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A Liar Tells the Truth: the Dramatic Function of the Vice in *Cambises*

Abstract

The nature of the Vice's function in Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (1560-1561) is one of the most mysterious and fascinating aspects of this early Elizabethan tragedy. In presenting a new take on the subject, this paper considers some aspects of the figure neglected in previous studies, which set this character apart from others of the same kind. These include the limits imposed by Preston to his role, resulting in the Vice being 'substituted' by the tyrant as the source of evil in the play, and the odd sincerity of the critique to *Cambises'* rule he expresses in his soliloquies, which is in tune with both literary tradition and the opinion of other positive characters. On these grounds, the paper offers an interpretation of the Vice's role as a character used by Preston to openly convey the message at the core of the play, the condemnation of the legitimate king turned tyrant: a message that, by the time the tragedy was being written, was a dangerous one to openly utter.

KEYWORDS: vice; *Cambises*; tyranny; resistance

Introduction

Between the last decade of the twentieth century and the first one of the twenty-first, Thomas Preston's tragedy *Cambises* (printed 1569, but written around 1560-1) enjoyed a new popularity among scholars of early Elizabethan drama. Starting with Eugene D. Hill's paper (1992), the tragedy has been recognised as a complex piece of theatre, the work of a high-profile intellectual dealing with important political topics and echoing the feelings of the English intellectual Protestant elite after the end of the Marian persecution. In the light of this new reputation, the work has been the subject of many studies, which have expanded the view of the tragedy as a politically engaged drama exploring the theme of tyranny and the issues connected to it in a multifaceted and thoughtful way.¹

¹ To mention the most recent examples Ward 2008, Sen 2011, Mathur 2014, Dall'Olio 2017: 491-2.

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One aspect of the tragedy to attract a great deal of attention has been Ambidexter the Vice. This is hardly a surprise, since not only is he the character with most lines in the drama,² but he is also “thematically as well as structurally . . . central to the play” (Hill 1992: 408). He is the absolute protagonist of the comic scenes where he interacts with low-life characters, but he is also able to move in the king’s court, thus tying together the two sides of the dramatic action. He plays an important part at some points in the tragedy: it is because of him that Sisamnes the judge and Smirdis, the king’s brother, fall victims to the tyrant. He also constantly steps out of the fictional world of the play to speak with the audience, commenting on what happened and boasting about his own ability at being duplicitous (or, as he calls it, ‘playing with both hands’). All these data strengthen the impression that Preston “structured his play on a running parallel between Cambises and Ambidexter” (Hill 1992: 427), a fact which did not fail to intrigue scholars, especially for what could mean for the political message underlying the tragedy.³

My object in this essay is that of offering a new interpretation of the Vice’s political function in *Cambises*, by focusing on some aspects of the role which have either gone unnoticed in previous studies, or whose importance to the understanding of the tragedy has been downplayed. In particular, in the first part of the paper, where I review what the Vice does in the play, I will show how Thomas Preston adopted a series of solutions whose result is to heavily undermine the role of Ambidexter as the ‘official’ incarnation of evil in the tragedy. This, in time, invites us to read in a new light the open critique to the tyrant’s behaviour Ambidexter expresses in his soliloquies, a critique which, as I will highlight in the second part, is expressed in such a way as to faithfully echo the literary tradition about Cambises, and is also shared by other, positive, characters inside the play: two factors which end up turning the character into a reliable voice of opposition to the tyrant. Then, in the final part of the paper, I will consider these results in relation to the political and cultural context of the play, in order to understand what moved Preston to use the Vice in such an unorthodox way.

² The Vice has 271 lines on a total of 1190 (Prologue and Epilogue excluded), and he is the only character in the play besides Cambises (who has 255 lines) to constantly appear from beginning to end.

³ After Hill, the most careful analysis of Ambidexter’s political role has been offered by Mathur 2014, which sees the Vice’s role in connection with the political theme of popular resistance to tyranny.

1. What the Vice Does (or Does Not)

As the traditional incarnation of evil, it is the Vice's role to convince either the protagonist or the antagonist of the play he is in to abandon the path of virtue in order to lead them and/or someone else to their downfall and rejoice in it. This was a traditional plot element of the genre of the interludes between the 1550s and the 1560s, from which *Cambises* reprises the character. The usual patterns saw the Vice either talking characters into following their own sinful desires or deceiving them into making an honest mistake with disastrous consequences. A clear example of the first pattern can be found in R.B.'s *Apus and Virginia* (printed 1575, but probably written before 1567; cf. Happé 1972: 273), where Haphazard the Vice persuades Judge Apus to give way to his lust for Virginia; for the second one, a good example can be seen either in Nicholas Udall's *Respublica* (1553), where Avarice the Vice, posing as Policie, deceives the titular character into entrusting him with the rule of the kingdom, or in John Pikeriung's *Horestes* (1567), where the titular character is convinced by Revenge into thinking that his action is approved by the gods, and therefore feels allowed to go on with killing his mother.⁴

Both these dramatic formulae are present in *Cambises*. In his first soliloquy, at the beginning of Scene 2, Ambidexter states his intention to "give . . . a leape to Sisamnes the judge" (2.155),⁵ the dignitary *Cambises* left as regent while he was leading a military expedition to Egypt. In the next Scene, Ambidexter persuades Sisamnes to abuse the power entrusted to him for his gain. This will prove to be the judge's downfall, since in Scene 4 *Cambises*, returned from war, when hearing of Sisamnes' misdeeds sentences him to death, a fate for which the Vice rejoices at the start of his next soliloquy in Scene 6 ("How like you Sisamnes for using of me?", he says to the audience, 6.605). Later, he persuades Smirdis, the king's brother, to retire from court and wait for his time to be king, only to denounce him immediately after to *Cambises*, saying that Smirdis is praying for his death because he thinks he can be a better king. In both these instances, Ambidexter's behaviour is in tune with the role he is supposed to play.

