselves. Marston, however, rarely mentions this kind of social climber, and indeed, when compared with those of Hall, his satires emerge as much less politically conservative.

Hall’s *Viridemiarum* targets a number of social upstarts. The yeoman farmer Lolio ‘drudges all he can’ (IV. 2. 1), and pawns his lands, in order to maintain his son in fashionable clothing at the Inns of Court, where ‘he unknowne and ruffling as he can, | Goes currant each-where for a Gentleman’ (IV. 2. 57-58). Similarly, a young would-be gentleman, Ruffio, wears ostentatious clothing which allows him to mingle with noblemen, but must starve himself in order to afford to do so: ‘So little in his purse, so much upon his backe: | So nothing in his maw’ (III. 7. 20-21). Hall’s satires are keen to maintain social distinctions by mocking those who threaten them, a conservatism that is also evident in Book III, Satire 1, which represents a venerated ‘Golden Age’ (III. 1. 4). In this earthly paradise each person knows his or her place. The squire, for example, does not touch the ‘chestnuts armed huske, and hid kernell’ for he knows that it is ‘Kept for the Court, and for the Kings owne bord’ (III. 1. 19, 21). The poem depicts a pre-capitalist society; the ‘onely seller’, Hall writes, ‘was the neighbour brooke’ (III. 1. 24), and this feudal, strictly hierarchical world is idealised: ‘Under each banke men laide their lims along, | Not wishing any ease, not fearing wrong (III. 1. 30-31). This romantic vision of the past is contrasted with the present, a time in which nothing in nature is safe from ‘the gorge of greedy man’, and in which ‘dunghill Pesants [are] dight as kings’ (III. 1. 53, 78). ‘Dight’ means to appoint or ordain, but also ‘to clothe, dress, array’, which seems the more likely sense here. Hall complains about the social confusion created when peasants dress in the fashion of kings, and more widely, expresses a desire to return to a pre-capitalist age of strict and visible social categories, from which England is seen as having deviated.

Marston’s satire, in contrast, is much more interested in those at the top of society, who behave badly or abuse their power, than it is in social upstarts. His targets

35 Manley, pp. 383-84.
36 ‘dight, n. 10a’, *OED Online*. 62
are typically young urban gentlemen, rather than would-be gentlemen, who indulge in behaviour deemed transgressive, such as excessive sexuality, and hide their corruption behind a veneer of civility. *Certaine Satyres*, V lists the crimes of the classical gods, such as Jove’s incest and multiple rapes, and complains, in malcontent style, that ‘mighty villanes are for Gods adored’ (*Certaine Satyres*, V. 58). *Scourge*, III derides those that censor ‘the veniall scapes of him that purses pick’, that is, the common crimes of the poor, when ‘some slie, golden-slopt Castilio | Can cut a manors strings at Primero’ (*Scourge*, III. 106, 107-08). The crimes of a poor cutpurse are pardonable ‘scapes’ compared to those of the courtier who, by cheating at cards, bankrupts his opponents. Rather than anxiety about those that disrupt society from the bottom up, Marston’s satires attack those at the top who, despite their noble lineage, abuse their position.

In fact, Marston explicitly rejects the kind of conservative nostalgia about a feudal age of social order that we find in Hall’s satires. *Scourge*, II represents the feudal past as characterised by constraint:

> Once Albion liv’d in such a cruel age
> That men did hold by servile villenage.
> Poor brats were slaves, of bond-men that were borne,
> And marted, sold. (*Scourge*, II. 50-53)

The feudal society that Hall venerates is portrayed as cruel by Marston. He interprets the system under which individual serfs were bound legally to a lord as no better than slavery, particularly given that the children of a serf (the ‘poor brats’ that the satire mentions) were born into the condition of bondage with no choice in the matter. Where Hall compares an ideal past with a corrupt present, for Marston past and present are equally corrupt. While he acknowledges that the laws of serfdom were ‘disanul’d, as too too inhumane’ (*Scourge*, II. 56), he also claims that the heirs of noblemen are currently treated even worse than the sons of serfs had been previously, through being bought and sold as wards of the court, ‘tail’d and retail’d’ (*Scourge*, II. 62) as commodities, until their inheritance is entirely used up. Rather than an ideal past from which the modern world has deviated, the satire depicts a world in which little has changed.

In *The Malcontent*, Malevole speaks his version of the truth to those in power, and his speech is said to be ‘halterworthy at all hours’ (I. 2. 27-28): it has the potential to get him hanged. Marston’s satires, concerned mainly with unmasking the crimes of

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courtiers and gentlemen, were also apparently viewed with suspicion by the authorities. On 1 June 1599, Richard Bancroft, the Bishop of London, and John Whitgift, the Archbishop of Canterbury, issued a decree that singled out nine texts, including both of Marston’s volumes of satires, as well as satires and epigrams by Hall, Middleton, Davies, and Guilpin, for state censorship. The printing of further copies was forbidden, existing copies were recalled and burned, and the Ban further stipulated ‘that noe Satyres or Epigramms be printed hereafter’. Various possible motives have been proposed for the Bishops’ Ban. Work by John Peter and Debora Shuger, for example, claims that the bishops responded to pornographic or obscene content in the nine works censored. Richard McCabe, however, contends that because the bishops were acting for the Privy Council, ‘for them, censorship was a predominantly political, rather than moral, issue’, and suggests that the ban stemmed instead from anxiety about social and political commentary in the satires. Cyndia Susan Clegg, noting that ‘reception, far more than regulation, determined whether or not a particular text was transgressive’, suggests that, in the light of the Earl of Essex’s unsuccessful military campaign in Ireland in 1599, the authorities were fearful that the banned texts might be received as politically provocative.

The accounts of both McCabe and Clegg agree that this sweeping act of censorship resulted, at least in part, from a fear on the part of the state censors that the flood of satirical poetry published in the late 1590s might be interpreted by readers as commenting on the contemporary political climate, and therefore risked spreading discontent, or even inciting sedition. The malcontent as represented by a number of commentators was thought to embody the potential for political disruption – in John Earle’s words, the malcontent is ‘the spark that kindles the commonwealth, and the bellows himself to blow it’ – and the response of the censors to the 1590s verse satire suggests that they might have interpreted this new form of satire in a similar way. Given that Hall’s more conservative satire was also censored, it is difficult to argue that Marston’s satires were targeted specifically because they attack the corruption those at

42 Earle, p. 197.
the top of society. However, their fundamental dissatisfaction with the status quo, along with the explicit London setting (the satires refer to locations like Westminster and the Inns of Court), might have played a role. Although the satires are in one sense on the side of authority, in that they target which deviates from normative morality, from a different perspective, what they do is to expose London as entirely inundated with vice, thus implying that the authorities are in fact unable to properly regulate the city. Adam Hansen proposes that the Ban might be ‘motivated by a desire to regulate the way writers amplified the unsettled city’s uncontrollable appetites’; the censors were uncomfortable, this suggests, with the nature of the satires’ depiction of vice, rather than with any direct political comment.\footnote{Adam Hansen, ‘Writing, London, and the Bishops’ Ban of 1599’, \textit{London Journal}, 42 (2017), 1-18 (p. 9).} Hansen’s argument certainly holds in relation to Marston; in what remains of this chapter I explore in greater detail Marston’s exposure of vice as something which overflows boundaries and disrupts fixed categories. The satires’ malcontented truth-telling, I argue, foregrounds chaos rather than order.

**Truth-Telling, Excess, and Disorder**

Conventional satiric theory suggests that satire generally aims to demarcate social and moral categories by the castigation of those that disrupt those categories, to reform, through the imposition of clear boundaries and standards. Alvin Kernan claimed that the satirist ‘sees the world as a battlefield between a definite, clearly understood good, which he represents, and an equally clear-cut evil’, and William Jones, more recently, writes that satire ‘generally intends, as Jonathan Swift states, “to mend the world”’.\footnote{Alvin Kernan, \textit{The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 21; William R. Jones, ‘Satire’, in \textit{The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry & Poetics}, 4th edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 1255-57 (p. 1255). See also Knight, p. 13. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe question the traditional conception of satire as a reformative genre, writing that ‘virtually all English satirists from the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century […] claim one purpose for satire, that of high-minded and usually socially oriented moral and intellectual reform; however, they engage in something quite different, namely, mercilessly savage attack on some person or thing that, frequently for private reasons, displeases them. The veneer of civilised behaviour serves to mask great primitive urges’, ‘Theorizing Satire: A Retrospective and Introduction’, in \textit{Theorizing Satire}, ed. by Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe, pp. 1-15 (p. 2).} While this might be true of other satire (though I would contend that such a position downplays the destructive impulses inherent in the genre), to apply this argument to that the satires of Marston takes as implicit something for which there is little textual evidence. Despite the anxiety of the satires’ speakers to separate themselves from their
satiric targets, and their self-conscious insistence on difference from literary tradition, the satires emphatically repeat that their project is the exposure of vice, and exposure does not necessarily entail reform or the imposition of order.

The London dramatized in the satires is marked by excess, occupied by an apparently never-ending procession of sinners. Although the satirist figuratively scourges these sinners with his verse, revealing and deriding their inner corruption, there is little sense of change or reformation. Unlike Hall, who depicts an idealised ‘Golden Age’ as an alternative to the corrupt present day, Marston offers no clear alternative to his sinful society. A poem which describes satire as the attempt ‘to purge the world from muck’ (*Scourge*, ‘Proemium in librum tertium’, 18), continues,

Would God I could turne Alpheus river in  
To purge this Augean oxtstaule from foule sin. 
Well, I will try, awake impuritie,  
And view the vaile drawne from thy villanie. (*Scourge*, ‘Proemium in librum tertium’, 19-22)

These lines refer to the fifth labour of Hercules, in which he is tasked with cleaning the stables of King Augeas, home to three thousand cattle, and does so by rerouting the river Alpheus to flow through them. While the satirist wishes that this kind of ablution were possible, the result of his fruitless attempt at purgation is only to draw the veil from the villainy of the world, and make it visible. The satires, indeed, reiterate that what they achieve is the exposure of hidden vice: satire is able to ‘unmaske the worlds detested sinnes’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 159); it involves ‘tearing the vaile from damn’d Impietie’ (*Scourge*, ‘Proemium in librum primum’, 18); its targets are ordered to ‘Unmaske, put of thy fained borrowed shapes’ (*Scourge*, IX. 104). To actually set the world to rights and eradicate vice is impossible: addressing himself, the satirist laments ‘Thou shalt as soone draw Nilus river dry, | As clense the world from foule impietie’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 159-60). Instead, by removing a deceptive facade of correct behaviour, satiric exposure simply makes the world’s corruption more visible.

Truth-telling in the satires, then, is conceptualised figuratively as unmasking – the revelation of that which is hidden by deceptive surfaces – and the kinds of behaviours that are uncovered are excessive and disruptive: they transgress the boundaries of normative behaviours and categories. Rather than imposing order on an unruly society, the satires expose, and therefore display, chaos. The representation of Duessa in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen* has a similar effect: Duessa, who stands for falsity, is stripped of her rich robes and ornaments to expose the truth of her
grotesque monstrosity: ‘all her filthy feature open shouen’.45 Duessa’s difference from Una, who represents truth, is for Spenser the religious difference between Catholic deception and Protestant truth, and indeed, I shall shortly demonstrate that Marston’s emphasis on unmasking draws similarly on a post-Reformation mistrust of the surface.46 Importantly, the conceptualisation of truth and falsity through spatial images of depth and surface, with truth-telling as uncovering, does not necessarily imply the order and harmony that the understanding of truth as correspondence (the agreement between a true statement and the object that it describes) does.47 Uncovering the truth preserves the possibility of dis-order, and dis-harmony, in that it has the potential to reveal something more chaotic, more unruly, than the false surface removed.

The kinds of behaviours that the satires expose are excessive. They cross boundaries or disrupt categories, and Marston’s speakers often emphasise the extent of this transgression by representing their targets as disrupting several categories simultaneously: the moral boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours are equated to boundaries of nationhood and gender, for example. In The Scourge of Villainie, vice is imagined in foreign terms: ‘dalliance’, or sexual licentiousness, is located as ‘Cyprian’ (Cyprus was a Venetian and then Ottoman colony, therefore doubly alien in this period), and ‘cheere’ (here the excessive consumption of alcohol) as ‘Belgick’ (Scourge, III. 142). That which the satires deem threatening to normative morality is thus also constructed as a foreign threat to national boundaries. In one sense this is an attempt, like the use of Italianate names for the satires’ targets, to distance the corruption described from native Englishness, and protect and bolster national borders. Yet if this is the case, then the attempt certainly fails; the version of England (specifically London) created by the poems is entirely inundated by vice.

The satires multiply rather than eradicate vice, as the crimes for which figures are initially attacked grow and mutate. The attack on the sexually voracious Luscus in Scourge, III singles out specific sexual practices deemed to overspill that which is considered reasonable or ‘normal’: homosexuality, in that he is tailed by ‘his Ganimede’,

46 This dichotomy is also deeply gendered, with Catholicism associated with deceptive femininity; the implications of this for malcontentedness are discussed in Chapter Four.
47 Martin Heidegger rethinks the interpretation of truth as correspondence or ‘correctness’ by recovering the originary meaning of the ancient Greek, aletheia, as ‘unconcealed’ (a- [not-] + lethe [hidden, forgotten]). Truth in its ontological ‘essence’, he asserts, is the unconcealment, or ‘un-hiddenness’ of the object to be judged, Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 107.
and masturbation, decried as a ‘luxurious incontinence’ (Scourge, III. 39, 54). Michael Hattaway notes that references to Ganymede, the mythological cup-bearer to Jupiter, have appeared, since antiquity, not only in reference to same-sex relationships, but also in ‘tales of androgyny or hermaphroditism’.\(^{48}\) Luscus’ sexuality is deemed immoral, then, not only because it exceeds the boundaries of acceptable sexual behaviour, but also because it confuses a binary system of gender. The satires’ constructions of vice as foreign, or as disruptive of gender dichotomy, emphasise its excessive, transgressive nature: it crosses multiple borders and pollutes multiple categories.

Luscus is transformed by vice into ‘a monster of a man’ (Scourge, III. 44), an image also used in an earlier satire, which imagines sin itself as a ‘foule monster’ (Certaine Satyres, III. 98). The monster image is emblematic of the satires’ representation of vice: a monster is something indeterminate, which defies categorisation, and exists at the edges of normative humanity. The monster, according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘threatens to smash distinctions’, and so by representing sin as a monster, Marston emphasises its potential to disrupt not only individual categories like morality, gender, or nationality, but all categories and distinctions together.\(^{49}\) It should be acknowledged that the satires themselves do not ‘smash distinctions’. To do so would make the transgressions that they describe meaningless, and unproblematic, in that to disrupt categories necessitates the existence of those categories. But by representing vice as something uncontrollable, which does ‘smash distinctions’, and which can only be exposed, not ordered or reformed, the satires present a threatening vision of a world descended into chaos.

The satires’ chaotic world vision is emphasised by their use of the grotesque imagery that also functions to mark this poetry out as malcontented. Vice in The Scourge of Villanie is physically unclean: words such as ‘scum’, ‘slime’, ‘filth’, ‘muddy’, ‘muck’, and ‘dung’ are used abundantly; the satires’ targets are ‘dung-scum rable’ (Scourge, X. 15) or ‘base muddy scum’ (Scourge, ‘In Lectores prorsus indignos’, 37). Such imagery amplifies the sense that vice is excessive and disordering. Mary Douglas argues that dirt does not exist as a substance in itself, and should instead be understood as that which contravenes order: ‘Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. […] Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting


\(^{49}\) Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in Monster Theory: Reading Culture, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25 (p. 6).
inappropriate elements’. That which causes us to see something as dirty is not its potential to infect us with germs, or make us ill, but the fact that the dirty object confuses or contradicts order or system; dirt is ‘matter out of place’.

Douglas provides the example of food, which she writes, ‘is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing.’ In the light of Douglas’ theorizing, Marston’s extensive use of dirt imagery in *The Scourge of Villanie* serves to heighten the disruptive potential of the vice that the satires display. By satirically exposing that vice, imagined as dirt, to the view of his readers, moreover, the satires work not to re-order or eradicate it, but to bring what, following Douglas, ‘is essentially disorder’, to light.

Indeed, the excess of images of dirt, filth, and muck in the satires creates a sense of surfeit and overflow: vice in the satires flows, seeps, and threatens borders. Images of bodily fluids, dung, muck, and slime, occur repeatedly. In *Scourge*, II the satirist describes ‘the snottery of our slimie time’ (*Scourge*, II. 71), and in *Scourge*, VII, ‘A Cynicke Satyre’, sin is imagined as ‘slime’ that flows out of the soul and disrupts humanity’s relationship with God (*Scourge*, VII. 196-98). ‘Slime’ as a substance is ambiguous and formless: a kind of liquid, creeping, indistinct matter. In a discussion of the French word *visqueux*, often translated as ‘slimy’, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that it is precisely its ambiguity that makes slime repulsive. Neither fully solid nor fully liquid, slime is a threshold substance that crosses borders and categories; Marston’s use of slime imagery to depict vice, therefore, reveals it as something chaotic, which defies control, and overflows its own edges.

The satires’ vision of the world as full of an inner filth that is hidden by deceptive surfaces which must be unmasked echoes the tone of the Protestant Reformation. In the Introduction, I discussed the displacement of Catholic image and spectacle under the Reformation, and proposed that a Protestant suspicion of surfaces and appearances might provide a possible model for the malcontented claim to speak the truth using a plain or harsh linguistic style. Marston’s satires certainly follow this pattern: their use of verbal assault and invective, and grotesque, often scatological

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., pp. 35-36.
53 Ibid., p. 2.
imagery echoes the Reformation tonally, specifically the writing of Martin Luther. In *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther, referring to the style of his rival, the Catholic humanist writer Erasmus, writes, ‘I thought it outrageous to convey material of so low a quality in the trappings of such rare eloquence; it is like using silver or gold dishes to carry garden rubbish or dung’. The dichotomy between outer surface and inner filth in this image closely parallels the language that Marston uses for his satiric targets, whose corrupt interiors are often said to be hidden by fashionable clothing or ostensibly civil behaviour. We might compare the speaker’s description of a London gallant as ‘a muckhill over-sped with snowe’ (*Scourge*, VII. 154), an image which Marston reuses in *The Malcontent*, and which also echoes the description of the Pharisees in Matthew 23. 27 as ‘like unto whitened tombs, which appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all filthiness’.

The 1523 text *Wider die Verkehrer und Fälscher kaiserlichen Mandats* [*Against the Corrupters and Falsifiers of the Imperial Mandate*] provides a further example of the tonal similarity of Marston and Luther. Luther writes, in the original German, ‘Ich werde schier gezwungen alzu lautt schreyen und sagen, Gott wollte dem Satan schnell die hautt abzihen und an den tag bringen’. Heiko Oberman, from whose essay I take this quotation, translates it as, ‘I am practically forced to shout too loud and cry out “May God strip Satan speedily and unmask him”’, yet this downplays the force of Luther’s verbal assault. A more accurate translation of the second half of the quotation, that maintains the linguistic violence of the original, is, ‘May God flay the skin from Satan speedily and bring him to daylight’. The image violently literalises the desire to remove the deceptive surface beneath which the devil hides, imagining it as the peeling of the skin from the body, and there are parallels in Marston’s use of anatomy imagery for the exposure of hidden sin in the satires: ‘Blacke Cypresse crowne me whilst I up do plow’.

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35 Scott Colley has argued convincingly that there is evidence of a preoccupation with Calvinist ideas in Marston’s work, including in the satires. In *Scourge*, IV, for example, the speaker mentions the need for ‘Grace [...] infus’d | By divine favour, not by actions us’d’ (*Scourge*, IV. 117-18). Colley interprets this as a reference to the Calvinist doctrine of election and reprobation, and connects it with Marston’s comments on the futility of satire: ‘his best efforts at satire may be useless to amend the behaviour of the already damned’, ‘Marston, Calvinism, and Satire’, *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, 1 (1984), 85-96 (p. 86). Calvinism was indeed the dominant branch of Protestantism in 1590s England, and Calvinist ideas are certainly expressed in Marston’s writing; tonally, however, the satires are closer to Luther than Calvin.


38 Oberman, p. 441.

39 The second translation is my own, with assistance from Sarah Holasek. One of the difficulties in discussing Luther’s use of violent and obscene language is the fact that English translations of Luther are often deliberately sanitised.
The hidden entrails of ranke villanie’ (Scourge, ‘Proemium in librum primum’, 16-17). Both writers emphasise the need for exposure – for Luther this is God’s work, and for Marston that of the satirist – and both express this using the language of assault and violence.

Luther is at his most crude and vitriolic in the 1545 treatise, Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil, in which the Pope is derided in scatological terms as ‘rotten paunch, crude ass-pope and fart-ass in Rome’, ‘the very scum of all the most evil men on earth’, who has ‘suffocated and strangled’ Christendom with ‘all the devil’s filth and stench’.60 Both Luther and Marston use scatological language to attack, and Luther actually claims such language as fundamental to his project, not something to be disavowed or quietly ignored in the interest of politeness: ‘when I here or elsewhere speak so coarsely about the loathsome, accursed, atrocious monster in Rome, be sure to credit it to me’.61 While it is not possible to ascertain whether or not Marston actually read Luther, Luther’s use of crude and violent language is echoed by Marston’s similarly excessive and ferocious language, and technique of exposure. Luther’s linguistic style as expressed in Against the Roman Papacy might, therefore, be said to offer an early prototype for the kind of malcontented railing found in Marston’s verse satires.

Stephen Greenblatt writes that, ‘for Luther, the Devil dwells in excrement, and his dominion over the world is made possible by the world’s excremental character: its obsession with gold and silver, its lies and trickery, its filthy desires’.62 Luther, indeed, uses the imagery of the body’s basest functions to represent the temporal world; a quote famously attributed to him states, ‘I am like ripe shit, and the world is a gigantic asshole; we will probably let go of each other soon’.63 The worldview depicted by Marston’s verse satires can similarly be described as ‘excremental’: references to dung and filth abound, and that which Greenblatt identifies in Luther’s worldview – the world’s obsession with material wealth, deception, and ‘filthy desires’ – is also that which is attacked most frequently by Marston. In The Scourge of Villanie’s ‘A Cynicke Satyre’, for example, the world is corrupt, chaotic, and fallen, and humanity is indistinguishable from the basest kinds of matter. The souls of the figures that populate the satire are soiled by ‘stayning spots of vile impietie’ (Scourge, VII. 11), and have lost their humanity:

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60 Luther, Works, XL1, pp. 355, 277, 366.
61 Ibid., p. 330.
62 Greenblatt, p. 12.
63 Cited in Greenblatt, p. 12.

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'But rather I dare sweare, the souls of swine | Doe live in men' (Scourge, VII. 7-8). The reference to the Circe myth here perhaps further hints at vice’s foreign otherness; in The Scholemaster, Ascham compares Italy to ‘Circes Court’, and warns that ‘if a man inglutte himself with vanitie, or walter in filthines like a Swyne, all learnyng, all goodnes, is sone forgotten’. Vice transforms the human into something other and abject.

The final fifteen lines of the poem refer to the idea that the immortal soul draws its ‘essence’ from God:

Sure I nere thinke those axioms to be true,
That soules of men, from that great soule ensue,
And of his essence doe participate
As’t were by pypes. (Scourge, VII. 188-91)

The satires’ editor, Arnold Davenport, connects the notion that the divine essence flows from God into human souls as though through a pipe, to that in Seneca’s Moral Epistles, that the ‘perfection of soul, developed to its highest capabilities [is] inferior only to the mind of God – from whom a part flows down even into this heart of a mortal’. The satire’s speaker rejects this theory as impossible, though, due to the fact that mankind is in his view entirely corrupt: ‘such foule filth, from such faire puritie, | Can nere proceed’ (Scourge, VII. 194-96). Even if humanity did have access to the divine essence, the speaker reasons,

[S]ure the slime that from our soules doe flow,
Have stopt those pipes by which it was convai’d,
And now no humane creatures, once disrai’d
Of that fayre jem. (Scourge, VII. 197-200)

The extent of humanity’s vice means that the figurative pipes imagined as conveying God’s ‘essence’ have been physically clogged up by the slime (ambiguous, insidious) emitted by the souls of not only the gallants, courtiers, usurers, and so on that populate Marston’s version of London, but of all humankind, including the speaker and reader (‘the slime that from our soules doe flow’ (my emphasis)). Whilst the vituperative excess of Marston’s style might in one sense be taken as a purgative, designed to clear the slime that clogs the pipes by exposing the blockage, the effect instead is to dissolve the link entirely. Any semblance of continuity between God and mankind is broken, and without the ‘fayre jem’ of the human soul imbued with divine essence, humanity has

64 Ascham, fols H4v, I1r.
lost its human status, and is undifferentiated from the purely material: ‘Beasts sence, plants growth, like being as a stone, | But out alas, our Cognisance is gone’ (*Scourge*, VII. 201-02). The humanity that emerges from these lines is alienated from the divine, and decentred from the great chain of being.

Marston’s verse satires claim to unmask the truth about a fallen world in which cosmic hierarchies are overturned and discord rather than harmony has pre-eminence. Earlier in this chapter I described Marston’s discordant poetic style (his ‘harsh discordant strings’), and this can itself be interpreted as a form of truth-telling, in that it mirrors the ‘true’ discord that the satires imagine as underpinning society. Discord in terms of form (the poetry’s rough, excessive style, which conflicts with the formal constraint of the rhyme scheme) speaks the truth about the discordance and excess of the satires’ subject matter. ‘Who would imagine that such squint-ey’d sight | Could strike the worlds deformities so right’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 37-38), the speaker at one point ponders, and as a metaphor for Marston’s malcontented satire this image is particularly apposite. Malcontented satire means looking at the world awry: it is the ‘squint-ey’d’ – ugly or deformed – perspective involved in malcontentedness that is able to perceive the ugliness or deformity of the world correctly. As in Renaissance perspective painting (for example, Hans Holbein the Younger’s *The Ambassadors* (1533)), which requires the viewer to adopt a kind of ‘squint-ey’d sight’ in order for the true form of a distorted image to be revealed, the skewed perspective of the malcontent reveals the ‘truth’ about the world’s corruption. By adopting the rough, discordant, and oppositional language and position of the malcontent, then, Marston’s satires claim to be able to recognise, and expose, the truth about the discord that is apparently hidden beneath the surface of society.

‘Pissing against the world’: Structural Disorder

The account of Marston’s literary style in *The Return from Parnassus* includes the assessment, ‘What, Monsieur Kinsayer, lifting up your legge and pissing against the world? Put up man, put up for shame’.*66 For the *Parnassus* authors, Marston’s literary style is itself disruptive; rather than purging or cleansing the world, the satires increase its filth. Ben Jonson, too, parodies Marston’s style in the 1601 play *Poetaster*, through the bad

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*66 The Three Parnassus Plays, p. 241.*
poet Crispinus. In the final act, Crispinus takes a pill that causes him to literally vomit into a basin a series of words either used regularly by Marston (for example 'snotteries', 'barmy froth', and 'puffy', all of which appear in the satires), or which describe, in Jonson’s view, his poetic style (such as 'oblatrant [railing]', ‘furibund [furious, raging]’, and ‘fatuate [foolish]’). In each of these texts, Marston’s style is imagined as an unruly and excessive bodily function: pissing or vomiting. Elizabeth Grosz, drawing on Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, writes that bodily fluids attest to ‘the perilous divisions between the body’s inside and its outside’. Of the body, yet separate from it, such fluids by definition disturb the subject/object binary, and foreground the ambiguous and the disordered. In their use of bodily fluids to describe Marston’s style, therefore, Jonson and the Parnassus authors imply that Marston’s way of writing disrupts that which it describes. More than just uncovering or reflecting a disordered world, Marston’s satires, in their use of an unruly, malcontented style, actually disorder that world themselves. The corrective force of satire is pushed by Marston to an excessive extreme, and it therefore disrupts and distorts the world that it castigates.

There is a parallel between the contemporary descriptions of Marston’s style and the use of bodily fluid imagery to depict vice in the satires: both the satires’ targets and Marston’s literary style are imagined as unruly and excessive. I suggested in the previous section that discord in form is one level on which the satires reveal the truth about their targets. Yet at the same time, this parallel works to break down the structural difference between the satirist and his objects, which Marston’s speakers so anxiously insist on in their claims to isolation and independence. We need not, in fact, look beyond the satires themselves to Jonson and The Return from Parnassus in order to notice this: Marston describes his own satiric style in markedly similar language to that used to describe his targets. For example, Marston’s speakers often refer to themselves as dog-like: a ‘barking Satyr’, who will ‘narle at those which doe the world beguile’ (Certaine Satyres, ‘The Author in prayse of his precedent Poem’, 44-46), for example, an image which likely draws on the association of the dog and the Cynic philosopher, famous for public diatribes. Yet the figures that the satires target are also often called ‘curses’, for example,

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or ‘guzzell dogs’ (*Scourge*, ‘Proemium in librum primum’, 19). In *Scourge*, IX the speaker proclaims, ‘Avant yee curres, houle in some cloudie mist, | Quake to behold a sharp-fang’d Satyrist’ (*Scourge*, IX. 3-4). Marston is imagined by his detractors in abject terms as a pissing dog, imagines himself as ‘sharp-fang’d’ and biting in his aggressive satiric assaults, and imagines his targets as howling in fear. The dog image, however, is common to all three, and erodes the difference between them.

This deconstruction of the difference between the satirist and his targets implies that the satiric speaker is not exempt from the corruption that he sees and describes, and indeed, Marston’s speakers actually refer explicitly to their own immersion in vice:

> But since my selfe am not immaculate,  
> But many spots my minde doth vitiate,  
> I’ll leave the white roabe, and the biting rimes. (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 11-13)

The ‘white roabe’ of this passage refers to the toga worn by candidates in public office in ancient Rome; just prior to these lines the speaker considers adopting the role of ‘*Tribunis plebis*, gainst the villany | Of these same Proteans’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 8-9), that is, the people’s tribune or representative in a fight against deception and hypocrisy. He rejects this office, however, because he is not ‘white’ or spotless, but tainted by vice himself. The claim that he will cease to write ‘biting rimes’, occurring as it does so close to the start of the first of Marston’s two volumes of satires, should obviously not be taken seriously, yet his self-incrimination serves to complicate the division between speaker and targets. The prefatory poem to the second section of *The Scourge of Villanie* contains a similar moment:

> I cannot with swolne lines magnificate,  
> My own poore worth, or as immaculate,  
> Task others rimes, as if no blot did staine,  
> No blemish soile, my young Satyrick vaine. (*Scourge*, ‘Proemium librum secundum’, 3-6)

The faults to which the speaker here admits are on one level purely literary, and are perhaps to some extent designed to further set his verse apart from that of others (the next stanza mocks those poets that write for a patron, for example). Yet the words ‘blot’, ‘staine’, and ‘soile’ create a sense of deeper pollution, and recall the dirt imagery used elsewhere in the volume to describe vice, again suggesting that the satirist is culpable in that which he attacks.
In general terms, the notion of the satirist’s implication in that which s/he satirises is not unusual; after all, how is a satirist to know the abuses s/he means to attack if s/he always maintains a safe distance from them? A number of theorists of the genre point out this tendency. Michael Seidel, for example, writes that, ‘it is one of the more plaguing paradoxes about the satiric mode that the satirist, having taken on a kind of monstrosity as his subject, makes something of a monster of himself’.70 Fredric V. Bogel argues that satire is a process of self-differentiation that stems from an initial identification between the satirist and the satire’s object: ‘satire is not a response to a prior difference but an effort to make a difference, to create distance, between figures whom the satirist – who is one of those figures – perceives to be insufficiently distinguished’.71 Indeed, in the sermon cited at the start of this chapter, John Donne admits that in satire, ‘we doe but reprehend those things, which we ourselves have done’.72 What makes Marston’s satires unusual, though, is the fact that they actively reveal the satirist’s similarity to his targets, through the dog and dirt imagery for example, and explicitly, in the passages cited above. Bogel claims that the work of the critic of satire is ‘the recovery and exploration’ of an initial state of identification.73 Marston’s satires, in openly admitting to that identification, carry out this work for us, and in doing so share much with certain malcontente characters on the stage: Webster’s Bosola, for example, who is deeply immersed in the deception against which he rails, and is painfully aware of that fact.

The strategy of pointing out one’s own implication in vice might be interpreted as a rhetorical ploy designed to strengthen Marston’s satiric attacks, and refute possible criticism, by pre-emptively acknowledging his own flaws. In effect, it makes the point that ‘it takes one to know one’. Yet by openly disrupting the structural oppositions on which satire is based, the satirist’s self-incrimination forms part of the poetry’s wider gesture towards discord and chaos. This thesis argues that the malcontent evokes anxiety in early modern culture because it threatens categories and distinctions: malcontentedness involves the transgression of boundaries, and the disturbance of order. In Marston’s satires, both the speech of the malcontent satirist, and the world that he denounces, are unruly, excessive, and disruptive. The ostensible difference

71 Bogel, p. 45.
72 Donne, Sermons, Volume III, p. 86.
73 Bogel, p. 46.
between the two is elided, the effect of which is to produce a threatening homogeneity: a monstrous, chaotic world without stability or certainty.

