Renaissance Remix'd: A Travesty of *The White Devil*

All technologies of mechanical choice and chance operations provide poetic
inquiry with the means for fascinating studies of language and learning.
(James, 2009, p. 60)

INTRODUCTION

Digital tools for inquiring into literacy practices for students, educators and

ethnographers are plentiful: i.e., search engines able to locate articles within a library's electronic

database, correspondence within a wide array of corpora texts and n-gram charts that display

frequencies of phonemes, words and concepts. Nearly all printed material has been scanned,

uploaded and could be found in a variety of databases, some password protected and others

requiring a credit card or PayPal account to access. Gribbin (2013) points out in his writing about

the potential of quantum computers how all computers, tablets and smartphones alike, are

programmed so that each functions as "a virtual machine in its own right, so a single computer

can simulate other computers" (p. 46). The processing power of digital tools begin to resemble a

play-within-a-play bringing to mind Baudrillard's (2004) writing on simulation or Ryan's (2006)

"make-believe metalepsis" (p. 227) in technological imaginary world. The paper recounts my

attempt to reconstruct the text of a stage play using digital tools to inquire into the alchemical

changes lurking in the words of an English Renaissance playwright.

Specifically, I am inquiring into the transformation a text through the Travesty generator

on Global Telelanguage Resources (GTR) Workbench website. As a "digital studio for

language" (Ayre, 2017) newly revised in 2016 for the Electronic Literature Organization

Conference & Media Arts Festival at the University of Victoria, Canada, there is a scarcity of

academic documentation on the current project. The Travesty generator, on the other hand, has a

history tracing back to the early days of digital text prior to first iteration of the World Wide Web

(Web 1.0) in 1991. The computer program Travesty initially appeared in a magazine article by its creators Kenner & O'Rourke (1984), followed by Hartman (1996) and Funkhouser & Baldwin (2007), each author impressed by the program's somewhat whimsical ability to scramble a text based upon the selected n-gram, or units of language. The higher setting for an n-gram produces a text subtly changed from the original, while a low n-gram setting creates "essentially random nonsense" that still seems to "preserve many 'personal' characteristics of a source text" (Kenner & O'Rourke, 1984, p. 449).

My attempt to breakdown and reassemble a 17th century dramatic text through GTR Travesty generator started as a way to better understand the quicksilver mind of English playwright John Webster, and my poetic inquiry process became much like an alchemist's search for the elusive Elixir of Life. Jung (1993) explores of alchemical practices in relation to better understanding the conscious (and unconscious) through a seemingly "unending series of futile and barren chemical experiments" (p. 241) and this observation became an apt metaphor for my poetic inquiry into Webster's *White Devil*. Each attempt to make meaning from a Travesty-generated text involves what Hartman (1996) describes as reading "nonsense all day for several long days" (p. 64) and becoming more aware of the process than the end-product text.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

My initial interest in the Travesty generator is related to Tom Stoppard's (1974) play *Travesties*, which features Modernist authors such as James Joyce and Tristan Tzara in dialogue with each other. Stoppard's play takes the dialogue into playful directions, lines broken up between allusions to Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, limerick poetry and Dadaist cut-up poetry. In discussing his writing process, Stoppard tells Gussow (1995):

> I don't write plays with heroes who express my point of view. I write
>
> argument plays. …Tempermentally and intellectually, I'm very much on
>
> Joyce's side [in the play's argument on art], but I found it persuasive to
>
> write Tzara's speech. Faced with the problem of writing a scene, I found
>
> things to say for Tzara. (p. 35)