However, a great difference can be found between Ambidexter's actions in *Cambises*, and those of the other Vices. In *Apus*, *Horestes* and *Respubli-*

⁴ It is true that in *Horestes* things are more complicated, since *Horestes*' punishment of Clytemnestra will be ultimately considered an act of justice; however, as Robert S. Miola recently pointed out, this ending does not take away the fact that the Vice's deception is never revealed, and with no intervention of the gods to claim the ultimate justice of what the hero did, *Horestes*' revenge remains ultimately ambiguous (cf. Miola 2017: 159-60).

⁵ All quotes from the tragedy are from Preston 1975.

ca, what the Vice does is quite literally the starting point of the action: it is thanks to him that Apius gives in to his lust for Virginia, Horestes pursues his revenge against his mother and Republica's kingdom falls into corruption and ruin. In all of them, the Vice's intervention disrupts the given equilibrium of the dramatic world and creates a situation that needs to be resolved. On the contrary, in *Cambises* everything Ambidexter does seems to be almost accidental to the tragedy's dramatic action; in fact, Thomas Preston writes the character in a way that makes him almost entirely innocent for the majority of the evil deeds committed in the play. This does not mean that Ambidexter is transformed into a fully positive character, since, as we saw, he still acts as his role requires; however, when seeing his actions in the larger scope of the tragedy, we cannot escape the feeling that, ultimately, Ambidexter's deeds are not the real source of the evil displayed throughout the drama, but rather episodic interventions.

Preston's tragedy can be divided into six sections, each one of them centred around one of the deeds attributed to Cambises in its source, the second book of Richard Taverner's *Garden of Wyshedome* (1547):⁶ the expedition to Egypt (Scenes 1-3), the punishment of the unjust judge Sisamnes (Scene 4), the killing of the son of Praxaspes, a noble who dared to reprimand him for his drunkenness (Scene 5), the murder of Smirdis (Scenes 6-8), the incestuous marriage with a cousin of his and her subsequent death (Scenes 9-10) and finally his own death (Scene 11). Of the four central actions, three of them represent the deeds Cambises commits as a tyrant, that is as a king whose rule is aimed to satisfy his own overbearing desire for power and pleasure, instead of being for the good of his people. In two of them, Ambidexter has no part. He is absent in Scene 5, where Cambises kills Praxaspes' son, and in Scene 9, when Cambises, seeing his cousin, conceives his desire to marry her. He is present in the next Scene, where Cambises holds the wedding feast and, seeing his wife mourning Smirdis' murder, orders her to be killed; however, Ambidexter barely speaks throughout the scene, and when he does, his words express solidarity to the victim ("If that I durst, I would mourne your case", he says to her in an aside, 10.1056). We have here

⁶ Taverner's work was printed for the first time in 1539, but in that edition was comprised of only one book; the second book was added in the second printing, eight years later. I therefore refer to this second edition. The *Garden* was recognised as the main source for the tragedy by Armstrong 1950; the scholar also added that Taverner's version of Cambises' tale was inspired by the one present in Johannes Carion's *Chronica*, which Taverner probably read in Hermann Bonus' Latin translation (1537). It is worth noting that these versions present some details, such as the name of the judge and the insistence on the political relationship between the king and his nobles, which seemed to reveal some knowledge of the original Greek text, unlike the previous literary tradition.

the ultimate paradox: the Vice, the 'official' incarnation of evil, has pity for an innocent victim of the tyrant, a feeling which, since he has never spoken or acted against her (nor told the audience he wanted to), is to be intended as genuine.

As for Smirdis' death, we have seen how Ambidexter fits into it; however, the context in which he acts limits his responsibilities. When he comes on stage, before meeting the Vice, the prince laments the king's vicious habits, and Ambidexter's advice to retire from court is well received by both him and his companions, the allegorical figures of Attendance and Diligence, as a good strategy to ensure his safety, since Smirdis cannot be certain of his brother's love ("I knowe not whether he loove me, or doo me detest", 6.643). Such a beginning is a proof that the characters' environment is already compromised before Ambidexter intervenes, a fact strengthened by this episode happening immediately after the murder of Praxaspes' son, where the Vice was absent. This also gives an interesting meaning to Cambises' reaction to Ambidexter's denouncement:

KING How sayst thou? speake the trueth, was it so or no?
AMBID. I think so if it please your grace, but I cannot tel.
KING Thou plaist with bothe hands, now I perceive wel:
 But for to put all doutes aside, and to make him leese his hope:
 He shall dye by dent of Swoord, or els by choking Rope. (6.685-9)

This dialogue makes clear that Cambises is 'not' deceived by Ambidexter; on the contrary, the king is shown to understand all too well that the Vice is somehow lying. And yet, he still decides to go along with the murder, not because he believes Ambidexter, but only "to put all doutes aside", that is his own doubts about Smirdis possibly being a better king than he is: "Shall he succeed when I am gone, to have more praise than I? / Were he Father as brother mine, I swear that he shall die" (6.690-1). The brief allusion to Cyrus the Great also contributes to clarify the personal reasons behind the tyrant's behaviour, since the previous action of the play clearly established Cambises' feeling of insecurity towards his father, a traditional figure of the ideal monarch for Elizabethan culture (cf. Grogan 2014: 40-57). In Scene 1, he motivated his expedition to Egypt to the Council as a way of being worthy of him (1.6-12); in Scene 5, the son of Praxapes was killed because the noble lord suggested that he was a lesser king than his father; now, Cambises kills his only brother because he may actually prove to be the real heir of Cyrus' greatness. The action of the tragedy maintains a clear distance between the Vice's lies and the tyrant's decision, in order to ensure that, while Ambidexter is certainly responsible for Smirdis' death, he still does not bear all the blame. Smirdis dies because of Cambises' doubts and suspicions, Ambidexter just offers him a pretext to act.