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The impulse to chaos in Marston’s malcontented satire cannot be separated from its claim to reveal the truth. The revelation that the difference from his targets upon which the satirist insists is a constructed stance is itself a form of malcontented truth-telling. Just as the satires expose the truth about their targets as corrupt and debased, they also reveal the truth about satire itself, ‘tearing the vaile’ from the posture of difference through which it is structured. Marston’s satires dismantle the oppositions on which the text is founded. In the next chapter I interrogate the various ways in which, through their depictions of malcontentedness, Marston’s *The Makent* and Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* explore the relationship between truth-telling and performance: malcontentedness, I argue, deconstructs an apparent distance between the two. The seeds of these ideas can be discerned in Marston’s verse satires. The satires claim to speak the truth about the world, yet at the same time reveal that the malcontented isolation of their speakers is a constructed posture. Marston’s malcontented satires begin to open up a space in which truth and performance, unconcealment and concealment, are brought together, and pave the way for the highly performative stage malcontents that I discuss in the next chapter.
Chapter Two

Theatrical Truth-Telling in *The Malcontent* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*

The malcontent on the early modern stage is exaggeratedly, and often self-consciously, theatrical: consider Hamlet’s performative madness, Jaques’ ‘all the world’s a stage’ speech, or the series of disguises adopted by Bosola. Herein lies one of the chief paradoxes of malcontentedness: malcontented speech claims a relationship with truth that is frequently figured in terms of depth (it pierces beneath false surfaces), but malcontentedness itself is consistently associated with surfaces. In early modern texts, malcontentedness is conceptualised as a way of speaking, behaving, even dressing; it is a playable role, a performable stance in relation to society. In hostile portraits malcontents are often disingenuous, discontented for fashion’s sake, rather than for any apparently authentic reason: Marston’s Bruto has no depth; he is only ‘black clothes’ and ‘sad array’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 147, 148). In a commendatory verse to Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, Thomas Middleton writes, ‘Thy note | Be ever plainness, ’tis the richest coat’. The notion that plainness might be worn as a ‘rich coat’ encapsulates the complex and paradoxical relationship between truth and performance, depth and surface, involved in malcontentedness. This chapter uses instances of disguise and performativity in Marston’s *The Malcontent* and Middleton’s *The Revenger's Tragedy* to explore this interplay of surface and depth. I argue that in these plays malcontentedness makes the theatrical the means by which the truth is revealed, and therefore reconfigures the conception of truth as plainness or uncovered-ness that I discussed in the previous chapter.

The majority of the male malcontented characters discussed in this thesis (Malevole, Vindice, Hamlet, Bosola, Flamineo) disguise themselves in one way or another, something unsurprising given the ways in which early modern theatrical disguise signalled social fluidity. Peter Hyland points out that ‘almost all disguises represented some sort of transgression of social boundaries, and could show and interrogate differences of class, gender, religion and nation’, differences which, as this thesis shows, are also interrogated in the malcontent discourse. Yet as a metadramatic device, disguise also signals, and transgresses, the borders of the enclosed world of the play in which it appears. It exposes the artificiality of performance and the fictionality of

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1 Thomas Middleton, “[Commendatory Verse]”, in Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, p. 4 (ll. 13-14).
the dramatic text. Both malcontentedness and disguise have transgressive, destabilising effects: they point to the borders of the text, and to the performativity of identity.

In this chapter, I argue that the disguises utilised by the malcontented central characters of *The Malcontent* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* have deconstructive effects. In both plays, the distance between disguise and ‘reality’ is dismantled, a blurring of surface and depth that functions to question the notion of an authentic self outside of performance. In *The Malcontent* disguise functions to enable the malcontent Malevole’s politically disruptive truth-telling; he can voice contentious material because he is, explicitly, a performed role. In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the use of disguise by Vindice, a character whose malcontentedness has been assumed, but not analysed in any depth, in scholarship thus far, gives rise to a fluidity of identity that makes it impossible to locate an authentic version of the character that exists beneath, or apart from, the performative. Both Vindice’s self-conscious references to his role as revenger, and the play’s wider metatheatrical qualities, I argue, are forms of malcontented truth-telling: the text exposes itself as a dramatic artifice. By bringing ideas about truth together with performance and theatricality, malcontentedness, as it appears in both texts, disrupts the notion that a dichotomy between the disguised and the revealed maps onto that between false and true in any straightforward way. The malcontent locates truth with the disguised and the theatrical, and exposes the way in which the conception of the true as that which is uncovered or plain is always at the same time a performative, constructed, rhetorical stance.

*John Marston, The Malcontent*

John Marston’s *The Malcontent* (1604) reprises the preoccupation with malcontentedness of the author’s earlier verse satires. Through the titular malcontent, Malevole, Marston transposes a number of the elements of the malcontent discourse explored in the satires onto the stage: vituperative satire directed at society’s corruption; a figurative association of malcontentedness with ‘discord’; the use of exposure imagery to represent a claim to truth; the voicing of potentially subversive material; a wider emphasis on the transgression and confusion of fixed boundaries. The contradictions inherent in malcontentedness – the malcontent’s disgust with society, yet delight in the opportunities for discord it accords, his claim to expose the truth at the same time as he
himself disguises and deceives – are actualised through the doubleness of the play’s central figure, who is both the disruptive, railing malcontent, Malevole, and the disguised Duke Altofronto, the usurped previous ruler of a Genoa that has since his deposition become corrupt, populated by flatterers, parasites, and bawds. The play makes such contradictions explicit by first dividing the malcontent into two separate personas or identities, and then demonstrating that these identities cannot be fully separated, but always exist simultaneously.

Malevole/Altofronto crystallizes wider contradictions in the text. Generally classed as a tragicomedy, The Malcontent mingles genres: it has the disguised central character, corrupt court setting, and exaggeratedly Machiavellian villain of revenge tragedy at the same time as darkly satirical humour (the Induction, an addition to the third quarto, describes it as ‘a bitter play’ (Ind., 51)), a relative absence of violence, and an ostensibly comic ending. Scholars have commented on the play’s ‘opposed claims of laughter and horror’, and on the discrepancy between ‘soberness of content and levity of form’. Historically, the critical response to the play mirrored the response of critics to the malcontent category more widely: it evinced a desire to resolve the play’s doubleness under some kind of unifying structure. Brownell Salomon, for example, argues that the play is structured by the ‘universal’ fairy-tale narrative of the returning hero, and Robert Beale Bennett proposes that the malcontent disguise represents a disordered holiday world which is returned to order with the disguise’s removal in the final scene. This desire to solve the play typically centres on the relationship between the two personas of the central character, and attempts to resolve the contradictions that he represents, for example by interpreting the Malevole disguise as simply a means to an end: a device through which Altofronto (the ‘reality’ beneath the disguise) is able to retake the throne.

Some of the more recent scholarship on The Malcontent, however, explores the contradictions, transgressions, and disunities in the play and its central character, without necessarily attempting to resolve them. T. F. Wharton, for example, describes Marston’s constant transgression of the ‘boundaries of literary convention, politics, [and]

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gender’, and ‘jagged shifts in tone, characterization, and meaning’. Nathaniel Leonard aims to embrace the play’s ‘mongrel’ genre by demonstrating its radical difference from ‘the “unified” Italianate tragicomic tradition’ represented by Giambattista Guarini and John Fletcher. Michael Cordner emphasises Marston’s use of ‘extreme rhetorical contrasts, bold generic experimentation, and drastic transformations of tone and register’. From these interpretations, the play emerges as multiple and slippery, disruptive of audience expectations and generic patterns. There is a tendency in this work, however, to shy away from direct consideration of malcontentedness in the play, and from deep analysis of the specific relationship between the malcontent and duke identities, likely because thus far the malcontent has generally been viewed as a relatively stable stock figure, at odds with the polyvalent qualities these critics notice in the text.

I wish to propose, conversely, that malcontentedness is in fact central to the amorphous ‘mongrel’ quality that critics of the play have noticed. The Malcontent’s refusal to be subsumed into either comedy, tragedy, or the more unified Italianate form of tragicomedy described by Leonard, is closely tied to its malcontented central character. Through Malevole/Altofronto, the play destabilises boundaries of rank, genre, and those between disguise and reality, truth and performance, and surface and depth. I argue that Malevole’s socially disruptive critique of courtly corruption is legitimated by the fact that ‘Malevole’ is a disguise, a performed role. Altofronto provides a space in which the malcontent’s truth-telling may be voiced without fear of censorship; Malevole’s truth-telling is enabled by its performativity. Through a reading of the discussion of truth-telling in Michel Foucault’s late lectures, I argue that the malcontent’s performative truth-telling can be used to reconsider a wider association of truth with plainness or openness. Malcontentedness disrupts this connection, locating truth with disguise and performance, and therefore reconceptualises it.

Malevole, Discord, and ‘Halterworthy’ Speech

The previous chapter discussed Marston’s use of the discord metaphor to describe his literary style, and connected this to a wider impulse to discord or chaos above harmony in the verse satires. This association is repeated in *The Malcontent*: the play opens with a stage direction for ‘the vilest out-of-tune music’ (I. 1. 1), and ‘the discord rather than the music’ (I. 2. 2) is said to come from Malevole’s chambers on the stage’s upper level. This discordant music, along with Malevole’s physical displacement from the Genoan court who at the play’s opening gather below his rooms, signal the separate, oppositional position that Malevole claims within the play. He is imagined as out of tune with, estranged from, the world that he occupies. From the outset, the malcontent of the play’s title is connected with disharmony, disorder, and difference, and indeed, Malevole’s name, from the Latin for ‘ill-will’ or ‘ill-wisher’, and with connotations of malevolence, marks him out as disruptive, emphasising the kind of active, hostile discontent that in the Introduction I argued is present in the word ‘malcontent’ through the *mal* prefix.

Pietro, the incumbent Duke of Genoa at the start of the play, describes Malevole as follows:

This Malevole is one of the most prodigious affectations that ever conversed with nature, a man, or rather a monster, more discontent than Lucifer when he was thrust out of the presence; his appetite is unsatiable as the grave, as far from any content as from heaven. His highest delight is to procure others’ vexation, and therein he thinks he truly serves heaven; for ’tis his position, whosoever in this earth can be contented is a slave and damned; therefore does he afflict all in that to which they are most affected.

Pietro’s account associates Malevole with a form of determined, incurable discontent to rival that of Satan himself, a reference which recalls the ‘Lucifrian pride’ (*Certain Satyres*, II. 152) of Marston’s parodic malcontent Bruto. Rather than indicative of a passive lack of contentment, Malevole’s discontent is active and infectious; he aims to vex others, to make them as discontented as he is. Indeed, his role in the court as he himself describes it is ‘as gum into taffeta, to fret, to fret’ (I. 2. 13-14). Malevole figuratively chafes or aggravates those around him, causing them to rub against themselves and each other; he aims to discomfit his courtly peers by creating the ‘variance’ or discord found within his own soul in theirs, eliminating any kind of easy contentment with the status quo.
This ‘vexation’ is achieved through what Pietro describes as Malevole’s ‘halterworthy’ speech (that is, speech liable to get him hanged), a form of satirical language constructed as truth-telling, which is similar in tone to that employed by the speakers of the satires. Whilst Pietro is duke he permits rather than punishes this speech; because Malevole speaks the truth where others only flatter, allowing Pietro to understand, and presumably resolve, his own weaknesses, his speech, like that of the Shakespearean Fool, is licensed: ‘he is as free as air; he blows over every man’ (I. 3. 2-3).

The ‘truths’ that Malevole speaks, however, prove deeply disruptive, both within the Genoan court, in that he attacks the corruption of those at the top of society, and, potentially, beyond the parameters of the text, given Malevole’s engagement with contemporary social ills.

Malevole’s satirical diatribes are packed with contempt for the self-serving ambition, hypocrisy, and sexual licentiousness that he observes at court. ‘Honesty and courtship straddle as far asunder as a true Frenchman’s legs’ (II. 5. 138-39), he claims, an image that combines courtly deception with diseased sexuality (the French were in this period associated with syphilis). The pandaress Maquerelle is described in language similarly reminiscent of Marston’s verse satires in its concern with the difference between appearance and reality: ‘thou picture of a woman and substance of a beast’ (V. 2. 8-9). The malcontent’s truth-telling is formulated as unmasking; Malevole’s speech, like the language of the verse satires, draws on a wider tradition of the exposure of what lies beneath falsely attractive surfaces, manifest in religious and Biblical texts associated with the Protestant Reformation. There are multiple possible examples of this: the parasitical courtier Bliososo, for instance, is derided as a ‘muckhill overspread with fresh snow’ (I. 3. 36), and ‘a pigeon-house […] smooth, round, and white without, and full of holes and stink within’ (I. 4. 85-87), metaphors which draw on the Biblical description of the Pharisees as ‘whited tombs’ full of ‘filthiness’ (Matthew 23. 27); Malevole’s favourite object of attack is what he sees as the courtier’s concealed sordid nature.

In Chapter One I argued that rather than imposing order, malcontented satire unmasks, and in doing so creates, excess and disorder. Malevole’s speech adds to this an element of social radicalism. Often, what he claims to unmask is injustice, exploitation, and the way in which the trappings of rank mystify inequality. The specific nature of the corruption that is hidden by Bliososo’s figuratively ‘white’ exterior, for example, is that he engages in the exploitative contemporary practice of rack-renting: ‘Here’s a fellow to be
damned’, Malevole observes, ‘This is his inviolable maxim – “flatter the greatest and oppress the least”; a whoreson flesh-fly, that still gnaws upon the lean galled backs’ (IV. 5. 103-06). Here, the malcontent stands up for the lower social orders, unseen in the play, who are exploited by powerful noblemen like Bilioso. Hierarchy itself, according to Malevole, is deceptive, and constructs false differences between people. After Mendoza calls him ‘beggar’ (I. 5. 14), Malevole responds with, ‘No vulgar seed but once may rise, and shall; | No king so huge but ’fore he die, may fall’ (I. 5. 18-19). By demonstrating that status is subject to fortune, the marginally positioned malcontent advocates a socially levelling viewpoint in which there is no intrinsic difference between a king and a ‘vulgar seed’; the king is king only as the result of chance. To push Malevole’s position further, if the difference between those at the top of society and those at the bottom is purely accidental, then things like rank, nobility, courtliness, and ceremony are masks that conceal the inequalities on which society, according to Malevole’s argument, is founded. Indeed, Malevole claims that in the court sin is ‘gilt o’er […] dressed pleasingly to sense’ (III. 2. 40-41), and implies that the work of malcontented speech is to expose it.

Malevole’s malcontented truth-telling therefore has disruptive potential. Like Marston’s satirist, he uses the metaphor of piercing beneath deceptive surfaces in order to make a truth claim for his view of courtly harmony and order as illusory, designed to conceal inequality. His speech is ‘halterworthy’, concerned with the spread of ‘true’ discord rather than ‘false’ harmony in the court, and indeed, certain passages spoken by Malevole – his comment on religious hypocrisy in describing the church as ‘the public place of much dissimulation’ (I. 3. 4-5), for example – were censored in most early printed editions of the play. More widely, the possible parallels between the Genoan court that the play dramatizes, and the early seventeenth-century Jacobean court, mean that Malevole’s comments, particularly those that imply that courtliness and ceremony are aesthetic fronts that mystify power relations, have contemporarily subversive potential that might have been reignited in performance.

Malevole’s ambiguous social status increases this subversive potential. For those characters unaware of his identity as the deposed Duke Altofronto, the malcontent Malevole disrupts class boundaries, threatening a social order founded on strictly

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8 In his introduction to the play, G. K. Hunter writes, ‘I know of no play in this period which touches with so much acerbity on the tender points of church and state’, Marston, The Malcontent, ed. by Hunter, p. xxvi.
demarcated hierarchies. Mendoza, in particular, expresses anxiety about Malevole’s social class and the apparent ease with which he is able to move in noble circles. He initially dismisses him as a ‘base-born rascal’ or ‘beggar’ (I. 5. 5, 14) not worthy of his attention, but later connects him with a class-based threat to the hierarchy at the head of which Mendoza himself, after usurping Pietro, is situated. Planning Malevole’s murder, Mendoza says,

Go to, then; thou must know that Malevole is a strange villain; dangerous, very dangerous. You see how broad ’a speaks; a gross-jawed rogue. I would have thee poison him; he’s like a corn upon my great toe, I cannot go for him; he must be cored out, he must. (IV. 3. 102-06)

For Mendoza’s comments on Malevole’s speech to make sense, Altofronto must, when disguised as Malevole, assume a mode of speech that is in some way rustic or lower class; while it is difficult to identify a specific accent or dialect from Malevole’s speech in the text, there are points at which he does speak in a noticeably different way to the play’s noble characters, for example, ‘Yaugh, god-a’-man, what dost thou there?’ (I. 2. 5-6). It is the way in which Malevole speaks, as well as what he says, that makes him dangerous. The word ‘villain’, moreover, which by the start of the seventeenth century was starting to be used in the modern sense as well as to refer to a lower-class individual, unites Malevole’s social class with a perceived criminality. Mendoza uses the language of the body politic to describe Malevole not only as the toe, the lowest, most base position on the body (and therefore in society), but a corn on that toe that requires removal: a disease or malformation that disfigures as well as disrupts early modern hierarchical society. Mendoza’s image, in fact, demonstrates the perception of the malcontent as threatening in terms of both class and nationhood. It constructs Malevole as a foreign infection; he is ‘strange’, an outsider in the world of the court. What is most threatening about malcontentedness for Mendoza is its marginality. Just as he hovers on the peripheries of the Genoan court, Malevole sits at the edges of hierarchies and categories, and threatens to disturb them.

Malevole’s uncertain social status signals contemporary concerns about social class as unfixed. Growing social mobility in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries threatened the traditional view of the universe as governed by divine hierarchies, in which every being held a fixed place. Tudor sumptuary bills, still in effect in the period during which Marston was writing, limited the kinds of clothing and fabric available to different levels of society, and were passed in attempts to control the
visual signifiers of social identity, and therefore ‘shore up this sense of divinely appointed good order by fixing each subject in his or her place’. While these laws were rarely strictly enforced, their existence indicates concern on the part of the powerful about increasingly permeable class boundaries. Philip Stubbes drew on the same concerns in his popular *Anatomie of Abuses*, complaining that due to the ‘confuse[d] mingle mangle of apparel in Ailgna [England]’, ‘it is verie hard to knowe, who is noble, who is worshipfull, who is a gentleman, who is not’. The marginal Malevole, apparently lower-class, yet permitted to speak and move freely in a court setting, and who makes a claim for the constructed nature of class hierarchies, can be read as an expression of these anxieties.

The theatrical representation of disguise in early modern drama presents a compelling vision of this increasing social malleability. In *The Malcontent*, that Malevole is also Altofronto gives life to the worry that the conventional signposts of identity and social class no longer functioned properly. As I explain below, the Altofronto and Malevole identities are often difficult to fully distinguish from each other, and this, like Malevole’s social class and contentious speech, disrupts the signifiers of class position and fixity of identity on which social hierarchies were founded. Yet at the same time as this, the fact that Malevole’s ‘halterworthy’ speech is part of a role performed by the deposed Duke Altofronto, rightful sovereign and representative of hierarchical order, functions to permit the existence of that disruption in the play. Altofronto provides a veneer of orthodoxy, particularly in his return to power at the play’s end, where Malevole’s disappearance (at least on the level of plot) works to re-assimilate the character into a vision of apparent order and re-established hierarchy. Altofronto can be understood as a kind of frame that allows Marston a structure within which Malevole’s malcontented observations can be voiced, yet this itself, I wish to argue, is transgressive. It complicates Malevole’s claim to unmask the truth by bringing it together with disguise, an example of the kind of false surface against which the malcontent rails, and therefore destabilises the distinction between disguise and exposure, or performance and truth.

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9 Hyland, p. 128.
The Malevole-Altofronto Relationship

On the level of plot, the relationship between Altofronto and Malevole is relatively straightforward. Before the start of the play, the Duke of Genoa, Altofronto, is deposed as a result of the political machinations of the Duke of Florence, and is replaced with Pietro, who is married to Florence’s daughter. Altofronto returns, disguised as the malcontent Malevole, and after engaging in a number of plots and counterplots removes this disguise and reclaims his throne and title. Consequently, readers such as Robert Beale Bennett and M. L. Wine have argued that Altofronto remains independent from the malcontent role that he performs, uses that role to his own advantage, and sheds it without problem after regaining his position. Even those that propound a more complex view of the Malevole-Altofronto relationship posit a clear distinction between Altofronto as 'true' identity and Malevole as performed disguise: Ejner J. Jensen argues that an increasing sense of disgust and disillusionment with society on the part of Altofronto demonstrates that he is taught something, and modified in some way, by the malcontent role that he plays, and Philip J. Finkelpearl suggests that, because Altofronto is displaced from his societal position, he himself can be understood as malcontented, and therefore not so different from the persona that he adopts. These readings differ from the more straightforward critical line taken by Bennet and Wine only in the effect that they view the disguise as having for the individual that performs it.

I wish to read the Malevole-Altofronto relationship in what might seem like a counter-intuitive way, however, in order to argue that in its unconventional representation of disguise, the text destabilises any straightforward understanding of Altofronto as a more ‘authentic’ and less performative identity than Malevole. Peter Hyland writes that prior to 1609 (the year in which Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* and Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s *Philaster* were produced) ‘playwrights were anxious to ensure that the audience was always aware that a character was in disguise’, something which works to create dramatic irony, or to make the audience co-conspirators with the disguised character. In Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, for example, another play that features a disguised duke, Vincentio explains at length what he intends to do and why

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13 Hyland, p. 20.
he must use a disguise. In *The Malcontent*, though, this pattern is reversed. Malevole begins the play disguised, and rather than a masking scene that works to reinforce the audience’s relationship with the ‘true’ undisguised character, there is a scene of unmasking, in which what the audience thought they knew about Malevole is revealed to be false. Although there are oblique references to disguise and usurpation in Malevole’s soliloquy at the end of I. 3, it is not until the following scene that his identity as Altofronto is disclosed to the audience: ‘Behold forever-banished Altofronto, | This Genoa’s last year’s Duke’ (I. 4. 7-8). The conventional movement from reality into disguise is turned on its head: the Malevole that we are initially introduced to is not, as far as we are aware, a performance.

The relationship between Malevole and Altofronto as simply one of performance to performer, then, is from the outset of the play confused. Analysis of the two personas’ respective modes of speech serves to complicate matters further. Although a linguistic difference between the two is posited – Malevole speaks in prose, adopting a different, perhaps coarser, accent to that of Altofronto, whereas Altofronto, when alone on stage or after his unmasking in the final scene, typically speaks in verse – considered in terms of content rather than style, their speech is remarkably similar. When ostensibly speaking as Altofronto, and not Malevole, the character often voices similarly malcontented sentiments to those spoken by Malevole. In the soliloquy that closes the third scene, for example, Malevole/Altofronto is alone on stage and uses verse, implying that he speaks undisguised. Yet what he says confuses this:

 Lean thoughtfulness, a sallow meditiation,
  Suck thy veins dry, distemperance rob thy sleep!
  *The heart’s disquiet is revenge most deep.* (I. 3. 156-58)

Just prior to this, Malevole had revealed to Pietro his wife’s affair with Mendoza, and now, apparently unmasked as Altofronto, calls for this news to psychologically torment him. He aims to destroy Pietro’s peace of mind through his malcontented truth-speaking. For Malevole, the role of the malcontent is to ‘fret’, to aggravate and disturb those around him, infecting others with the ‘heart’s disquiet’ that the malcontent suffers. This moment, therefore, demonstrates that even when apparently unmasked, Malevole/Altofronto continues to delight in malcontented vexation.

Given the reference to ‘revenge most deep’, it could be contended that these lines are evidence of Altofronto’s use of the malcontent persona to attain a kind of
psychological revenge on Pietro for his deposition. Yet it proves difficult to maintain the argument that revenge is Malevole/Altofronto’s primary motive. He does not, Iago-like, fabricate Aurelia’s affair with Mendoza, but reports the truth, something which, if not quite an act of kindness, does differentiate him from the deceptive flattery of the other courtiers. At no other point than the above, moreover, does Malevole/Altofronto mention revenge, and he does not play any kind of instrumental role in the defeats of either Pietro or Mendoza; these are brought about instead by the same political connections in Florence that led to Altofronto’s own deposition. Instead, the mention of revenge can be understood as an excuse or justification for the aggravation of Pietro through malcontented truth-telling, rather than a motive for it. This provides an alternative perspective on the relationship between Malevole and Altofronto: the fact that Malevole is also the deposed duke functions, through the possible revenge reading, to create an acceptable space for his disruptive malcontentedness within the play’s wider narrative structure.

Malevole and Altofronto share the malcontent’s delight in ‘vexing’; T. F. Wharton, indeed, notes that ‘the disguise is a matter of language, rather than attitude’. Yet the extent to which disguise remains even a matter of language is doubtful. At certain points, language breaks down as the signifier of the difference between disguise and ‘true’ identity:

Hope, hope, that never forsakes the wretched’st man,  
Yet bid’st me live, and lurk in this disguise!  
What, play I well the free-breathed discontent?  
Why, man, we are all philosophical monarchs or natural fools. Celso, the court’s afire;  
the Duchess’s sheets will smoke for ’ere it be long; impure Mendoza, that sharp-nosed Lord that made the cursed match linked Genoa with Florence, now broad-horns the Duke, which he now knows.  
Discord to malcontents is very manna;  
When the ranks are burst, then scuffle Altofront. (I. 4. 29-39)

This speech comes directly after Altofronto’s initial revelation of his hidden identity, and indeed, the first three lines of the passage quoted are verse: formal, restrained language that suits his noble status. Yet the third line begins to complicate matters, the rhetorical question hinting that Altofronto knows that he plays ‘the free-breathed discontent’ very well indeed: so well, in fact, that it is difficult to maintain the position that this discontent can be separated from the person that ostensibly performs it. In line

four, the description of the scandal that is shortly to engulf the court brings a shift from measured verse to fast-paced prose: a frantic piling-up of short clauses. This, along with the sexual references to the Duchess’s sheets and Pietro’s cuckoldry, fits much more readily with Malevole’s linguistic register than that of Altofronto. The blurring of Altofronto’s identity with Malevole’s is made explicit in the passage’s final couplet: ‘Discord to malcontents is very manna; | When the ranks are burst, then scuffle Altofronto’. Although speaking in verse, Altofronto openly characterises himself as a malcontent, enamoured with discord.

Thus, rather than a straightforward relationship in which the malcontent identity is laid over that of the duke, concealing it, yet easily set aside, Malevole’s malcontent energy and volubility seems barely held back by Altofronto’s restraining verse, and at moments like that described above, bursts forth out of it. The effect of this is that rather than a layering of identities, both Malevole and Altofronto are present simultaneously, with the difference between the two elided, something which throws the existence of a ‘true’ or authentic self for the character into question. The distinction between depth and surface, on which malcontented satire so frequently insists, and which the conventional reading of Altofronto as ‘truth’ and Malevole as ‘performance’ would promote, is, paradoxically, undercut. Again, malcontentedness foregrounds a threatening homogeneity rather than separate categories or distinctions. We have seen this already in the way that malcontentedness transgresses boundaries of class and nationhood (and also, as I shall discuss in Chapter Four, gender), and in the way that the difference between the malcontented satirist and the objects of his attack are broken down; here, through disguise, malcontentedness deconstructs ideas about the difference between truth and performance.

**Altofronto and ‘Fictional Veiling’**

Before discussing this deconstruction of truth and performance in detail in the next section of this chapter, I wish to demonstrate more clearly the ways in which Altofronto functions to enable Malevole’s subversive malcontented critique. The fact that the seditious malcontent turns into a duke at the end of the play is what permits the voicing of his malcontented speech in the first place, and this can be interpreted as a strategy through which Marston responds to the dangers of literary censorship. Indeed,
Marston’s career was dogged by censorship. In the previous chapter I discussed the suppression and public burning of his verse satires under the 1599 Bishops’ Ban, and two years after writing *The Malcontent* he narrowly avoided imprisonment for his part in producing the satirical comedy *Eastward Ho*. The significance of literary censorship in the period can hardly be underestimated, and it is likely that Marston was particularly attuned to the risks associated with publishing potentially seditious material; Wharton suggests that in all of Marston’s plays ‘the censor is the unseen presence […] as they tread the delicate balance between covert question and overt challenge’.\(^{15}\) Plays had to be examined and licensed for performance by the Master of the Revels, and a proclamation from Elizabeth at the start of her reign instructed her officers that ‘they permit none to be played wherein either matters of religion or the governaunce of the estate of the common weale shal be handled or treted’.\(^{16}\) The treatment of religion and contemporary politics in drama was therefore disallowed without the use of what Richard Dutton refers to as ‘fictional veiling’: techniques by which the potential for contemporary applications was displaced, for example through the use of foreign setting, by putting contentious material in the mouths of villains, or by having those who voice such material killed off.\(^{17}\)

Malevole’s critique of political systems and those in power in *The Malcontent* must be read in relation to the limitations placed on early modern writers by censorship. Michael Cordner suggests that the play is a fantasy of free speech: Altofronto, he writes, ‘is positioned so that, in his malcontent guise, he can speak truth as he now sees it directly to power – precisely the liberty that Marston had been denied by ecclesiastical censure in 1599’.\(^{18}\) While Malevole’s licensed position under Pietro’s rule at the start of the play certainly means that he is able to speak freely, without fear of censorship, I wish to contend that Marston’s liberty to present contentious material through Malevole’s voice is made possible by the existence of the Altofronto identity, an instance of ‘fictional veiling’ through which the potentially destabilising speech of Malevole is encoded within a politically orthodox framework.

In the fourth act, Malevole tells the soon to be deposed Pietro,

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\(^{18}\) Cordner, p. 177.
Come, be not confounded; th’art but in danger to lose a dukedom. Think this—this earth is the only grave and Golgotha wherein all things that live must rot; ’tis but the draught wherein the heavenly bodies discharge their corruption; the very muck-hill on which the sublunary orbs cast their excrements. Man is the slime of this dung-pit, and princes are the governors of these men; for, for our souls, they are as free as emperors’, all of one piece; there goes but a pair of shears betwixt an emperor and the son of a bagpiper; only the dyeing, dressing, pressing, glossing, makes the difference. Now, what art thou like to lose?

_A jailer’s office to keep men in bonds,
_Whilst toil and treason all life’s good confounds._ (IV. 5. 108-21)

The earth, Malevole asserts, is no more than a grave for mortal life, which is merely matter in decomposition. Like that of the verse satires, with their similar use of excremental imagery and conception of humankind as abject and alienated, the malcontented world-vision presented here works to destabilise the Renaissance humanist idea of Man as elevated above his animal counterparts. Malevole uses this cosmic disruption to bring out narrower, politically and socially radical, implications. If humankind is ‘slime’ or ‘filth’, he reasons, everybody is equally abject: ‘all of one piece’. It is only external factors such as clothing and appearance, the visual signifiers of status, that, through ‘dyeing, dressing, pressing, glossing’, separate the lowest in society from the highest. And if, as Malevole’s claim implies, cosmic and worldly hierarchies are false, then the office of duke or prince is by definition exploitative: ‘a jailer’s office to keep men in bonds’. The malcontent’s disgust with the world is constructed in political terms as a critique of the structures that underpin society.

This speech has been interpreted as a shrewd piece of rhetoric that successfully convinces Pietro to renounce his claim on the throne and swear allegiance to Altofronto.  

Indeed, almost immediately after the speech Malevole ‘undisguiseth himself’ (IV. 5. 132), and gains Pietro as an ally. Yet this reading encounters a number of problems. Firstly, by this point in the play, Malevole knows that Pietro will be deposed by Mendoza whether or not he intervenes. For Malevole/Altofronto to manipulate Pietro into renouncing his title would therefore be pointless given that Pietro is about to have no more title than Altofronto himself does. Secondly, the audience is informed, at various points, that the identity of the occupant of the throne is more subject to the whim of higher powers in Florence (whom we never witness) than it is to any individual within Genoa. No more than a few lines before the ‘Golgotha’ speech, Biliosso brings the news that the Great Duke of Florence desires that ‘Duke Altofronto be reaccepted’
(IV. 5. 84). All that Malevole/Altofronto can really do himself is to ‘temporize’ (IV. 4. 150): wait until the balance of power shifts into his favour and make his move.

The ‘Golgotha’ speech should not be seen simply as a clever political manoeuvre, then. Yet that this political motive exists as a possibility, along with the fact that Malevole reveals himself to be Altofronto directly after the speech, works to enable its expression. By removing his disguise immediately after he has called into question the hierarchical structure of society, the audience, and also, perhaps, the censors, are reminded that the person speaking is not ‘real’, but a performed role, and that his words should not necessarily be taken seriously. Thus, rather than the speech serving as a means to an end for Altofronto, the moment of Altofronto’s revelation serves a purpose in relation to the speech, providing a more orthodox motive that works to veil its politically radical implications. The Altofronto identity is a form of safety-net, which allows the malcontent to voice contentious material whilst protected by the fact that this is part of a disguise. As Malevole says himself, ‘no one thinks it fashion | To peise my breath’ (I .3. 167-68).

From this perspective, the play’s comic ending neutralises the threat that Malevole represents. Altofronto publically sheds the Malevole disguise and reclaims his position as Duke of Genoa, Mendoza is defeated yet allowed to live, and two pairs of husbands and wives (Altofronto and Maria, and Pietro and Aurelia) are reconciled. For Wine, this signals ‘the triumph of the humane world and the restoration of order’, and indeed, on the level of plot there is an apparent movement from disguise into reality, chaos into order, and discord into harmony, which functions to reassert the hierarchies and categories that malcontentedness had threatened.20 Yet this reassertion of order is not as simple as it might appear. The revelation of Malevole’s true identity to the court is, in fact, confused and unstable, and this undercuts the sense of a straightforward shift from disguise to ‘truth’, just as at the start of the play the conventional movement from ‘truth’ to disguise was turned on its head by the introduction of Malevole before Altofronto.

In the final scene Malevole/Altofronto is doubly disguised: Altofronto performs as Malevole, and Malevole performs, along with three companions, as one of the dancers in the masque that celebrates Mendoza’s coronation. At the climactic moment

of unmasking, when the dancers remove their disguises, Mendoza is initially unsure whether it is Malevole or Altofronto that is revealed:

_Cornets sound the measure over again; which danced, they unmask._

_Men._ Malevole!

_They environ Mendoza, bending their pistols on him._

_Mal._ No.

_Men._ Altofront! Duke Pietro! Ferneze! Ha!

_All._ Duke Altofront! Duke Altofronto! _Cornets, a flourish. (V. 6. 113-16)_

Rather than marking the end of confusion, the moment of revelation continues to blur Altofronto with Malevole. Instead of a straightforward movement from disguise to reality, the malcontent and duke identities are revealed simultaneously, again eliding the difference between surface and depth. Although Malevole’s ‘No’ negates the malcontent identity, his identity as Altofronto must be inferred: he does not assert it himself, either here, or at any other point in this final scene.