There is a sense that the playwright is not in complete control of the dialogue, but allows for a flow of words to match Joyce's stream of consciousness or Tzara's Dadaism. Even with Stoppard's thoughtful reflections on his writing process, it is just one interpretation of how the text came into being, similar to what Smith (2016) examines in Stoppard's plays (in addition to the poetry of Tzara) and their use of cuts to Shakespeare's plays. No biographer or scholar can say with certainty what authors such as Stoppard, Joyce or Tzara truly meant in their literary work, even with backstage interviews, critical commentary or published manifestoes. There is less certainty when it comes to English Renaissance playwrights such as Shakespeare, Jonson and Webster, when the playwrights had little control over the publication of the plays, let alone evidence of how they were received. Jonson, in addition to writing a play titled *The Alchemist* (a thoroughly-researched comedy about swindlers posing as alchemists), the playwright took pains to publish his collected work with explanatory introductions (Jonson, 2012). Webster may seem overlooked in literary studies, as mentioned in Coleman (2010), yet there are significant mentions of other worlds seen through Galileo's telescope, atomies and infinite space to make his play curiously more modern than his contemporaries. "The very texture of *The White Devil*" Goldberg (1987) explains "seems to express the chaos and loneliness that Webster sees as basic to the human condition" (p. 73), feeling one's way through "the maze of conscience" (Webster, V. iv, 115) interpreted through Webster's words.

The inner working of the mind, for many the question of consciousness, remains as much of a mystery to the earliest natural philosopher as the most recent cognitive map. Several authors (Ellrodt, 2015; Tribble, 2011) see the production of dramatic plays performed on the Renaissance stage as an exploration of consciousness in a relatively emergent medium: live performance of soliloquies. In Goldberg's (1987) analysis of John Webster's plays, she describes his literary period thus: "there never existed a finer instrument for the expansion of communal consciousness than the Elizabethan-Jacobean theatre" (p. 6). My own experience reading such plays as *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* are of a playwright in touch with frustrations and fears of a literate portion of the London held back from fortune by an oppressive ruling class. Falk (2014) declares Shakespeare's interest in contemporary sciences as evidenced throughout his play, and while Webster's plays are overlooked in favour of contemporaries like Jonson and Donne. Reading and rereading Shakespeare and Webster's plays had led me to wonder about the choice of words, particularly ones that other dramaturgical scholars (Artaud, 1958; Bogart, 2007) have written about staging reality and the alchemical transformation.

METHOD & RATIONALE

James (2009) writes of "two modes of investigation" poetic inquirers may adopt in the selection and analysis of the digitally cut-up text. The first way of inquiring can be likened to diving into the ocean, either carefully looking before one leaps into the textual data that seeks "specific features addressing the preconceived notion of significance" (p. 62). The other way involves diving in headfirst, yet adapting one's senses to unfamiliar poetic environment, "to dwell within the text until resonances become audible and interpretable" (p. 62). My choice in running Webster's play through the GTR Workbench started off with the look-before-you-leap mode, as I had noticed after a couple readings of the play proper that certain words recurred. One

example from *The White Devil* that set me off on this inquiry was a Latin phrase one of the characters speak in fifth act: "*cogita quantum habeas meritorum*" (Webster, V. iii, 137-8: think how many good deeds you have done). It would be tempting to run the scene through the Travesty generator to see where "quantum" ends up in the resulting data, yet it would only be a curious connotation rather than revealing Webster's ahistorical foreknowledge of quantum physics. On the other hand, "alchemy" is a word that makes two slightly more meaningful appearances in Webster's play and would serve as an indication of the playwright's grasp of prescientific natural philosophy. Following the same spirit as James' (2009) second inquiry mode, Adam McLean's commentary for the 17th century text *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (Anon., 1991) attempts "to allow the inner structure of the *Chemical Wedding* to unfold itself" (p. 111). My analysis of the Travestied text of Webster's *White Devil* requires the same patience to discover the unfolding data.

My first attempt at generating a Travesty text of the Webster's (2004) play produced the following text, which I have tidied up somewhat by assigning stage directions and speakers' tags (in italics) as well retaining a sense of the iambic pentameter line (with capitalized initial letters). I copied entire play from beginning to end based on the Project Gutenberg edition and entered it into the GTR Workbench with the Travesty setting at its highest (n=6).

