



Four Species of Suspectacle

Gary Watt

Provocations and definitions

This essay originated in a keynote talk delivered at the conference *Reframing Suspicion*.¹ It still retains something of the character of a keynote talk, which is to say that it does not offer a sustained theoretical argument so much as a set of provocations around the conference theme. I will offer four provocations, each of which makes a different point, with each connecting to the others through their shared concern for rhetorical performances in which persuasion, credibility, and doubt are in issue. The “suspectacle” of my title is intended to connect the idea of performance to the idea of suspicion through their apparent shared concern for the visual (as evidenced by the visive “spect” that is shared by the words “suspect” and “spectacle”). The presumptively dominant concern for the visual in the language of (and talk about) suspicion will be critiqued in this essay. My methodology is etymological and philological, which entails suspicion of the surface of words and an excavation of deeper significations. Semantics aside, the core question for us as readers, audience members, and spectators, is to determine whether and to what extent a performance should be believed. This has always been the key question when witnesses are called upon to judge rhetorical performances. To assist the reader in the task of connecting my four provocations, I offer an organising allegory. I was tempted to borrow the metaphor of “reframing” which is supplied by the conference title. It would certainly be neat to imagine my four provocations as the four sides of a frame, but to express my concern for rhetorical persuasion and the doubling or layering of appearances, I have preferred the more dynamic image of the two-team contest known as “Tug-of-War.” This is the English name for a game which no doubt has its equivalents in many countries and cultures. The idea of the game is that a team of people holds one end of a rope which is held at the other end by an opposing team. At the middle of the rope a ribbon is tied which hangs over a centre line drawn on the ground. The challenge is a simple one—to pull the other side over to your side. This is achieved when the central ribbon passes over a line that is marked—one on each side of the field of contest—to indicate the home

¹ Online conference *Reframing Suspicion*, October 14-15, 2021, hosted by CLIMAS, Bordeaux Montaigne University. I am grateful to the convenors and facilitators of the conference, Pascale Antolin, Chiara Battisti, and Anja Meyer. I also acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust through the award of a Major Research Fellowship.

ground of the two opposing camps. It seems a suitable image to describe the persuasive success or failure of a rhetorical performance.

It may be helpful to think of a spectacle as a rhetorical performance that establishes a relationship between actor and spectator in which the spectator will either be suspicious or susceptible. The French etymology of the word “suspect” suggests the activity of placing someone under one’s gaze so as to render them “*sous-spect*.” In other words, if I am suspicious of your performance, I subject you to a double take—I look, I doubt, I look again. I put you under my critical gaze. On the other hand, to say that a spectator is “susceptible” means etymologically that they are “under-taken” (think “*sous-captive*”). If, as a spectator, I am susceptible to your performance, it means that I am taken under your performative spell. Hence the utility of the image of a Tug-of-War—either I am susceptible in the sense of being pulled in and taken under (“*sous-captive*”) your performance, or I am suspicious of your performance in the etymological sense of putting you under my critical gaze (“*sous-spect*”).

The Tug-of-War metaphor is by no means perfect—for one thing it brings in the language of war, which always feels like a failure—but it usefully makes the basic point that a persuasive performance in a contest between two rivals (for example the opposing sides in a political election or in a legal trial) entails not only an effort to establish the strength of one side but also to establish the weakness of the other side. Anyone who saw the popular South Korean television show *Squid Game* (Dir: Hwang Dong-hyuk, 2021), will have seen the ostensibly weaker side win a Tug-of-War contest not through their own strength but by causing their supposedly stronger opponents to stumble. In the zero-sum game that is Tug-of-War, as in those forms of political and legal trial where one side is declared “victor” in a two-way trial, victory can be achieved through one side’s strength, the other side’s weakness, or through a combination of both.