The confused revelation at the end of _The Malcontent_ raises the possibility that malcontentedness might not be fully eradicated with the removal of the Malevole disguise. This is emphasised by the play’s generic ambiguity. The play leaves its audience with neither the cathartic satisfaction of a violent ending that a play concerned with tragic themes of usurpation, sex, and revenge might lead one to expect, nor a positive vision of universal harmony that (to generalise somewhat) one might expect from comedy. Tonally, the comic ending feels hollow, even inadequate, after the cynical worldview propounded by Malevole’s vituperative railing. Whilst Malevole’s disruptive speech disappears, after unmasking, Altofronto’s language is clipped and formal:

_The rest of idle actors idly part._

_And as for me, I here assume my right._

_To which I hope all’s pleased. To all, good night. (V. 6. 165-67)_

Altofronto’s resumption of his position comes across as mechanically dutiful rather than joyful. Moreover, the fact that his reinstatement results from the machinations of the Duke of Florence, who was also responsible for his deposition, makes it difficult to support the argument put forward, for example in Salomon’s reading, of the ending as indicative of ‘universal values’, or by G. K. Hunter, who claims that while Altofronto is mainly a structuring device, he nevertheless ‘reassure[s] us that this day-to-day world exists within a providential dimension’. 21 Jonathan Dollimore argues that in certain

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21 Salomon, p. 153; Marston, _The Malcontent_, ed. by Hunter, p. lxix.
politically minded early modern plays there is a kind of ‘perfunctory closure – that is, a
*formal* restoration of providentialist/political orthodoxy, a compliance with its letter after
having destroyed its spirit. 22 The Malcontent has exactly this kind of ‘perfunctory closure’:
Malevole reclaims his dukedom because the play’s wider narrative demands resolution,
and because it constitutes a return to orthodoxy that ostensibly eradicates the
malcontent’s ‘halterworthy’ speech. Yet the weary, cynical tone of the structurally comic
ending shows it to be suffused with the malcontentedness that underpins the play more
widely. It withholds the possibility of the malcontent’s disruptive potential being fully
assimilated into an orthodox vision of harmony.

The Performance of Truth

My reading of *The Malcontent* demonstrates that Altofronto is as much a mask as
Malevole: Malevole disguises Altofronto, and Altofronto functions to veil Malevole’s
disruptive potential beneath a veneer of legitimacy. As the confused revelation in the
final scene makes clear, one identity does not lie beneath the other in any
straightforward sense. Instead, both exist on a performative, surface level, and thus the
difference between depth and surface on which malcontented satire paradoxically insists
is destabilised, and the existence of ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ identity questioned. Malevole’s
speech, constructed as truth-telling, moreover, is enabled by the very fact that such
truth-telling is the performance of a disguise. *The Malcontent’s* representation of
malcontentedness therefore deconstructs the distance between such oppositions as
disguise and reality, and truth and performance, and in doing so redefines conceptions
of truth. In what follows, I argue that Michel Foucault’s work on truth and truth-telling
in his final lecture series at the *Collège de France* can be understood to unite ideas about
truth with performativity in ways similar to malcontentedness. I read Foucault’s
discussion of the figure of the truth-teller or *parrhesiast* alongside the malcontent’s claim
to speak the truth about society, and argue that Foucault’s treatment of ancient
Cynicism as a lived mode of truth-telling works to bring together truth and performance
in ways that intersect dynamically with early modern malcontentedness as it appears in
Marston’s play.

22 Dollimore, p. 28.
In the 1983-84 lecture series, published in 2011 as *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault is primarily interested in what he refers to as “‘alethurgic’ forms’ rather than in ‘epistemological structures’: in the ways in which material, local, and specific truths are manifested or brought to light, rather than in the nature of truth itself, either in the scientific sense of verified fact or as some kind of metaphysical abstraction. He approaches truth through ‘the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth-telling as an activity’; rather than something abstract to be discovered, the version of truth that Foucault is concerned with relates to specific contexts and worldviews: ‘[truth-telling] is always applied, questions, and is directed to individuals and situations in order to say what they are in reality, to tell individuals the truth of themselves hidden from their own eyes, to reveal to them their present situation’. Foucault’s arguments focus on the originally Greco-Roman concept of *parrhesia* (franc-parler or free-spokenness), which he defines as the act by which a critical truth is spoken frankly, courageously, and without rhetorical ornament to a person or group of people in relation to whom the speaker holds an inferior position. *Parrhesia* is the act by which truth is spoken to power.

Foucault’s account of *parrhesia* centres on a discussion of the ancient Cynic philosophers. For Foucault, the Cynics’ *parrhesia* breaks decorum: their public diatribes speak the truth ‘without shame or fear […] to the point that it becomes intolerable insolence’. In his *Lives of the Ancient Philosophers*, likely written during the third century AD, Diogenes Laertius writes that his namesake, the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, ‘sneered at high birth, honours and worldly distinctions, calling them camouflage for vice’, a sentiment strikingly similar to Malevole’s vocal destabilisation of courtly hierarchies in *The Malcontent*. Indeed, there are a number of ways in which malcontented speech compares with *parrhesia*. Malevole’s truth-telling is addressed to his social superiors, and given his apparently inferior position, entails a degree of risk; it is

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25 It is important to note that Foucault’s treatment of *parrhesia* is very different from the way in which early modern writers thought about the concept. In the early modern period, *parrhesia* came to be understood as a rhetorical figure that excuses the act of speaking boldly, and not the act of speaking boldly itself. David Colclough describes a ‘tendency in sixteenth-century translations of the figure to reduce its potency, turning a figure based on (at least the appearance of) the deliberate breaking of decorum into one designed to shore up such decorum’, *Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 60. Foucault, however, concentrates on the classical understanding of *parrhesia* as the courageous speaking of truth to power, and it is this earlier model that I have in mind when discussing malcontented speech as potentially parrhesiastic.
satirical, and criticises society and its rulers. Pietro says that Malevole’s speech ‘makes [him] understand those weaknesses which others’ flattery palliates’ (I. 2. 29-30), a result which we might compare to Foucault’s discussion of the parrhesiastic ‘game’ in which the counsellor speaks truth, and the Prince deigns to listen.”

Like the Cynics’ parrhesia, malcontented speech breaks decorum, something demonstrated by Mendoza’s reaction to Malevole’s ‘gross-jawed’ speech, and also by Vindice’s transgression of social boundaries in The Revenger’s Tragedy: ‘the slave’s | already as familiar as an ague […] I pray you do remember me’ (I. 3. 35-36, 39), Lussurioso warns him. For Foucault, Cynicism is ‘the irruptive, violent, scandalous manifestation of the truth’, and the satiric railing of malcontentedness might be thought of in similar terms as a scandalous irruption into the ordinary life of the court or society, which aims to expose that ordinary life as false.

Foucault argues that the Cynics made life itself a form of truth-telling. He explains this by taking the meanings of the ancient Greek for true, alēthēs, as ‘not hidden or concealed’ and ‘not added to or supplemented’ as crucial to understanding the Cynic mode of life. The Cynic life manifests unconcealment in that all aspects of it, including eating, sleeping, masturbating, and copulating, are carried out visibly, in public. Laertius writes of Diogenes of Sinope that ‘it was his habit to do everything in public, the functions of Demeter [eating] and Aphrodite [sex] alike’. The idea that that which is true is ‘not added to or supplemented’ is manifested in the radical simplicity of Cynic life: the Cynics begged, wore rags, and slept rough, rejecting nomos (society’s rules, customs, and conventions) as unnecessary additions to a ‘bare’ or ‘natural’ life. Thus, for Foucault, ‘Cynicism makes life, existence, bios, what could be called an alethurgy, a manifestation of truth’. Foucault’s point, importantly, is not that the Cynic life embodies any particular truth or that studying Cynicism provides access to some kind of metaphysical or universal ‘Truth’. Instead, the Cynic life, lived in simplicity and unconcealment, manifests truth as an ‘alethurgic form’: it is life as a means for the expression of truth, or life as a form of truth-telling. Just as parrhesia is plain and frank

30 Ibid., p. 219.
31 The Cynic Philosophers, p. 43. Modern understanding of classical Cynicism is based mainly on anecdotes and stories about the Cynics, rather than on their own written records or philosophical doctrine. This lends weight to Foucault’s position in that it demonstrates that Cynic philosophy and its relation to truth is exhibited not in writing, but in lived experience.
speech, not veiled by rhetorical ornament, Cynicism, as Foucault understands it, is plain and frank life, not veiled by the laws, conventions, and codes of society or the state.

By focussing on ‘unconcealment’, Foucault associates truth with plainness, openness, and simplicity. His ideas draw on a tradition of plain, truth-telling language that also appears in religious texts by St Paul and Martin Luther, as well as the Cynics. In the Introduction, I suggested that malcontented texts and characters also draw on this tradition: they lay claim to plainness in order to construct their words as truthful. In malcontentedness, plainness is a rhetorical strategy, a performance of the ‘unconcealment’ mode of truth-telling. The use of disguise, and often highly complex, rhetorical language, in malcontented texts, moreover, complicates any simple understanding of malcontentedness as plain or unconcealed. Rather than suggest that Malevole is a straightforward version of Foucault's parrhesiast or Cynic philosopher, therefore, I want to use malcontentedness to complicate Foucault’s arguments. The paradoxical combination of performance and truth involved in a character like Malevole points to the performativity involved in the examples of truth-telling that Foucault provides: the Cynic life, as Foucault describes it, is itself a performance of unconcealed truth-telling.

Many of the anecdotes and stories that Foucault uses to formulate his arguments present the Cynic mode of life as highly theatrical. Instances such as Diogenes searching for honest man with a lighted lantern in broad daylight, his encounter with Alexander the Great, or even simply the Cynic’s public diatribes, are performed to an audience of onlookers; as David Mazella notes, ‘Diogenes, who needed very few things, nevertheless needed a crowd, an audience whom he could harangue and entertain’.33 The Cynic’s uniform of thin woollen cloak and wooden staff might similarly be viewed as a costume in which the Cynic role is performed. More than Foucault acknowledges, the Cynic life as a manifestation of truth as ‘unconcealed’ (lived totally in public) and ‘not added to or supplemented’ (stripped of $\text{nomos}$), is at the same time staged and theatrical. Like malcontentedness, the Cynic life intertwines truth and performance. Indeed, malcontentedness points to the fact that those discourses that use plainness or unconcealment to assert truth value – Reformation Protestantism for example, as well as ancient Cynicism – are always to some extent performing that plainness. Malcontentedness makes the point that the true can be performative,

33 David Mazella, The Making of Modern Cynicism (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p. 27.
disguised, concealed, as much as, and at the same time as, it appears plain, simple, or unconcealed.

In *The Malcontent*, the performativity of malcontented truth-telling is metatheatrically doubled by the fact that Malevole’s malcontentedness is the explicit performance of a part: ‘an affected strain’ (I. 3. 164). Malevole shows that he understands the conventions associated with the malcontent discourse (which was by 1603 firmly established in the cultural imagination), and uses these to his advantage. When Mendoza hires Malevole to murder Pietro because he ‘seem[s] a desperate malcontent’ (III. 3. 34) – somebody discontented with his lot in life and willing to do just about anything in exchange for social advancement – Malevole recognises that Mendoza is drawing on the contemporary understanding of the malcontent as a rebel or troublemaker, whose seditious desires to upset the social order might be utilised to his own political ends, and performs an exaggerated version of that role. When solicited by Mendoza for this purpose, Malevole’s reply is hyperbolic to the point of ridiculousness:

> My heart’s wish, my soul’s desire, my fantasy’s dream, my blood’s longing, the only height of my hopes! How, O God, how? O, how my united spirits throng together! […] Lend me, lend me, rapier, pistol, cross-bow—so, so, I’ll do it. (III. 3. 75-77, 80-81)

Malevole performs an overblown and parodic version of the malcontent role as perceived by Mendoza, and in doing so draws attention to the conventions associated with malcontentedness as conventions, emphasising the wider theatricality of malcontentedness. We might read this as itself a version of malcontented truth-telling: the malcontent disguise in the play works as a metadramatic device that reveals the truth about malcontentedness as performative. In what remains of this chapter I use *The Revenger’s Tragedy* to further explore the connections between metatheatricality and malcontented truth-telling: Vindice’s consciousness of his role as revenger and use of disguise works to expose identity as performative and fluid, disrupting the notion of an authentic self, and, more broadly, through its metatheatrical elements the play reveals the truth about itself as a dramatic illusion.

**Thomas Middleton, *The Revenger’s Tragedy***

It has become something of a critical commonplace to designate Vindice, the titular revenger in Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (c. 1607), a malcontent. Tanya
Pollard, for example, calls Vindice a ‘melancholic malcontent revenger’, Jonathan Dollimore uses the phrase ‘malcontented satirist’, and R. A. Foakes writes that he is ‘like the hero of Marston’s play, a malcontent’. It is surprising, then, that there has been little interrogation or analysis of the assumptions that underpin the use of that term in relation to Vindice. To an extent, this is due to the dominance of the stock figure approach to malcontentedness: if the malcontent is viewed simply as an easily categorised type with a stable set of characteristics then one can categorise Vindice as a malcontent without necessarily exploring the form of that malcontentedness within the play. Yet even the most recent study of malcontentedness itself goes into little depth in its consideration of Vindice, limited to a two page discussion of his relationship to the author’s categories of ‘malcontent born’ and ‘malcontent made’. A detailed exploration of malcontentedness in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is therefore long overdue.

The critical history of the play has, however, emphasised a number of elements that can be brought together through an examination of malcontentedness in the text. Inga-Stina Ekeblad, for example, traced the play’s relation to earlier satirical verse, Farah Karim-Cooper explores the relationship between disguise and identity in Middleton’s work, and multiple critics including Dollimore and Leslie Sanders have discussed its self-conscious, almost parodic theatricality. Analysis of the form and function that malcontentedness takes within *The Revenger’s Tragedy* demonstrates that such areas are closely related. The play’s expression of the malcontent discourse, I argue, permits a re-reading of its metatheatrical qualities as closely connected to the malcontent’s disruptive truth-telling. Metatheatrical devices in the play, particularly Vindice’s use of disguise, are deconstructive in three key ways. Firstly, disguise undercuts the difference between the malcontent and the corrupt world he derides, exposing the contradictory nature of the malcontent who both loathes and loves that world. Secondly, disguise leads to the disintegration of Vindice’s identity, and therefore works to question the existence of a non-performative stable ‘self’. Thirdly, and finally, the metatheatrical elements in the text constitute an extreme version of malcontented truth-telling, in that they expose the

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35 Brooke, p. 97.

truth about the play itself as a dramatic illusion. In what follows I treat these three areas in turn, in order to argue that in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, as in *The Malcontent*, malcontentedness functions to question and redefine the relationship between truth and performance.

‘Villains all three’: Malcontentedness in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*

The unnamed Italianate court that *The Revenger’s Tragedy* dramatizes is a place suffused with discontent. The court is ruled by oppression and corruption: the entire royal family are endowed with boundless appetites for sex and power, indulged under the cover provided by endless ‘revels’ (I. 4. 37). The denial of advancement and suppression of ambition are rife; the Duke’s marriage to a new Duchess has caused a number of the nobles that had previously held favour to be supplanted by her family and allies, the effect of which is to make the court something of a breeding ground for malcontents.\(^37\) Lussurioso, for example, seeks to hire as a pander somebody of ‘ill-contented nature [...] by new grooms displaced | Since his stepmother’s nuptials’ (I. 1. 77, 78-79). Those that have lost positions or been denied advancement might, Lussurioso hopes, be turned to criminality.

The coup enacted by Antonio and his followers, which ostensibly stems from anger at the rape of Antonio’s unnamed wife by the Duchess’s youngest son, Junior, is therefore the culmination of a more pervasive sense of oppression for which that rape is the trigger. Indeed, in order to incite the assembled lords to action in the final act, Vindice reminds them not of the rape, but of ‘old griefs’ and ‘discontents’ (V. 2. 1, 4), and of ‘those few nobles that have long suppressed you’ (V. 2. 11). There is a history of injustice in the court, it seems, and malcontentedness is therefore a widely experienced condition; as well as the malcontented lords described, Vindice’s brother Hippolito at times uses malcontented language, referring, for instance, to flattering courtiers as parasitical ‘flesh-flies’ (V. 1. 13), a verbal echo of Malevole’s description of the courtier Bilioso. Middleton also draws on contemporary connections between malcontentedness

\(^{37}\) There are clear parallels with the culture of favouritism in the Jacobean court, for which James I was criticised in this period. The fact that Vindice’s dead lover (who serves as a reminder of a better past time) is named Gloriana – the name given to the allegorical representation of Elizabeth I in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* – suggests further contemporary comment: that Middleton’s play sets an idealised Elizabethan past against a corrupt Jacobean present. For more extensive discussion of malcontentedness as a possible literary response to political discontent around James’s ascension to the English throne, see the Introduction, pp. 18-19.
and bastardy (discussed briefly in the Introduction) in his representation of the Duke’s bastard son Spurio, who aims to take revenge on the social system in which, due to his illegitimate birth, he cannot prosper: ‘if a bastard’s wish might stand in force, | Would all the court were turned into a corse’ (I. 2. 35-36).

Vindice, however, is the primary incarnation of this broadly experienced malcontentedness, which for him, as for Antonio’s discontented followers, stems in part from social displacement and suppression. Vindice claims that as well as murdering his lover Gloriana nine years prior to start of the play, the Duke ‘did much deject’ his father, to the extent that he died ‘of discontent, the nobleman’s consumption’ (I. 1. 124, 126-27). In the same exchange, Gratiana describes Vindice’s father as ‘a worthy gentleman, | Had his estate been fellow to his mind’ (I. 1. 122-23). While the exact nature of his oppression by the Duke is not made clear, these quotations paint a picture of a man not permitted the means or estates to match his noble birth. Vindice and his family are poverty-stricken as a result of this, meaning that Vindice is displaced from the societal position one might expect given his noble status.

In a different way to Malevole, Vindice signals the anxieties around shifting social boundaries in this period. While Malevole represents the possibility, and threat, of movement from the lower ranks of social hierarchy to the upper, Vindice points to the fear that positions at the top of society are similarly unfixed. Yet even more so than Malevole, who does at least occupy an official, licensed position within the Genoan court, Vindice is something of an outsider to the world he inhabits. He has been absent from the court for a number of years, long enough that Lussurioso does not recognise him, and thus has a marginal perspective on court life. The play in some ways insists on Vindice’s difference from the society that he perceives as having oppressed him, an effect achieved through his use of the language of satire, and his relationship with time.

Vindice adopts the role of the satirist, the only individual willing to speak the truth about the corruption that he witnesses. Like Malevole, he observes and comments, often in verbal asides to the audience, on the degraded world around him. The play’s opening lines, in fact, are reminiscent of the allegorical representations of vice typical of Elizabethan verse satire:

Duke, royal lecher, go, grey-haired adultery
And thou, his son, as impious steeped as he,
And thou his bastard, true-begot in evil,
And thou his duchess that will do with devil,
Four exc'elt characters! (I. 1. 1-5)

Middleton had tried his hand at verse satire earlier in his career, and like Marston had a volume, *Microcynicon: Six Snarling Satires*, burned by the censors in 1599. The prologue to this volume also claims a relationship between satire and truth, referring to the genre as ‘truth’s refinèd purity’. Vindice’s use of satirical language in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, then, works to associate him with truth, and in doing so further emphasises his difference from the deceitful court society, ‘full of fraud and flattery’ (I. 4. 30).

Simply to be a revenger by definition entails opposition and discontent. It is no coincidence that a number of the malcontents considered in this thesis are also revengers (Hamlet and Bosola, as well as Vindice): the act of seeking revenge implies that the status quo is in some way defective, that the proper channels of justice are faulty or insufficient, and so the revenger, like the malcontent is set against wider social systems. Paul Hammond argues that tragedy is characterised by ‘estrangement’ from normative time and space:

> The protagonist is translated out of his normal time and space into forms of these which others cannot inhabit. The space in which he stands is one which has been transformed by his imagination into a terrain contoured by guilt or ambition or desire […] The time in which he moves is not the time of his neighbours, but a dimension in which what they would call the past is urgently present to him, or in which the future seems already to have happened.

This argument is particularly apposite with regard to the protagonist of revenge tragedy. The revenger is associated with the past – Vindice seeks revenge for events which occurred nine years prior to the start of the play – and also with the future: the moment of the fulfilment of his revenge. One of the effects of this is to further displace Vindice from the courtly world, which, as Scott McMillin notes, is concerned with the present moment: with the immediate fulfilment of present appetites for food, power, and sex, as demonstrated, for example, by the ‘vicious minute’ (I. 4. 39) of the rape. Gloriana’s skull is emblematic of Vindice’s temporal displacement: it is both a reminder of the past, and, as *memento mori*, of the future, and death. The skull situates Vindice in both a lost past time, and in the future eternal time of death, outside of the constantly shifting

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present moment represented by the desires of the royal family. In a passage reminiscent of *Hamlet*, Vindice imagines himself as somehow dislocated, translated into a strange or ‘unnatural’ space of alienation from the normal progress of life and time: ‘My life’s unnatural to me, e’en compelled | As if I lived now when I should be dead’ (I. 2. 119-21).

Hammond’s comments on the spatial and temporal displacement of the tragic protagonist recall the malcontent’s association with musical discord. Vindice, like Malevole, is said to be out of tune with the false harmony of the court: as Vindice enters, Hippolito comments, “Sfoot, just upon the stroke | Jars in my brother. ‘Twill be a villainous music’ (IV. 1. 27-28). The word ‘jar’ implies temporal nonconformity as well as disharmony: in this period it could refer to the ticking of a clock, as well as to discordant sound. In Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, for example, hearing music leads Richard to soliloquize that his ‘time is broke’ (V. 5. 43). He imagines himself as a clock, driven by the forces of time, rather than an acting subject: ‘My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar | Their watches on unto mine eyes’ (V. 5. 51-52). Vindice is not, like Richard, in thrall to time, but he too has a non-normative relationship to time that is closely associated with his malcontentedness: he is estranged from, he ‘jars’ with, its usual patterns.

Like Chapman’s Bussy, or Marston’s satirical speakers, however, Vindice embodies the contradiction of the malcontent who is attracted to that which he condemns, and from which he is estranged. Vindice is displaced from the ‘present minute’, yet his use of disguise nevertheless works to entrench him within the spatial and temporal plane of the court. Vindice disguises himself as Piato, a pander, and is hired by Lussurioso to seduce Castiza on his behalf. Piato is a bawd, he enables sexual debauchery, and in order to play him, Vindice says that he will be ‘a right man then, a man o’ th’ time, | For to be honest is not to be i’ th’ world’ (I. 1. 94-95). Piato, like the wider court, is associated with the present time of the gratification of lustful desires: describing Piato’s character to Lussurioso, Hippolito says, ‘This our age swims within him […] | He is near kin to this present minute’ (I. 3. 23-25). Whilst on one level this creates distance between Piato and Vindice, there is nevertheless a sense that Vindice is arrested by the role that he plays. Leading Lussurioso to what he believes to be the Duchess and Spurio together in bed, he comments ‘Softly, my lord, and you may take ‘em twisted’, ‘O, ‘twill be glorious | To kill ‘em doubled, when they’re heaped’ (II. 3. 2,
3-4). His language lingers obsessively on the physicality of the sexual act, a fascination that also infects his explicitly satirical speeches. The frenzied energy of his diatribe against lust in II. 2, for example, evokes a kind of heady excitement and delight in the description of it, ‘Now cuckolds are | A-coining, apace, apace, apace, apace’ (II. 2. 139-40), and this demonstrates the ease with which the revelatory function of malcontented truth-telling can spill over into a voyeuristic obsession with the corruption that it unmarks.

The excessive, highly theatrical violence with which Vindice achieves his revenge also works to efface the distance between the malcontent and the world against which he rails. James J. Condon notes that a ‘convention typical of many revenge plays [is] the protagonist’s gradual and increasingly problematic resemblance to the villain whom he stalks’, and Arthur Lindley claims that in The Revenger’s Tragedy ‘revenge becomes simply another unchecked appetite, expressed in the same carnal terms as other court appetites’. Vindice’s revenge on the Duke is brilliantly ironic: the murder weapon is the poisoned skull of Gloriana, masked and ‘dressed up in tires’ (III. 5. 43) in order to stand in for the ‘lady’ that the Duke has asked Vindice, disguised as Piato, to procure. The Duke is in effect murdered by his own lust, as well as by a previous victim of that lust: as Vindice gleefully proclaims, ‘The very ragged bone | Has been sufficiently revenged’ (III. 5. 153-54). As well as this, before he dies the Duke is forced by Vindice to watch his wife have sex with his bastard son; he witnesses himself cuckolded by the product of his own infidelity. All of this is enormously apposite, as Vindice puts it, ‘somewhat witty-carried’ (V. 3. 97), and almost comic in its excess. Yet that excess makes it difficult to maintain that Vindice is as separate from the world of the court as his satiric truth-telling and temporal displacement might suggest. Indeed, Vindice’s cry, ‘Now nine years’ vengeance crowd into a minute!’ (III. 5. 123) elides the difference between the malcontent revenger, displaced into a time nine years past, and the corrupt world of the court represented by Piato, and concerned with the ‘present minute’. Middleton’s treatment of malcontentedness in this way parallels that of Marston in the verse satires: just as the excess of the corrective impulse in the satires works to break down the difference between the malcontented satirist and the excessive desires of his satiric objects, in The Revenger’s Tragedy the excess with which Vindice

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carries out his revenge works to elide the difference between the revenger and his target. Indeed, when the Duke asks who he and Hippolito are, Vindice effaces any distance between the Duke and the two revengers, responding ‘villains all three’ (III. 5. 153).

**Disguise and Identity**

As Farah Karim-Cooper points out, on the early modern stage disguise is always ‘a metatheatrical device gesturing towards the beguilement of acting’. The disguised character reminds the audience of the artifice of the performance: we watch somebody pretend to be somebody else within the fictional world of the play, and are reminded that we are not watching ‘real’ people, but a host of performed roles. Disguise suggests the possibility of transformation, and shows identity to be fluid rather than fixed. In *The Malcontent*, Malevole is lower class malcontent and duke simultaneously: the disguise and the ‘self’ it hides are blurred, heightening Malevole’s transgressive potential, and disrupting the notion of authentic identity. In *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, disguise is similarly deconstructive. Not only does the Piato disguise dismantle the distance between the malcontent and the corrupt court world that he attacks, the fluidity of identity that the use of disguise creates functions to annihilate Vindice’s sense of his identity as fixed or stable.

While disguised as Piato, Vindice mistakenly leads Lussurioso to burst in with sword drawn on the Duke and Duchess together in bed. After being imprisoned and almost executed for this, Lussurioso decides to hire Hippolito’s ‘discontented brother’ (IV. 2. 35), Vindice, whom he has heard of but never met, to kill Piato, because ‘discontent and want’, he asserts, ‘is the best clay to mould a villain of’ (IV. 1. 48-49). In a comic and potentially confusing turn of events, then, Vindice is hired to kill the previous persona under which he had disguised himself. It is not clear, however, whether the Vindice that Lussurioso hires to kill Piato is the same Vindice that existed beneath the Piato disguise. Whilst Hippolito suggests so, ‘Brother, disguise must off | In thine own shape now I’ll prefer thee to him’ (IV. 1. 59-60), and a stage direction instructs Vindice to appear ‘out of his disguise’ (IV. 2. 1), this is complicated by the fact that, when disguised as Piato, Vindice had failed to alter his voice. Thus, when hired by

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42 Karim-Cooper, p. 281.
Lussuriosi for the second time, he is forced to change his speech so that he is not recognised:

I'll bear me in some strain of melancholy,
And string myself with heavy-sounding wire,
Like such an instrument that speaks
Merry things sadly. (IV. 2. 28-31)

Vindice repeats the musical imagery with which Hippolito earlier associated him, and suggests that melancholic speech is mournful in tone, like a cello, perhaps. The way in which Vindice actually speaks when presented to Lussuriosi, though, is apparently rustic or lower class: ‘How don you? God you god den’ (IV. 2. 43). Lussuriosi observes ‘how strangely such a coarse, homely salute | Shows in the palace’ (IV. 2. 44-45), and indeed, this dialect emphasises both the socially transgressive nature of the malcontent and his separation from the world of the court.

In his strange guise as Hippolito’s ‘discontented brother’, Vindice straddles the border between disguise and its revelation. He is forced to perform a version of his self, the effect of which is to deconstruct the distinction between the disguise and the ‘self’ it hides, pointing to identity as fluid. Disguise leads Vindice to undergo a form of self-disintegration in which he can no longer distinguish himself from the roles that he plays. When after the Duke’s murder Vindice and Hippolito dress his corpse in Piatto’s clothes, for example, Vindice identifies both as the speaking self and as the Piatto disguise in which the Duke’s body is dressed:

Brother, that’s I; that sits for me. Do you mark it? And I must stand ready here to make away myself yonder – I must sit to be killed and stand to kill myself. I could vary it not so little as thrice over again. (V. 1. 4-8)

It has become impossible for Vindice to detach himself from his disguise. Identity is shown to be performative, associated with external markers like clothing and behaviour as much as with any kind of inner quality; the very existence of a ‘self’ separable from performance is, in fact, questioned.

Metatheatrical references to Vindice’s role as revenger emphasise the destabilisation of ideas around selfhood in the play. He repeatedly insists on his own identity; in a triple proclamation of selfhood Vindice reveals himself to the Duke before he kills him, “Tis I, ’tis Vindice, ’tis I’ (III. 5. 167). Similarly, at the point of Lussurioso’s death, Vindice whispers, “twas Vindice murdered thee— […] Murdered thy father—
There are moments in which the protagonists, such as ‘Vindice’, express a sense of self, often in the form of metaphysical monologues. ‘And I am he’ (V. 3. 78-80). These moments can in one sense be interpreted as responding to the self-disintegration brought on by disguise, attempts by Vindice to shore up his sense of his own identity. Yet they also have the opposite effect. ‘Vindice’, of course, is Italian for revenger, and Vindice’s apparent assertions of selfhood are therefore also theatrically self-conscious repetitions of his role within the play. They point to the dramatic type of the revenger, as much as to any kind of ‘authentic’ identity, and this exposes the fact that ‘Vindice’, a fictional character, is always a performance. To attempt to find the ‘authentic’ Vindice is made to seem nonsensical.

Metatheatricality and Malcontented Truth-Telling

The points in The Revenger’s Tragedy at which Vindice adopts the role of the satirist place him at the limits of the text, close to the border between the play and the audience. Like a theatrical director, he cues in the entrances of the figures he derides, ‘Duke, royal lecher, go, grey-haired adultery’ (I. 1. 1). Similarly, his elaborately ironic revenge on the Duke is a theatrical spectacle in which Vindice is director, stage manager, and star player. In his self-conscious references to his role as revenger, Vindice points beyond the margins of the fictional world to the generic conventions of the part that he plays. Vengeance, he says, is his ‘tragic business’ (III. 5. 101). ‘When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good’ (III. 5. 202) he cries after murdering the Duke; just as in The Malcontent Malevole is aware of the conventions of malcontentedness, and performs an exaggerated version of them, Vindice knows what his play’s genre demands: violence in excess, and the punishment of the wicked.

Vindice’s self-conscious theatricality can be read as an extreme version of the malcontent’s truth-telling. He points to the borders of the play and to the truth that he is an actor performing the role of a revenger within a revenge tragedy. It is his truth-telling that undoes him, however. Just as he cannot help but reveal his role as revenger to the Duke and Lussurioso in their dying moments, in the final scene Vindice cannot resist claiming the ‘witty carried’ murder of the Duke as his own. This revelation leads to the execution of both Vindice and Hippolito; in the end it is Vindice’s malcontented impulse to expose the truth that leads to his death, and therefore to the final dissolution of his self.
Vindice’s theatrical self-awareness is typical of a play often seen as parodying the dramatic conventions of revenge tragedy, a reading that originates with Jonathan Dollimore’s discussion of the play’s use of stage effects.\footnote{Dollimore, pp. 139-40. See also Sanders’ discussion of the play as ‘black parody’, p. 25, and McMillin’s discussion of its ‘abandonment to theatricality’, p. 285.} Dollimore argues that the fact that Vindice draws attention to stage-effects, such as the thunder at V. 3. 43, works to shatter dramatic illusion, and subvert the notion of heavenly retribution.\footnote{Dollimore, p. 139.} This is in itself a form of truth-telling: just as Vindice reveals the truth about himself, the play’s wider metatheatrical elements work to reveal the truth about the play as artifice. In the previous chapter I argued that the excessive truth-telling of Marston’s malcontented satires exposes and therefore destabilises the structural boundaries on which satire relies. Similarly, the metatheatrical, parodic excess of Middleton’s play disrupts the borders of the text’s self-enclosed fictional world. As well as through Vindice’s insistence on himself as revenger, the play points to itself as revenge tragedy by pushing the conventions of that genre to their limits. It is a hyperbolic, comically exaggerated version of earlier Elizabethan iterations of the genre. Rather than one revenger and one villain (like Hamlet and Claudius, for instance), we get an excess of courtly corruption, and a whole host of revengers to match. There is Hippolito, of course, as well as Vindice, but also the Duchess and Spurio, whose affair is the means for revenge on the Duke, Antonio and his followers, who vow revenge for the rape of his wife, and Ambitioso and Supervacuo, who declare that they will be revenged on Lussurioso due to their botched attempt to have him executed, in which the wrong brother was killed (in this final case revenge is a justification for violent ambition: Ambitioso and Supervacuo want Lussurioso dead because he is heir to the throne). Other revenge tragedy conventions are similarly multiplied: there are two sets of disguised masquers in the final scene, for example, and there is an extreme level of violence, with corpses or dismembered body-parts appearing on stage on seven separate occasions, not to mention the seven dead bodies piled up on the stage at the end of the play, in addition to the three (Vindice, Hippolito, and an unnamed nobleman) sent to execution. The effect of this parodic multiplication of revenge tragedy conventions is to expose those conventions for what they are, and therefore to remove any sense of the play as other than theatrical show.
The uses of stage effects and dramatic spectacle work in a similar way. Thunder sounds after Lussurioso and his followers are killed in the final scene, leading Vindice to exclaim, ‘Mark, thunder! | Dost know thy cue, thou big-voiced crier?’, and shortly after, ‘No power is angry when the lustful die. | When thunder claps heaven likes the tragedy’ (V. 3. 42-43, 47-48). As noted by Dollimore, Vindice takes the notion that thunder might be a sign from providence and makes it ridiculous, drawing attention to it as theatrical effect through ‘cue’, ‘claps’, and ‘tragedy’. Theatrically stylised scenes like the procession of the royal family at the beginning of the play, the dumb show that represents Lussurioso’s ascension to the throne, and the double masque in the final scene, work to expose all drama as theatrical illusion rather than naturalistic representation of reality. The play continually points to itself as an artifice created by actors and stage effects, and to its central character as a player performing the role of the revenger.