> "THE SCENE – – ITALY
> ACT I SCENE I
>
> *Enter Count Lodovico, Antonelli, and Gasparo*
> *Lodo.* Banish'd!
> *Ant.* It griev'd me much to hear the sentence.
> *Lodo.* Ha, ha, O Democritus, thy gods
> That govern the whole world! courtly reward
> And punishment. Fortune's a right whore:
> If she give aught, she deals it in small parcels,
> That she may take away all at one swoop.
> This 'tis to have great enemies! God's quite them.

Your wolf no longer seems to be a wolf
Than when she's hungry.

Gas.   You term those enemies,
Are men of princely rank.

Lodo.   Oh, you slave!
You that were held the famous politician,
Whose art was poison.

Gas.   And whose conscience, murder.

Lodo.   That would have broke your wife's neck down the stairs,
Ere she was poison'd.

Gas.   That had your villainous sallets.

Lodo.   And fine embroider'd bottles, and perfumes,
Equally mortal with a winter plague.

Gas.   Now there's mercury —-

Lodo.   How! how! I hope you will not got to't here.

Fran.   Nay, you must hear my dream out.

Zan.   Well, sir, forth

Fran.   When I threw the mantle o'er thee, thou didst laugh
Exceedingly, methought.

Zan.   Laugh!

Fran.   And criedst out, the hair did tickle thee.

Zan.   There was a dream indeed!

Lodo.   Mark her, I pray thee, she simpers like the suds
A collier hath been wash'd in.

Zan.   Come, sir; good fortune tends you.
I did tell you I would reveal a secret:
Isabella, The Duke of Florence's sister, was empoisone'd.
By a fum'd picture; and Camillo's neck
Was broke by damn'd Flamineo, the mischance
Laid on a vaulting-horse.

Fran.   Most strange!

Zan.   Most true.

Lodo.   The bed of snakes is broke.

Zan.   I sadly do confess, I had a hand
In the black deed.

Fran.   Thou kept'st their counsel.

Zan.   Right;
For which, urg'd with contrition, I intend
This night to rob Vittoria.

Lodo.   Excellent penitence!
Usurers dream on't while they sleep out sermons.

Zan.   To further our escape, I have entreated
Leave to retire me, till the funeral,
Unto a friend i'th'country: that excuse
Will further our escape. In coin and jewels
I shall at least make good unto your use

> An hundred thousand crowns.
> *Fran.*   Oh, 'twas well!
> We shall not want his absence past six days:
> I fain would have the Duke Brachiano run
> Into notorious scandal; for there's naught
> In such cursed dotage, to repair his name,
> Only the deep sense of some deathless shame.
> *Mont.* It may be objected, I am dishonourable
> To play thus with my kinsman; but I answer,
> For my revenge I'd stake a brother's life,
> That being wrong'd, durst not avenge himself.
> *Fran.* Come, to observe this strumpet.
> *Mont.* Curse of greatness! Sure he'll not"

For the most part, the resulting text resembles the play proper, and at first glance one might

safely assume that it is a simple copy and paste of the opening scene. The first eleven lines, for

instance, are word-for-word the dialogue between Lodovico, Antonelli, and Gasparo, with an

almost seamless transition into ACT V SCENE III at the end of the eleventh line "Oh, you slave!"

The travestied text weaves in lines from the additional characters of Francisco, Zanche and

Monticelso from other parts of Webster's original, ending with a snippet of dialogue from ACT II

SCENE I after Zanche's line "An hundred thousand crowns." The cut-up text, even in this brief

excerpt, retains the misogyny and aggressive Machiavellianism typical of Protestant English

depictions of the Catholic Italian court. Coleman (2010) writes of the play's (and the

playwright's) "aesthetic relativism" that in the example of *The White Devil* "becomes wedded to

the content of his concern" (p. 80) of a world without morality or absolute truths. Goldberg

(1987) further elaborates on this theme by mentioning how the play's major characters "are

singularly conscienceless" (p. 72) and how difficult it would be for audiences to determine the

good guys from the bad. The challenge of my inquiry into the Travesty-generated text was to

find evidence of the playwright's view of conscience and its association to the more modern term

consciousness (Strohm, 2011), yet I needed to break down the play into scenes, run them each through the GTR Workbench and develop more of systematic process.