With the allegory of the Tug-of-War in place, we can now proceed to outline two of my four provocations. These are, first, the observation that a “spectacle” (a rhetorical performance) can operate in “believe me” mode and, second, that a “spectacle” can operate in “don’t believe them” mode. Here we see the allegorical utility of the two-way task (to make my side strong and my opponent’s side weak) inherent in a bout of Tug-of-War. When I compete with my opponent for the favourable judgment of my audience, I can win by convincing my audience of my credibility or I can win by convincing my audience of my opponent’s lack of credibility. Of course, it will be all the better for my chances of victory if I can convincingly perform both these sides of the “spectacle.” Accordingly, the first substantive section of this essay will be devoted to rhetorical performance that operates in “believe me” mode, and the

second to “suspectacle” in “don’t believe them” mode. The latter is especially subtle or invidious because the act of calling out my opponent’s lack of credibility performs reflexively to infer my own credibility. The inference runs along the following lines: “because I cast doubt on suspicious or dishonest actors, you can take it that I am an honest actor.” What they lose, I gain. Going forward, I will use the label “credit clause” as shorthand for performance of the “believe me” suspectacle, and “calling out” as shorthand for performance of the “don’t believe them” suspectacle.

Arguably there is a Tug-of-War inherent in the very language of the English word “suspicion,” for at first sight the word has something of the quality that William Empson called the “seventh type of ambiguity” (Empson 202) since the word “suspicion” can simultaneously suggest two opposite meanings. If I say, “I am suspicious,” it can mean either that “I am suspicious [of others]” or the quite opposite possibility that “I am suspicious [in the opinion of others]” i.e. that “others are suspicious of me.” I could of course be simultaneously both suspect and suspector. In fact, this is not a true case of ambiguity but rather a consequence of casual language. By changing the word from “suspicion” to “suspect,” the different meanings become apparent. Where “suspicious” is ambiguous, the distinction between “I suspect” and “I *am* suspect” is clear. The linguistic trick nevertheless takes us to the heart of what I want to say in this essay, which is that the dynamics of suspicion—and of any suspectacle—cannot be appreciated without attending both to the person who performs and to the person who witnesses. Suppose that my performance is to utter the words “I am suspicious of you.” Such a performance is directed not only at your credibility, but also at mine. In performing my suspicion of you, I imply my own honesty and might hope to deflect any suspicious gaze away from the quality of my own character. Whether that hope is realised in practice is a moot point. Witnesses to my performed claim to be “suspicious of you” might conclude that I am a truth-teller, or they might conclude to the contrary that my performed mistrust is evidence of my own untrustworthy character; as the adage has it: “it takes a liar to know a liar.” Shakespeare makes much the same point when Shylock takes a suspicious mind to be a sign that the “suspector” is of bad character:

O father Abram, what these Christians are,

Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect

The thoughts of others. (Merchant of Venice 1.3.156-8)

Shakespeare has hit, as so often he does, upon a perennial truth of human character—the truth that a suspicious mind might be evidence of a suspect mind.

I will now outline my third and fourth provocations. The third I will label “countenance” for it concerns the performance of social persona. The fourth I will call “cargo” because it concerns the relationship between suspicion and weight. The essential import of the “countenance” provocation is to suggest that the mask or persona that each one of us puts on as a “front” for our social performance (to borrow Goffman’s terminology) is in some respects a site of contestation between the social actor and their social audience (Goffman). I make my face, but it is only fully made according to what others make of it. Countenance was chosen not just because it is a synonym for “face,” but because it alludes etymologically to the actor’s attempt to “contain” and control the performance or spectacle of self. The fourth provocation, “cargo,” is a rather different creature to the other three. It challenges us to weigh up a performance by attending to its ponderance and feel rather than to its visual show. The tension between the seductive appearance of a matter and a more solid assay of its merits is expressed in the legal phrases “weighing evidence” and “preponderance of evidence” (Salky and Brown; Brook) for “evidence” alludes to that which is apparent to the eye—leading to what Othello calls “ocular proof”—whereas “weighing” and “ponderance” alert us to the need for more substantial judgment based on the weight and feel of a matter.