In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, then, malcontented truth-telling, like everything else in the play, is pushed to an extreme level. It not only leads to Vindice’s death, but, through metatheatricality, exposes the play and its frontman as the illusions of fiction. The play deconstructs itself, inviting its audience to see it as exactly that, a play. Just as Vindice’s malcontented impulse to the revelation of truth reverses back on him as he reveals the truth about himself as murderer, the play itself undergoes a similar reversal and unmasking itself as dramatic performance. *The Revenger's Tragedy*, when read as a malcontented text, emerges as chaotic and unstable, full of reversals, contradictions, and border-crossings. In exposing its own illusory nature, the play shares the malcontent’s paradoxical combining of truth and performance, revelation and concealment.

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Both Marston and Middleton deconstruct the difference between truth and performance in their dramatic explorations of malcontentedness. In doing so, they reconsider the conception of truth as something necessarily plain or unconsidered. In Chapter One I argued that the elision of the difference between the malcontented speakers of Marston’s verse satires and their satirical targets is evidence of the malcontent’s impulse to chaos above order, discord above harmony. Analysis of the links between disguise and malcontentedness in *The Malcontent* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* reveals a similar elision of difference: between the malcontent and what he attacks, but also between performance and truth. Again, malcontentedness deconstructs oppositions
and categories; it tends towards chaos, and this chaos, this instability, in these plays centres on the concept of truth. The malcontent discourse asks questions about how, and if, truth can be recognised and conceptualised, and this raises a further question about whether what is ‘true’ can be known at all. In the next chapter I argue that this is the key question posed by malcontentedness in *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Drawing on contemporaneous discourses of doubt and scepticism, and on the early modern subject’s uncertain and shifting sense of his or her place in society and the wider universe, malcontentedness in these plays works to frustrate access to the truth, offering a sceptical worldview in which conclusive knowledge is impossible.
Chapter Three

Uncertainty in Hamlet and The Duchess of Malfi

The ‘purpose of playing’, Hamlet says, ‘is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’ (III. 2. 20–24). For Hamlet, theatre can reveal the truth about the age; it shows the world its true nature. Those who would defend the early modern theatre from its critics agreed. In Thomas Heywood’s An Apology for Actors, Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy, claims to have ‘Unmask sterne Murther; sham’d lascivio
| Pluct off the visar from grimme Treasons face’.¹ For Philip Sidney, true tragedy ‘openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue’; like the anatomist who strips away the surface of the body to unmask its secrets, the theatrical performance has the ability to expose hidden truths about the world.² The ending of Hamlet connects the staged spectacle with the dissemination of true knowledge:

[…] give order that these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view,
And let me speak to th’yet unknowing world
How these things came about. (V. 2. 382-85)

Horatio promises to recount the story of Hamlet in a future time after the play has ended, to tell of ‘carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, | Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters’ (V. 2. 386-87), and Fortinbras undertakes to ‘call the noblest to audience’ (V. 2. 392). Bizarrely, in the play’s final moments, the characters that remain alive plan a staging of Hamlet that will impart the true version of events. This metadramatic reference works, as in The Malcontent and The Revenger’s Tragedy, to connect the truthful with the theatrical. It suggests that the theatre itself, malcontent-like, is in some way able to speak, or reveal, the truth.

Hamlet hopes to use the theatre’s potentially revelatory function to discover the truth about the Ghost’s account of Claudius’s guilt:

I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim’d their malefactions. (II. 2. 584-88)

There is a chance that these lines refer to actual events: the 1599 play *A Warning for Fair Women*, which was performed by the Chamberlain’s Men directly before they performed *Hamlet*, describes an incident in Norfolk in which a woman, watching a tragedy ‘wherein a woman that had murthred hers | Was ever haunted with her husbands ghost’, was apparently so affected by the performance that she ‘openly confesss’ to the murder of her own husband.³ When Hamlet stages his own ‘cunning’ scene (‘The Mousetrap’), however, the results are much less conclusive. After witnessing the murderer, Lucianus, pour poison into the sleeping Gonzago’s ear (a dramatization of the murder of Hamlet Senior), Claudius rises, calls for lights, and leaves the stage. While Hamlet takes this to signify his guilt – ‘I’ll take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound’ (*Hamlet*, III. 2. 280-81) – this is not self-evident; there is no open confession like that of the Norfolk woman, and Claudius’s hasty exit could be construed as offence at the staging of a king’s murder more generally, rather than an indication of his guilty conscience. What ‘The Mousetrap’ actually reveals is not certain until Claudius’s confession in the following scene.

Compared to the equivalent moment in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, the play-within-a-play device in *Hamlet* actually moderates the connection between theatre and the exposure of truth. In staging the play *Soliman and Perseda*, Hieronimo uses dramatic spectacle to reveal the truth about his son’s murder; he cries, ‘See here my show, look on this spectacle!’, as he exhibits Horatio’s body to his audience.⁴ In addition, the targets of Hieronimo’s revenge, Balthazar and Lorenzo, are murdered in performing what they believe to be fictional roles; the play-within-a-play constitutes the climactic moment of revenge itself, and in a sense, therefore, *is* the truth, as the actors literally perform their own deaths. In *Hamlet*, conversely, the theatre is a test of truth that produces only incomplete, uncertain results. ‘The Mousetrap’ constructs a relationship between performance and access to true knowledge, and then refuses to permit that access in any clear-cut or complete way. In this, it condenses a wider frustration of

³ *A Warning for Faire Women* (London, 1599), fol. H2r.
knowledge that I propose is at the heart of the representations of malcontentedness in both *Hamlet*, and Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. In the previous chapter I discussed the ways in which malcontentedness paradoxically reconceptualises truth by locating it in the performative surface. In *The Malcontent* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, in different ways, truth is spoken, allowed, and accessed through performance. The implication of this identification of truth with potentially slippery surfaces, however, is that the notion of truth as a stable category is thrown into doubt. *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi* explore this doubt. In both texts, truth is held out as possibility, only for complete, stable, or certain knowledge of it to be refused. I connect this pattern to a malcontented delight in vexing or ‘galling’, and to the wider disruption of humanity’s sense of the universe as fixed, stable, or harmonious that is central to the malcontent discourse.

**Renaissance Uncertainty**

In Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were significant transformations in the realms of truth and knowledge. The Reformation, in which previously held truths about the universe, and humanity’s place within it, were thrown into doubt, and in which multiple different versions of the truth competed for dominance, was central to an emergent scepticism in the period. In England, there were five official state religions during the sixteenth century alone, each of which claimed absolute truth; one of the results of this, Steven Mullaney writes, ‘was to displace and destabilize the very notion of the orthodox or the absolute, producing a sceptical if not cynical relativism evident, in court records, even among the lower classes’. ⁵ Epistemological and hermeneutical questions about what it meant to believe, and about how and if one could truly know, came to the fore for both orthodox and reformed thinkers. Stefania Tutino has explored the ‘complex tension between certainty and uncertainty’ in post-Reformation Catholic culture, for example, arguing that the debates about the doctrines of mental reservation and equivocation contributed to ‘a fundamental uncertainty over the capability of language to reflect human reality truthfully’. ⁶ Uncertainty was also inevitable in the Reformed Faith, Melissa Caldwell suggests, due to ‘the pluralism engendered by Protestant hermeneutics and the new

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power invested in language itself. This emphasis on language, in a church which also stressed ‘the fallibility of reason, and the vulnerability of faith’, in Caldwell’s words, ‘readily invited instability’.

Scientific as well as religious transformations contributed to this epistemological questioning. Early modern writing on cosmology proposed new forms of continuity between the heavens and the earth; the theories of astronomers like Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, for example, displaced earth’s position at the centre of the universe, and suggested that the physical heavens, like the earth, were subject to change. Developments in scientific methodology, such as a new emphasis on experimentation, and the invention of the microscope and telescope, as well as the mapping of both the human body and the globe, reconfigured ways of seeing and knowing the physical universe. It is important to emphasise the gradual nature of these changes, and their continuity with classical traditions (many thinkers continued to utilise Aristotelian methods, for example); yet all of this, combined with a slow but steady increase in literacy and vernacular translation, as well as the expansion of print culture, led to substantial increases in the amount and variety of forms of knowledge available, and to new challenges to previously accepted forms of knowledge.

In 1610, John Donne responded to the transformations in natural philosophy with bewilderment:

And new philosophy calls all in doubt;  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and th’earth, and no man’s wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.10

The disruption of humankind’s place at the centre of the universe by Copernican astronomical theory, for Donne, engenders a crisis of knowledge; what the truth is has been thrown into doubt, and human ‘wit’ is not sufficient to discover it again. Indeed, the religious and scientific changes that I have been describing are connected with a

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8 Ibid.
The concomitant flourishing of philosophical scepticism that engages directly with this epistemological crisis. Multiple scholars have explored the recovery of classical forms of scepticism by European humanist thinkers; while academic scepticism (based mainly on the writings of Cicero) was current in the early Renaissance, the recovery of Pyrrhonism in the mid-sixteenth century, through the newly rediscovered writings of Sextus Empiricus, proved massively influential. The sceptical position, as summarised by Ann Hartle, is that, ‘we can know nothing of the nature of things; hence, the right attitude towards them is to withhold judgment; the necessary result of withholding judgment is imperturbability (ataraxia).’ Its most influential proponent in the early modern period was the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, whose personal motto, ‘What do I know?’ summarised his sceptical viewpoint.

This viewpoint is most fully articulated in the essay An Apology for Raymond Sebond, where Montaigne questions the veracity of the senses. He argues that what we can know is limited by our senses – ‘knowledge begins with them and can be reduced to them’ – but that there is evidence to suggest that our senses might be unreliable, for example the subjective differences in how things are experienced (he provides the example of the fact that wine tastes different to a sick man than it does to a healthy man). If the senses are not reliable, he reasons, then how can we trust anything that we think we know? Montaigne concludes that true knowledge or certainty is impossible given the constant change and inherent instability in both the subject and the physical world: ‘We ourselves, our faculty of judgment and all mortal things are flowing and rolling ceaselessly: nothing certain can be established about one from the other, since both judged and judging are ever shifting and changing’. For Montaigne nothing is certain; throughout his essays ‘truth value is constantly undermined by sceptical analysis’.

William Hamlin connects the challenges posed to truth by scepticism with early modern English tragedy:

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14 Montaigne, p. 680 (Book II, Chapter 12).
English tragedy in the late Elizabethan and Jacobean years manifests contrariety with stunning vehemence, and one result is that its meditations can seem disturbingly inconclusive [...] Topcis tacit and explicit are examined from multiple angles, their constituent elements subsumed within a sceptical milieu where every perspective can be entertained and every utterance is treated as provisional. Malcontentedness in particular can be read in this way. The ‘contrariety’ that Hamlin notices in all tragedy is condensed and magnified in the malcontent discourse, characterised as it is by contradiction and paradox. Malcontentedness foregrounds uncertainty, openness, and inconclusiveness over stability or fixity, and therefore engages with sceptical ideas. In fact, the period between the first vernacular translation of Sextus Empiricus (The Sceptick) in 1590 and the English translation of Montaigne’s Essays in 1603 corresponds closely to the period during which malcontentedness developed as a literary discourse. This suggests a late Elizabethan preoccupation with both malcontented and sceptical ideas: in England, it seems, the two discourses emerged out of the same context.

Scepticism, Hamlin writes, ‘induce[s] judgmental vertigo, dislodging people from settled opinions and biases, it functioned as a discursive irritant [...] It helped to undo institutional and ideological structures that had been in place for centuries’. Malcontentedness, with its emphasis on vexation and the disruption of the status quo, engages with sceptical ideas: it displays a fundamental concern with instability, with the questioning of established ideas, and with the disruption of fixed categories. In particular, Hamlet and The Duchess of Malfi, both of which are malcontented texts, draw on sceptical ideas. While (like Montaigne) neither text necessarily denies the existence of ‘truth’ in itself, they in different ways refuse to provide access to a truth which they nevertheless gesture towards. By closing off access in this way, they make a sceptical claim about the impossibility of conclusive knowledge.

My discussion in this chapter focusses particularly on Hamlet and Bosola, both of whom are disillusioned malcontent characters that are liminal in position. Despite his central position as a member of the royal family, Hamlet appears as a peripheral outsider to the world of the court, differentiated visually by his ‘inky cloak’ (Hamlet, I. 2. 77). Bosola, an ex-convict of obscure background and social position, is designated a

16 Hamlin, Tragedy and Scepticism, p. 2.
17 William Hamlin demonstrates that Sextus Empiricus was known by writers including Samuel Rowland and Thomas Nashe, ‘A Lost Translation Found? An Edition of The Sceptick (c. 1590) Based on Extant Manuscripts [with text]’, English Literary Renaissance, 31. 1 (2001), 34-51.
18 Hamlin, Tragedy and Scepticism, pp. 5-6.
‘black malcontent’ (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I. 1. 81) outright, and hovers on the margins of the world of ‘great men’ that Webster dramatizes, complaining of neglect and oppression. They both speak out satirically against societies in which they are nevertheless embedded. Rather than on satirical speech or social marginality, however, I focus on the ways in which Bosola and Hamlet are constructed as objects of inquiry. Both Shakespeare and Webster depict their malcontents in a way which actively encourages interpretation or diagnosis, yet the diagnostic attempts of critics and other characters are thwarted by the discontinuity of both characters. In this way, these plays work to confound knowledge, and this is especially the case with *The Duchess of Malfi*, which I demonstrate encodes uncertainty through its constant emphasis on obscurity and opacity, and its structural confusion. In the scene that opens Webster’s play, Bosola is described as ‘the only court-gall’ (I. 1. 23), an epithet that refers both to the bitterness of his malcontented social satire, and to its harassing, vexing effect. I wish to link this second sense to Hamlin’s depiction of scepticism as a ‘discursive irritant’, and to argue that both *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi* work to vex or ‘gall’ their audiences in their rejections of certainty or knowledge.

**William Shakespeare, *Hamlet***

There are a number of levels on which *Hamlet* might be read as an expression of malcontentedness: his disillusionment, melancholy, satirical speech, and black clothing, for example. In the chapter titled ‘Hamlet and Other Malcontents’ from his 1943 monograph *Shakespeare’s Satire*, however, Oscar James Campbell wrote,

The purpose of this essay is certainly not to explain *Hamlet* by showing that he is a malcontent – not even a malcontent subtilized in the manner of which no one but Shakespeare was master. If such an attempt could succeed, it would destroy all the richness of *Hamlet’s* nature and reduce the complexity of the dramatic action to a simplicity as jejune as it would be unreal.  

Campbell’s argument is more than seventy years old, dated not least by its bardolatrous references to Shakespeare’s mastery and *Hamlet’s* ‘richness’ of nature. Yet he neatly summarises the antithesis that exists between *Hamlet* and the malcontent as they emerge from traditional criticism. Where the malcontent is conventionally understood as a stock figure, a flat, two-dimensional stereotype associated with a discrete set of

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characteristics, Hamlet is conceived as a vast and complex psychological interior that exceeds the limits of Shakespeare’s text. For Harold Bloom, Hamlet ‘appears too immense a consciousness for Hamlet, a revenge tragedy’, and for Marjorie Garber, similarly, the play is ‘the premier Western performance of consciousness’. Malcontents are associated with flatness, with the surface, but Hamlet points to deep interior space, to ‘that within which passes show’ (I. 2. 85).

Whilst a number of scholars make passing reference to the malcontent type when discussing Hamlet, overall there is a critical reluctance to make any kind of comprehensive argument for Hamlet as a malcontent himself. The only lengthy discussions of Hamlet and malcontentedness that I have been able to identify add little: Julia Lacey Brooke seems to abandon the category altogether when faced with Hamlet, focussing instead on the play’s dramatization of Stoic principles, and James R. Keller does exactly what Campbell is afraid of, reducing Hamlet’s complexity by forcing the character to fit a narrowly defined category of conservative ‘malcontent prince’. Yet this thesis rethinks the malcontent, demonstrating that much more than a stock figure, malcontentedness is an assembly of ideas, attitudes, behaviours, and stylistic patterns, which involves complex interplays between surface and depth, inside and outside, performance and truth, and so on. Similarly, there is a significant school of thought that aims to rethink the conception of Hamlet as the herald of modern consciousness. Taking both of these revisions into account, a space emerges where both Hamlet and Hamlet interact with malcontentedness in dynamic ways.

Indeed, when Hamlet is considered in its literary context, malcontentedness becomes difficult to ignore. The play is generally dated to between 1599 and 1601, the same years that saw the vogue for Juvenalian verse satire reach fever pitch before its outlaw in the summer of 1599, as well as plays including Jonson’s Every Man Out of his Humour, Marston’s Antonio and Mellida, and Shakespeare’s own As You Like It, likely

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written directly before *Hamlet*, all of which engage in various ways with malcontentedness. I wish to place *Hamlet* firmly into this context. Reading the play through the lens of the malcontent discourse, with its emphasis on discord, deliberate ‘vexing’, and the deconstruction of established ideas and categories, reveals new critical perspectives on the question that has dogged scholarly responses to *Hamlet*: what exactly is the ‘heart’ of Hamlet’s ‘mystery’? *Hamlet*, I contend, is malcontented in its refusal to answer that question.

‘You would pluck out the heart of my mystery’: *Hamlet’s* Trap

*Hamlet* is driven by the attempts of various characters to work out the truth about each other. Hamlet seeks to verify the Ghost’s account of his father’s murder by Claudius; Claudius attempts to discover the truth behind Hamlet’s apparent madness; Polonius spies on Laertes, and forces Ophelia to ‘give up […] the truth’ (I. 3. 98) about her relationship with Hamlet; as university scholars, Hamlet and Horatio are concerned with the wider pursuit of knowledge. The play’s opening question, ‘Who’s there?’ (I. 1. 1), foregrounds this search for answers from the outset. Yet in what are almost his first words in the play, Hamlet indicates, but forecloses access to, a central truth about himself:

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Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’.
’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all the forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These i
Indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I. 2. 76-86)
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Hamlet draws on the dichotomy between appearance and reality – that which ‘seems’ and that which ‘is’ – also evident in the claims made by malcontented discourse to pierce beneath false surfaces to hidden truths. He makes a truth claim for his grief: its external signifiers, his tears, his ‘inky cloak’, cohere with his inner being. Compared to hostile portraits of malcontentedness, which emphasise its disingenuousness – the fashionable ‘studied carelessness’ of John Earle’s ‘Discontented Man’, for example –
Hamlet asserts absolute sincerity.  This sincerity, however, is completely unverifiable: ‘that within which passes show’ suggests that there is something that exceeds signification, something unknowable, at his centre. In the previous chapter I suggested that malcontentedness makes truth available through disguise and performance, but Hamlet rejects this, restating the dichotomy of surface and depth and in doing so drawing our attention away from the external sign towards a hidden mystery. In this way, Hamlet invites interpretation: to quote Drew Daniel, he ‘has played a part in fashioning the very topology of abyssal subjectivity’ that critics like Bloom and Garber have seen in him; he points to an inner ‘that’ which such critics have taken to indicate a vast psychological interior.

This simultaneous indication and foreclosing of inner truth is repeated in the third act, when Hamlet rebukes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s attempts to diagnose the cause of his ‘distemper’ (III. 2. 328):

You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me. (III. 2. 355-63)

Again, Hamlet draws attention to a ‘mystery’ at his centre, to something ambiguous, hidden, there to be exposed. Yet the reproachful, accusatory tone that he employs here, made clear by his indignant repetition of ‘you would’, denotes his reluctance to reveal that mystery; again, he forecloses access to this hidden truth. Indeed, his final words on the matter, ‘though you fret me, you cannot play upon me’, aggressively refuse the possibility that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern might ever be able to discover it. Hamlet compares Guildenstern’s inability to play the recorder ‘to any utterance of harmony’ (III. 2. 352-53) with his inability to ‘play upon’ Hamlet and discover the truth about him. In the extended musical metaphor at work in the passage, then, truth is equated to harmony, and uncertainty, the inability to access the truth, is associated implicitly with the opposite of harmony: discord. Hamlet himself, a malcontent like Malevole and Vindice, is linked explicitly with this discord – Ophelia compares him to ‘sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh’ (III. 1. 160) – and this implies that malcontentedness and uncertainty in this play are in some way connected. My contention is that Hamlet enacts a malcontented disruption of knowledge: the play draws on the malcontent discourse to

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24 Earle, p. 197.
25 Daniel, p. 121.
demonstrate that while a complete, harmonious truth might exist, for humankind to access this truth in anything other than a fragmentary, uncertain, and discordant way is impossible.

Hamlet complains that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ‘fret’ him, a word that means both the act of equipping a stringed instrument with frets in order to make it easier to play, and therefore to their attempts to work him out, and also to irritate, or annoy. Yet as much as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ‘fret’ or irritate Hamlet, he frets them, and all those that try to work him out, both within and without the text. In previous chapters I discussed the malcontent’s fixation on ‘vexing’, evident in both Marston’s satires and The Malcontent, and Bosola, similarly, is described as ‘the only court-gall’ (The Duchess of Malfi, I. 1. 23). Hamlet’s refusal to articulate the ‘heart’ of his ‘mystery’, at the same time as he draws attention to it, can be interpreted as an example of this malcontented vexing; just as Malevole or Bosola fret or gall those around them through their malcontented speech, Hamlet frets those who would interpret him, by drawing us in, and then refusing access. Where Malevole’s vexing is socially disruptive, Hamlet’s works to sceptically disrupt the idea that truth is in any way accessible. In this way, Hamlet sets a trap for his interpreters: he actively encourages attempts to explain his ‘mystery’, yet such attempts, I shall demonstrate, are inevitably limited.

Over the course of the history of Hamlet criticism, multiple scholars (too many to survey in depth) have been drawn into this trap. The desire to work out Hamlet’s ‘mystery’ is evident, to name a few examples, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s early nineteenth-century description of the ‘psychological’ as ‘peculiarly characteristic of Hamlet’s mind’, in A. C. Bradley’s attempt, a century later, to explicate Hamlet’s ‘pathological condition’, in the twentieth-century psychoanalytic readings of the play, for example by Ernest Jones and Ella Sharpe, and in Bloom’s repeated references to Hamlet’s ‘personality’ or ‘inwardness’. These commenters share a concern with what is going on inside Hamlet’s head, with the division between inside and outside that Hamlet constructs in the passages previously quoted. Even those more recent interpretations that react against the tendency to attribute a ‘modern’ subjectivity to Hamlet often continue to gloss his ‘mystery’. Margreta de Grazia argues that to abstract

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Hamlet from the play as an icon of modern consciousness misses the political ‘premise of the play’: that Hamlet is dispossessed. Yet she nevertheless asserts that there is something to be discovered about Hamlet, arguing that resentment at his dispossession is ‘that’ which he has within; a central truth which, due to its treasonous nature, he must keep hidden, and hint at only indirectly through the ‘wild and whirling words’ (I. 5. 139) of his mad behaviour. Similarly, Drew Daniel argues for a ‘salutary resistance to interpreting Hamlet’s abyssal interiority’, and to some extent succeeds, rejecting the notion of Hamlet’s modernity in order to reclaim him as an early modern humoral subject. While Daniel resists psychologising Hamlet, though, he continues to posit a singular explanation for him: for Daniel what lies inside Hamlet is melancholy, literally the material substance black bile. All of the above, therefore, provide an answer to the question that Hamlet poses in his first extended speech: what is it, exactly, that he has within?

‘Crafty madness’: Hamlet’s Overdetermination

This critical desire to work Hamlet out is both encouraged and resisted by the play itself. As well as Hamlet’s references to a mysterious inner ‘that’, the play depicts the diagnostic attempts of various other characters, and presents a plurality of possible explanations for the problems that Hamlet poses. The result of this is an overdetermination that resists the interpretative endeavours of both those characters and the critics discussed. Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and, to an extent, Gertrude and Ophelia, spend much of the play searching for the elusive truth about Hamlet. Claudius, for example, echoes Hamlet’s reference to ‘that within’ when he suggests that there is ‘something in his soul […] this something settled matter in his heart’ (III. 1. 166, 175). Acts Two and Three stage a series of attempts to gloss or to find out what this ‘something’ is: to ascertain the truth behind Hamlet’s ‘antic disposition’ (I. 5. 180). In the second act, Polonius claims to ‘have found | The very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy’ (II. 2. 48-49). He explains that, because of Ophelia’s rejection, Hamlet,

Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,

27 de Grazia, p. 1.
28 Ibid., pp. 1-6, 88-89.
29 Daniel, p. 121.
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness wherein now he raves. (II. 2. 147-50)

Polonius assumes the role of the physician in his diagnosis of Hamlet as suffering the effects of love-melancholy; he describes the successive stages of the disease, and their corresponding symptoms: depression, loss of appetite, insomnia, giddiness, and then madness. There is evidence to suggest that Hamlet himself invites this interpretation: he encounters Ophelia with ‘his doublet all unbrac’d, | No hat upon his head’ (II. 1. 78-79), breathing ‘piteous and profound’ (II. 1. 94) sighs. He performs the role of the stereotypical melancholy lover: ‘I have not the art to reckon my groans’ (II. 2. 19-20), his letter hyperbolically states. When Polonius and Claudius test this theory by observing Hamlet alone with Ophelia, however, his behaviour refutes Polonius’s theory, as he aggressively rejects her. ‘Love? His affections do not that way tend’ (III. 1. 164) is Claudius’s conclusion. A certain interpretation of Hamlet’s behaviour is encouraged, but then its plausibility is undercut by his radically discontinuous behaviour.

Dispossession is a further possible candidate for the cause of Hamlet’s strange behaviour. Asked directly by Rosencrantz, he bluntly replies, ‘Sir, I lack advancement’ (III. 2. 331); he states that the reason for his ‘distemper’ is frustrated political ambition, presumably given the fact that after Hamlet Senior’s death the throne passed not to Hamlet (who in a patrilineal system has reason to expect it) but to Claudius. As mentioned, de Grazia sees resentment at this dispossession as the key to unlocking Hamlet’s mystery, and indeed, it is a tempting reading, particularly given Hamlet’s malcontented traits. Yet frustrated ambition is only one of many possible explanations for Hamlet’s behaviour offered in the play. In the final scene, for example, dispossession is one of a number of motivating factors in his revenge:

He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,
Popp’d in between th’election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life. (V. 2. 64-66)

The loss of the election does not outweigh grief for his father; the two, indeed, cannot be separated, as ‘king’, for Hamlet, signifies both the father and the title. Nor does it outweigh the disgust at his mother’s marriage that was expressed in vivid terms in the closet scene, something which Gertrude herself offers as a possible explanation – ‘I doubt it is no other but the main, | His father’s death and our o’er-hasty marriage’ (II. 2. 56-57) – or the fact that Claudius has attempted to kill Hamlet himself. Although
Hamlet foregrounds frustrated ambition in his response to Rosencrantz’s question, then, that does not automatically indicate that it is the solution to his wider ‘mystery’. Instead it works to further confuse interpretation: it becomes another possible explanation which does not necessarily carry more weight than any other.

Hamlet presents the audience with multiple possible motives for Hamlet’s revenge, reasons for his ‘distemper’, and solutions to his ‘mystery’, and Hamlet himself, at various moments, places different levels of emphasis on certain of these possibilities. Guildenstern describes the frustration that meets his attempts to work Hamlet out:

Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,
But with a crafty madness keeps aloof
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state. (III. 1. 7-10)

‘Crafty madness’ not only implies the suspicion that Hamlet’s madness is feigned (that he is not ‘essentially’ mad but ‘mad in craft’ (III. 4. 189, 190)), but also that Hamlet’s madness involves a deliberate and calculated refusal to reveal his ‘true state’. Whilst on one level this is a strategy to prevent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and therefore Claudius, from discovering his knowledge of the murder, it also makes it impossible to find a stable perspective from which to understand Hamlet. In his antic performance he speaks in puns and riddles, teasing his audiences by hinting at contradictory motives for his behaviour. To Polonius, for example, Hamlet mentions daughters and conception, which Polonius takes as further confirmation of his melancholy lover theory, but to Claudius he describes himself as ‘promise-crammed’ (III. 2. 94), a hint at the frustrated ambition that de Grazia reads as central. In Act Two, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he does not actually know the reason for his change in behaviour – ‘I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth’ (II. 2. 295-96) – an assertion that draws on the contemporary understanding of melancholy as fear and sorrow without cause. There are multiple possible versions of the truth when it comes to Hamlet, and part of what I have described as the trap that he sets, is that it becomes impossible to settle conclusively on any one of these: overdetermination leads to indeterminacy. In An Apology for Raymond Sebond, Montaigne proposes that the profusion of philosophical and scientific explanations for the nature of things like the divine, the natural world, or the human soul – ‘so much din from so many philosophical

30 For Robert Burton, melancholia is chiefly characterised by ‘fear where there is no ground for fear’ and sorrow ‘continual, and still without any evident cause’, The Anatomy of Melancholy, First Partition, pp. 385, 389. The epistemological challenge posed by melancholy is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
brainboxes!’ – demonstrates that for humankind to know the truth of things is impossible: ‘whenever some new doctrine is offered to us we have good cause for distrusting it and for reflecting that the contrary was in fashion before that was produced; it was overturned by this later one, but some third discovery may overturn that too, one day’. There is something similar at work in the proliferation of explanations that are offered for Hamlet’s behaviour in Hamlet: they make too much meaning available; each one has the potential to be undermined by another, and thus it cannot be said that any is conclusively ‘true’.

Francis Barker argues that the universe of Hamlet is primarily spectacular: ‘from the first apparition to the last procession where four sad captains carry the dead prince to the stage where his body will lie displayed in state, the moment of reality is the moment of sight’. Truth, if available, is located in the surface: the inhabitants of Elsinore are constantly surveilled, and are therefore (knowingly or otherwise) metatheatrically constructed as performers. Characters hide and observe each other, turning ostensibly private moments into performances; Hamlet, for example, observes Claudius at confession, turning the intimate relationship between the subject and God into a public spectacle. There are, of course, exceptions to this play of surfaces – Barker acknowledges that surfaces can occlude hidden meanings, ‘in Denmark one may smile and smile and be a villain’ – yet the world of Hamlet is indeed ‘top-heavy with visibility’.

For Barker, Hamlet’s gesture to a mysterious inner space represents an anachronistic breach in this spectacular order, which signals an as yet unavailable modern subjectivity, founded on depth rather than surface. He reinserts the play into a transitional historical moment in which modern subjectivity was incipient, but not yet fully formulated: ‘the historical prematurity of this subjectivity places it outside the limits of the text-world in which it is as yet emergent only in promissory form’. Hamlet’s gesture to an unknowable interior is for Barker an anachronistic reference to a subjectivity that does not yet exist; Hamlet refers to what is essentially an empty space. Barker’s thesis raises important questions for a study of malcontentedness in Hamlet, and more broadly. Perhaps malcontentedness itself is a symptom of the transitional

31 Montaigne, pp. 576, 643 (Book II, Chapter 12).
33 Barker, pp. 23, 22.
34 Barker, p. 33.
moment for subjectivity that Barker discusses. Might the fragmented, discontinuous identity of the malcontent as s/he appears in multiple early modern texts (not only Hamlet but Bosola, discussed in the second half of this chapter, or Vittoria, discussed in Chapter Four) result from an attempt to find an as yet unavailable modern subjectivity, and might the frustration involved in the malcontent subject position be frustration at this unavailability?

The cumulative effect of the various potential versions of the truth of Hamlet’s ‘mystery’ with which we are presented, though, is uncertainty. Whether or not the truth to which Hamlet gestures is, indeed, an unavailable modern subjectivity – whether at Hamlet’s centre ‘there is, in short, nothing’, as Barker argues, or whether there is in fact, as Claudius believes, ‘something in his soul’ (III. 1. 166) – is ultimately unknowable: the text makes it impossible to get a handle on Hamlet, or to find a stable perspective from which to understand him.\textsuperscript{35} Montaigne writes that certainty is impossible, ‘since both judged and judging are ever shifting and changing’, and both Hamlet and Hamlet are characterised by precisely this discontinuity.\textsuperscript{36} Herein lies the text’s malcontentedness: in the same way as individual malcontent characters ‘fret’ or aggravate those around them by disrupting social hierarchies and fixed categories, Hamlet ‘frets’ its audience by first hinting at, and then refusing to provide, a singular explanatory truth. In doing so, the text refuses the comfortable harmony that such a truth would provide. In fact, it might be suggested that by drawing us in, by encouraging interpretation, and then demonstrating that interpretation to be necessarily inadequate, Hamlet’s malcontented vexing functions to teach its audience something. It leads us to the realisation that complete knowledge is impossible; it encourages a sceptical, questioning mind-set, and perhaps, therefore, a malcontented mind-set, in which discord takes priority over harmony, uncertainty over certainty, discontent over content.

\textbf{John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi}

Although written in 1612 or 1613, at least a decade after Hamlet, John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi echoes Shakespeare’s play in significant ways. Both plays are concerned with malcontented figures, with madness and melancholy, and with attempts to work

\textsuperscript{35} Barker, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{36} Montaigne, p. 680 (Book II, Chapter 12).
out the truth. Malfi, like Elsinore, is full of spies. Characters deceive, observe, and report on each other, attempting to discover the secrets that abound in this play. Most obviously, the malcontent Bosola (as the agent of Ferdinand and the Cardinal) spies on the Duchess, yet he himself is the object of enquiry, and, like Hamlet, repeatedly resists explanation, and frustrates understanding. This sceptical resistance of the interpretative impulse, in fact, is even more pervasive in Webster's play than it is in Shakespeare’s. By depicting an obscure and disordered world, populated by multiple figures whose ‘insides’ are impossible to ‘understand’ (II. 1. 83), and by encoding uncertainty into the play’s structure, *The Duchess of Malfi* enacts a more total rejection of certainty, and of the stability, order, and harmony that it implies.