The next approach I took to cutting up the text, had a more alchemical constraint based upon the twelve stages of alchemical operation from Josephus Quercetanus (Jung, 1993, p. 239). My analysis began with a Travesty-generated text for each scene for all five acts (sixteen scenes in total), alternating between high and low settings. As with the example above, high settings closely followed the dialogue for each scene while the low setting gave a jumble of lines that Hartman (1996) describes as to "make Shakespeare talk very thickly through his hat" (p. 57). Once a text was generated, it might be combined with other scene from the same act and put through the Travesty Workbench again, using a different setting. Some of the more intriguing examples were when a low-setting text got reassembled at a high setting, such as the "Coagulatio" text for the third act combined that had already went through the "Putrefactio" stage:

> ACT III
>   Savoy Lawyer, when several kind of Vittoria,
> *Enter French Ambassador.*
>   Thou hast scarce maintenance
>   To gull suspicion.
>   O poor Charity!
>   Do you understand Latin.
>   Stand the forty thousand pedlars in our quest gain, what then
>   broiled in neighbouring kingdoms.
> *Fr.*   Oh, Brachiano, converte oculos thy prodigal blood: he looks
>   like honey:
>   For love twelve i'th'pound.
> *Fran.* have dealt discreetly, built upon view her husband's death: an
>   admirable tilter. carried his stalking horse,
>   This devil would not ill; wear sheep-skin linings, a blooming
>   hawthorn–
> *Vit.*   At your pleasure, 't, how near know we seldom found fresh
>   chamois. got?
> *Mont.* I would serve; rich gown under him.
>   Shall prove but kissed one by all mirth, thee them.

>Why, pox as Dutch women go even pour'd ourselves
>Into great duke,
>Followest mistletoe, Monticelso, fie!
>Ambass

Funkhouser & Baldwin (2007) would call such an example "cyborgain poetry," being a literary work "cocreated by humans and digital machinery" (p. 78). James (2009) writes in favour of such "digital poetic inquiry" as a step "toward critical and creative literacies that signify within the dynamic interplay and exchange of artificial and human intelligences" (p. 71). Reading the above text with such an understanding illuminates Webster's worldview while presenting a poetic interpretation of the play. To reiterate Goldberg (1987) and Coleman's (2010) point about relativism and being unable to tell the good characters from the bad, the Travesty generator creates a play without plot, characterization or context, closer to what Artaud (1958) finds beneath a texts' poetry "there is the actual poetry, without form and without text" (p. 78) and possibly a consciousness without psychology.

FINDINGS

The final stage of the play's transformation is based upon the final stage of the alchemical process, what Quercetanus calls Projectio and is the combination of the Travestied text reinserted into Project Gutenberg's ACT III SCENE II and augmented with speech heading. A transcript of the proceeding stages for this scene is available on this link to my class blog: https://blogs.ubc.ca/narrativeandpoeticinquiry/2017/04/06/the-white-devil-gtrd-procedural/.

>ACT III SCENE II
>
>*Enter Francisco, Monticelso, the six Lieger Ambassadors, Brachiano,*
>*Vittoria, Zanche, Flamineo, Marcello, Lawyer, and a Guard.*
>
>*The Arraignment of Crusadoes*;
>
>*Mont.* Would those apples travellers report
>   To our examination.