We are thus left with Sisamnes' punishment as the only portion of the tragedy where the Vice's role is completely in tune with his traditional behaviour; however, this episode also represents the only action of Cambises which previous literary tradition recognised as right. Not to wander too far from our play, suffice it to say that in *The Garden of Wyseedome*, Richard Taverner presents this story as both a cautionary tale about the administration of justice ("Thys exemple teacheth them that beare office and rule to remember, that god suffereth not iniustice nor iniury unrevenged", Taverner 1547: 2.18r) and as a proof that even a tyrant can sometimes do some good ("ther is no prince of so dysperate an hope of so naughty a life but that at the less have otherwhyles dothe some honeste acte", 2.17r-v). This reading of Sisamnes' story is maintained in Preston's tragedy, and the dramatist has the positive character of Praxaspes recognize that the king has done a deed of justice (5.478). Therefore, we may conclude that, in this instance, it is not only the Vice who fulfils his role, but the king too is acting for once as his role requires, as the keeper of justice instead of as an autocratic and wilful ruler.

When looking back at the whole play, what is clearly evinced is the dramatic strategy adopted by Preston to seriously undermine the role of the Vice as the incarnation of evil inside the play: Ambidexter bears no responsibility for two of the tyrant's deeds during the tragedy, he is only partially to blame for a third one, and the only one for which he may be deemed entirely responsible constitutes a special case within the drama itself. We may also notice that, in all instances but the last one, the Vice's action is replaced by that of the tyrant himself: Cambises decides independently to kill Praxaspes' son and the Queen and has his own reasons to kill Smirdis. It clearly emerges how Preston wanted to diminish the Vice's action, in order to have the tyrant emerge as the real source of evil in the play, in a way which, while it may seem obvious to us, it was 'not' at the time. Indeed, it would have been totally acceptable for Preston to have the Vice start the moral decadence of the tyrant by convincing him to pursue his desires, and then act as his accomplice and bad advisor, as it happens in *Apilus* and *Horestes*; but this is exactly what Preston chooses 'not' to do. And indeed, this is the one last important point we should make about Ambidexter's role in the tragedy: the moral downfall of the protagonist happens without any intervention of the Vice whatsoever.

This is a point we ought to consider, because it justifies why, in the title of the play as recorded in both its first printed edition and the *Stationers' Register*, *Cambises* is defined a tragedy (cf. Preston 1975: 45, *Stationers' Register Online* [SRO] 1122). As Gordon Braden pointed out (cf. Braden 2015: 373-4), by the time Preston wrote *Cambises*, the term did not yet define a dramatic genre identifiable by way of stylistic features. In most cas-

es, it simply indicated a tale of great, appalling events and their horrendous and bloody outcome. It often involved kings, queens, and other types of political leaders, usually represented as deranged, proud rulers who oppressed the innocent and were eventually punished (usually, but not always, by God) in a violent way.⁷ In this scenario, heavily inspired by the Medieval tradition of *de casibus*, the presence of characters whose choice of evil was not the fruit of a supernatural intervention but of their own will, was nothing new. On the contrary, it may be argued that the absence of a supernatural intervention was what made these tales ‘tragic’ in the first place, since rendered their protagonists fully responsible for what they did. This paradigm was even more strengthened by the rediscovery of Seneca’s tragedies, whose first translations were published when *Cambises* was being written, and which deeply affected Elizabethan readership with their powerful depiction of men completely dominated by their tumultuous passions, deaf to any advice and bent on committing even atrocious crimes to satisfy their own will, without any discernible push from superhuman entities.⁸ In this context, Preston’s depiction of Cambises as a man committing evil out of his own will, with little to nothing cooperation by Ambidexter, should not strike us as a surprise: it is nothing less than what *Cambises*’ first audience could expect by the protagonist of a self-proclaimed tragedy, especially when known as a tyrant from the literary tradition.

However, in the *Stationers’ Register*, the play is also recorded as “an enterlude”, whose ‘title’ is “a lamentable . . . Tragedy full of pleasant mirth” (*SRO* 1122). Such an oxymoron, that would have made Shakespeare’s Theseus laugh for its apparent self-contradiction, is a signal of the mixed nature of the play, and an element that must not be forgotten when we come to interpret Preston’s dramatic choices. On the one hand, the title suggests a strong connection with the dramatic genre of the interludes, whose printed editions promised in their frontispieces to be ‘merry’ and/or pleasant,⁹

⁷ A year before *Cambises*, the first edition of *The Mirror of Magistrates* (1559), edited by William Baldwin, defined ‘tragedies’ the cautionary tales contained in it, involving the crimes and following ruin of sovereigns. In that case, reference was to the content, not to the form, of these stories. Only at a later stage did a more sophisticated theory about tragedy as a literary dramatic genre start to develop, and even then, a strong connection remained with the former interpretation: cf. Braden 2015: 374-5.

⁸ I find *Cambises*’ chronological proximity to the first three translations by Jasper Heywood, *Troas* (1559), *Thyestes* (1560) and *Hercules furens* (1561) particularly meaningful, especially since all three deal with the theme of the subjects’ oppression by tyrannical rulers, both divine and human, and two of them present amongst their characters the figure of a cruel, overbearing tyrant (Atreus and Lycus). Cf. Woodbridge 2010: 132-4.

⁹ Just to make a few examples: *The Play of the Weather* (print. 1533) is “a . . . merry enterlude” (Happé 1972: 139), just as *Respublica* (1553, Happé 1972: 224); *King Darius*

thus establishing a definite set of expectations. And indeed, from the presence of allegorical figures to the alternation between serious and comic scenes, many are the formal elements connecting Preston's tragedy to this early literary genre. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that its readers could see no difference with the didactic works of John Heywood or Nicholas Udall, allegorical, simple stories made to educate their audience while entertaining them.¹⁰ However, by defining Cambises a 'tragedy', i.e. a gruesome story of blood and violence,¹¹ Preston also sets up another set of expectations potentially clashing with the previous ones. This makes Cambises substantially a dual play, both an interlude 'and' a tragedy: a choice which required Preston to undergo a serious rethinking and rewriting of the elements he was using.