**Opacity in *The Duchess of Malfi***

The central secret in *The Duchess of Malfi* is the Duchess’s marriage to Antonio, which, given her brothers’ refusal to let her remarry, must be kept, ‘As warily as those that trade in poison | Keep poison from their children’ (I. 1. 353-54). Just as the plot of *Hamlet* is driven by attempts to discover the truth, it is Ferdinand and the Cardinal’s obsession with discovering the Duchess’s secret that drives *The Duchess of Malfi*; Ferdinand hires the malcontent Bosola to ‘note all the particulars of her haviour’ (I. 1. 253) and report back to him. When the Duchess’s secret is eventually discovered, this happens, in Bosola’s words, ‘uncertainly’ (III. 1. 58). The truth about her marriage and three children is revealed in fragments, piece by piece. Bosola finds out that she is pregnant with her first child by Antonio in Act Two, for example, but does not discover that Antonio is the father until the third act, which takes place some years later, and similarly, Ferdinand actually witnesses the Duchess speaking to Antonio in her chamber, yet fails to recognise his identity as her husband.

The uncertainty with which the truth is revealed parallels the inconclusive results elicited by ‘The Mousetrap’ in *Hamlet*. Specifically, Hamlet’s use of ‘The Mousetrap’ as an investigative test is recalled by the invasive ‘trick’ (II. 1. 69) with the apricots with which Bosola tests his suspicions that the Duchess is pregnant. There is, in fact, a direct echo of *Hamlet* in Webster’s play when, after the test has started to affect her, the Duchess, like Claudius, calls for ‘lights’ (II. 1. 158), before swiftly leaving the stage. As in *Hamlet*, the results produced by Bosola’s trick are less than conclusive, and
Bosola lacks confidence in them. While he takes the Duchess’s ‘vulturous’ eating of the apricots as an ‘apparent sign of breeding’ (II. 2. 2-3), he nevertheless worries that their effect on her might stem from a different cause: ‘that these apricocks should be poisoned now, | Without my knowledge’ (II. 2. 34-35). Despite finding evidence to show that Antonio is the father shortly after this, moreover, Bosola mistakenly assumes that he must be her bawd. Bosola does not discover the full truth until the Duchess’s own unwitting revelation, much later, that ‘this good one that you speak of, is my husband’ (III. 2. 275).

The uncertain and fragmented revelation of the Duchess’s secrets to Bosola and Ferdinand is mirrored in the way in which her clandestine relationship with Antonio is revealed to the audience. Frances E. Dolan argues that while the viewer is offered hints and glimpses at the pair’s domestic life, as in the affectionate banter of the bedroom scene at the start of III. 2, the precise nature of their relationship, and crucially, their own thoughts and feelings about it, remain opaque, something that has generated much critical speculation.37 While clandestine marriages like the Duchess and Antonio’s were in the early modern period considered binding, the fact that the marriage is carried out in secret, and without documentation, makes it open to dispute by those that have not witnessed it: ‘her brothers can intervene because it is not absolutely clear to everybody that she is married and to whom’.38 Their marriage is always to an extent indeterminate in status and legitimacy. Through its central secret, then, The Duchess of Malfi disrupts access to knowledge. We are offered glimpses of marital life that encourage us to speculate, like Ferdinand, on the Duchess’s relationship, but are not provided with conclusive answers.

Although the Duchess is in many ways held above the secretive and corrupt characters that surround her, associated with light imagery rather than the darkness that characterises the world in which she is placed, she is markedly opaque. Ferdinand hopes to discover her ‘privat’st thoughts’ (I. 1. 315), but she never provides this transparency. Unusually for the title character of a tragedy, she never speaks in soliloquy; the audience is therefore unable to access the inner thoughts and feelings that the soliloquy can be

38 Dolan, ‘“Can this be certain?”’, p. 121.
understood to provide. This opacity is emphasised in the torture scenes: Cariola compares the Duchess to ‘some reverend monument’ (IV. 2. 33), which contrasts with her previous insistence on herself as ‘flesh and blood’, not ‘the figure cut in alabaster | [Who] kneels at my husband’s tomb’ (I. 1. 453, 454-55). The Duchess’s statement during these scenes, ‘I am Duchess of Malfi still’ (IV. 2. 142), which on one level works as an assertion of individual identity in the face of adversity, functions at the same time to proclaim her performance of a public role, and to foreclose the access to those private thoughts that Ferdinand, and perhaps the audience, desires. The Duchess, indeed, is always only ‘Duchess’, and the fact that we never learn her name works further to bar our access to her as a private individual.

The Duchess of Malfi, in fact, is full of characters with obscure backgrounds, hidden motives, or opaque interiors who, therefore, frustrate attempts at full knowledge or understanding. The minor character Delio appears unexpectedly in Rome as a suitor to Juliet: he has a secret private life, it seems, that we are told nothing about. Ferdinand hints at a hidden interior which he refuses to disclose; Bosola’s questions about his motives regarding the Duchess are met with blunt rebuffs:

Do not ask, then:
He that can compass me, and know my drifts,
May say he hath put a girdle 'bout the world
And sounded all her quicksands. (III. 1. 83-86)

Bosola is quick to deflate Ferdinand’s words as proud hyperbole (‘you are your own chronicle too much, and grossly | Flatter yourself’ (III. 1. 88-89)), yet like those of Hamlet, they gesture towards a hidden inside. Ferdinand claims possession of a mental space so expansive that knowledge of it is impossible. The nature of Ferdinand’s ‘drifts’ (that which drives his obsessive persecution of his sister), has been the subject of much critical debate; the play, however, remains frustratingly opaque on this point.

Diagnosing Bosola

It is Bosola, however, the play’s most obviously malcontented character, who most regularly thwarts understanding: like Hamlet, he is both the subject and the object of incomplete knowledge. Bosola (again like Hamlet) is said to have been a scholar, and he works as Ferdinand’s intelligencer; he is concerned with the pursuit of knowledge, yet,
as discussed, the intelligence he discovers is often fragmentary and uncertain. As an object of enquiry himself, Bosola is equally ambiguous, and this ambiguity both invites and frustrates explanation, from other characters in the play as well as from critics. There are obscure hints at a background, which various scholars have taken as the key by which he should be understood, and both Antonio and Ferdinand provide diagnostic accounts of his character. Yet Bosola is discontinuous, and undercuts these explanations; in this, like Hamlet, he enacts a malcontented vexing.

In 1893, the theatre critic William Archer complained that with Bosola, a ‘fatal lack of clearness ruins everything’. Archer’s phrase condenses a common critical response. In 1957, C. G. Thayer noted with surprise that despite Bosola’s central role in a play of ‘monumental complexities’, critics have ‘almost without exception, avoided the task of attempting a complex examination of the character’, and with a few important exceptions, the same is true for the half century following the publication of Thayer’s essay; character-based critical responses more commonly focus on the Duchess, Ferdinand, or Antonio. In Dympna Callaghan’s survey of criticism on The Duchess of Malfi from 2000 to 2008 Bosola is barely mentioned, which makes evident the lack of critical attention that the character has elicited in recent years. Amongst those critics who do treat Bosola, the most common approach is to attempt to solve the interpretative puzzle that his ambiguity poses, and thereby erase that ambiguity. Thayer attempts to work out what he describes as ‘the secret of Bosola’, and in doing so reduces him to a simple dichotomy between truth and disguise; the villainous aspects of his character are said to be simply a role which he ‘casts off’ at the end of Act Four, to reach ‘a genuine understanding of his true identity’, and ‘a final personal redemption’. More recently, Leslie Thomson has argued that Bosola is little more than a ‘conventional example of the ambitious man’, and exemplifies ‘the crudest form of Machiavellian virtù, the adaptable pragmatism of ambition’. Even Frank Whigham’s

42 There are, however, some critical accounts that acknowledge Bosola’s complexities without attempting to resolve them, for example Bryan Crockett refers to Bosola in his discussion of the ways in which Webster challenges his audience’s interpretative faculties, The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 132-40.
43 Thayer, pp. 165, 170.
often convincing New Historicism account of Bosola as caught between feudal and capitalist modes of employment, and therefore alienated, is problematic, in that his argument that Bosola seeks self-realization through employment constructs for him a stable motive, and therefore downplays his discontinuity. The lack of critical consensus on Bosola makes clear the interpretative challenge that he poses: he can be read as a disaffected social commentator, a Machiavellian villain, an exploited servant, a tragic revenge hero, for he is, at times, all of these things.

Bosola begins the play with no clear social position, a marginal malcontent made bitter by what he perceives to be neglect: he spent a number of years as a galley slave in punishment for an unspecified crime carried out in the service of the Cardinal, and has been seeking recompense only to be repeatedly ‘sighted’ (I. 1. 30). Bosola blames not only the Cardinal, but the entire world, for this mistreatment: ‘Miserable age, where the only reward | Of doing well is the doing of it’ (I. 1. 31-32). In the play’s opening scene, Antonio presents two contradictory accounts of Bosola’s malcontentedness. He tells Delio that he has heard that Bosola is ‘valiant’, and fears that his neglect by the Cardinal, and the melancholy it has apparently engendered, ‘will poison all his goodness’ (I. 1. 75, 76); he imagines Bosola as the unfortunate victim of neglect and poverty, a largely good person forced into villainy against his better nature. This is undercut, however, by Antonio’s earlier assertion that Bosola’s malcontented railing against the court’s corruption,

Is not for simple love of piety;
Indeed he rails at those things which he wants,
Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud,
Bloody, or envious, as any man,
If he had means to be so. (I. 1. 24-28)

In this account, Bosola rails only because he has been denied, and would behave as badly as any of the great men that he attacks if only he were able. From this angle, Bosola is not a good man forced into villainy by want, but a villain prevented from indulging his corrupt appetites due to lack of means. Bosola himself provides little help in deciding which account to trust. Like Vindice in The Revenger’s Tragedy, he is implicated in the world that he attacks, but unlike Vindice, he is painfully aware of that fact. Bosola acknowledges that Ferdinand’s ‘curs’d gifts’ (I. 1. 264) come at the price of damnation, yet he accepts them anyway, and later deplores ‘the base quality | Of intelligencer’

45 Whigham, pp. 214-23.
whilst also noting that for his actions he is ‘certain to be raised’ (III. 2. 327-28, 330). Self-divided, at once ambitious and aware of the moral bankruptcy of his position, Bosola, like Vindice and Malevole, crystallizes the multiplicity and contradiction involved in the malcontent subject position.

A common critical response to Bosola’s disunity has been to read him as a version of a contemporary social type: the ‘alienated intellectual’, the highly educated, but positionless and frustrated, university graduate, described by Mark H. Curtis, and discussed at more length in the Introduction.\(^{46}\) Although published more than fifty years ago, Curtis’ model continues to influence interpretation of *The Duchess of Malfi*, and indeed, the model is certainly an attractive one for Bosola.\(^{47}\) He does apparently possess a university education – Delio says that he ‘knew him in Padua – a fantastical scholar’ (III. 3. 41) – and in Act One, at least, he is disaffected due to frustrated ambition: ‘I will thrive some way’ (I. 1. 37) he insists. The ‘alienated intellectual’ model allows for easy categorisation of Bosola alongside other malcontents: Bussy D’Ambois and Hamlet are both said to be scholars, as is *The White Devil*’s Flamineo, who like Bosola turns to villainy due to lack of means, acting as a go-between and murderer in the employ of Bracciano. However, the success of this interpretation relies on the construction of a history for Bosola that is not given conclusively in the play. Delio’s comment is the only reference to Bosola’s study (he never mentions it himself), and the use of the word ‘fantastical’ suggests that Bosola’s claim to scholarship is somehow capricious or airy, which undercuts the notion, essential to Curtis’ model, that he is a serious scholar. Delio continues by suggesting that Bosola studied only to ‘gain the name of a speculative man’ (III. 3. 47), that is, only to be thought of as wise by others. This implies that Bosola is in some way disingenuous, that there is more to him than meets the eye. It hints at unknown motives and complexities. From this perspective, to read Bosola as based on a singular, straightforward model (and the reading itself based on a single, inconclusive reference) seems limited.

In fact, Bosola’s background is consistently uncertain. Various possibilities are suggested, but none of them conclusively, or, importantly, by him. As well as Delio’s reference to his university career, there are hints that Bosola might have served as a

\(^{46}\) Curtis, pp. 295-316.

soldier, something ostensibly lent weight by Antonio’s claim to have ‘heard | He’s very
valiant’ (I. 1. 75-76). Yet this claim is based on hearsay only, and Antonio does not
elaborate further. Even the length of time that Bosola spent in the galleys is uncertain –
he says it was two years, but Delio later says seven – as is the reason for his
imprisonment: while Delio states that “twas thought (I. 1. 71, my emphasis) that he was
imprisoned for a murder suborned by the Cardinal, Bosola himself refers obscurely to
‘service’ (I. 1. 34). What is true and what is false about Bosola’s background is
impossible to ascertain from these brief hints, and Bosola himself is stubbornly opaque
on the matter. This works, like Hamlet’s unarticulated references to his inner ‘mystery’,
to simultaneously encourage and thwart interpretation. We are invited to construct a
history for Bosola, and to use that history to resolve his discontinuities, when in fact,
those discontinuities mean that any singular or stable explanation is necessarily
insufficient.

The depiction of Bosola’s melancholy serves to emphasise this obscurity. For
Ferdinand and the Cardinal, also associated with melancholy, it is most definitely a
pathological condition. The Cardinal, for example, hallucinates ‘a thing, arm’d with a
rake’ (V. 5. 6) in the fish-pond in his garden, and Ferdinand’s ‘lycanthropia’, which is
said to stem from an overflow of ‘melancholy humour’ (V. 2. 6, 9), causes him to
imagine himself to be a wolf. Bosola’s case is less certain. Described variously as a
‘poison’ (I. 1. 77), a ‘garb’ (I. 1. 278), and a ‘fashion’ (II. 1. 86), his melancholy is neither
definitely genuine nor feigned, and apart from a single brief reference, Bosola does
not mention it himself. Antonio, however, provides an account of it in the play’s first
scene:

This foul melancholy
Will poison all his goodness, for ——I’ll tell you—
If too immoderate sleep be truly said
To be an inward rust unto the soul,
It then doth follow want of action
Breeds all black malcontents, and their close rearing
Like moths in cloth, do hurt for want of wearing. (I. 1. 76-82)

Antonio here constructs Bosola as the object of logical enquiry; his language is scientific
and explanatory in tone. He draws on the humoral understanding of melancholy as
black bile, which has the potential, in excess, to ‘poison’ the mind, but also emphasises
the importance of circumstance (Bosola’s lack of employment) in ‘breeding’ this
humour. His point about ‘immoderate sleep’ corresponds with contemporary medical
writing on melancholy: Timothie Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholie*, for example, discussed the ill effects of ‘inordinate sleepe’ in ‘the encrease of melancholike humours’.\(^{48}\) Antonio uses his existing knowledge of melancholy to diagnose Bosola, for the benefit of both Delio, to whom Antonio is speaking, and the audience.

In the following scene, Antonio’s perspective on Bosola’s melancholy has changed: ‘I do understand your inside […] Because you would not seem to appear to the world puffed up with your preferment you continue this out-of-fashion melancholy. Leave it, leave it’ (II. 1. 82, 84-86). Bosola’s melancholy is ‘out-of-fashion’ because, at this point in the play, he is employed as the Duchess’s Provisor of the Horse; Antonio, who previously diagnosed Bosola’s melancholy as caused by ‘want of action’, therefore concludes that it must be artificially affected in order to create the appearance of humility. Yet ‘out-of-fashion’ is also an ironic reference by Webster to his own staging of malcontentedness: in the 1590s, writers like Thomas Nashe and Robert Greene had derided malcontentedness as a fashionable affectation, and in 1608 Joseph Hall claimed of the figure that ‘every ear was long ago weary of him’; by 1614 (the likely date of the first performance of *The Duchess of Malfi*\(^{49}\)) malcontents had been common in drama for almost twenty years, and might certainly have been viewed as ‘out-of-fashion’.

According to Antonio’s accounts, melancholy is at once a substance that can poison Bosola internally, transforming his goodness into wickedness, and a fashion, something that one is able to put on or take off, associated with the external rather than the internal. After Bosola agrees to his offer of employment, Ferdinand tells him, ‘Be yourself: | Keep your old garb of melancholy’ (I. 1. 277-78). ‘Garb’, like fashion, seems to designate melancholy as something external to Bosola, like a piece of clothing that he can choose whether or not to wear, or a role that he can choose whether or not to perform. Yet by telling him, ‘be yourself’, Ferdinand, at the same time, presents melancholy as something intrinsic to Bosola’s identity. Bosola’s melancholy is simultaneously personal – if he is being himself he is being melancholy – and performative, a role that he can choose to act in order to, Ferdinand continues, ‘gain access to private lodgings’ (I. 1. 280-81). These accounts are not necessarily antithetical: Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass point out that clothing and identity were closely connected in this period. Clothing functioned to identify the wearer as the servant of a particular household, for example, or a member of a particular guild, and

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\(^{49}\) Hall, *Characters*, p. 79.
given the social formation of the subject, Jones and Stallybrass write, ‘clothes permeate the wearer, fashioning him or her from within’. Ferdinand’s understanding of melancholy as a ‘garb’, therefore, does not necessarily imply that it is disingenuous, but works to bring inside and outside, surface and depth, together.

While it might seem as though Bosola’s melancholy can potentially help us to ‘understand’ his ‘inside’, then, it in fact works to disrupt the idea that there is any ‘inside’ to be understood; Bosola’s melancholy is neither ‘authentic’ nor performed, but combines the internal and external. Indeed, Bosola draws attention to the ways in which the difference between genuine and affected instances of melancholy more generally posed epistemological problems for early modern subjects. The vast amount of writing on the topic in the period produced a variety of opinions and theories, the result of which is that early modern melancholy appears overdetermined. It was seen as a pathological condition caused by an excess of the material substance melancholy, or black bile, but was also, as in the fifteenth century Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino’s account, a sign of intellect, ‘associated with exceptional excellence in a dazzlingly wide range of human activities, gathering a pantheon of exceptional heroes from philosophy and politics and poetry and the arts’. Ficino’s version of genial melancholy, it is important to remember, is gendered: the creatively inspired melancholy genius is an identity open only to men. But for elite men, at least, melancholy is something to aspire to; it is an illness, but also a sign of genius.

It is not surprising, therefore, that early modern texts express the suspicion that some instances of melancholy might be disingenuous imitations. In Shakespeare’s King John, for example, Prince Arthur remembers young gentlemen in France that ‘would be as sad as night | Only for wantonness’ (IV. 1. 15-16): melancholy could be a fashionable whim, as well as a bodily affliction. The authenticity of the malcontent’s melancholy, in fact, was a particular target for writers: Thomas Nashe’s critical portrait in Pierce Penilesse derides the malcontent because he ‘take[s] upp a scornfull melancholy in his gate and countenance’ in order to gain ‘regard’. This is one example of the many

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51 Daniel, p. 19.
52 Juliana Schiesari describes Ficinian melancholy as ‘a privileged state of inspired genius from which women are implicitly or explicitly excluded’, The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss (London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 96. This gendering of melancholia is discussed further in Chapter Four.
attempts by hostile writers to discredit malcontentedness, and therefore neutralise the social threat it was perceived to represent, yet Nashe’s implicit distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ versions of melancholy has persisted in modern criticism. The editor of the Revels edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, for example, claims that after the Duchess’s death ‘Bosola’s *melancholy* is now a true one, brought on by remorse, not the affectation of a malcontent’.54 To attempt to distinguish Bosola’s melancholy as either true or false is pointless, though; as said, it is both a ‘garb’ and something intrinsic to him. As Drew Daniel writes, early modern melancholy ‘oscillates between sincerity and affectation, turning identity into a thing of discursive fashion only to insist that something incommensurably personal lies behind the stereotypical surface’.55 In Chapter Two I argued that the interplay of surface and depth in malcontentedness works paradoxically to bring the two together, and melancholy, as Bosola demonstrates, constitutes a further level on which this happens.

Early modern melancholy, then, is by definition uncertain. Not only is this the case for those onlookers and commenters that struggle to distinguish between sincerity and affectation in instances of melancholy, but also experientially, for the melancholic himself. Despite the multiplicity of opinions on the topic, writers tended to agree that melancholy as a mental state was characterised by ostensibly causeless sorrow and fear. Both the French physician André du Laurens and Robert Burton, for example, cite the common definition of melancholy as ‘a kind of dotage […] having for his ordinarie companions, feare and sadnes, without any apparant occasion’.56 Shakespeare often represents melancholy as similarly obscure, as demonstrated in the opening line of *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, ‘In sooth, I know not why I am so sad’ (I. 1. 1) and, as mentioned, in Hamlet’s ‘I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth’ (II. 2. 295-96). Whatever the various models and theories suggest, melancholy for the individual sufferer is often mysterious.

Attempts like Antonio’s to use melancholy to understand Bosola’s ‘inside’, then, do not get very far: his melancholy only heightens his ambiguity. Where Hamlet makes too much meaning available – he hints at multiple possible reasons for his distemper – Bosola provides too little: he remains frustratingly silent on his background and his

55 Daniel, p. 6.
melancholy, leaving it up to other characters to attempt to elucidate him for us. Yet this has a similar effect: in different ways, both texts gesture towards something unknown about their central malcontents – a hidden inside, or an obscure background, for example – and by doing so invite attempts to work out the truth about them. Both Hamlet and Bosola ‘fret’ or aggravate those that undertake such attempts, however, repeatedly thwarting conclusive understanding. In The Duchess of Malfi, however, not only are attempts to know the entire truth about the Duchess and Antonio’s relationship, about Ferdinand’s motives, or about Bosola, continually frustrated, the play encodes a tonal and structural uncertainty, and therefore enacts a wider confounding of knowledge, which disrupts the notion of truth as open or accessible.

‘I know not how—’: The Rejection of Certainty

After the deaths of the Duchess and her children at the end of Act Four, Bosola rejects his role as intelligencer and hired murderer, and decides to seek out Antonio, in order to rescue him and join him in avenging the Duchess. But instead, he accidentally murders Antonio, in the dark believing him to be Ferdinand. This ‘direful misprision’ (V. 4. 80) leads Bosola to the paradoxical notion, voiced in his dying speech, that the only certainty is uncertainty. Answering the question, ‘How came Antonio by his death?’ (V. 5. 93), he says,

In a mist: I know not how—
Such a mistake as I have often seen
In a play. O, I am gone!
We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,
That, ruined, yields no echo. Fare you well.
It may be pain, but no harm to me to die
In so good a quarrel. O, this gloomy world!
In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!
Let worthy minds ne’er stagger in distrust
To suffer death or shame for what is just—
Mine is another voyage. (V. 5. 94-105)

Bosola’s rejection of knowledge in the first line refers directly to Antonio’s death, but also applies more widely; the play repeatedly frustrates attempts at knowledge on the parts of characters and audience. Human beings are opaque, ‘dead walls’ which provide no answers, and which after death simply vanish: ‘yield no echo’. The world is a ‘pit of
darkness’ in which clarity and understanding are impossible. There is a level on which this might offer some kind of conclusion: a nihilistic certainty of the world as a place in which nothing has meaning, and in which one’s actions therefore do not matter. Yet Webster withholds even this certainty. Bosola oscillates between statements that promise nothingness and those that offer hope. His words directly after the mournful claim that humans are ultimately empty, ‘vaulted graves’ that return no echo, suggest the possible existence of a higher moral order, that to die for a worthy cause makes that death worthwhile, and gives it meaning: ‘It may be pain, but no harm to me to die | In so good a quarrel’. The platitude offered by the penultimate couplet implies the same, that to die for a just cause has inherent nobility. Yet Bosola ends with neither this optimism, nor the nihilism of the rest of the speech. In his final line, ‘Mine is another voyage’, he turns away from both the echoless grave, and from the possibility of moral order and meaning, towards uncertainty; where this voyage leads (heaven or hell), and what his life (and death) means, is unknown.

This uncertainty is encoded into the structure of The Duchess of Malfi. After the death of the Duchess in the fourth act, the play itself takes ‘another voyage’ as Bosola, the marginal malcontent who throughout the play acts as both object and subject of incomplete knowledge, takes over from the Duchess as tragic protagonist in what becomes a revenge tragedy. The Duchess is repeatedly associated with light – she ‘lights the time to come’ (I. 1. 209), Antonio says; ‘mine eyes dazzle’ (IV. 2. 264) is Ferdinand’s reaction to her strangled body – and this elevates her above a world that is consistently both figuratively and literally dark. Darkness is the constant cover for secrets and intrigues: the majority of the second act, for instance, while the Duchess secretly gives birth to her first child, takes place at night, while ‘all the court’s asleep’ (II. 3. 26). The Duchess and Antonio’s relationship is enabled by the cover of darkness: ‘my rule is only in the night’ (III. 2. 8), Antonio says. The final scenes in which Antonio is mistakenly killed and the play reaches its bloody conclusion occur, similarly, ‘after midnight’ (V. 2. 320). For Bosola, the world is ‘a shadow, or deep pit of darkness’ (V. 5. 101); after revealing his murder of the Duchess, the Cardinal asks Julia whether her bosom ‘will be a grave, dark and obscure enough | For such a secret’ (V. 2. 272-73); time and time again the play deals with the obscure, the secret, the unknown, and uses darkness to literalise this obscurity and inconclusiveness.

Shortly before the Duchess’s marriage, she tells Cariola,
I am going into a wilderness
Where I shall find nor path nor friendly clew
To be my guide. (I. 1. 359-61)

This ‘wilderness’ can be taken as a metaphor for the play more widely. In its representation of an often literally obscure world, in which little is certain, *The Duchess of Malfi* is itself a wilderness in which it is frustratingly difficult to anchor meaning. In the dirge that Bosola sings in his guise as a ‘common bellman’, he tells the Duchess that ‘life [is] a general mist of error’ (IV. 2. 173, 188), words also recalled by his comment that he killed Antonio, ‘in a mist: I know not how’ (V. 5. 94). Life is imagined as a haze of uncertainty and mistake. Etymologically, ‘error’ (from the Latin *errāre*) means to wander or rove, a meaning that was still current in seventeenth-century English. Bosola’s use of ‘error’, then, also encodes a spatial metaphor – to stray or wander from the path of certainty of meaning – which connects it with both the wilderness metaphor and with Bosola’s final voyage image.

The Duchess, however functions as a light in the play’s darkness. Despite her own opacity, in her endurance of suffering, and as an object of sympathy, she is unambiguous and steadfast: the play’s structural and moral centre. If the play is a ‘wilderness’, then she is the ‘friendly clew’ (a ball of thread) that, like Theseus in the labyrinth, leads the viewer through the play’s perplexities. After she dies, that ‘clew’ is lost, and the play changes direction. Her death is a startling move that defies generic expectations; the play loses its moral centre and the ‘voyage’ that it takes in the final act tends to the openness and disorder of the wilderness, to the unknown, rather than to the conventional patterns and structures of tragedy.

Bosola’s image of the unknown voyage, which I take as symbolic of the play’s wider structure, finds parallels in Montaigne’s sceptical rejection of conclusive knowledge, discussed at the start of this chapter. For Montaigne, knowledge is not a fixed object that can be achieved, but can be understood, Eric Johnson writes, as ‘the process of inquiry itself’: knowledge is a question or journey, not a statement.\(^{57}\) This is because the human mind as Montaigne understands it is in constant flux and cannot settle conclusively on any one object: ‘what we decided just now we will change very soon; and soon afterwards we come back to where we were: it is all motion and inconstancy’.\(^{58}\) Montaigne’s use of the essay form itself makes this clear. ‘Essay’ means

\(^{57}\) Johnson, p. 70.
\(^{58}\) Montaigne, p. 374 (Book II, Chapter 1).
to test or to attempt; Montaigne’s chosen form of intellectual enquiry is unpredictable, therefore: it might lead to dead ends, yet it might lead ‘to new, unfamiliar regions of thought to explore’.59 This notion of knowledge as process, as uncertain exploration, is emblematised by the frontispiece to Francis Bacon’s *Instauratio Magna*, which depicts a ship sailing through the ‘pillars of Hercules’, the classical gateway from the known world into the unknown.60 Bosola’s voyage is a similar journey beyond the limits of human certainty; he travels towards the unknown waters of death, in Hamlet’s words, ‘the undiscover’d country, from whose bourn | No traveller returns’ (III. 1. 79-80).

Indeed, in both *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Hamlet* death is the ultimate uncertainty. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost is a figure for the unknowable space beyond death. Horatio views it as a mysterious portent – ‘this bodes some strange eruption to our state’ (I. 1. 72) – and Hamlet does not know how to interpret its ‘questionable shape’ (I. 4. 43): ‘Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn’d, | Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell’ (I. 4. 40-41). The words used to refer to the Ghost emphasise its indeterminacy: ‘this thing’ (I. 1. 24); ‘illusion’ (I. 1. 130); ‘guilty thing’ (I. 1. 153). Hamlet describes the effect of the Ghost on those that witness it as,

Making night hideous and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls (I. 4. 54-56)

The Ghost represents that which surpasses the edges of human thought or knowledge, and this unknown is suffused with dread. It hints at the obscure horrors that come after death, but refuses to articulate them: ‘this eternal blazon must not be | To ears of flesh and blood’ (I. 5. 21-22). In his third soliloquy, on whether ‘to be or not to be’, Hamlet again voices the fear of the unknown that follows death. ‘The dread of something after death’, he says, ‘makes us rather bear those ills we have | Than fly to others that we know not of’ (III. 1. 78, 81-82). While there is certainly ‘something’ after death in *Hamlet*, it is a ‘something’ about which nothing can be known: it ‘puzzles the will’ (III. 1. 80). Benjamin Bertram uses sceptical ideas to read this soliloquy, arguing that ‘Hamlet borrows a move from classical scepticism, “equipollence”, weighing two opposing

60 The frontispiece is reproduced and discussed in Brian Vickers, ‘Francis Bacon and the Progress of Knowledge’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53. 3 (1992), 495-518 (p. 495).
possibilities and suspending judgment’. Indeed, Hamlet comes to no decision regarding his opening question, and instead concludes that ‘conscience does make cowards of all’ (III. 1. 83). Thought itself, which for Hamlet is the human condition of not knowing, is a source of fear that inhibits action.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, death is equally uncertain. Bosola’s claim in his final speech that nothingness is humankind’s final destination is met by the graveyard scene in which Antonio hears what seems to be the voice of the Duchess in the form of an echo, and sees what is possibly her image, ‘a face folded in sorrow’, framed by ‘a clear light’ (V. 3. 45, 44). The Duchess’s liminal presence figures death as ambiguous, and counterpoises Bosola’s nihilistic vision. That she is present at all is not certain, however, and Antonio could simply be hearing the echo of his own voice. Yet the final lines of the play seem to offer a possible solution to the uncertainty of death. The *sententia* (an aphoristic moral saying or commonplace) offered by Delio, ‘*Integrity of life is fame’s best friend, | Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end*’ (V. 5. 120-21), suggests that life after death is possible through the reputation for virtue and honesty. *Sententiae* like this occur frequently in *The Duchess of Malfi* at the end of a scene or section, and seem to comment or pass judgment on the action that has just played out. The *sententiae* promise to unlock the meaning of the dramatic situation to which they are appended, an effect amplified by the order and harmony offered by their rhyming couplet form. Yet more often than not, the *sententiae* have no real relevance to the scene on which they comment, or work to further confuse meaning. In III. 1, for example, Ferdinand uses a *sententia* to express a liking for blunt honesty, when Bosola refuses to flatter him: ‘*That friend a great man’s ruin strongly checks | Who rails into his belief all his defects*’ (III. 1. 92-93). Yet elsewhere Ferdinand refuses to hear criticism, and openly invites flattery, stating, for example, that his courtiers should be his ‘*touch-wood, take fire when I give fire; that is, laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty*’ (I. 1. 122-25). Webster puts the *sententia* into the mouth of somebody who had previously professed the opposite, and who the audience is encouraged to mistrust: he uses it not to clarify, but to confuse. From this perspective, the *sententia* that closes the play perhaps does not offer the answer it seems to. It is

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62 In the first print edition of the play, the *sententiae* are typographically highlighted by a change in font from roman to italics. On the practice of marking *sententiae* in early printed literary texts as an assertion of scholarly value, see G. K. Hunter, ‘*The Marking of Sententiae in Elizabethan Plays, Poems, and Romances*’, *The Library*, 5. 6 (1951), 177-88, and Zachary Lesser and Peter Stallybrass, ‘*The First Literary Hamlet and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 59. 4 (2008), 371-420.
spoken by Delio, who with his secrets and hidden motives is hardly himself a voice of ‘integrity’, and there is no real reason to place any more credence on his words than on Bosola’s nihilism. The play ends with ambiguity; Webster refuses to provide any final or conclusive answer to the questions that he poses.