> *Brach.* Sir, had you not suit a strange tongue?
> *Fran.* Put up your peace!
> *Mont.* [*to Francisco*] But that.
> *Flam.* You see, the hard pennyworth your kindness
>   Were come from thence a thousand ducats,
>   Put up your papers in hanc pestem,
> *Mont.* That preachers are charm'd silent.
> *Marc.* Sir, pray cease to church.
> *Vit.* Put up your kindness: 'pothecary should do 't.
> *Mont.* Now, Marcello,
>   Put up your language!
> *Brach.* Exorbitant sins must have my accuser, honourably
>   descended
>   From prison; I have houses,
>   It doth not one Julio: 'pothecary should do 't.

Much like Hartman's (1996) *Virtual Muse*, I have engaged in the process of altering the text with the Travesty generator, reading "and when I couldn't read any more, I stuck with the best I'd found" (p. 64) in this case a scene based upon "The Arraignment of Vittoria" (the only scene named in the stage directions for *The White Devil*). My Projectio text has created "the Arraignment of Crusadoes," an absurdly grandiose mockery of legal proceeding and state-enforced morality (the *crusado* being a Portuguese coin bearing a Christian cross on one side). Many of conscienceless main characters appear in the scene, and the generator randomly assembles dialogue for some of them. What is remarkable about this machine-wrought poetry is how many lines hone in on the limits of language: "strange tongue," "charm'd silent" and "Put up your language!" This last phrase can be traced back to a line spoken by the character Francisco (as opposed to Flamineo in the above text) "Put up your papers in your fustian bag–[*Francisco speaks this as in scorn*" (Webster, III. ii, 47) as he chastises the overly-eloquent Lawyer for his Latin phrases such as "hanc pestem" originally assigned to the Lawyer.

The same character receives abuse from Vittoria (and her lover Brachiano) as she derisively calls the Lawyer an apothecary:

> *Vit.*   Surely, my lords, this lawyer here hath swallow'd
>   Some 'pothecaries' bills, or proclamations;
>   And now the hard and undigestible words
>   Come up, like stones we use give hawks for physic.
>   (Webster, III. ii, 36-39)

Once again, it is an attack on the Lawyer's language, so it is only fitting that the Travesty's Projectio text–even without a reader's knowledge of the relationship between characters in the play proper–would demand "put up" or cease any attempt to make meaning from language. Perhaps the GTR Workbench has a sense of when enough is enough, and ordered the generated words to prevent me from going beyond the Projectio stage? I am left to wonder about the apothecary and what this person should do.

SIGNIFICANCE

In a contrast between Oriental and Occidental theater styles, French poet and playwright Antonin Artaud (1958) urges his readers to do away with the West's obsession over the written text, calling it "the mere projection of physical doubles that derived from the written work" (p. 73). Instead he declares an affective and alchemical aesthetic for his Theater of Cruelty that is based upon gesture, sound, space and light that doubles reality similar to the Balinese performers who inspired him. His groundbreaking book even begins with a chapter on the plague–hanc pestem–and proceeds to mention one of Webster's contemporaries John Ford, author of the especially cruel play *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*. It feels like there is a synchronistic connection between Webster's 'pothecary and the avant-garde Artaud, yet the latter was adamantly opposed to psychologizing theatre that he seems unlike to fit into this quasi-medical role.

Another contender for the role of 'pothecary might be American theatre director Anne Bogart (2007) who is inspired by Artaud's sense of double-ness of theatre: what an audience sees "has an equal counterbalance in the unseen" (p. 89) that connects the material stage with the

audience's imagination. Bogart's career spans continents, almost a conjunction of the East-West

dyad presented in Artaud's book: she trained as a director in North America and Europe, and hit

her creative strive in her collaboration with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki from 1992 onward.