The changes made by Preston to the Vice's role are a primary example of this. On the one hand, the Vice behaves as he always did; on the other, if the tyrant, as a cruel, oppressive sovereign, was going to be the dramatic centre of the tragedy, the Vice could no longer be the main agent of evil inside the play. Besides, he could not be shown as the corrupting agent of Cambises, as this would diminish the tyrant's own evil by turning him into yet another victim of the Vice's actions and deprive the story of its tragic quality. Thus, Preston chose to make the tyrant fully and tragically responsible for his actions, with no cooperation nor complicity of the Vice.

As a result of this choice, Preston does 'not' show how the king's decadence begins. All the spectators know about it is what the allegorical character of Shame tells them in his soliloquy, in Scene 4, and he strongly insists on the personal responsibility of the king:

All pietie and vertuose life, he [Cambises] dooth it clene refuse.
 Lechery and drunkennes, he dooth it much frequent:
 The Tigers kinde to immitate, he hath given ful consent.

(print. 1564) is "pretie . . . both pitie and pleasaunt" (*Darius* 1564: A.ir).

¹⁰ The choice of a story of classic ascendance for a dramatic subject did not constitute a difference, since it too was an almost constant feature for the genre: *The Play of the Weather* was an adaptation of Lucian's dialogue *Icaromenippus* (cf. Happé 1972: 142), *Jack Juegler* (1553, cf. Axton 1982: 205) a partial rewriting of Plautus' *Amphitruo*, *Horestes* a staged version of the Atreides' myth (although in a version derived from Medieval romances) and *Apilus*' subject was from Livy (*Ab Urbe condita* 3.41-8).

¹¹ Even though I wouldn't rule out that from the start Preston decided to call its work a tragedy even in a literary sense, similarly to what Norton and Sackville did with *Gorboduc*. If that is so, this makes Preston's choice ground-breaking, since it gave the honourable name of 'tragedy' not to a play that, like *Gorboduc*, tried to imitate the ancient model, but to one that took a previous theatrical, popular genre and elevated it into a new form of drama, with lasting consequences for Elizabethan theatre (cf. Hill 1992: 406-7).

He nought esteemes his counsel grave, ne vertuous bringing up
But daily stil receives the drink, of damned vices cup.
He can bide no instruction, he takes so great delight:
In working of iniquitie, for to frequent his spight. (4.344-50)

The soliloquy takes place after the scene where Ambidexter persuades Sisamnes to follow his desires, and before the king returns home from his military expedition. At this point of the action, Ambidexter and Cambises have not yet met, nor has the Vice manifested any desire to move against the sovereign: the only time he mentioned him, was to say he may come and go from his court (“Now with king Cambices and by and by gone, / Thus doo I run this and that way”, 2.152-3), hardly a declaration of evil intent. As we saw, the Vice will remain absent during the next couple of scenes, where Cambises will first punish Sisamnes, and then kill Praxaspes’ son. The tyrant and the Vice first meet when Ambidexter denounces Smirdis, but by that time Cambises has already fallen, and Ambidexter is more interested in ruining the innocent prince than in contributing to the King’s moral breakdown. We may then conclude that, despite Shame saying that Cambises “receives the drink, of damned vices cup” (4.348),¹² nothing of what Ambidexter does in the play affects the king, whose moral descent into tyranny is depicted as completely autonomous of the Vice’s influence.

To conclude this first part of the discussion, I would like to introduce an interesting piece of evidence. We have already noticed that Ambidexter remains absent during Scenes 4 and 5; when he comes back on stage, in Scene 6, he starts his soliloquy by expressing the following view about Cambises: “The King him self was godly up trained: / He professed virtue, but I think it was fained. / He playes with bothe hands good deeds and il” (6.607-9). Ambidexter acknowledges that the tyrant possesses the same ability he has of “play[ing] with bothe hands”, something which, in the Vice’s mouth, is clearly meant to put both characters on the same moral plane. The interesting thing about this remark is that it is pronounced at a point of the action where the tyrant has already begun to replace the Vice as the main source of evil in the play. Until the end of the tragedy, all the evil deeds that take place in it will be of Cambises’ doing, not of Ambidexter’s, whose contribution to the dramatic action will be of very little importance. It is as if Preston, at this point, wanted to make the ‘substitution’ official: the role of the Vice is being taken over by the tyrant, he is now the

¹² Ward uses this line as a proof that Cambises’ wickedness is of infernal origin; however, I do not think we can read that much into the text (2008: 156-7). While it is true that the imagery of Shame’s soliloquy establishes a connection with the traditional description of Hell in Elizabethan literature of the time, the absence of a scene where Cambises is corrupted deprives this suggestion of every concrete, scenic correspondent.

real source of evil in the play. It was an audacious choice on Preston's part, and was accompanied by another one, which we are going to consider now.

2. What the Vice Says

The ability of talking directly to the audience is one of the traditional features of the Vice. At some point during the action, he steps out outside the dramatic world of the play and is able, for a while, to say literally whatever it pleases him to say. Other than commenting on what happened on stage (as Merry Reporte in *The Play of the Weather*), informing the audience of his schemes (as Jack Juegler at the beginning of the homonymous play), and boast of his own ability to perform evil deeds (as Haphazard in *Apilus*), he could also joke with the audience (as Jack, Revenge in *Horestes* and Haphazard do), perform comic routines which involved them directly, such as reminding them of the presence of his cousin Cutpurse, and make contemporary allusions to recent events, both great and small.¹³ Theatrical convention understood that, when this happened, he spoke honestly to the audience: since he was outside the dramatic action, invisible to the play's other characters, the Vice could openly be himself and speak frankly.¹⁴