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In his essay *On the Inconstancy of our Actions*, Montaigne repeats the musical metaphor that is so commonly associated with malcontentedness. He writes that, were it possible for man to establish ‘a settled government […] over his own brain’, he would be characterised by a calmness and uniformity imagined figuratively as ‘a harmony of sounds in concord such as no one can deny’. In reality, however, ‘anyone who studies himself attentively finds in himself and in his very judgment this whirring about and this discordancy’. The sceptical position must reject the possibility of ‘harmony’ as an attractive fantasy, and accept the ‘discordancy’ of human knowledge. Both *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi* foreground uncertainty and inconclusiveness, and in doing so foreground malcontented ‘discord’. In the first chapter of this thesis I proposed that by claiming to tell the truth about vice John Marston’s malcontented satires construct the world as completely disordered. The truth that the satires reveal is slippery and chaotic: a world characterised by discord rather than harmony or order. *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are similar: by showing that certainty is impossible these texts reject order; they bring obscurity to light, and the ‘truth’ that they tell is that the truth cannot be accessed in any clear or conclusive way, if at all.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, this malcontented discord is actualised by the song of the madmen with whom Ferdinand tortures the Duchess. A stage direction tells us that the song is sung ‘to a dismal kind of music’ (IV. 2. 61), and the lyrics emphasise its tunelessness: ‘O, let us howl some heavy note | Some deadly dogged howl’ (IV. 2. 61-62). A contemporary setting for this song survives in three manuscripts, one of which attributes it to the Jacobean composer Robert Johnson, who wrote prolifically for the theatre. Leah S. Marcus describes the way in which the setting’s ‘daring use of chromatics […] the oscillation between B flat and B natural on ‘howle’ in measures 3-4 […] invite the singer to repeatedly imitate the sound of a wolf’s howl’. The madmen’s song makes literal the

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63 Montaigne, p. 375 (Book II, Chapter 1).
64 Ibid., p. 377.
discordance so commonly associated with malcontentedness, and which both Webster’s and Shakespeare’s plays more widely, in their disruptions of certainty, clarity, and order, might be said to represent.
Chapter Four
Malcontentedness and Gender

In early modern writing, malcontentedness is usually codified as male. For Thomas Nashe, the malcontent is ‘a certaine kind of brokerly Gentleman’, and John Earle’s ‘Discontented Man’ locates the male malcontent within a network of patriarchal relations: his discontent is occasioned ‘commonly of one of these three, a hard father, a peevish wench, or his ambition thwarted’. Even when used in a less specific, adjectival sense, to indicate general discontent or unhappiness, the majority of textual instances of ‘malcontent’ refer to men rather than to women, something which might be connected to the political emphasis of early uses of the term. As is discussed in more detail in the Introduction, the use of ‘malcontent’ in England initially arose out of civil wars and rebellions on the continent during the final thirty years of the sixteenth century: it comes from the discontented noblemen and mutinous soldiers in France and the Low Countries that styled themselves the ‘Malcontents’, and ‘malcontent’ as it moves into more general usage in English appears most commonly in political contexts. The 1584 defamatory tract Leicester’s Commonwealth, for example, describes Leicester as ‘a full malcontent’ due to ‘his disgrace and checks received in Court’. Given that the role of women in early modern political and public life was generally more limited than that of men, it is not surprising that in the cultural imagination the malcontent is usually figured as male: a woman was much less likely to be able to occupy the position of the ambitious courtier, the discontented soldier, or the unemployed and alienated university graduate, for example.

In George Peele’s play The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England, however, the female character Constance does express an explicitly political malcontentedness. After the betrothal of the French Dauphin and the English Blanche, Constance, complaining to her son Arthur, says, ‘We must obscure this moan with melody | Lest worser wrack ensue our malcontent’. Constance is malcontented for political reasons – the marriage promises union between France and England and therefore stands in the way of her

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1 Nashe, fol. B2v; Earle, pp. 196-197.
2 Leicester's Commonwealth, pp. 55, 54.
ambitions regarding her son — and the reference to ‘melody’ as a disguise for malcontentedness repeats, implicitly, the connection between the malcontent discourse and discord, discussed earlier in the thesis. Later in the play, after Arthur’s capture and imprisonment, Constance is again described as ‘malcontent’ (I. 10. 17), and she does, in fact, share a number of traits with male malcontents. As a widow, Constance has a relatively autonomous position, and speaks to King Phillip as an authorised courtier. She is learned, having brought up her son, and politically active: ambitious on behalf of her son, and also, perhaps, for herself. Queen Eleanor accuses her of political ruthlessness, suggesting that she would sacrifice her son in her pursuit of power:

Her pride we know, and know her for a dame
That will not stick to bring him to his end,
So she may bring herself to rule a realm. (I. 1. 56-58)

Constance is frustrated in that ambition, though, and uses violent malcontent language that implores ‘revenge’ (I. 4. 206) on the society she perceives as having betrayed her: ‘Send foul contagion to infect this clime — | This cursèd country where the traitors breathe’ (I. 4. 207-08).

Constance emerges from The Troublesome Reign as a powerful expression of female malcontentedness, and is a counter to the idea that malcontentedness is limited to men. There are, indeed, a number of malcontented women that appear on the early modern stage: in the second half of this chapter I analyse in detail the malcontentedness of Vittoria, from Webster’s The White Devil, and Paulina, from Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, who, like Constance, is a widow who speaks as an authorised courtier. Characters including Katherina from The Taming of the Shrew, Queen Margaret, who speaks using malcontent language in Shakespeare’s Henry VI plays, Mother Sawyer from The Witch of Edmonton, or the transgressive Tamyra from Bussy D’Ambois, might all also be understood from the perspective of the malcontent, and therefore invite further study, although it is beyond the scope of this thesis do consider them in any detail.

Despite the characters listed above, the majority of modern criticism takes the male gendering of the malcontent as read; like early modern commentators, scholars use male pronouns when referring generally to the malcontent as a figure, and little consider
the implications of this gendering.\textsuperscript{4} This is unsurprising given the approach generally taken by earlier critics: if the malcontent is a stock type, then it is simply male, and the fact of its gender is not an issue. Yet if malcontentedness is approached in a broader sense, as a discourse which involves a particular mode of speech or linguistic style, which can function as the means by which the experience of constraint or dispossession is negotiated, which makes possible intervention in unjust or corrupt social conditions, and which has deconstructive effects in early modern culture, then the gendering of that discourse need not be ignored. The discourse approach makes it possible, and indeed necessary, to explore who has access to that discourse, who it excludes, and what is at stake in that exclusion.

The first use of ‘malcontent’ in native English drama, John Lyly’s 1584 \textit{Sappho and Phao}, points explicitly to the centrality of gender in malcontentedness. The malcontented scholar Pandion shares a brief exchange with the courtier Trachinus and the court lady Ismena:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Ismena.} Faith, sir, no, you are best purge your own melancholy. Belike you are a male content.
\textit{Pandion.} It is true, and are not you a female content.
\textit{Trachinus.} Soft, I am not content that a male and female content should go together. (III. 1. 12-16)
\end{quote}

Lyly plays on the common early modern spelling of malcontent as ‘malecontent’, something which Mark Thornton Burnett notes ‘could convey that “males” and “discontent” were familiar bedfellows’.\textsuperscript{5} From an orthographical perspective, malcontent has ‘male’ embedded within it: masculinity is central to malcontentedness. Pandion’s pun, however, rests on a linguistic slippage from ‘male content’ to ‘female content’, which hints that from the earliest development of the literary category, the malcontent’s maleness is closer to femaleness than it might appear.\textsuperscript{6} Trachinus’ odd and slightly uneasy response implies that this proximity might be the occasion for anxiety, and Burnett also touches upon this possibility, suggesting that the malcontent signals ‘masculinities in states of dangerous extremity’.\textsuperscript{7} Yet by referring to Ismena as a ‘female content’, Pandion’s pun also opens up a space in which the female expression of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[4]{Although this is particularly true of earlier twentieth-century criticism on the malcontent, neither of the two more recent book length studies of malcontentedness, by James R. Keller and Julia Lacey Brooke, consider gender.}
\footnotetext[5]{Burnett, p. 343.}
\footnotetext[6]{The Revels edition of Lyly’s play adds a hyphen (which I have removed) not present in the 1584 first quarto to ‘male content’ but not to ‘female content’, thereby reducing the effect of the linguistic slippage.}
\footnotetext[7]{Burnett, p. 343.}
\end{footnotes}
discontent becomes a possibility, and Trachinus’ anxious reply might therefore also suggest the potential for female discourses of discontent to unsettle male contentedness or complacency. The pun points to a need to consider whether women are able to inhabit malcontentedness as a subject position, whether they are able utilise the discourse as a means of articulating grievance, or whether, given proscriptions on female speech in the period, they are excluded.

This chapter considers a range of early modern texts and dramatic characters, both those discussed in previous chapters and others, in order to explore the complex gender relations involved in malcontentedness, as signposted by Lyly’s text. I propose that gender is central to the ways in which malcontentedness is constructed and demarcated by writers. Malcontentedness, I argue, reveals much about gender itself as unstable and performative. The first half of the chapter focusses on the often aggressively misogynistic language deployed in malcontented texts. I argue that a structural similarity between the dependent and constrained social positions of the male malcontent and the court lady leads to an insistence on gender boundaries in malcontented speech, and to a strategy of differentiation, in which the corruption against which malcontentedness defines itself is gendered as feminine. The anxiety that this involves, however, demonstrates that the malcontent’s masculinity is in fact fragile and under threat: malcontented misogyny actually points to gender as dangerously fluid.

In the second half of the chapter I use the equivalence in position of ‘woman’ and ‘malcontent’ to raise questions about the potential for female malcontentedness. It is uncommon for female characters in drama to be designated malcontents explicitly (Constance is something of an anomaly in this); when active, female discontent is more commonly labelled as cursing, scolding, or shrewishness, and when passive, it appears as complaint. Yet there are nevertheless cases in which female voices draw on or ventriloquise elements of the malcontent discourse, often in order to criticise patriarchy itself. I demonstrate that reading instances of female boldness or discontent (albeit generally in male-authored texts) alongside the malcontent discourse can work to

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8 Throughout this chapter I use the term ‘feminine’ to refer those qualities stereotypically constituted as female within early modern patriarchal culture.

9 Malcontentedness, as I discussed in the Introduction, is an active form of discontent: malcontented discourse involves an outright refusal to be contented; it involves anger, invective, and satirical railing. While the relation between malcontentedness and the sixteenth century tradition of female-voiced complaint poetry is something that certainly merits further attention, complaint poetry typically favours stylised lament above invective, and therefore is not considered in this chapter. On the characteristics of complaint poetry, see the Introduction to Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and Female Complaint, A Critical Anthology, ed. by John Kerrigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 1-13.
provide new perspectives on both the texts in which they occur and on theatrical representations of both women and malcontentedness more widely.

The three previous chapters identified three different, but closely related, ways in which malcontentedness in early modern texts functions as deconstructive. Chapter One demonstrated the disruptive effects of malcontented truth-telling in John Marston’s verse satires: that truth-telling exposes a chaotic world in which boundaries are transgressed and categories blurred. Chapter Two argued that malcontentedness in The Malcontent and The Revenger’s Tragedy enacts a reconceptualization of truth as a category by deconstructing the division between truth and performance. Chapter Three showed that in Hamlet and The Duchess of Malfi malcontentedness functions to frustrate access to knowledge. While malcontentedness has different effects in each of these texts, in all of them it works to question, disrupt, and disorder, foregrounding the chaotic, the unstable, and the uncertain. This final chapter represents something of a departure, firstly in that it ranges across multiple texts rather than focussing closely on just one or two, and secondly in that I concentrate less on the ways in which malcontentedness questions metaphysical concepts like truth or knowledge, than on the extent to which it is a gendered discourse. As in previous chapters, however, malcontentedness engages with gender in a way which foregrounds instability, uncertainty, and fluidity above order or fixity. Although malcontentedness is a masculinist mode most commonly expressed by men, the masculine anxiety of the male malcontented subject, and the female uses of malcontented speech to critique patriarchal injustice, demonstrates that malcontentedness nevertheless destabilises ideas about gender in the same way that it destabilises the other categories and dichotomies explored in this thesis.

‘You are still abusing women!’: Malcontented Misogyny

In The Duchess of Malfi, Bosola is met with the charge, ‘You are still abusing women!’ (II. 2. 11-12). This is not only true of Bosola: malcontentedness often includes both satirical speech in which female behaviour is singled out for critique, and aggressive linguistic assaults directed at specific women. Bosola’s tirades against female deceptiveness, Vindice’s obsession with policing the borders of the female body, and Hamlet’s aggressive encounters with Gertrude and Ophelia, are all examples of this tendency. While misogyny is, of course, commonplace in literature from this period, that which is
involved in the malcontent discourse is frequently especially fervent, and malcontented characters are often the predominant spokesmen of misogynistic discourse in the texts in which they appear. Why, precisely, this is the case is a complex question, particularly given that the male malcontent never explains or acknowledges his fraught relationships with women, and writers from the period tend not to comment on this aspect of the category. However, I propose that the male malcontent’s attacks on the feminine are tied up with his marginal societal position; they constitute a reaction against a perceived feminisation engendered by disempowerment.

Susan Dwyer Amussen, writing on the intersections between gender and class in early modern England, suggests that ‘for the many men who were subordinate in the social system because of either age or status or both, it was impossible to be “real” men’.10 Frances E. Dolan, similarly, claims that ‘manhood depended not on having a penis, but on owning property’.11 The malcontent position is always socially marginal, and is often marked by lack: of preferment, position, money, land, or means. It involves a social position that is in some way constrained: Chapman’s Bussy D’Ambois is ‘discontent with his neglected worth’, and complains that ‘reward goes backward’ (Bussy D’Ambois, I. 1. 47, 2). The malcontent position, therefore, signals the fragile and constructed nature of early modern masculinity; it exposes masculinity as inevitably anxious, reliant on the mutable conditions that Amussen and Dolan describe. Resentment at an inferior social station leads a number of malcontent characters to enter into the service of somebody higher up the social scale than themselves, often in order to achieve the material reward or preferment that they crave. Because of this, the malcontent position often involves disempowerment and dependency, or, in the case of usurped rulers like Malevole and, potentially, Hamlet, a sense of enforced passivity. The perceived inferiority that this produces, I propose, gives rise to an unspoken anxiety that the social position involved in malcontentedness is feminised in some way. In ‘Patriarchal Territories’, Peter Stallybrass briefly notes the ‘structural dependency’ shared by the malcontent and the court lady, in that the malcontent too ‘is bought by the highest bidder; like them, his only role is service’, and more recently Swati Ganguly connects ‘the gendered dimension of the malcontent’s lack of power’ with Iago’s

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appropriation of a feminine gossip role.\textsuperscript{12} I wish to develop the theory that the malcontent is a feminised position further than these writers, though, and to demonstrate the ways in which it accounts for the malcontent’s misogyny: the malcontent, like many early modern women, is reliant on men of higher social status for position and maintenance, and the gender anxiety produced by this similarity is borne out in aggressive denigrations of femininity, which function as attempts to reassert masculinity against this perceived feminisation.

Webster’s malcontents, Bosola and Flamineo, demonstrate this pattern particularly well. Both are obliged to enter into the service of corrupt dukes. Having been slighted by the Cardinal, Bosola is employed by Ferdinand in exchange for money and position, and in \textit{The White Devil}, Flamineo’s service of Bracciano, as pander and assassin, is a similar attempt to thrive in the face of social constraint. When challenged by his mother about the moral dubiousness of his employment, Flamineo gives bitter voice to his inferior position in language that refers pointedly to the visual signifier of his masculinity, his beard:

\begin{quote}
I would fain know where lies the mass of wealth
Which you have hoarded up for my maintenance,
That I may bear my beard out of the level
Of my lord’s stirrup.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Continuing, he relates a personal history of destitution: noble by birth, his father sold his lands before dying and leaving his family impoverished. Due to ‘want of means’ (I. 2. 321), Flamineo informs his audience, he suffered the humiliation of having to mend his tutor’s stockings in order to pay for his university education. This history is used as justification for his actions in Bracciano’s service:

\begin{quote}
And shall I,
Having a path so open and so free
To my preferment, still retain your milk
In my pale forehead? No, this face of mine
I’ll arm and fortify with lusty wine
‘Gainst shame and blushing. (I. 2. 327-32)
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{13} John Webster, \textit{The White Devil}, ed. by John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1960), I. 2. 311-14. Further references are to this edition, and are given after quotations in the text.
As Flamineo constructs it, the history of his disempowerment is also a narrative of emasculation. Not taking steps to escape his constraint is for Flamineo equivalent to retaining within him the childish femininity and dependency for which his mother’s milk is a metonym. He rejects this possibility in favour of the masculine vigour implied by the ‘lusty wine’ with which he will ‘arm and fortify himself’, warfare imagery that functions, like his earlier reference to his beard, to insist on masculinity, and to construct the feminine ‘shame and blushing’ as a threatening assault on manly fortitude. He asserts masculine independence in the face of the feminised dependence and inferiority that his position implies, yet the vehemence of that assertion signals the anxiety that this potential feminisation engenders, and points to the fragility of his carefully constructed masculinity.

This anxiety is not unfounded. Flamineo’s employment by Bracciano does indeed align him structurally with a specific court lady: his sister, Vittoria. Both Flamineo and Vittoria are in effect paid for services rendered to Bracciano. Vittoria receives ‘his jewel for her jewel’ (I. 2. 225), and the latter ‘jewel’ is a reference to both her chastity and the female genitalia. Vittoria enters into a sexual relationship with Bracciano at least in part due to a desire for advancement, and indeed, in the second half of this chapter I argue that she can herself be read as a female expression of malcontentedness. What I wish to point out here, though, is that brother and sister occupy equivalent positions in relation to the ‘great men’ that govern the play’s society. The misogyny that peppers Flamineo’s speech stems from his perception of that similarity, yet also works to reveal it. He refers to Vittoria, and by extension all women, as ‘like curst dogs’ (I. 2. 199), but later uses the same metaphor for himself: ‘Am I your dog?’ (IV. 2. 50), he bitterly asks Bracciano. The shared metaphor makes clear the similarity of his perception of himself to that of the women he maligns: disempowered, servile, and base. Yet while the malcontented dog has the ability to bark at his superiors – Marston’s Malevole is told ‘Come down, thou ragged cur, and snarl here’ (The

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15 Dog imagery is common in malcontented discourse, and while it often draws on the etymological connection between dogs and Cynics (as in Marston’s descriptions of the satirist as dog-like, for example), here it is used to represent the hyper-abjection of the male speaker, as is also typical in lyric poetry. See, for example, Maura Grace Harrington’s discussion of Astrophil’s self-comparison with Stella’s dog in Sonnet 59 of Sidney’s sequence. ‘Astrophil the Super Dog: Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*, Sonnet 59’, *The Explicator*, 65. 3 (2007), 130-33.
Just as Flamineo is Bracciano’s ‘dog’, Bosola is Ferdinand’s ‘creature’ (The Duchess of Malfi, I. 1. 287). His constrained and dependent position in Ferdinand’s service leads to similarly heated denunciations of femininity and assertions of manhood. Bosola figures relationships between men and women in terms of payment and exchange, restating misogynist tropes about female sexuality. ‘If we have the same golden showers that rained in the time of Jupiter the Thunderer, you have the same Danaës still, to hold up their laps to receive them’ (II. 2. 18-21), he avows: ‘we’ (men) must pay ‘you’ (women) for sexual favours which you are all too willing to extend. His treatment of the Danaë myth not only interprets a narrative of female imprisonment and rape as prostitution, but makes it archetypal of sexual relations between men and women. Yet this preoccupation with monetary exchange and service reveals much about Bosola’s self-perception. He himself, in the paid service of Ferdinand, occupies an equivalent structural position to the ‘whores’ that he denigrates. His degradation of women can therefore be interpreted as a defensive displacement of his self-perception onto those more abject and disempowered than he is, in an attempt to reassert gender dominance.

Bosola insists on his masculinity above and against this feminised position. Surprised by his grief after the Duchess’s death, he maintains, in strikingly similar language to that used by Flamineo, that,

This is manly sorrow;
These tears, I am certain, never grew
In my mother’s milk. (IV. 2. 361-63)

Male tears were in the early modern period often seen as effeminate. In Hamlet, for example, Laertes, shedding tears for his dead sister, says, ‘When these are gone, | The woman will be out’ (IV. 7. 187-88). Bosola, in an attempted reversal of this notion, insists that his tears are in fact ‘manly’ and endeavours to distinguish them from the childish dependence and femininity of ‘mother’s milk’. This rejection of the feminine is juxtaposed with Bosola’s veneration of the Duchess’s dead body; he praises her ‘sacred innocence’ (The Duchess of Malfi, IV. 2. 355). In fact, the Duchess’s body is a further

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means by which Bosola attempts to bolster his masculinity. It functions to incite action and to defend against the dangerous passivity that grief might inspire:

Here is a sight
As direful to my soul as is the sword
Unto a wretch hath slain his father. (IV. 2. 366-68)

Like the skull of Vindice’s dead love Gloriana, in The Revenger’s Tragedy, the idealised female body is the spur for the malcontent’s engagement in the ostensibly masculine, active, pursuit of revenge. Bosola attempts to replace the fluid femininity represented by tears and breast milk with a less perilous male-constructed version which bolsters rather than threatens masculinity. However, Alison Findlay draws attention to the ways in which in this period revenge was seen as having potentially emasculating effects. It was associated with ‘maternal origins’, risked placing passion over reason, and therefore threatened the male revenger’s sense of self: ‘To set out on such a course was an implicit acknowledgement of one’s alienation from patriarchal institutions and structures of power. […] The revenger constituted himself as “other”’.¹⁷ Thus, even when Bosola rejects female passivity in favour of masculine activity, he at the same time points to the fragility of that masculinity. Indeed, revenge is only one of the many ways in which malcontented characters are alienated from ‘patriarchal institutions and structures of power’; malcontentedness involves an inherent otherness, and is therefore, as Flamineo and Bosola demonstrate, an inevitably feminised position.

The Gendering of Corruption

Webster’s malcontents attempt to reassert masculinity in response to a perceived femininity, through the misogynistic denigration of women. This misogyny does more than degrade individual women, however. It functions to make the stereotypically ‘feminine’ synonymous with the wider corruption that the malcontent identifies as characteristic of the age, and against which he defines himself (for example as a blunt truth-teller in a world of hypocritical flatterers). In what follows, I aim to show that by defining itself against a corruption frequently figured in terms of dissembling as opposed to truthfulness, malcontentedness is defined in opposition to certain patriarchal stereotypes about femininity as deceptive and easily corruptible.

For Hamlet, the name of ‘frailty’ is ‘woman’ (*Hamlet*, I. 2. 146); women, I shall demonstrate, come to represent all that he perceives to be rotten in Denmark. Like Bosola and Flamineo, Hamlet insists on masculinity, but where he differs is in the location of that masculinity: it is not his own that he repeatedly asserts, but that of his father. In a reworking of the masculine blazon tradition that entirely excludes the woman, Hamlet creates a portrait of the old king as a paradigm of masculine strength and virtue: ‘Hyperion’s curls, the front of Jove himself, | An eye like Mars to threaten and command’ (III. 4. 56-57). In an earlier scene he responds to Horatio’s ‘a was a goodly king’ with ‘a was a man, take him for all in all’ (I. 2. 186, 187). As Jennifer Low also notes, ‘king’ is replaced with ‘man’; his father’s status as masculine ideal for Hamlet surpasses his position as monarch.18 This ideal manhood vanished from the world with his father’s death, however – ‘I shall not look upon his like again’ (I. 2. 188), Hamlet continues – and Claudius, by comparison, is ‘a king of shreds and patches’ (III. 4. 103): an inferior version of the ideal masculine sovereign. With his father’s death the world for Hamlet has lapsed into a lesser, specifically less ‘manly’, condition.

Yet Hamlet’s aggressive encounters with women demonstrate that it is they, more than Claudius, who are blamed for society’s faults. While the idealised recent past is represented by the virtuous manhood of the dead king, the corrupt present is made concomitant with a degraded femininity. In the closet scene Hamlet tells Gertrude,

Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
While rank corruption, mining all within
Infects unseen. (III. 4. 147-51)

Taken out of their immediate context, Hamlet’s words here might be used more generally to express the diseased worldview that is common to malcontentedness: society (Denmark under Claudius’ rule) is an ‘ulcerous place’ in which unseen corruption is ‘film[ed]’ or concealed by ‘flattering’ appearances. What is important about this image, however, is that it applies tropes common in malcontented speech (the opposition to flattery, imagery of hidden corruption, and implicit desire for truth) to Gertrude specifically. The female body is the site of disease and decay; Gertrude’s ‘trespass’ (her insufficient grief and too hasty marriage) is made the locus of the hidden corruption against which malcontents so often set themselves.

Bosola’s tirade against an old court lady in *The Duchess of Malfi* has a similar effect. In this episode, which has little bearing on the play’s plot, he derides the female use of cosmetics as ‘your scurvy face-physic’, a ‘shop of witchcraft’ (II. 1. 23, 35). Painting for Bosola is abject, bewitching, and deceptive. The reference to witchcraft suggests that a current of fear runs beneath his outburst, perhaps a hint at the dangerous potential for attractive female appearances to lead desire to supersede masculine reason. Bosola imagines the Old Lady’s face before the application of her cosmetics as diseased and decaying, however: he describes that application as the ‘careening of an old morphewed lady, to make her disembogue again’ (II. 1. 31-32).

Female corporeality is imagined by Bosola in grotesque terms, yet the attempt to mask it is deceptive. As Susan Zimmerman comments, for Bosola women are ‘committed to an elaborate hypocrisy to mask the symptoms of organic decay’: he sees women as either revolting, or false.¹⁹

This denigration of an individual woman (who for Bosola functions metonymically for all women), occasions a more general ‘meditation’ (II. 1. 44) on human bodies:

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What thing is in this outward form of man,
To be beloved? We account it ominous
If nature do produce a colt, or lamb,
A fawn, or goat, in any limb resembling
A man, and fly from ’t as a prodigy.
Man stands amazed to see his deformity
In any creature but himself.
But in our own flesh [...]  
Though we are eaten up of lice and worms,
And though continually we bear about us
A rotten and dead body, we delight
To hide it in rich tissue. (II. 1. 45-58)
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Bosola moves from a specific prose tirade against female bodies as grotesque and deceiving, to a more general verse disquisition on the human body as inevitably deformed, always already in a state of disease and decay, by virtue of its materiality. He reasons that the human shape when it appears in any other creature is treated as monstrous, and actual human bodies are similarly revolting; the only difference is that human bodies are hidden in ‘rich tissue’ (clothing), in the same way that the grotesque face of the Old Lady is concealed by cosmetics. It is the corrupt artificiality of ‘Woman’,

then, that triggers Bosola’s meditation on ‘Man’, and this implies that women are representative of that wider corruption; it works to gender Bosola’s malcontented vision of all-encompassing corruption as female, at the same time as it restates the denigration of the feminine that allows Bosola to assert his own masculinity in the face of his perceived inferiority. That Bosola’s disgust with bodily materiality in general is shown to stem from disgust with female bodies in particular also recalls Janet Adelman’s psychoanalytic discussion of male anxiety about the body’s origins in the contaminated female body of the mother; the malcontent’s misogyny from this perspective is tied up with a fantasy of freedom from threatening maternal origins.20

In both *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, the apparently truthful malcontent is set against a deceptive and corrupt femininity. Both malcontents take issue with the deceptiveness of the female bodily surface – Gertrude’s ‘trespass’ is ‘film[ed]’ over, and the Old Lady’s cosmetics deceptively hide the grotesque reality of her body – a concern which is repeated in other malcontented texts. The speaker of Marston’s ‘A Cynicke Satyre’, for example, describes a woman ‘vizarded’ by cosmetics: ‘So steep’d in Lemons-juycce, so surphuled | I cannot see her face’ (*Scourge*, VII. 166-68). The malcontent’s conflation of femininity with corruption is emblematized by the image of the woman’s face as a death’s-head concealed by an artificial cosmetic surface. As discussed, this is how Bosola imagines the Old Lady, and the image is repeated in Hamlet’s direction to Yorick’s skull, ‘Now get you to my lady’s chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come’ (*Hamlet*, V. 1. 186-88). In *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, the image is actualised when Vindice attires and paints Gloriana’s skull. He projects a vision of all-encompassing decay onto the female body, and at the same time uses this to attack female deceptiveness: ‘Does every proud and self-affecting dame | Camphor her face for this? […] See, ladies, with false forms | You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms’ (III. 5. 84-85, 97-98).

Previous chapters have discussed the malcontent’s self-fashioning as a truth-teller, and the way in which malcontented satire draws on a dichotomy between surface and depth; it is set against deceptive speech forms like flattery, and claims, to quote Marston, to ‘unmaske the worlds detested sinnes’ (*Certaine Satyres*, II. 159). The moments discussed above, in which female deceptiveness is singled out in malcontented satire, and made to stand in for wider corruption, demonstrate the extent to which this

dichotomy is gendered. The difference between surface and depth, between dissembling and honesty, is also that between feminine and masculine: the deceitful surface is feminine, and its opposite, that which is true and non-deceitful, masculine. By defining itself against a wider corruption that is imagined in terms of the deceptive surface, then, malcontentedness also attempts to define itself against the feminine.

This is not something singular to malcontentedness; indeed, the malcontent participates in a centuries-long construction of women as stereotypically deceitful. The authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, for example, allude to biblical and classical texts in their description of female deceptiveness:

And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives. For Cato says: When a woman weeps she weaves snares. And again: When a woman weeps, she labours to deceive a man.\(^21\)

Joseph Swetnam’s controversial yet hugely popular pamphlet, *The Araignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward and unconstant women*, describes women using images of beautiful exteriors and corrupt or worthless interiors of the kind often found in malcontented discourse: ‘painted pottes commonly holde deadly poison: and in the clearest water the ugliest Tode, and the fairest woman hath some filthines in hir’.\(^22\) We might compare Malevole’s comparison of the hypocritical courtier Bilioso in *The Malcontent* to ‘a pigeon-house […] smooth, round, and white without, and full of holes and stink within’ (I. 4. 85-87). There are biblical precedents for this image – specifically the description of the hypocritical Pharisees as ‘whited tombs […] within full of dead men’s bones’ in Matthew 23. 27 – yet Malevole also attacks a man in the terms that early modern misogynistic discourse applies to women; the preoccupation with female surfaces in malcontented texts in this way comes to colour all malcontented attacks on deception.

The ‘pigeon-house’ image conflates corruption, hypocrisy, and femininity, and demonstrates the interrelation of religious and misogynist discourses in malcontentedness. There are further parallels in post-Reformation attacks on Catholicism. Thomas Tuke’s ‘Treatise against Painting’, for example, connects female painting and idolatry:


[T]hough she be the creature of God, as she is a woman, yet is she her own creatress, as a picture [...] [She] is both a substantive and an adjective, and yet not of the neuter gender: but a feminine as well consorting with a masculine.\textsuperscript{23}

The painted woman is an idolater, guilty of self-worship, and as both subject and object, she confuses categories of grammar and gender. In an example of what was a common alignment in the post-Reformation period, the attractive yet deceptive woman is associated with the Catholic threat. The use of the elaborately ornamented Duessa to represent the Catholic Church in Spenser’s \textit{The Faerie Queene} has a similar effect: when stripped of her fine clothing, she is ‘A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill favoured, old, | Whose secret filth good manner biddeth not be told’.\textsuperscript{24}

In the Introduction and first chapter I outlined the ways in which malcontentedness echoes the mistrust of the surface in early Protestantism. In fact, malcontentedness shares with Protestantism the mistrust of a specifically female surface. Dolan has noted that both Catholics and women were restricted groups whose difference was culturally insisted upon, yet which were endowed with a threatening familiarity, and therefore ‘dominated the culture’s imagination’.\textsuperscript{25} While the discourse of deceptive femininity was of course established prior to the Reformation, in post-Reformation England the alignment between the Catholic and the feminine is used as a means to control and debase both Catholics and women: in misogynist tracts like those cited, women are associated with Catholicism to their detriment, and in anti-Catholic polemic, Catholicism is often linked with femininity to its detriment. The anti-Catholic annotations to Revelation 17 in the Geneva Bible, for example, make an allegorical alignment between the Roman Church and the Whore of Babylon. The note to the fourth verse reads, ‘This woman is the Antichrist, that is, the Pope […] whose beautie only standeth in outwarde Pompe and impudencie and craft like a strumpet’.\textsuperscript{26} Earlier, the annotators explain that ‘Antichrist is compared to an harlot because he seduceth the worlde with vaine wordes, doctrines of lies, and outwarde appearance’.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} Spenser, I. 8. 46.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{The Geneva Bible}, fol. GGg4v. This association is repeated in multiple early modern texts, for example an anonymous pamphlet from 1590 describes Pope Sixtus V as ‘the Queen of new Babilon’, and, ‘one of the most shamelesse strumpets of all her whoorish predecessors’, \textit{A True and perfecte description of a straunge Monstar borne in the Citye of Rome in Italye, in the yeares of our salvation, 1585} (London, 1590), fols A2r, A4r.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{The Geneva Bible}, fol. GGg4v.
surfaces are used to connect women with Catholicism, and indeed, the idea of stripping away false exteriors to reveal the truth, reiterated in malcontented texts such as Marston’s satires, had been made literal in the acts of iconoclasm earlier in the sixteenth century.

**Masculine Anxiety**

The malcontent’s claim to truthfulness, then, is embedded in a long-standing gendered dichotomy. To return to my earlier point about the malcontent’s fear of feminisation, we might read this insistence on truthfulness as, in part, an attempt to reject the feminine: malcontentedness draws on contemporary associations of deception with femininity, and therefore masculinity with honesty, in an attempt to assert difference in response to perceived emasculation. Yet the malcontent’s anxious assertions of difference, at the same time, draw attention to that which undercuts that difference: the feminisation involved in the malcontent position, and perhaps also an association with the feminine surface through the use of performativity and disguise. Mark Breitenberg argues that this kind of ‘masculine anxiety’ is in fact inevitable in patriarchal social systems, due to,

> [T]he unequal distribution of power and authority [which] always and only sustains itself in constant defence of the privilege of some of its members and by the constraint of others. [...] Those individuals whose identities are formed by the assumption of their own privilege must also have incorporated varying degrees of anxiety about the preservation or potential loss of that privilege. 28

Breitenberg’s central thesis is that masculine anxiety ‘enables and drives patriarchy’s reproduction and continuation of itself’, yet at the same time reveals the contradictions inherent in patriarchy. 29 The misogynistic speech of malcontents like Flamineo and Bosola works to repeat patriarchal structures, and reinforce gender stereotypes, but at the same time, their insistence on masculinity reveals that it is not a natural condition, but something that must be asserted and maintained. It is *The Revenger’s Tragedy’s* Vindice, however, who demonstrates the pattern of masculine anxiety in malcontentedness most effectively, and I shall therefore spend some time discussing him in more detail.