Alchemy is one of the "multiple magnetic forces fundamental to the art form" (p. 64) Bogart

writes about, and there are many knowing reference to quantum physic's uncertainty principle in

her writing, inspired equally by scientists like Schrödinger and Einstein as well as philosophers

like Heidegger and Wittgenstein. One further source of knowledge that gives shape to Bogart's

sense of theatre also comes from outside the field of dramatic arts, but gives a fitting observation

on the seen/unseen double-ness of Artaud and Bogart's theatre practice:

> The artist's job is to get in touch with the dark places of the soul and then
> shed light there. … The dark places of the soul that haunt our dreams are
> understandably matched by the tendency to shut out the issues with the
> busy work of the daylight hours. But without looking into those dark
> places, as Carl Jung suggested, we will lose touch with our essential
> humanity.
>
> (Bogart, 2007, p. 11)

It may seem like a bitter irony for Artaud, who suffered nearly a decade at the electroshock-

wielding hands of psychologists, to be connected through Bogart to the psychoanalyst Jung, yet

the three of them are connected by an appreciation of alchemical influences that linger between

the known and unknown, conscious and unconscious. The voice that speaks loudest to me in the

Projectio text is that of the "wounded healer" (Dunne, 2015) as Webster's true 'pothecary, Carl

Jung.

It is here, in my conclusion that I return to one of the sources that inspired my "busy

work" with the Travestied *White Devil* and the GTR Workbench. Much of what I was reading at

the start of my digital cut-up poetic inquiry began with Jung's (2010) research into a

phenomenon he describes as "synchronicity" that is "no more baffling or mysterious than the

discontinuities of physics" (p. 102) where unconscious images (Bogart's darkness) imprint themselves on the conscious mind (like Artaud's double). Jung's biographer Dunne (2015) summarizes this theory by asserting that the "point of a synchronous event is its meaningfulness to the experiencer, which in turn signals the larger forces of life operating in the background" (p. 187). I chose the Webster's play *The White Devil* out of all the play-scripts sitting on my bookshelf, from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Stoppard: *Julius Caesar* was the first time I noticed the word "alchemy" in one of Shakespeare's plays, as well as its influence on the structure of the play itself, a textual note in Jonson's (2012) *The Alchemist* first alerted me to the twelve stage of alchemy ending with projection, and two characters from Stoppard's (1975) *Travesties* transmuted from one book into another when James Joyce and Tristan Tzara appeared in chapters by James (2009) and Smith (2016) that both describe the cut-up process. Jung (2010) describes the "old dream of the alchemists" that I above called the Elixir of Life "has become a reality in [Jung's] own day… a veritable goldmine for the psychology of the unconscious" (p. 97). While many of the books I consulted during preparations for my poetic inquiry with the GTR Workbench were printed in books, a majority of the plays and prose at least until Artaud's time were physically put to paper by the authors' hand (Jung reportedly had secretaries' hands involved), my study digitized every word to include in this essay. In fact, each quotation used in this essay can be entered into the Travesty generator (with the exception of Webster's play already workbenched) for a summative analytical cut-up poem:

> All technologies of investigation
> specific features addressing the busy work
> has an equal counterbalance in own
> day for the Arraignment of Vittoria
> the human condition the experiencer,
> so a source text until resonances become
> audible and creative literacies that signify
> within the soul and exchange of writing

a veritable goldmine for physic.
a reality in the Arraignment of Crusadoes
strange tongue, this as Carl Jung suggested,
you slave! An hundred thousand crowns.
The very texture of physical doubles
that signify within the daylight hours.
…
a veritable goldmine for physic.
wounded healer busy work synchronicity
no more baffling or proclamations;
And now the expansion of physical doubles
that signify within the experiencer, you slave!
An hundred thousand crowns. The dark places,
cocreated by the discontinuities of his hat
cyborgain poetry, as basic to dwell within
the problem of The White Devil seems to shut out
the maze of significance to unfold itself
Oh, but I write argument plays.
…
The very thickly through his hat cyborgain poetry,
without text unending series of language
and loneliness that derived from the discontinuities

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