All these traditional features can be found in *Cambises*. On his first appearance, at the beginning of Scene 2, Ambidexter, clothed in mock-armor,¹⁵ jokes about his own willingness to fight inferior beings such as flies and snails, and then presents himself to the audience as a character able "with both hands finely . . . [to] play" (2.151), and willing to use his ability to bring ruin and destruction. He informs the audience of his plot against Sisamnes, performs it, and then boasts about his success. In Scene 6, he shares his evil intentions against Smirdis with the audience, warns them of the presence of his cousin Cutpurse amongst them, and at the end of the scene rejoices in the ruin of the prince; similarly, in Scene 8, he informs the audience of his intention to trick the peasants Hob and Lob into fighting each other. However, starting with Scene 6, this type of soliloquy traditional to the Vice is slowly but steadily phased out (in deliberate synchrony with the decrease of his importance in the plot), and is replaced with a stunning novelty: Ambidexter becomes an explicit opponent of the tyrant. This aspect of the character has sometimes been noticed but never fully appreciated. It has been undervalued because it comes from the mouth of a

¹³ Cf. *Jack Juegler* 993-99 and Axton 1982: 16, 202-3 on it.

¹⁴ This has made those moments also really ambiguous, since the Vice's dealings with the viewers ended up being a source of amusement and fun, potentially damaging the moral message at the end of the play: cf. Somerset 1997-1998.

¹⁵ On its symbolic meaning see Wentersdorf 1981.

character traditionally recognised as duplicitous and untrustworthy.¹⁶ It is instead my opinion that here the Vice should be taken seriously, not only because his downplayed role as the evil one dispels shadows of suspicions about his hypocrisy, but also because what Ambidexter says in the soliloquies echoes both previous literary and cultural tradition on tyranny and what other positive characters in the play say about Cambises.

This becomes apparent in his soliloquy in Scene 6 (6.610-2): “It was no good deed, Praxaspes sonne for to kil. / As he for the good deed on the Judge was commended: / For all his deeds els he is reprehended”. Soon afterward he also recognises that the king “some good deeds . . . wil doo, though they be but few” (6.615). These lines sound like a close summary of Richard Taverner’s already recalled words on Sisamnes’ punishment in *The Garden of Wysedome*: albeit a tyrant, Cambises can be just. And yet, his life can only be mentioned as an example of bad rule (“[Cambises] otherwyse as I have sayde, lyved a very tyrannouse and wicked lyfe”, Taverner 1547: 2.18r). What Ambidexter here repeats is nothing more than traditional knowledge, reformulated in a way to suggest that others too disapprove of the king’s behaviour. This is immediately shown to be true: as soon as Ambidexter’s soliloquy ends, Smirdis comes on scene, expressing his dislike of his brother’s attitude (“I like not wel of those his deeds, that he dooth stil frequent: / I wish to God that other waies, his minde he could content”, 6.624-5).

The Vice as a reliable character, expressing what appears to be a shared feeling on the tyrant’s deeds, remains constant to the end of the play, even though, at first, it does not seem to change much in the character’s behaviour. This is what happens in his next soliloquy, at the beginning of Scene 8, which can be easily divided in two distinct parts. In the first one (8.732-45), the Vice pretends to weep for Smirdis, only to laugh about the fate of the young prince: up until that point, he speaks in the traditional way. In the second part, though, Ambidexter shows a more considered view of the fact:

But hath not he [Cambises] wrought a moste wicked deed:
Because king after him he should not proceed:
His owne naturall brother and having no more:
To procure his death by violence sore?

¹⁶ The only exception is Mathur 2014, where Ambidexter’s action is connected to the theme of popular resistance inside the play. The scholar underlines how the Vice, notwithstanding his duplicity, “aids their resistance [of the popular characters] to the status quo” (51) by heightening their rebellious spirits against the tyrant, and in the end “takes such ideas [of rebellion to authority] to their logical conclusion by boasting that he had a hand in Cambises’ death” (ibid.). While I do not think that the play fully supports this interpretation, I still acknowledge Mathur to be the first to recognize the seriousness of Ambidexter’s critique of the king.

In spight because his brother should never be King:
 His hart beeing wicked consented to this thing.
 Now he hath no more Brothers nor kindred alive:
 If the King use this geer stil, he cannot long thrive. (8.745-54)

Once again, Ambidexter voices a view confirmed by other characters. That Smirdis was the only other son of Cyrus had been acknowledged by every character appearing in Scene 6, and that the reason behind his death was Cambises' envy had been made clear by the king's reaction to Ambidexter's denunciation (see above). That the murder of the Prince was unjust will be recognized immediately after this soliloquy by the peasants Hob and Lob, who will echo what Ambidexter is saying here:

Bum vay Naybor, maister king is a zhrode lad.
 Zo God help me and holidam, I think the vool be mad.
 Zome say he deale cruelly, his Brother he did kil:
 And also a goodly yung lads hart blood he did spil. (8.770-3)

And finally, the idea that Cambises cannot prosper long if he continues to behave as he does is not only an anticipation of the end of the tragedy, but is also part of the traditional Elizabethan conception of tyranny (cf. Armstrong 1946: 174-7): a traditional ending for a so-called 'tragedy' and a reminder of what the Prologue had prefigured about the shameful end of Cambises' family after his death ("But what measure the king did meat, the same did Jove commence / To bring to end with shame his race, two yeeres he did not reign", Prol. 32-3). Once again, then, Ambidexter emerges as the purveyor of a reliable, general truth, which boils down to being the moral of the tragedy.¹⁷

Now we come to the Vice's last soliloquy, following the death of the Queen and immediately preceding Cambises' own demise. Like his previous speech, this one too can be divided into two parts, the first (11.1127-38) where Ambidexter laments the death of the Queen, and the second (11.1139-52) where he expresses once again his judgment on Cambises. Unlike the previous soliloquy, though, this time Ambidexter's grief is to be understood as genuine: not only is he blameless of every action against the Queen, not only does he show compassion for her when she is to be dragged to her death, but also no drastic change of tone occurs to signal that what Ambidexter says is a pretence, as in the case of his lament for Smirdis. As a re-