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29 Ibid., p. 2.
Vindice’s speech reveals an obsession with the borders of the female body. As he constructs them, these borders are both easily penetrated (sexually, and by words or ideas), and subject to leakage. He uses sexual, corporeal language to describe female credulity: ‘they’ll swallow | Because their sex is easy in belief’ (I. 1. 106-07); ‘That woman is all male, whom none can enter’ (II. 1. 112). Yet the words and secrets which so easily enter the female ear are also imagined as leaking out, overflowing the body’s limits,

Why are men made close,
But to keep thoughts in best? I grant you this:
Tell but some woman a secret overnight,
Your doctor may find it in the urinal i’ th’ morning. (I. 3. 80-83)

To use Gail Kern Paster’s coinage, women for Vindice are ‘leaky vessels’, inscribed as permeable by patriarchal culture. Where male bodies are impenetrable, able to keep thoughts and secrets enclosed, female bodies are open and porous, and substances, including the words that in these images are made fluid and material, constantly leak out or enter in. Vindice makes the various openings of the female body – the mouth, the ears, the vagina – interchangeable. Female credulity is ‘swallowing’, the mouth standing in for the ears, and in the image of female loquacity, secrets physically leak out of the woman in her urine, the vagina standing in for the mouth.

The sexual overtones at work here are obvious – female verbal laxity is always also sexual laxity – and indeed, Vindice’s concern with the sexual thresholds of the female body is made clear in a speech in II. 2, incited by the sight of Spurio, the Duchess’s illicit lover:

Now ’tis full sea abed over the world:
There’s juggling of all sides. […]
This woman in immodest thin apparel
Lets in her friend by water; here a dame,
Cunning, nails leather hinges to a door
To avoid proclamation; now cuckold are
A-coining, apace, apace, apace, apace;
And careful sisters spin that thread i’ th’ night
That does maintain them and their bawds i’ th’ day. (II. 2. 136-45)

Vindice’s world-wide vision of sexual incontinence focusses solely on its female participants. All women, he implies, engage in illegitimate sexual behaviour that makes

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cuckolds out of their husbands. The speech is packed with images of threatened boundaries: the woman’s ‘immodest thin apparel’ constitutes a fragile boundary between her body and the outside world; doors are opened silently, allowing easy access to interior female spaces. The use of water imagery, along with the speech’s formal features, works to emphasise the fluidity of this border-crossing: with frequent use of enjambment and a seven line sentence, the speech builds in momentum, which culminates in the repetition of ‘apace’, and this mirrors the continuous and sinister ‘thread’ spun by the women, imagined as silkworms, or perhaps spiders. Female sexuality is for Vindice excessive and dangerous, in need of constant surveillance in order to avoid the at once arousing and nightmarish scenario that he imagines. He himself takes on this role, stating of his sister Castiza that he will ‘guard her honour, | And keep the ports sure’ (II. 2. 104-5), a militaristic image of the female body as a walled city with gates or harbours, which must be defended at all costs from both the leakages and fluid entries described.

Vindice’s misogynist obsession with policing the borders of the female body stems from his own liminal, borderline, and potentially feminised position, which threatens his identity as patriarchal masculine subject. Vindice is the head of a noble family, responsible for the maintenance of his mother and sister, but as a result of the Duke’s neglect of his father, the family’s means do not match their noble lineage. Vindice is impoverished and socially displaced, and like Flamineo and Bosola, he enters into the service of a social superior (first the Duke, and then his equally corrupt son Lussurioso). He differs from Bosola and Flamineo in that this service is carried out in disguise, in order to further his revenge, rather than to achieve advancement, something which might provide him with a level of distance from that service; yet this does not negate the potential impact of the position on Vindice’s perception of his masculinity. Indeed, as explained in Chapter Two, Vindice struggles to distinguish himself from the disguises that he adopts, and this in itself serves to associate him with the female gendered disingenuousness against which malcontents as truth-tellers attempt to define themselves. The potentially emasculating effects of revenge itself, mentioned earlier in this chapter, are also a factor here. Findlay discusses the potential of revenge to lead passion to supersede reason in the same way as desire, and this is certainly the case for Vindice, who takes an almost sexualised pleasure in revenge – ‘O sweet, delectable, rare, happy, ravishing!’ (III. 5. 1) – and who undergoes a form of self-disintegration. In Chapter Two I linked this to his use of disguise, yet it might also point to a feminising
loss of reason brought about by revenge: ‘a dissolution of the masculine self into the feminine task’.

To return to Breitenberg’s formulation, then, Vindice’s masculine anxiety reinforces patriarchal structures at the same time as it points towards their fragility. He reproduces in exaggerated and often proverbial language the prevailing misogynistic perspective on women in the period, in an attempt to re-establish the patriarchal dominance that is threatened by the potential femininity involved in his social disempowerment, use of disguise, and revenger role. At the same time, however, Vindice’s anxious insistence on clearly delineated gender categories, in which men are impermeable, while women are open and porous, exposes the fault lines in those categories. Vindice himself is the play’s prime example of the kind of incontinent loquacity that he attacks in women. His speech is unruly, and has a tendency to run away with him. After one of his tirades against courtly vice, Hippolito is forced to rein him in: ‘Nay, brother | You reach out o’ th’ verge now’ (I. 3. 17-18). Vindice’s verbal incontinence has self-destructive effects when in the final scene of the play he cannot help but disclose his and Hippolito’s orchestration of the Duke’s murder: ‘This murder might have slept in tongueless brass | But for ourselves’ (V. 3. 113-14), he states. ‘Tongueless brass’ refers to the brass plaque on the grave of the Duke, but also implies the sealed and statue-like male body, as opposed to the open and verbally incontinent female. Vindice’s revelation of his role as murderer aligns him with the latter category rather than the former; he is, like the stereotypical woman of misogynistic discourse, unable to keep secrets enclosed in an impermeable male body.

The fear of feminisation and insistence on masculinity involved in the malcontented subjectivity of figures like Hamlet, Vindice, Bosola, and Flamineo, finds a context in the continuity between the sexes described by early modern anatomical theory. In the Galenic ‘one-sex’ model of human anatomy, the female sexual organs are an inferior, inverted version of those of the male, and women are therefore essentially defective versions of men. Thomas Laqueur argues for this model’s dominance in the early modern period, and although later research has suggested that the Galenic model was, in fact, subject to debate and scrutiny (as Laura Gowing points out, the Galenic model is ‘part of the landscape of early modern bodies, not the whole world’), early

31 Findlay, Feminist Perspective, pp. 61-62.
modern anatomical texts nevertheless demonstrate its continued influence. The Tudor physician Thomas Vicary, for example, describes the womb as an inverted penis – ‘the likenes of it is as it were a yarde reversed or turned inward: having testikles likewise’ – and anatomical drawings of the female genitalia in Helkiah Crooke’s 1616 *Somatographia anthropine* depict it as phallic in appearance.

Stephen Orgel points out that ‘in this view of anatomical history, we all begin as female, and masculinity is a development out of and away from femininity’; while on one level the model perpetuates female inferiority, it also implies the absence of any sharp division between the sexes. Those that subscribe to the model are faced with the threatening possibility that women might complete the developmental process and transform into men, and indeed, the sixteenth-century French physician Ambroise Paré recounts a number of instances of this, including the story of Germain Garnier (previously Marie), who underwent such a transformation after leaping over a ditch: ‘at that very moment the genitalia and the male rod came to be developed in him, having ruptured the ligaments by which previously they had been held enclosed’. The ease with which such a transformation seems to occur, however, also hints at the even more threatening possibility that the transformation might be reversed, that, as Orgel suggests, men might ‘be turned back into women, losing the strength that enabled the male potential to be realised in the first place’. Masculinity, this would imply, is precarious on the most material level; the malcontent’s anxiety about feminization can be mapped onto wider concerns about biological sex itself as unfixed.

The malcontent’s masculine anxiety, then, has roots in wider cultural anxieties about sex and gender. In fact, scholars have connected the perceived breakdown in social order in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, discussed at length in the Introduction, with ‘strained gender relations’, which, according to D. E. Underdown, were ‘at the heart of the “crisis of order”’. As evidence for the impact of these


34 Orgel, p. 20.


36 Orgel, p. 25.

troubled relations, Lynda E. Boose refers to an increase of instances of crimes defined as female, such as ‘scolding’, ‘witchraft’, and ‘whoring’, the punishments for which (the scold’s bridle and the cucking stool) became heavily gendered. Underdown cites a surge in anti-feminist literature: Joseph Swetnam’s *The Araignment* (reprinted at least thirteen times in the seventeenth century) is one of a number of possible examples. Breitenberg, similarly, points to an increase in marriage manuals as potentially signifying a growing anxiety about gender roles within the family, and in particular, about the potential for unruly female behaviour. Whether or not there was an actual increase in unruly female behaviour, these manuals, treatises, and court records show that there was a perception on the part of the patriarchal authorities that this was the case, and that masculine authority was at least to some extent seen as under threat. The malcontent discourse, with its virulent misogyny that exposes deep-rooted fears about masculinity as perilously fragile, can be understood as both responding to this context, and participating in its production.

‘Are not you a female content?’

In a number of the iterations of malcontentedness explored in this thesis, a pattern can be discerned whereby something is indicated, only to be undercut or confused. For example, Hamlet points to an interior ‘truth’ set against the ‘seeming’ of the rest of the court, yet refuses to articulate it. Marston’s satirical speakers set themselves apart from the excessive desires of their targets, yet the excess of their malcontented style works to break down that difference. Vindice insists on his difference from the corruption of the court, yet is shown to be embedded within it. This deconstructive pattern, I have demonstrated, can be refigured in gendered terms: the malcontent’s insistence on independence and truth corresponds with an insistence on masculinity above femininity, yet this is undercut by the feminisation engendered by the malcontent subject position. Malcontented misogyny is a reactionary response to sameness that attempts to reassert difference, but which nevertheless points to gender as an unstable, dangerously fluid category.

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39 Underdown, pp. 116-17.
40 Breitenberg, pp. 21-22.
The fact that malcontented masculinity is always fraught, always involves potential femininity, raises the question as to whether the slippage of the male malcontent into the feminine might work in the opposite direction. Does the structural similarity between the position of woman and the position of malcontent suggest that women are themselves able to access the malcontent discourse? To repeat Pandion’s pun from *Sappho and Phao*, might a ‘female content’ as opposed to a ‘male content’ be a possibility? Findlay draws attention to the early modern female playgoer, and writes that, ‘For female spectators [of revenge tragedy], normally excluded by, and from, the dominant discourses of Renaissance society, the outlawed agency of the revenger must have looked exciting’.\(^{41}\) The same applies with regard to the malcontent: for the inevitably disempowered early modern woman, malcontentedness, a mode through which the experience of injustice can be articulated and mediated, might have seemed an attractive prospect.

Indeed, while female speech, as I explain below, was constrained and regulated in a way male speech in this period was not, there is nevertheless significant evidence to show that early modern women did express discontent in vocal ways. Research by Pamela Allen Brown, Maria Prendergast, and Rosalind Smith, for example, demonstrates female engagement with, and participation in, the typically male dominated discourses of popular jest, satirical railing, and poetic complaint.\(^{42}\) Texts such as Rachel Speght’s *A Monzell for Melastomus*, Ester Sowernam’s *Ester hath hang’d Haman*, and Constantia Munda’s *The Worming of a mad Dogge*, all published in 1617 in response to Joseph Swetnam’s *The Araignement*, demonstrate that voices which were ostensibly female did in fact make use of fierce invective, in these cases in order to discredit misogyny. Rachel Speght is the only of these writers whose female gender can be stated with complete certainty: Ester Sowernam and Constantia Munda are pen-names, and the authors’ identities are unknown. The entry for Munda in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, in fact, notes that her use of Greek, Latin and Italian texts, and of

\(^{41}\) Findlay, *Feminist Perspective*, p. 36. It could, indeed, be argued that the female revengers from classical drama, such as Medea, or Clytemnestra, are early examples of a female version of malcontentedness, or what we might call ‘proto-malcontentedness’.

legal language, makes a female gender ‘doubtful’. Yet The Worming of a mad Dogge is significant in that, regardless of the actual identity of the writer, it uses a female persona to direct linguistic violence of precisely the sort found in malcontented speech against male misogyny. Addressing Swetnam, Munda writes,

Ile take the paines to worme the tongue of your madnesse, and dash your rankling teeth downe your throat: tis not houlding up a wispe, nor threatning a cucking stoole shall charme us out of the compasse of your chaine, our pens shall throttle you.

Munda’s aggressive linguistic tone and use of medical imagery recalls Marston’s verse satires: for both, the pen is a weapon. The phrase ‘mad dogge’, in fact, exactly echoes the quarrel between Marston and fellow satirist Joseph Hall. Specifically, in the 1599 edition of The Scourge of Villanie, Marston reproduced and responded to an epigram, which he claims that Hall ‘caused to bee pasted to the latter page of every Pignation that came to the stacioners of Cambridge’ (Scourge, X. 47-49). This epigram ridicules ‘S.K.’ (Signor Kinsayder, Marston’s pseudonym) as a ‘mad dogge’ and a ‘mankind Asse’ (Scourge, X. 51), and states that, ‘the dog was best cured by cutting & kinsing’ (Scourge, X. 54). Marston, in a marginal note, comments sarcastically, ‘mark the witty allusion to my name’. Munda’s use of ‘mad dogge’ in a similarly literary dispute might suggest that the pamphlet’s author was aware of the Marston-Hall quarrel when writing the response to Swetnam, or perhaps even that the text echoes it deliberately, in order to carve out a space for the female speaker in the typically masculinist realm of aggressive literary rivalry. Although Munda’s pamphlet was published eighteen years after Marston and Hall’s satires, this is not beyond the realms of possibility, as research by Charles Cathcart shows that the dispute is referenced thirteen years later in epigrams written by John Davies of Hereford; it had clearly, to some extent, entered the literary imagination.

Whilst it cannot be ascertained conclusively that the pamphlet author read Marston, the linguistic similarities are certainly striking: a prefatory poem to The Worming of a mad Dogge, for example, refers to Swetnam’s ‘barren-idle-donghill braine’, and to ‘the slimy pit | Of your inventive pamphlet’, phrases which would not seem at all

45 Given that no surviving copies of The Metamorphosis of Pigmalioun’s Image and Certaine Satyres include this epigram, it is also perfectly possible that Marston fabricated the entire episode, perhaps in order to garner publicity.
46 Marston, Poems, p. 165.
misplaced in *The Scourge of Villanie*. Direct echoes aside, stylistically, Munda’s pamphlet has much in common with malcontented satire, and demonstrates that female-voiced linguistic violence did in fact occur in early modern writing.

In the passage cited, Munda refers to two of the common punishments meted out to women designated scolds: the ‘wispe’ of straw that she was given as a sign of disgrace, and the ‘cucking stoole’ to which she was tied and paraded through the streets, or ducked into water. Munda defies such punishments, asserting that she and her fellow (ostensibly) female writers will ‘throttle’ Swetnam despite them, yet the reference points out the fact that aggressive female speech in this period was generally coded as scolding or shrewishness, not, as is the case with Marston, malcontentedness. Both scolding and male malcontented speech were perceived as disruptive to social order; in 1598 the Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, described ‘scolders’ as ‘sowers of discord between neighbours’. Like the malcontent, the scold is associated with discord and accused of spreading public unrest. Yet malcontentedness, while constructed as socially threatening in contemporary accounts, is for the most part a literary discourse. Scolding, conversely, was a legal offence as well as a cultural category, for which hundreds of women were tortured and publically humiliated, by the punishments described above, and by the even more brutal scold’s bridle. To equate the two categories without qualification risks denying both the reality of the extent to which women were constrained in the period, and also the privilege involved in malcontentedness, in that the articulation of discontent is possible at all.

Indeed, all female speech was potentially scolding. Conduct books such as William Gouge’s *Of Domesticall Duties* demonstrate the restrictions placed on female speech; as Peter Stallybrass explains, the regulation of early modern women ‘concentrated upon three specific areas: the mouth, chastity, the threshold of the house. These three areas were frequently collapsed into each other’. Female silence was equated to female chastity, and both of these were made analogous to the enclosure of the woman within the domestic space of the house. The notion of a female malcontent, then, given the different, and far more restrictive, systems of control and surveillance to which women were subject compared to men, is difficult: for a woman to inhabit,

48 Munda, fols A4r, A4v.
50 Stallybrass, p. 126. William Gouge writes that a woman’s words ‘must be few, reverend, and meeke […] silence, on the one side implieth a reverend subjection, as on the other side too much speech implieth an usurpation of authoritie’, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London, 1622), pp. 281-82.
unproblematically, a subject position predicated in many ways on the ability to speak out publically would seem impossible. Thinking beyond malcontented speech, moreover, malcontentedness generally involves a sense of neglected merit or frustrated ambition, a feeling of being in some way hard done by, and to complain of neglect implies that it is possible, at least theoretically, for the person complaining to actually achieve that which s/he lacks. Women, denied public or political position, this would suggest, are too far down the social scale to inhabit the malcontent subject position.

Shakespeare’s Ophelia, for example, has the potential for malcontentedness, yet is not permitted to articulate her discontent. Like Hamlet, she loses a father to murder, and suffers rejection; we might, conjecturally, compare Hamlet’s loss of the throne through Claudius’s succession, with Ophelia’s loss of the advancement she would have achieved in becoming Hamlet’s wife. In Ophelia, Shakespeare creates a female version of the lack that characterises Hamlet’s experience in *Hamlet*. But where Hamlet has recourse to the discourses of malcontentedness and melancholy in order to express his grief, Ophelia does not. Juliana Schiesari has demonstrated the categorical exclusion of women from a Western ‘canon of melancholia’ in which melancholy comes to signal the exceptionality of the male sufferer. In Chapter Three, I discussed the epistemological challenge posed by this notion of genial melancholy: how is one to distinguish ‘true’ instances of melancholy from those which are feigned in order to gain cultural prestige? When it comes to women, however, there is no question: female sorrow, Schiesari argues, is expressed ‘by less flattering allusions to widow’s weeds, inarticulate weeping, or other signs of ritualistic (but intellectually and artistically unaccredited) mourning’. Hamlet’s melancholy is interpreted as the mysterious signifier of his difference from what is common – as Gertrude says, his grief is ‘particular’ (*Hamlet*, I. 2. 75) – and he voices his discontent in forthright, often satirical language. ‘Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?’ (II. 2. 524-25) he asks, constructing his loss in terms of world-wide corruption. Ophelia’s response to loss, however, is inarticulate: we are told that she ‘speaks things in doubt | That carry but half-sense’ (IV. 5. 6-7), and

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51 Schiesari, p. 4.
52 Schiesari, p. 12.
53 Freud cites this line in *Mourning and Melancholia*, where he uses it to support his claim that melancholy provides access to the truth: ‘[the melancholic] has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic’. The influence of the genial tradition of melancholy on Freud is clear here, and the fact that Hamlet is his only named example demonstrates the privileged place that he occupies in the Western tradition of exceptional male melancholics. Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1966-74), XIV (1957), pp. 243-58 (p. 246).
that much of this is in ‘winks and nods and gestures’, which indicate ‘nothing sure, yet much unhappily’ (IV. 5. 11, 13).

Hamlet’s mad speech has ‘method in’t’ (II. 2. 205-06). Rosencrantz asks him the cause of his ‘distemper’ (III. 2. 328), a question which implies the possibility, at least, of a reasonable response. Although he appears to be mad, Hamlet nevertheless maintains control over his words and actions: in Chapter Three I discussed the way in which he actively encourages interpretation, inviting those around him to discover the true meaning of his words. Yet where Hamlet’s madness is of the mind, Ophelia’s, as Elaine Showalter observed, is of the body, and draws on contemporary ‘representational bonds between female insanity and female sexuality’.54 Ophelia uses bodily gestures to communicate, and her snippets of songs and rhymes are full of sexual imagery: ‘Young men will do’t if they come to’t — | By Cock, they are to blame’ (IV. 5. 60-61). Her giving away of wildflowers can be interpreted, Showalter suggests, as a symbolic deflowering, and her death by drowning hints at the humoral construction of the female body as fluid, cold, and wet. Hamlet’s madness is enigmatic, and actively hints at hidden depths. Ophelia’s, conversely, is quickly dismissed by the Gentleman that initially reports it as ‘nothing’ (IV. 5. 7), nonsense or meaningless, and also the ‘no-thing’ between her legs. He describes, however, the tendency of those who hear her to shape her speech to their own ends: they ‘botch the words up to fit their own thoughts’ (IV. 5. 10). Meaning is placed not with the mad subject, as is the case with Hamlet, but with those who listen and interpret.

Horatio warns that Ophelia might ‘strew | Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds’ (IV. 5. 14-15). He is concerned that those with ill, perhaps seditious, intentions might ascribe false meaning to Ophelia’s words, and draw dangerous conclusions from them. Contemporary descriptions of malcontented speech often emphasise a similar danger. Thomas Lodge writes that the malcontent ‘draws discontented Gentlemen to conspiracies’, and for John Earle malcontentedness is ‘the spark that kindles the commonwealth’; it has the potential to spread and multiply, infecting others.55 Ophelia’s speech has a similar potential. Her words apparently ‘strew’ ill interpretations, as their speaker strews flowers across the stage. But where

55 Lodge, p. 17; Earle, p. 197.
malcontentedness involves agency – Earle continues that the malcontent is ‘the bellows himself to blow it’ – any potentially dangerous meaning in Ophelia’s speech is severed from her as speaker, and given instead to the ‘ill-breeding minds’ that discover it there.56 Ophelia’s words might be attributed malcontented meaning, but both Horatio and the Gentleman insist that this would stem from a fault in the listener, rather than from anything in the words themselves.

The appropriation of Ophelia’s speech by the men around her signals the extent to which all female speech in this period was regulated by men, and therefore suggests that women are not permitted the agency that the malcontent position requires in order to be able to articulate discontent. Even Munda’s pamphlet acknowledges that malcontented language voiced by a woman (even when this ‘woman’ is a fictional persona) might be dismissed as scolding. Women, it seems, are never permitted to inhabit the malcontent subject position with the same ease that the male characters discussed in this thesis are. One of the benefits of the discourse approach to malcontentedness, however, is that it allows us to go beyond the question of whether or not female malcontents existed. It prompts us to explore, given that malcontentedness is so closely tied up with the experience of inferiority and constraint, whether there are examples in early modern literature of women who perform or ventriloquize elements of the discourse in an attempt to resist that constraint, and whether male authors ever draw on malcontentedness in their depictions of female speech. The answer to these questions is, emphatically, yes. In what remains of this chapter I analyse two such examples in depth: Vittoria, from Webster’s The White Devil, and Paulina, from Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale. Neither character is described as a malcontent either in the plays themselves or in later criticism, yet both can be read fruitfully alongside the malcontent discourse. These characters, I argue, appropriate the deflationary, deconstructive, and truth-telling effects of malcontented speech, and turn it against the patriarchal structures that constrained early modern women.

‘She scandals our proceedings’: Vittoria and Malcontentedness

In The White Devil, Flamineo is malcontented due to his poverty-enforced service of the Duke of Bracciano, about which he complains in bitter language. His facilitation of and
participation in vice is a rebellious rejection of the laws of a society in which virtue goes unrewarded: Flamineo’s brother, the morally upright Marcello, cannot even afford to ‘keep [himself] in fresh chamois’ (III. 1. 46). In enabling the adulterous affair between Bracciano and his sister Vittoria, Flamineo says, he ‘made a kind of path | To her and mine own preferment’ (III. 1. 36-37): brother and sister are equated, and this suggests that they might both be understood in relation to malcontentedness. Indeed, in their dealings with Bracciano, the pair are remarkably similar. Vittoria, too, rejects the strictures placed on her by society, and like Flamineo, enters into a relationship with Bracciano in the hope of financial gain and social advancement. In the scene that establishes their relationship there is no mention of romantic love, and instead Vittoria refers pointedly to her ‘weak fortune’ (I. 2. 223), and receives a jewel from Bracciano in exchange for her ‘jewel’ (I. 2. 225): the gratification of his (and perhaps her) lust. Francisco notes that despite her husband’s poor fortune and family’s poverty, Vittoria wears ‘cloth of tissue’ (II. 1. 55); her relationship with Bracciano is to some extent structured on the basis of monetary exchange. Jonathan Dollimore also notices the parallels between Flamineo and Vittoria, writing that while ‘Vittoria rebels against her subordination as a woman, Flamineo [rebels] against the subordination of one forced into service through dispossession’.

Although Dollimore is right to note that Vittoria’s rebellion is gendered – I will shortly demonstrate that her use of malcontented speech in the trial scene works as a direct attack on the patriarchal system that restricts her behaviour – his summary of Flamineo’s rebellion actually applies equally well to her. Vittoria also rebels against ‘the subordination of one forced into service through dispossession’, in that she too is impoverished, she too desires social advancement and financial reward.

This structural similarity is made particularly clear when Vittoria is briefly rejected by Bracciano, after her imprisonment in the house of convertites. ‘What have I gain’d by thee but infamy?’ (IV. 2. 107) she asks, continuing ironically,

Who hath the honour to advance Vittoria
To this incontinent college? Is’t not you?
Is’t not your high preferment? (IV. 2. 116-18)

All that Bracciano’s ‘preferment’ has brought Vittoria is imprisonment and infamy, and she uses the masculine malcontented language of service and reward to bemoan that

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57 Dollimore, p. 235.
fact. Her aggrieved speech here is reminiscent of both Flamineo and Bosola’s denunciations of lordly ingratitude. Flamineo tells Bracciano, ‘All your kindness to me is like that miserable courtesy of Polyphemus to Ulysses,—you reserve me to be devour’d last’ (IV. 2. 63-65), a reference to the Cyclops in Homer’s *Odyssey* that consumed his guests. In Webster’s later play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola asks, ‘who would rely on these miserable dependences, in expectation to be advanced tomorrow? [...] there are rewards for hawks and dogs when they have done us service’ (I. 1. 55-56, 59-60).

Bosola’s words actually echo Vittoria directly; she indicts Bracciano by claiming that ‘your dog or hawk should be rewarded better | Than I have been’ (*The White Devil*, IV. 2. 190-91). Like Bosola, she inveighs against her subordinate position by equating herself to the non-human pets of the elite, and the fact that Webster repeats this line almost verbatim, in the mouth of a character that he explicitly designates a malcontent, demonstrates that Vittoria ought to be considered from the same perspective.

Scholarship on *The White Devil* has emphasised the discontinuity in Webster’s presentation of Vittoria. John Russell Brown, for example, notes that ‘there are only four scenes of any length in which she appears and her mood, or tone, is very different in each of them’. Catherine Belsey makes the same point in stronger terms:

> The text makes no apparent effort to establish any continuity whatever between the Vittoria of I. ii, the scene of her seduction by (or of?) Bracciano, and the Vittoria who eloquently defends herself against the charge that she is Bracciano’s whore in the arraignment scene (III. ii). The oxymoron of the title (since white is the colour of innocence as well as of beauty, and Renaissance devils are conventionally black) is recapitulated in reverse in these consecutive appearances of the central female figure in the play.

Belsey contrasts Vittoria’s cynicism in the first of these scenes with what she refers to as her ‘plausibility’ when she speaks out against the injustice of her oppressors in the trial scene. Vittoria certainly changes dramatically as the play unfolds: mercantile and ambitious in Act One, persecuted and outspoken in Act Three, an aggrieved prisoner in Act Four, and in the final scenes, as Bracciano’s wife, often silent, denied the long death-speech given to Flamineo. Belsey suggests that because of this, Vittoria ‘seems to have no place, intelligible to the audience as single or continuous, from which to speak, to be recognised’. I wish to propose, however, that the malcontent discourse provides

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60 Ibid., p. 162.
61 Belsey, p. 163.
a place from which Vittoria’s discontinuities might be approached, and her speech be recognised. This is not to say that malcontentedness unites Vittoria as a single, continuous character; my point is that the discontinuity and multiplicity involved in the malcontent discourse allows us to better negotiate her discontinuity, in the same way as it does that of Hamlet and Bosola, as discussed in the previous chapter. The central disjunction that scholars such as Belsey have noticed in Vittoria is also a key paradox in malcontentedness: it involves ambition, cynicism, and often an immersion in vice, yet at the same time makes a claim to voice the truth, and to be somehow different from the corrupt society in which it is embedded. The malcontented subjects of early modern drama are all to some extent white devils.

Critical interpretation of Vittoria’s arraignment has foregrounded her performance of masculine discourse. Her defence, she says, ‘must personate masculine virtue’ (III. 2. 136). My contention is that throughout the play, but particularly in the trial scene, Vittoria performs a specific male subject position: that produced by malcontentedness. A consistently disruptive presence, she rejects societal expectations about female silence and chastity, and is constructed by the men around her as a threat to patriarchal order. She is put on trial for these contraventions; given that there is ‘nought but circumstances | To charge her with, about her husband’s death’ (III. 1. 4-5), she is tried by an ecclesiastical court for her sexual transgression. Yet in the arraignment scene, Vittoria appropriates the deflationary, subversive malcontent discourse usually limited to men, and uses it to expose the hypocrisy of the masculinist legal system even as it disempowers and condemns her. The Cardinal Monticelso, who governs the trial, maintains that, ‘She scandals our proceedings’ (III. 2. 130): Vittoria’s female malcontented speech represents a scandalous, decorum-breaking transgression of the limits placed on female behaviour by early modern patriarchy.

From the trial’s outset, Vittoria draws attention to and undercuts obfuscatory legal language. She insists that the lawyer appointed to prosecute her ‘speak his usual tongue’ (III. 2. 13), her reason being that though she herself knows Latin, among those that have come to watch the trial ‘the half or more | May be ignorant in’t’ (III. 2. 16-17). This is a metatheatrical reference to the theatre audience, many of whom, chiefly the women, are, indeed, unlikely to have been able to understand Latin. Lisa Hopkins suggests that by drawing attention to this, Vittoria, who does know the language,

implicitly aligns herself with men. In fact, it has the opposite effect: it is a strategy through which she gains audience sympathy. Vittoria’s refusal to have her ‘accusation clouded | In a strange tongue’ (III. 2. 18-19) works to position her with the Protestant English audience of Webster’s play, particularly the women (‘the half or more’ of the audience), and against the ‘strange’ Catholic ecclesiastical court being dramatized on stage. The rejection of Latin, from this perspective, recalls the Protestant rejection of the Latin Catholic liturgy in favour of the apparently plainer and more truthful vernacular, and thus draws on the connections between frank or blunt malcontented language and the aesthetics of the Protestant Reformation. In one seemingly simple act at the start of the scene, Vittoria tacitly places herself on the side of plainness and truth, and implies that the legal proceeding ostensibly designed to determine the truth might in fact obscure it.

A second repudiation of obfuscatory language, in which Vittoria strips away the lawyer’s ostentatious legal jargon, restates the emphasis on plain rather than elaborate speech forms in malcontentedness, and further emphasises the alienness of the Italian Catholic court to the English audience:

[…] the hard and undigestable words
Come up like stones we use give hawks for physic.
Why, this is Welsh to Latin. (III. 2. 37-39)

Vittoria derides the rhetorical ornamentation and complexity of the lawyer’s words as unnatural: in her image they are unable to be digested (that is, understood), and are rejected by the body. As Kathryn R. Finin-Farber points out, by yoking together Latin, the language of masculine humanist ‘civility’ and Catholicism, with Welsh, associated with savagery and barbarousness, Vittoria ‘infects the former […] with the latter’; the apparently civilised ecclesiastical court has barbarity at its centre. Legal language and the court itself are designated as savage and foreign, and Vittoria is positioned alongside the play’s English audience. The misogynist discourse that would construct Vittoria herself as foreign and other, given the association of Catholicism with femininity in this period, is here turned on its head and used by Vittoria to gain audience sympathy.

This insistence on plain language goads Monticelso into an impassioned outburst against Vittoria’s transgressions:

64 Finin-Farber, p. 229.
I shall be plainer with you, and paint out
Your follies in more natural red and white
Than that upon your cheek. (III. 2. 51-53)

Monticelso uses misogynist stereotypes about cosmetics and female deceptiveness in order to discredit Vittoria’s implicit association with truth. For him, Vittoria is the ‘white devil’ of the play’s title; her fair exterior conceals ‘black lust’ (III. 1. 7), a dichotomy repeated when he compares her to the apples reputed to grow on the site of the destroyed biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah: ‘I will but touch her and you straight shall see | She’ll fall to soot and ashes’ (III. 2. 66-67). Monticelso’s comparison of Vittoria to biblical exemplars of sin (he also compares her to Eve: ‘Were there a second paradise to lose | This devil would betray it’ (III. 2. 69-70)) demonstrates that in his eyes her transgressions are archetypal; her very gender marks her guilt. Yet the ‘white devil’ title could also apply to Monticelso himself. After his election as pope, he appears on stage ‘in state’ (IV. 3. 60), presumably in the white robes of the pontiff, yet he also possesses a ‘black book’ in which ‘lurk | The names of many devils’ (IV. 1. 33, 35-6): it catalogues intelligencers, bawds, and murderers, and in the fourth act Monticelso gives it to Francisco to aid in his revenge on Vittoria and Bracciano. By provoking his outburst in the trial scene, Vittoria exposes Monticelso’s hypocritical partiality, and by extension, the hypocrisy of a legal system that purports to discover the truth yet which is weighted against her from the outset: ‘if you be my accuser | Pray cease to be my judge’ (III. 2. 225-26), she states. Like Malevol’s destabilising social critique in The Malcontent, Vittoria’s speech has a vexing, antagonistic effect, which works to disrupt institutions and reveal injustice.

Given that public female speech itself is in early modern patriarchy concomitant to unchastity, Vittoria’s verbal defence of herself increases her guilt in the eyes of Monticelso and the court: ‘She comes not like a widow; she comes arm’d | With scorn and impudence’ (III. 2. 120-21). Vittoria’s response to this is to ask,

[…] what, is my just defence
By him that is my judge call’d impudence?
Let me appeal then from this Christian court
To the uncivil Tartar. (III. 2. 126-29)

Vittoria draws attention to the fact that whatever she says – her ‘just defence’ of herself – serves only to condemn her further in that it constitutes further violation of decorous female behaviour. The fact that she is indeed guilty of that which she is accused is
somewhat beside the point here; what is important is that she exposes the barbarity of a legal system in which to speak increases Vittoria’s guilt, but to remain silent would constitute her admission of it. Finin-Farber suggests that ‘Vittoria engages in a transgressive mode of questioning which undermines our confidence in the very process whereby guilt is discovered’, and indeed, her use of a deflationary malcontent discourse disrupts the legal process that aims to silence and constrain her, and points out its injustice.65 By the time Monticelso tells the assembled lords that Vittoria ‘scandals our proceedings’, in fact, he is too late, as Vittoria has already won her audience over; the English Ambassador, one of several foreign envoys that observes the trial, and who perhaps functions as an internal figure for the play’s English audience, comments that ‘the cardinal’s too bitter’, and ‘She hath a brave spirit’ (III. 2. 107, 140). Although Vittoria is condemned for her indiscretions to imprisonment in a house for ‘penitent whores’ (III. 2. 267), the victory of Monticelso and the patriarchal system that he represents feels hollow after her exposure of the hypocrisy of that system, and her final line in the scene remains defiant: ‘Know this, and let it somewhat raise your spite: | Through darkness diamonds spread their richest light’ (III. 2. 293-94).

After Vittoria’s sentence has been decided, and guards directed to take her away, she cries out, suddenly, ‘A rape, a rape. […] Yes, you have ravished justice, | Forced her to do your pleasure’ (III. 2. 273-75). The masculinist legal system is summarised as, not only a corruption of true justice, but an act of male violence against women. We might compare Vittoria’s exposure of the gendered violence and injustice that underpins patriarchy to Malevole’s exposure of class-based injustice in The Malcontent: his speech can be read as an unruly interruption of the status quo by someone of indeterminate social rank, and Vittoria’s speech represents a female interruption of the masculine public sphere. In Chapter Two, I discussed how Malevole’s speech ‘fret[s]’ or ‘afflict[s]’ (The Malcontent, I. 2. 14, 25), and works to disrupt established hierarchies and institutions, and Vittoria’s does something similar. She frets or goads Monticelso in order to draw out his prejudice, and where Malevole identifies a courtly society in which social inequality and corruption are ‘gilt o’er’ (The Malcontent, III. 2. 40) by false civility and fine appearances, Vittoria exposes the apparent civility of the court that tries her, and by extension the patriarchal system more widely, as concealing barbarity: ‘I discern poison | Under your gilded pills’ (The White Devil, III. 2. 190-91). Vittoria is morally ambiguous, immersed in vice herself, and like many of the other malcontents of Jacobean tragedy,

65 Finin-Farber, pp. 219-20.
her critique is silenced by her death at the end of the play. Yet her direction of malcontented discourse against the masculine power that elsewhere (in the misogynist speech of Flammeo, for example) it works to uphold, functions to expose the hypocritical workings of that power. Thus, Vittoria’s performance of the male discourse of malcontentedness not only violates proscriptions for female behaviour, but uses that discourse to critique and expose the wider patriarchal system out of which it emerges, and with which it engages: she uses malcontentedness to deconstruct.

‘The office becomes a woman best’: Paulina’s Malcontented Truth-Telling

Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale was likely produced in 1611, the same year as The White Devil, and it also contains a structurally central scene in which a noblewoman is put on trial for sexual transgression. The Sicilian queen Hermione’s verbal defence of herself, like Vittoria’s, draws attention to the fact that her trial for adultery is little more than a spectacle orchestrated by her husband Leontes: it is ‘devised | And played to take spectators’ in order that he might ‘be cleared | Of being tyrannous’ (III. 2. 34-35, 4-5). The proceedings, she emphasises, are weighted against her from the outset:

[I]t shall scarce boot me
To say ‘Not guilty’. Mine integrity
Being counted falsehood shall, as I express it,
Be so received. (III. 2. 23-26)

Hermione underscores the injustice of the fact that any defence she might make of herself serves only to incriminate her further in the eyes of her accuser; once doubted, her ‘integrity’ is irrevocably damaged. The trials of both Hermione and Vittoria can be compared to early modern witchcraft trials, in which the woman on trial was guilty simply by virtue of being accused; like that of the witch, their voices are heard only to be rejected. Yet Hermione, like Vittoria, rejects the very language with which she is accused, telling Leontes, ‘You speak a language that I understand not’ (III. 2. 78). She dismisses the trial as tyranny rather than justice – “Tis rigour, and not law’ (III. 2. 112) – and places her fate instead in the divine authority of Apollo’s oracle, the revelations of which are wholly unambiguous: ‘Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless, Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant, his innocent babe truly begotten’ (III. 2. 131-33).

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By demonstrating that the possibility of being found innocent lies only with the oracle, Hermione exposes the injustice of the trial, and entirely discredits Leontes’s accusations.

Hermione’s speech in her trial is perhaps less subversive than that of Vittoria. Hermione is innocent, and Leontes is indeed a tyrant, an example of patriarchal authority and masculine anxiety pushed to an extreme level, which the play represents as unhealthy. While Vittoria, who is guilty rather than innocent, exposes the wider injustice of the masculinist legal system that tries her, Hermione exposes a specific, anomalous instance of injustice. Yet her words in the trial nevertheless constitute a momentary instance of transgressive female speech, which is condemned by Leontes as ‘impudence’ (III. 2. 54). All three primary female characters in The Winter’s Tale, in fact, might be accused of such impudence, and are perceived as threatening by the play’s representatives of patriarchal authority. The socially transgressive union of the ostensibly lower-class Perdita with Polixenes’s son Florizel produces in Polixenes a class-based anxiety that explodes in a violent verbal tirade: ‘fresh piece | Of excellent witchcraft […] I’ll have thy beauty scratched with briers’ (IV. 4. 410-13). After this outburst, and Polixenes’ abrupt exit, Perdita says,

I was not much afeard, for once or twice I was about to speak, and tell him plainly The selfsame sun that shines upon his court Hides not his visage from our cottage, but Looks on alike. (IV. 4. 430-34)

Perdita’s compulsion to speak out boldly and ‘plainly’ against the patriarchal power that would govern her, even though the speech is not delivered to Polixenes directly, is potentially disruptive on the levels of both gender (given the restrictions on female speech in the period) and class. Her socially levelling sentiment erases the hierarchical difference between king and peasant, and while it does not involve the harsh invective tone of malcontentedness, it is nevertheless reminiscent of similar comments by male malcontented speakers, who also insist on the plainness of their speech: for example, Malevole’s assertion that ‘there goes but a pair of shears betwixt an emperor and the son of a bagpiper’ (The Malcontent, IV. 5. 118-20).

This impulse to plain, bold speech suggests a kinship between Perdita and the third of the primary female characters in The Winter’s Tale: the outspoken court lady Paulina. After Hermione’s accusation and wrongful imprisonment, Paulina takes it upon
herself to act as her ‘advocate to th’ loud’st’ (II. 2. 42). She decides to speak out, in order to demonstrate to Leontes the truth about his tyrannical behaviour:

> These dangerous, unsafe lunes i’th’ King, beshrew them!
> He must be told on’t, and he shall. The office
> Becomes a woman best. I’ll take’t upon me. (II. 2. 33-35)

The notion that the ‘office’ of free speech and honest counsel ‘becomes a woman best’ is a rejection of the patriarchal codes that prescribed female silence and obedience, and indeed, Paulina is initially dismissed by Leontes in misogynistic terms as a scold and a witch. Yet after the oracle’s revelations and Hermione’s apparent death, Paulina takes on the counsellor role full time, and becomes Leontes’ most trusted adviser during the sixteen years that pass between Hermione’s seeming death and resurrection. One of the most important decisions in patriarchal monarchy, in fact, the question of who the king should marry, is left up to Paulina. Carolyn Asp suggests that the female counsellor role makes Paulina something of an anomaly: ‘she has no real models in the social or political context, nor does such a figure appear in the courtesy books’.67 To understand Paulina, Asp turns to the female *consolatio* figure from medieval literature: spiritual advisers such as Lady Philosophy in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, or Beatrice in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, who aim to educate the male protagonist as to his errors, and thereby bring him to enlightenment. Paulina also recalls Lucrece’s speech to Tarquin in Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*. Lucrece attempts to dissuade Tarquin from raping her by using the male vocabulary of Renaissance royal counsel: ‘This deed will make thee only loved for fear, | But happy monarchs still are feared for love’ (ll. 610-11).68

Paulina’s criticism of Leontes’ tyranny, in Act II Scene 3, draws on similar vocabulary:

> This most cruel usage of your queen—
> […]—something savours
> Of tyranny, and will ignoble make you,
> Yea, scandalous to the world. (II. 3. 117, 119-21)

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Other critics read Paulina alongside marginal female figures ‘such as the shrewish wife, the midwife, the widow, and the witch’, through Catholic penitential models, and, given her name, as a female figure for the apostle Paul.\footnote{Martine Van Elk, ““Our praises are our wages”: Courtly exchange, social mobility, and female speech in The Winter’s Tale’, Philological Quarterly, 79. 4 (2000), 429-57 (p. 445). On Paulina’s use of penitential models see Paul D. Stegner, ‘Masculine and Feminine Penitence in The Winter’s Tale’, Renaissance, 66. 3 (2014), 189-202. On the Pauline associations see Huston Diehl, ““Does not the stone rebuke me?”: The Pauline Rebuke and Paulina’s Lawful Magic in The Winter’s Tale’, in Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance, ed. by Paul Yachnin and Patricia Badir (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 69-82.}

Certainly, aspects of all of these models are visible in Paulina. I wish to add to this, though, by demonstrating that Shakespeare also draws on the malcontent discourse in his representation of Paulina. Her verbal rebukes of Leontes, I argue, are very similar in tone to the malcontent’s indecorous truth-telling, and her orchestration of Hermione’s apparently miraculous resurrection in the final statue scene can be understood as a visual or theatrical form of truth-telling, that counterpoises the verbal form. It is important to stress here that I do not intend to argue that Paulina comprehensively inhabits the malcontent as a subject position in the same way as Vittoria and the male malcontents discussed in this thesis do. Her tonally malcontented speech comes from a position of self-sacrificing care, rather than from the experience of personal grievance with which the malcontent subject position is so essentially bound up. Yet Paulina does draw on elements of the discourse, in particular, on the emphasis that it places on blunt, unreserved, truth-telling speech, and on the connections that it makes between truth and theatricality, which I discussed at length in Chapter Two. The remainder of this section analyses Paulina’s uses of these elements in detail, and argues that her transgressions of the limitations placed on female speech and behaviour have deconstructive, revisionary effects on the distinctions between feminine and masculine, performance and truth, and visual and verbal.

Paulina’s intrusive entrance into the forbidden male space of Leontes’s private rooms in the play’s second act literalises the break in decorum presented by malcontented speech. Her speech and behaviour in this scene constitute a transgressive interruption of decorous femininity. Paulina uses blunt, unrestrained language, for instance referring to Leontes’ ‘weak-hinged fancy’ (II. 3. 119), and explicitly rejects flattery in favour of this direct approach: ‘If I prove honey-mouthed’, she states, ‘let my tongue blister’ (II. 2. 36). The rejection of sweet, flattering, yet deceptive forms of speech (represented by honey) in favour of speech that is bitter and harsh, yet truthful...
(represented by gall, the bitter substance secreted by the liver), is common in malcontented discourse: Bosola, for example, is ‘the only court-gall’ (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I. 1. 23). In its association with this opposition, the honey image makes an implicit claim for Paulina’s words, which are not ‘honey-mouthed’, as bitter and difficult to swallow, and therefore truthful.

Paulina’s speech in II. 3 can be further compared with the language of malcontented satire through its use of medical imagery. She describes herself as a ‘physician’ (*The Winter’s Tale*, II. 3. 54) and claims to,

[...] come with words as medicinal as true,
Honest as either, to purge [Leontes] of that humour
That presses him from sleep. (II. 3. 37-39)

In *As You Like It*, Jaques offers, in speaking his mind, to ‘Cleanse the foul body of th’infected world, | If they will patiently receive my medicine’ (II. 7. 60-61). Marston’s malcontented satires, similarly, use imagery of bloodletting, anatomy, and purgation. Marston’s speakers promise to expose what is diseased in society, but not necessarily to cure it: the satirist is an anatomist that presents to the world ‘the hidden entrails of ranke villanie’ (*Scourge*, ‘Proemium in librum primum’, 18). Paulina, however, emphasises the medicinal quality of the truth-value of her words, and stresses that however harsh, they aim at healing and care. Indeed, this is a key difference between Paulina and those more essentially malcontented subjects; Paulina’s critique is behalf of another rather than herself, and is not indiscriminate, but rather directed to a specific individual. Where the malcontented truth-telling in Marston’s satires spreads discord and exposes chaos, Paulina’s truth-telling reveals Leontes as himself discordant, and aims to re-harmonise his disordered mind.

Paulina’s purpose is to cure Leontes of his diseased viewpoint by making him aware of the truth of his behaviour. Her public criticism of not only a social superior, but a man by a woman, and a king by his subject, accords closely with Michel Foucault’s understanding of the Greco-Roman concept of *parrhesia* as the act by which truth is spoken to power. In the second chapter I discussed the similarities between malcontented speech and Foucault’s account of the ancient Cynics’ *parrhesia*: the malcontent, like the Cynic, claims to speak the truth frankly, ‘without concealment, reserve, empty manner of speech, or rhetorical ornament which might encode or hide it’,

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and in doing so breaks decorum. Paulina’s verbal rebukes of Leontes, which, as we have seen, in some ways draw on malcontentedness, though in other ways are different from it, actually come closer to Foucault’s *parrhesia* than that of the malcontents discussed earlier in this thesis. Foucault emphasises that *parrhesia* aims to teach the auditor something about his or her self or conduct. It is critical speech directed to somebody more powerful, and therefore entails risk, and requires courage, yet it also comes from a place of care: ‘care as the objective and end of this *parrhesia*, of this interrogatory frankness’. Paulina, as seen, chooses frankness above persuasion or flattery, and sees it as her duty to speak out. Although, as Huston Diehl notes, there are a number of scholars that have found Paulina’s rebukes in the first three acts of *The Winter’s Tale* ‘excessive and distasteful’ (and therefore perhaps echo the misogynistic comment of an onlooking courtier that ‘Howe’er the business goes, you have made fault | I’th’ boldness of your speech’ (III. 2. 215-16)), that speech is nevertheless intended to do Leontes good.

Paulina’s speech certainly involves the courage that *parrhesia* requires. Leontes asserts that anybody that speaks for Hermione is ‘afar-off guilty’ (II. 1. 106), and the risk that Paulina’s speech specifically involves is increased by her female gender. Given the contemporary associations of female speech with unruliness and unbridled sexuality, Paulina risks both her reputation and her life in speaking out. Leontes’s initial response to her truth-telling, indeed, is stereotypically misogynistic. He responds to her violation of decorum in gendered terms, calling her ‘Lady Margery’ and ‘Dame Partlet’, both contemptuous names for a disorderly woman that has ‘unroosted’ her husband (II. 3. 160, 76, 75). She is labelled ‘a callat | Of boundless tongue’ (II. 3. 91-92): ‘callat’ could mean both ‘a lewd or wanton woman’ and ‘a woman given to nagging; a scold’. For Leontes, Paulina’s unruly speech disorders gender, giving her a threateningly masculine authority over her husband, and points also to unruly sexuality. In particular, his attacks draw on associations of excessive female speech with witchcraft (the use of ducking as a punishment for both witches and scolds points towards the place that they shared in the

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72 Diehl, “‘Does not the stone rebuke me?’”, p. 72. As evidence for this critical discomfort Diehl cites T. G. Bishop, *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Roy Bartenhouse, ‘Theme and Structure in *The Winter’s Tale*, *Shakespeare Survey*, 33 (1980), 123-38. Even Paul D. Stegner’s reading of Paulina as asserting penitential authority in her relationship with Leontes plays down the more assautive elements of her language; he does not consider II. 3, in which she is at her most transgressive, at all.
73 ‘callat, n.’, *OED Online.*
early modern patriarchal imagination): Paulina is ‘a mankind witch’ (II. 3. 68). Leontes conflates the whore, the scold, and the witch in his response to Paulina in II. 3, and threatens to have her burned alive in punishment for her transgression. Paulina, however, ignores these dangers. Her response to Leontes’s threats is,

[…] I care not.
It is an heretic which makes the fire,
Not she which burns in it. (II. 3. 114-16)

Paulina turns Leontes’s words against him, alluding to both the flames of martyrdom and the fires of hell into which Leontes, the heretic, risks damning himself. She therefore undercuts the misogynist stereotypes that he repeats; her association with the truth exposes their falsity.

Indeed, the truth that Paulina speaks is in the next act corroborated by the message from the oracle, which puts Hermione’s innocence beyond all reasonable doubt, and of which Paulina continues to remind the court sixteen years later. Her rebellious speech has divine vindication. Paulina’s name, as mentioned, alludes to the apostle Paul, also known for the boldness of his speech. Parrhesia, Foucault writes, is in the New Testament ‘the apostolic virtue par excellence’, ‘the sign of the courageous attitude of whoever preaches the Gospel’. The final verse of Acts makes Paul’s parrhesia clear: he is described as, ‘Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things, which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness of speech [ancient Greek παρρησίας, or parrhesia], without let’ (Acts 28. 31). Diehl explores the Pauline elements of The Winter’s Tale in depth, arguing that Shakespeare’s presentation of Paulina draws on ‘Protestant constructions of the historical Paul’, in particular the emphasis placed by Luther and Calvin on the plainness of his speech, and their defence of his use of violent rebuke as necessary to the reform of his audience. Paulina’s ‘red-looked anger’ (II. 2. 37) can be connected to that which Paul justifies in Ephesians 4. 25-26: ‘Wherefore cast off lying, and speak every man truth unto his neighbour, for we are members one of another. | Be angry, but sin not’. Anger, like Paulina’s, prompted by a commitment to truthfulness, rather than by personal malice or desire, is justified by Pauline doctrine. In earlier chapters I suggested that malcontentedness tonally echoes a Protestant tradition

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74 On the contemporary connection between witchcraft and violent female speech, see Kirilka Stavreva, Words Like Daggers: Violent Female Speech in Early Modern England (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), pp. 71-102.
76 Diehl, “‘Does not the stone rebuke me?’”, pp. 70-71.
of plain and frank speech, which itself draws on Paul’s rhetorical style. Shakespeare makes use of the same traditions in his representation of Paulina.

My reading of Paulina alongside Foucauldian parrhesia and St Paul might imply that her speech is always direct and unconcealed, and that the play entirely embraces a Protestant aesthetic of plainness, simplicity, and the rejection of the visual or theatrical in favour of the verbal. Much modern criticism of the play, however, argues the opposite: that given the final scene, in which Paulina presents the quasi-magical transformation of Hermione’s statue into a living woman, the play foregrounds the visual and the mysterious, and therefore affirms or reanimates the enchanted world of Roman Catholicism. From this perspective, Paulina’s frank speech in the earlier acts appears incompatible with her orchestration of the visual spectacle of the final scene, which has potentially idolatrous overtones; while Paulina insists on the lawfulness of her ‘magic’, that insistence itself draws attention to the possibility that it might in fact be less than lawful, evocative of both idolatry and witchcraft, practices which, Marion O’Connor explains, were in seventeenth-century Protestant England considered as essentially connected in that both involved the worship of false gods.

The malcontent discourse, though, provides one possible outlook from which the apparent discontinuity, between Paulina’s verbal plainness and her role in the final scene, might be better understood. In Chapter Two, I suggested that malcontentedness in The Malcontent and The Revenger’s Tragedy works to bring together truth and theatricality: the malcontent role in these plays is explicitly performative, yet also claims to reveal the truth. It therefore interrogates the idea that truth is necessarily to do with plainness or unconcealment. Paulina has a similar effect. Her verbal rebukes of Leontes, as discussed, are malcontented in tone, yet her orchestration of the statue scene also has much in common with malcontented characters who often, in some sense, bridge the gap between the play and the audience. Vindice, for example, makes metadramatic references to theatrical stage effects, and Hamlet both produces the ‘The Mousetrap’ and interprets its action for the internal and external audiences: Ophelia tells him that

he is ‘as good as a chorus’ (*Hamlet*, III. 2. 240). Paulina, like Hamlet, choreographs her own visual spectacle. In the statue scene she is a version of the theatrical director, and even, perhaps, a figure for the playwright himself: ‘Prepare to see life as lively mocked’ (*The Winter’s Tale*, V. 3. 19), she tells audiences both on and off stage.

Hamlet stages ‘The Mousetrap’ in an attempt to discover the truth: he hopes that viewing the play will lead Claudius to reveal his crimes, though this test provides only inconclusive results. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Paulina’s theatrical spectacle is not used to discover the truth, but functions to continue her project of bringing Leontes into a state of awareness, about the truth of his jealous and tyrannical behaviour, and about his role in the deaths of his son and wife. Diehl argues that the statue, for Leontes, is a form of ‘visual rebuke’:

> I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me
> For being more stone than it? O royal piece!
> There’s magic in thy majesty, which has
> My evils conjured to remembrance’ (*V. 3. 37-40*)

The statue, Diehl writes,

> shames [Leontes], unsettles his sense, and pierces his soul […] Its magic is not the magic of the Roman Catholic icon, with the power to heal, protect, grant desires, or save, but rather a very different kind of magic, the power to “conjure” evils to remembrance, reminding the viewer of his own impurity.79

Diehl’s position suggests that the statue scene can be understood as visual or theatrical counterpoint to Paulina’s verbal rebukes in the earlier scenes, and I agree that it serves the same function, though perhaps even more effectively. Paulina’s verbal assaults have little effect on Leontes, and even the unambiguous words of the oracle fail to convince him of Hermione’s innocence. He does not begin to come to any kind of realisation until the deaths of Mamillus and, ostensibly, Hermione, and at this point in the play Paulina increasingly emphasises the importance of that which is seen, as well as of that which is heard, in persuading him of the truth: ‘I say she’s dead. I’ll swear’t. If word nor oath | Prevail not, go and see’ (*III. 2. 201-02*). Where words fail, Paulina suggests, sight might succeed, and she spends the next sixteen years in planning the elaborate visual device of the statue, as well as continuing to verbally remind Leontes of his crimes.

79 Diehl, “‘Does not the stone rebuke me?’”, p. 81.
It is the verbal and visual together, then, that proves most effective in leading Leontes to an awareness of the truth. The statue scene does not foreground the visual at the expense of the verbal. It also insists on the power of words; Paulina’s speech is represented as able to bring stone itself to life: ‘Tis time. Descend. Be stone no more. Approach. Strike all that look upon with marvel’ (V. 3. 99-100). The sound of Paulina’s speech has the power to awaken Hermione, and the sight of the transformation has the power to strike marvel and amazement, and also shame and remembrance, into the hearts of the onlookers. Even when Paulina’s verbal rebukes are at their harshest, in II. 3, in fact, she presents Leontes with the infant Perdita, in the hope that the sight of his innocent child might ‘persuade when speaking fails’ (II. 2. 45). Paulina unites the visual and the verbal, and the play therefore begins to suggest that the theatre, a medium both visual and verbal, is a space in which the two might be brought together. While to argue that Paulina is herself a malcontent would be incorrect, her representation through elements of the malcontent discourse works, as in plays like The Malcontent and The Revenger’s Tragedy, to reconfigure conceptions of truth, by bringing together verbal plainness and theatrical spectacle.

At the end of As You Like It, the malcontent Jaques excludes himself from the general festivity that ends the play: ‘So to your pleasures; | I am for other than for dancing measures’ (V. 4. 181-82). An uncomfortable, discordant presence, the malcontent cannot be subsumed into the harmony of the Shakespearean comic ending. Paulina similarly attempts to absent herself from the general joy that greets Hermione’s awakening at the end of The Winter’s Tale:

I, an old turtle
Will wing me to some withered bough, and there
My mate, that’s never to be found again,
Lament till I am lost. (V. 3. 133-36)

At this moment, perhaps more than any other, Paulina has the potential to fully inhabit a version of the malcontent subject position, albeit one that is inspired by personal loss rather than by political or social oppression. Like Jaques, who retreats to an ‘abandoned

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80 Huston Diehl argues that Protestantism itself to some extent links the visual and the verbal; she demonstrates, for example, that while John Foxe’s history of the Reformation, Acts and Monuments, condemns Roman Catholic theatricality it ‘champions another kind of theatre, substituting the theatrics of martyrdom for traditional pomp and pageantry’. Renaissance drama, she suggests, ‘develops a Protestant aesthetics, thereby reforming the stage’, Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theatre in Early Modern England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 24, 8. Malcontentedness, I propose, as utilised by a character like Paulina, plays a key role in this dramatic reformation.
cave’ (*As You Like It*, V. 4. 185), or the title character of Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois*, who at the start of the play has rejected worldly life for a ‘green retreat’ (I. 1. 45), Paulina desires the freedom to reject court life, and express her sorrow in solitude. Leontes, however, refuses to allow this:

O peace, Paulina!
Thou shouldst a husband take by my consent
As I by thine a wife. (*The Winter’s Tale*, V. 3. 136-38)

Paulina is silenced, as Leontes reasserts the patriarchal authority that throughout the play she had threatened. The potential for an independent, female, malcontentedness, that lives on beyond the end of the play in Paulina’s ‘withered bough’, is shut down, and Paulina, Leontes implies, is to be re-assimilated into dutiful female obedience through marriage to Camillo. In one sense, this is because the purpose served by her transgression of authority – the curing of Leontes’s madness – has been achieved, but at the same time, it is gendered: the return to order at the end of the play cannot include her transgressive, independent female voice.

* Paulina, therefore, demonstrates that female malcontented speech is often delimited and regulated to an extent that that of men is not. While Vittoria uses the malcontent discourse both to articulate personal discontent and to attack the patriarchal systems that condemn her, Paulina performs only elements of it, and is unable to inhabit it as a subject position through which to negotiate the experience of personal grief. From one perspective, her malcontented speech actually functions to restore social order, in that it works to temper Leontes’s madness, and then vanishes. Yet in other ways, Paulina’s use of elements of malcontentedness has more destabilising effects. It provides her with a position from which she is able to speak out against authority, and especially patriarchal injustice. It embeds her within the masculine traditions of plain speech, counsel, and religious authority, and in doing so functions to interrogate stereotypical conceptions of women as deceptive. Both Vittoria and Paulina use malcontented language to disrupt misogynist systems and stereotypes, misogyny that malcontentedness, when employed by men, actually functions to perpetuate. Vittoria does this through her malcontented vexing of the masculinist legal system and Paulina by bringing together truth, theatricality, and female speech. Malcontentedness is a masculinist discourse which for men involves anxiety about potential feminisation, but which is also open to
appropriation by women. While on the one hand sharply gendered, on the other, the malcontent discourse points to gender as fluid in ways that, for men, are threatening, but which for women, have the potential to provide access to a standpoint from which to intervene in constraining social conditions, and to speak the truth.
Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates that although malcontented voices occupied marginal positions in relation to the social structures and institutions of their day, malcontentedness was a central concern in early modern English literary culture during the thirty years or so surrounding the turn of the seventeenth century. It emerged out of, and is symptomatic of, a specific set of historical circumstances – a combination of political uncertainty, the threat of foreign wars, changing social and economic formations, and religious conflict – and is both produced by, and productive of, anxieties about the transformations and dangers, both real and perceived, that these circumstances engendered. The malcontent discourse points to the thresholds of class, nation, and gender, and imagines such thresholds as fragile, and easily transgressed. It offers a subject position through which those on the margins of society are able to negotiate, articulate, and sometimes intercede in, the experience of that marginality, and the social conditions that produce it. As a literary mode, malcontentedness is deconstructive. Not only does it threaten the stability of social categories and hierarchies, it points to the margins of texts themselves: malcontented literary texts often refer self-consciously to their status as texts, and malcontented characters in drama are often unsettlingly aware of their existence as characters. Malcontentedness is somehow located in the liminal space between text and reader, or play and audience. It threatens to overspill the boundaries of the purely fictional, and its destabilising effects are therefore construed as threateningly real by contemporary writers.

More widely, my study demonstrates the extent to which malcontentedness was part of a broader early modern interest in questioning recognised ideas and ways of knowing. Malcontentedness asks epistemological questions: it is a way of experiencing and interacting with the external world that involves the constant questioning of the established and the ordinary. Malcontentedness works, in Malevole’s words, ‘as gum into taffeta, to fret’ (The Malcontent, I. 2. 13-14): it is an irritating, frustrating, often obnoxious force, that works to expose, and therefore construct, reality as discordant rather than harmonious, and to make the comfortable uncomfortable. I have demonstrated that it has this effect both within specific early modern texts, and within wider society, and also that it frustrates and vexes as an object of study. Malcontentedness is contradictory, slippery, and multiple. It juxtaposes apparently
opposed concepts – masculine and feminine; disguise and reality; Protestant and Catholic; truth and falsehood; surface and depth; inside and outside; native and foreign – yet without unifying them in any straightforward or comfortable way. Indeed, this thesis came out of my feeling that while the stock figure approach to malcontentedness points to a clear concern with the experience of loss and lack, and its verbal expression, on the part of early modern writers, it fails to do justice to the often exasperating complexity of the characters and texts that it designates. I aimed to find a way of approaching malcontentedness that stayed with this difficulty, and which considered its effects and functions, rather than attempting to resolve it.

The approach that I have taken to this topic opens up a number of questions that merit further study. For example, the contribution of the malcontent discourse to sixteenth and seventeenth century debates about the place of the theatre in early modern English culture deserves further consideration. By showing that malcontentedness draws aesthetically on Protestant Reformation texts, my thesis contributes to recent scholarly questioning of the notion that the early modern theatre was a primarily secular institution. As my discussion of *The Winter's Tale* in Chapter Four demonstrates, malcontentedness reconceptualises ideas about truth, showing to be performative as well as plain, visual as well as verbal; malcontentedness might therefore make a meta-dramatic claim for the theatre, a form that unites the visual and the verbal, as itself truth-telling, and therefore play a part in defending the theatre from its Puritan critics. Steven Mullaney’s account of the spatial and ideological marginality of the early modern theatre as, ‘a freedom, a range of slightly eccentric or decentred perspectives, that gave the stage an uncanny ability to tease out and represent the contradictions of a culture it both belonged to and was, to a certain extent, alienated from’, in fact, could easily also apply to malcontentedness. Do the disruptive effects of malcontentedness, then, perhaps condense those of the early modern theatre more widely?

The revisionist approach of my discussion in some ways limits its scope, by making it necessary to reconsider a number of the characters labelled malcontents by earlier scholars, in order to demonstrate the ways in which they engage with a much wider and more complicated discourse than previous work allowed. Yet my consideration of non-dramatic texts in Chapter One, and of those normally excluded from the malcontent category – women – in Chapter Four, opens up exciting

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possibilities for future exploration of the appearance of malcontentedness as a literary mode in texts which do not necessarily include such patently malcontented characters as Malevole or Bosola. The use of a malcontented tone in the seventeenth-century pamphlet wars briefly touched on in Chapter Four in relation to Constantia Munda, for example, certainly merits further attention. Further consideration of the ways in which other forms of writing than drama engaged with and utilised malcontentedness as a mode, moreover, has the potential to open up new questions about the interactions between dramatic and non-dramatic writing in the period.

This thesis focuses on a relatively narrow period of time; the earliest texts I consider date from the emergence of the discourse in the 1580s, and the latest I explore in depth is The Duchess of Malfi, likely written in 1612 or 1613. Another area that would therefore benefit from further exploration is if, and how, the malcontent discourse continues and develops into the later part of the seventeenth century. Does malcontentedness vanish with the closure of the playhouses in 1642 due to the Civil War, for example, or does it persist in other, different ways? It seems no coincidence that the malcontent discourse, which is so deeply enmeshed with the experience of marginality and uncertainty, reached its peak at the threshold between two centuries. Did something akin to malcontentedness arise in literature at the turns of later centuries, then? Might it be possible, for example, to draw parallels between the emergence of the malcontented literary mode in the late sixteenth century, and the emergence of literary and artistic modernism in the late nineteenth century? Both involve self-consciousness about form, and are concerned with the disruption of established modes of thought and institutions; could the sense of dissolution or fragmentation in the work of modernist writers and artists, therefore, find parallels in the deconstructive satire of the early modern malcontent?2 Similarly, what does malcontentedness have to tell us about our present moment, a period marked by instability and uncertainty on a global scale? These questions are far beyond the scope of this thesis, yet they demonstrate that the recovery of malcontentedness as a literary discourse has potentially far-reaching applications.

2 The illustrations for Shakespeare’s Timon of Athens – a play which I did not have the space to consider in this thesis, yet which is certainly malcontented in tone – created by the modernist writer and painter Wyndham Lewis in 1912 lend weight to this connection. They suggest that he saw something akin to the brutality of modernity in Shakespeare’s most misanthropic of plays. In his 1927 book on Shakespeare, in fact, Lewis sees what, drawing on Marston’s The Malcontent, he calls ‘the altoriento type’, or the ‘cynical railer’ (the malcontent by another name), as ‘the master-motive of [Shakespeare’s] work’, The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare (London: Richards, 1927), pp. 236, 201. For Lewis, what was most relevant about Shakespeare for the early twentieth century was his preoccupation with malcontentedness.
I wish to finish, in fact, by suggesting that malcontentedness might encourage us to reconsider our own interpretative practice. Rita Felski has recently drawn attention to the tendency among literary scholars to a mode of reading ‘driven by a spirit of disenchantment’, and figured in spatial metaphors: digging down into a text, uncovering or exposing its meanings. Malcontentedness, on one level, does exactly this. It claims to remove the veil from the world’s villainy, to expose the discord hidden by an apparently illusory harmony. But at the same time, in malcontented texts like those explored in this thesis, the idea of truth, or meaning, is reconceptualised, located in surfaces as well as depths, in the performance, in the space between text and reader, or frustrated entirely. Felski asks us to ‘revitalize and reimagine’ interpretation. ‘Rather than looking behind the text’, she writes, ‘we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible’. Somewhat paradoxically, malcontentedness also reimagines critique. It signals an interrogative mode which ranges across surfaces as well as peering into depths, which searches for contradictions and does not attempt to resolve them, and which stays with the uncomfortable and the discordant, without seeking harmony.

4 Felski, p. 10.
5 Ibid., p. 12.
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