¹⁷ Something which was consonant with both aspects of *Cambises* as a play with two natures. On the one hand, the expression of this moral was in line with the didactic tone traditionally associated to interludes; on the other, the tragic tradition exemplified by texts such as *The Mirror for Magistrates* also implied an ethical judgment on their characters' actions.

sult, his following statements about the tyrant can also be regarded as being genuine:

There is a sorte for feare, for the King doo pray:
That would have him dead, by the masse I dare say.
...
Cambises put a Judge to death, that was a good deed:
But to kil the yung Childe was worse to proceed.
To murder his Brother, and then his owne wife:
So help me God and holidam, it is pitie of his life.
Heare ye? I wil lay twentie thousand pound:
That the king him self dooth dye by some wound.
He hath shed so much blood that his wil be shed:
If it come so to passe, in faith then he is sped. (11.1145-52)

And indeed, these words are wholly consonant with what Ambidexter and others have been saying from Scene 6 onwards. The opinions he gives on the single actions of the king (with Sisamnes' punishment being the only justifiable one) are the same he has been repeating from that scene on, and have been echoed by other characters, while also reflecting a whole literary tradition on tyranny. The idea that Cambises will soon be punished in a way compatible with his crimes is not only a development of the idea already expressed that he could not have a long reign, but, as we saw, it is both an example of traditional thinking about tyranny, and something that has been anticipated in the Prologue of the tragedy. The idea will be taken up again at the very end of the tragedy, where one Lord will say of the tyrant, dead from a wound he got by falling from his horse: "A just rewarde for his misdeeds, the God above hath wrought: / For certainly the life he led, was to be counted nought" (11.1187-8).¹⁸

To summarize what has been observed up to this point, Preston's handling of the Vice makes him a very complex character to deal with. On the one hand, while he still acts as his role requires, his impact on the dramatic action is significantly diminished, to the point that he loses to the tyrant his traditional function of being the main incarnation of evil, thus allowing Cambises to fully display his own 'tragic' character. On the other, he gives voice several times to a critique of the tyrant himself, always aligned either with general Elizabethan thought about tyranny or with the literary tradition involving Cambises. It is also confirmed by what other characters in

¹⁸ Ward 2008: 160 thinks that Cambises' death "remains problematic ... because it subverts the traditional account of his fall", since "Preston fails to present a tragic pathos linked to the tyrant's suffering". While this is certainly true, I will argue that this is exactly Preston's intention, not his failure: the audience is not supposed to feel pathos for the tyrant.

the tragedy say and do. This double aspect makes *Ambidexter* a special case amongst the Vice figures of early Elizabethan drama, and raises the question of why Preston decided to change such a traditional character in such a drastic way. This is what now we are going to consider in the final part of this article.

3. Telling the Truth by Playing with Both Hands

When he wrote *Cambises*, in 1560-1561, Thomas Preston was twenty-three, he was soon to receive his M.A. at Cambridge University (1561), and was just at the beginning of a rather successful academic career. Four years later, he would make such an impression upon the Queen during her visit to Cambridge that she would grant him permission to kiss her hand, and bestow on him the title of *scholar[is] suu[s]* (cf. the entry on Preston in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [DNB]; Hill 1992: 409). In point of fact, he was not at his first attempt in literary writing: he had already written a Latin poem in honour of Martin Bucer and Paul Fagius, the two Protestant academics whose bones were dug up and burnt at the stake during the Marian persecution, and then reinstated in July of 1560 during a public ceremony. In the following years, he would occasionally revert to poetry, either in Latin or in English, most of the time penning politically engaged works on contemporary political and/or religious subjects. The portrait of Preston resulting from these facts gives us the image of a devoted Protestant intellectual, and it is no surprise that criticism has long doubted his authorship of such a popular, rough-shaped work as *Cambises*. However, as Eugene D. Hill has showed, this does not constitute a serious obstacle. Not only is the tragedy a well-thought-out piece of theatre, despite its apparent awkwardness, but in 1560s the use of 'popular' literary genres as instruments to spread faith and educate people was actually recommended and encouraged in Protestant circles (cf. Hill 1992: 410-1).

In this period, Elizabeth's ascent to the throne had given the new generation of intellectuals who had grown up under Marian tyranny new hope for the future. In her first years of reign, the new Queen pursued a politics of reconciliation and tolerance, which seemed to promise a new era of collaboration between the crown and the intellectual elite. This was a relief for all the kingdom, but it held a special meaning for the Protestant community, not just because of the end of Marian persecutions, but also because the presence at court of such eminent figures as Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, alimanted the hope that the Protestant ideal of a completely reformed England could finally be realized. For people like Thomas Preston and other young intellectuals such as Thomas Norton, Thomas Sackville and John Puckering, to name just a few, educated on the Humanist model of the in-

tellectual who acted as advisor to the sovereign, this also meant a chance to go to court and offer their skills to the new Queen, thus fulfilling the purpose of their education. Personal interests collided with religious and civic ideals, and around Elizabeth soon there formed a group of politically engaged, enthusiastic young politicians and intellectuals, united by a common loyalty to the Queen and a desire to act for her good and that of the country.

And yet, they would have to learn that, while Elizabeth might be more tolerant than her sister on some matters, she was not an easy person to deal with, and did not allow free discussion on certain topics. In 1559, with a royal proclamation, Elizabeth officially prohibited “Unlicensed Interludes and Plays” to deal in “Religion or Policy”, and instructed officials to ensure that “they permit none to be played wherein either matters of religion or the governance of the estate . . . shall be handled or treated” (Hughes and Larkin 1969: 115). This was no light matter, since the interludes performed in the houses of the nobility and even in court had always dealt with political matters, and were sometimes used by their authors to deliver advice and admonition to their patrons and even to the king himself.¹⁹ Neither did the queen relax the hold her predecessors had on the press, instead keeping and enforcing the traditional severity towards possible dissident opinions present within it. In this context, authors interested in discussing potentially dangerous political themes had to be very careful in what they said in order to avoid censorship, usually doing so either by constantly modifying their works or by using such literary means as prologues and epilogues as spaces where they could reassure their audience that they did not contain contemporary allusions.²⁰

This was especially true when literary works dealt with one specific subject: tyranny, or, to be more specific, what makes a tyrant and how people should react to his rule. During the Marian persecution, an abundant resistance literature flourished amongst Protestant exiles. According to writers as John Ponet, Christopher Goodman and John Knox, a tyrant was a ruler who acted against the law of God and abused his power for his own benefit, and the people had the right not only to disobey his or-

¹⁹ Cf. Walker 1998 on this subject.

²⁰ Two notable examples of this are *The Mirror of Magistrates* and *Damon and Pythias*, the famous comedy of Richard Edwards (printed 1575, but staged in 1564-1565: cf. King 2001: 32-5). The first one, after being suppressed in its first edition under Mary (1554), underwent a notable series of changes in all following re-printings to satisfy readers and to be aligned with the official view of the kingdom (cf. Winston 2004: 399); the second one opens with a prologue announcing that no contemporary allusion should be recognised in the play: “We talk of Dionysius’ court, we mean no court but that” (*Damon*, Prol. 40; cf. Hill 1992: 425).

ders, but also to depose and even kill him. They supported this theory with examples taken both from the Bible and from Latin literature.²¹ This theory was initially thought to be in contrast with Marian rule, but did not disappear with Elizabeth's ascent; on the contrary, it provided, in 1567, the theoretical ground on which the Scottish nobility justified its uprising against and deposition of Mary Stuart. Elizabeth could not tolerate this view, even more so because it was not just her sister and predecessor Mary who was criticized: some of the Protestant exiles did not spare her own father, Henry VIII, from blame, accusing him of having used the Reformation for his purposes.²² So, during her reign, Elizabeth attended to the development of a new view of the subject, whose full exposition can be found in the *Homilie against disobedience and wylful rebellion* (1571). In this text, the tyrant is identified with the usurper of the throne, against whom people could (and indeed should) rebel; on the contrary, people were not allowed to rebel against a legitimate king, even if he acted in a way unfitting to his rule. All they could do was to pray either for the king to convert to good or for God to remove him.

The relationship between this political and cultural context and *Cambises* has long been recognised and discussed; in fact, it has undergone a slight but significant critical revision over time. William A. Armstrong, the first one to consider it, saw Preston's tragedy as a work upholding this official ideology. Years later, Eugene D. Hill pointed out that it instead presented a more general depiction of tyranny and its evils, especially turn-coating, and also included an indirect but clear criticism of both Mary Tudor and Henry VIII, and advice to the young Elizabeth not to follow in their footsteps (cf. Armstrong 1955 and Hill 1992). More recently, Allyna Ward and Maya Mathur have explored how the tragedy stages various forms of resistance to political power and discusses about their justice (cf. Ward 2008 and Mathur 2014). They have also highlighted how Preston was dealing with topics that were both fairly complex and terribly dangerous: a word spoken out of place could alert censorship, and that would bring about perilous consequences which the young, ambitious intellectual wished to avoid. At the same time, though, Preston wanted his work to express a very clear political message about tyranny, one that the young Protestant intellectual, who had seen Marian tyranny first-hand, desired to voice at all costs. He sought to show the evils of tyranny and condemn the person that

²¹ For an effective review of resistance literature in the 1550s, cf. Woodbridge 2010: 138-49. It is also worth noting that the ideas of resistance literature were the same ones present in Medieval philosophic tradition about the tyrant: cf. Parsons 1942.

²² Cf. Hill 1992: 426-7, where the scholar reports the case of Anthony Gilby, another Marian exile.

was at the heart of it, the king who thought to use his power for his personal gain, broke the law of God and refused the advice of his peers. He probably also intended to warn the new Queen not to follow the same pattern as her predecessors, but to remain faithful to the true nature of kingly power.²³

In my opinion, this is the key to understanding Ambidexter's role, and also why Preston crafted him in a way that was highly unusual for a Vice. He could have had him simply act as a bad advisor and an accomplice to the tyrant; instead, he chose to diminish the impact of his action on the plot, so that the tyrant could emerge as the real disruptor of the social order and its norms. It is not by chance that the only moment the Vice is completely responsible for something evil occurs when he persuades Sissamnes towards his ruin: this, as we saw, is also the only moment in the tragedy when the king acts as he should. In the rest of the play, after the king abandons the path of virtue and turns to tyranny, the Vice is reduced to a figure resembling a parasite or a clown rather than the master of all evil. The king's choice to misuse his position makes him a far more dangerous character for the social order: while Ambidexter's performance of evil deeds constitutes an example of conventionally accepted behaviour (at least from a theatrical point of view), the king, by abandoning his traditional function, jeopardizes the entire society as well as the traditional structures of the dramatic genre of the interlude.

The diminishment of Ambidexter's role as a Vice is accompanied by another startling move on Preston's part: his choice of having him express the moral condemnation of the tyrant, which collides not only with the literary tradition about Cambises and the Elizabethan views on tyranny, but also with the opinions of other, more positive, characters like Smirdis, Hob and Lob, Attendance and Diligence. This is extremely important, because is in stark, and deliberate, contrast with the rest of the tragedy, where denial of freedom of speech is presented as the main consequence of tyranny. Praxaspes' son is killed because his father dared to reprehend the king, the Queen dies because she dares to lament Smirdis' death, Smirdis chooses to remain silent and retire from the court because he knows that it is not safe to be around his brother. In fact, none of them has the chance to speak against the tyrant, all the more so because Cambises, though abusive and oppressive, is still the legitimate king. To accuse him of tyranny means committing high treason, as is proved in Scene 8, where Ambidexter threat-

²³ Bevington (1968: 158) thought it likely that *Cambises* was written for a representation before the Queen, under Leicester's patronage. While no documentary evidence survives, I agree with Hill (1992: 405) that this is not unlikely, given that Dudley did something very similar with Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (cf. Walker 1998: 197-220).

ens to expose Hob and Lob as traitors for their criticism of the king.²⁴ However, the Vice has the possibility to speak outside the dramatic world, in a space where he enjoys absolute freedom, as in the tradition of the interludes: Preston uses this convention to let him deliver what otherwise could not be said, the open and clear condemnation of the king turned tyrant as “the moste evil disposed person that ever was” (6.613).

As final evidence of this, let us consider that Ambidexter is one of the only two characters in the tragedy to openly call Cambises a tyrant, the other one being Smirdis in a vain attempt to convince Crueltie and Murder not to kill him (“Consider the king is a tirant tyrannious: / And all his dooings be damnable and parnitious”, 7.724-5). In this instance, Smirdis uses the word ‘tyrant’ to delegitimize the orders of his brother and save his life: if he is a tyrant, then his power is not legitimate, and he should not be obeyed. However, this way of thinking, as Allyna Ward pointed out (2008: 159-60), was very similar to that of the resistance writers, especially since the word is referred to a king whose title is legitimate. By calling his brother a tyrant, the prince is unwittingly committing high treason. As for Ambidexter, he calls Cambises a tyrant twice during his soliloquies, first in Scene 6 (“this tirant Cambices”, 6.615) and then in Scene 11, this time in coincidence with the only allusion to contemporary events in the tragedy:

What a King was he that used such tyranny?
 He was a kin to Bishop Bonner, I think verely,
 For bothe their delights was to shed blood:
 But never intended to doo any good. (11.1141-4)

When the Vice pronounces these words, he is still in his personal space outside the dramatic world, when theatrical convention allows him to speak freely. Preston takes advantage of this space and uses it to say what otherwise would simply be unspeakable: that the king who abuses his position and rules for his own gain is, indeed, a tyrant, even if his title is legitimate. It was a bold thing to say on a public stage (especially given the unmistakable parallel with recent English history created by mentioning Bonner),²⁵ but that is also the reason why Preston had the Vice say it: in his

²⁴ Like Mathur (2014: 50-1), I do not see any contradiction between Ambidexter’s threat to Hob and Lob and his condemnation of the King. It is not clear whether Ambidexter really means to denounce the two peasants (on the contrary, he seems to suggest to the audience that he is just joking), and in any case his behaviour would still be perceived as conventional.

²⁵ Edmund Bonner (d. 1569), Bishop of London under Mary’s reign (1553-1559), was one of the most infamous upholders of Marian persecutions. His numerous trials of ‘heretics’ made him a particularly hated figure amongst Protestant resistance literature, granting him the nickname of ‘bloody Bonner’. After Elizabeth’s ascent to the throne,

mouth, to inattentive ears, the word would simply have been that of a traditional character, performing his usual routine on stage. Only an attentive eye, stopping to consider the dramatic action as a whole, in its mixture of 'old' elements from the interlude genre, and a 'new', tragic subject, and to reflect on its meaning, would have been able to perceive the author's real game: the way Preston played with both hands just like his character to convey a very disrupting message while seemingly respecting the rules of theatrical genres.

Conclusion

"The trick was to make's one point indirectly, obliquely, one might say, ambidextrously – in such a way that nobody could pin the dangerous argument down if the author wished to evade responsibility": this is how Eugene D. Hill explained Preston's incorporation of dangerous messages in his play without suffering any consequences (1992: 425).²⁶ This paper has shown how Preston's treatment of *Ambidexter* follows this strategy, describing the way the young intellectual and playwright subverted the theatrical conventions around the Vice in order to convey indirect critique of tyranny. Preston undermines the actual impact of *Ambidexter's* deeds on the dramatic action, thus making the tyrant the real source of evil instead of the Vice. He also revised the Vice's traditional address to the audience by having him express a strong condemnation of the titular character, thus turning him into the accuser of the tyrant, who, albeit a legitimate king, rules for his own gain. This was not an easy message in 1560s England, where it risked being seen as an act of high treason. By allowing the Vice to communicate this message camouflaged as the unreliable state-

he was forced to resign his seat, and spent the last ten years of his life in prison. Cf. the entry on Bonner in *Oxford DNB*. The Bonner mention recalled above had been often used by scholars as a confirmation of the playwright's political involvement. For Armstrong (1955: 291-2), it confirmed the close link between the tragedy and the two anti-Catholic ballads ascribed to Preston, thus suggesting not only that it was the same person, but that he also was "a polemical writer" (292). Hill 1992: 417 saw the reference as a way for Preston to make clear the parallel between the Persian kingdom oppressed by Cambises and the recently-ended Marian tyranny: "the allusion . . . makes the connection for anybody who might have missed it." Mathur also supports this view: "By aligning Bonner with Cambises, Preston draws attention to the violence perpetrated under Mary and suggests that those seeking contemporary examples of tyranny did not have far to look" (2014: 41).

²⁶ Specifically, Hill was talking about the fact that Preston was inviting his audience to recognize the figure of Henry VIII in Cambises. However, the idea can be easily widened to embrace other aspects of the tragedy.

ment of an unreliable character, Preston intended to reach a compromise that would allow him to utter that message freely while, at the same time, avoiding censorship. On a superficial level, the Vice was to talk and act as usual, but to attentive eyes, his behaviour and speech would appear much more meaningful and dangerous. After all, one of Ambidexter's tasks, Eugene Hill suggested, was that of alerting the attention of the spectator so he/she might perceive the deep implications of the dramatic action, since "we are the ones whose purses (and lives) are threatened" (Hill 1992: 432).

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