I am conscious that this is a collection devoted to suspicion as a theme in English literature, and I am not offering a sustained literary reading of any literary text. What I am offering instead is a strategy for reading rhetorical performance in which persuasion is attempted and suspicion is at issue. Most of my examples are drawn from political performance, and especially the political performance of Donald Trump, but I hope that the same strategic appreciation of the dynamics of suspicion-focused performance might have potential to elucidate suspicion as a character trait or narrative device in works of literary fiction. Elsewhere, I have started to explore that potential in a case study of the “credit” theme in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, where I note that Shakespeare sets up the theme of credit (including commercial and romantic bonds) when he opens each of the first two scenes of the first Act with “credit clauses”—Act I, scene 1 begins with Antonio’s credit clause “In sooth” and Act I scene 2 commences with Portia’s credit clause “By my troth” (Watt 2020). Shakespeare puts credit in issue at the first opportunity and the theme goes on to pervade the whole play—connecting Shylock’s thoughts on suspicion, to the dubious glister of the golden casket supposed to contain Portia’s portrait, to suspicion between the various pairs of lovers, and Portia’s suspect appearance as a male Doctor of Law. Even the title of the play is suspicious, for who in fact is *The Merchant of Venice*? Its professed genre is equally doubtful, for the playgoer will legitimately suspect that they have witnessed a Jewish tragedy rather than

a Venetian comedy. I move now to consider each of my four provocations (the four species of “suspectacle”) in turn.

Credit clause—the spectacle of “believe me” claims

Through the performance of a credit clause such as “believe me,” “trust me,” “to tell you the truth,” and so on, the rhetorical actor performs their own creditworthiness. This class of spectacle does not depend upon discrediting an opponent but requires only that the spectator should be impressed by the speaker’s performance of their own trustworthiness. Every time we begin a sentence with “believe me when I say” or “to tell you the truth” or “to be honest” or “to speak frankly” we are employing a credit clause. In a commonplace and casual way, it serves to enhance our truthfulness. A credit clause is typically employed to frame a claim or proposition and is therefore often to be found at the very start or at the very end of a sentence. As well as being employed in a casual and commonplace way in everyday speech, credit clauses are a long-standing feature of political performance. This fact is fictionalised in the famous funeral or forum scene at the heart of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (Act 3, scene 2) where we see Brutus employ a rather clumsy and crude type of credit clause when he says, “believe me for mine honour” (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.14-15). Politicians use similar phrases today, with Donald Trump being especially notorious for it.

On 24 May 2016, when Donald Trump was on the threshold of winning the Republican nomination to run for President, *The Boston Globe* carried an article entitled “Donald Trump Relies on a Simple Phrase: ‘Believe Me’” in which journalist Matt Viser surveyed Trump’s remarkably prolific usage of that species of credit clause (Viser). Examples cited in that article and in a *Los Angeles Times* article on the same subject (Mascaro), include the following:

On the Islamic State (ISIS): “I know more about ISIS than the generals do. Believe me.”

On the defeat of ISIS: “We will. Believe me”

On a lawsuit against Trump University: “Believe me, I’ll win that case.”

On illegal immigration: “We are going to get rid of the criminals and it’s going to happen within one hour after I take office... Believe me.”

Claiming he had studied the Iran nuclear deal in detail: “I would say, actually, greater by far than anybody else. Believe me. Oh, believe me. And it’s a bad deal.”

Viser notes that:

In the 12 Republican debates, Trump used it some 30 times—at a rate 56 times greater than his opponents, who used it a combined three times. (Neither Clinton nor Bernie Sanders used the phrase during the Democratic debates.)

and, intriguingly, that:

Trump uses “believe me” far more often when speaking than he does when writing. In a speech he gave to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in March, the phrase appeared only once in his prepared remarks. But when he delivered it, he used the phrase 12 times.

This distinction between scripted and spontaneous usage is significant, for it suggests that Trump’s “believe me” credit clause is a sort of involuntary performative tic. It indicates that subconsciously Trump is aware that credibility and persuasiveness are in play. When the rhetorical Tug-of-War is afoot, Trump abandons the script and resorts to his rhetorical instincts as a showman and salesman. The repeated instinctive use of the credit clause indicates that he is trying hard, though perhaps subconsciously, to pull listeners over to his side.

Is Trump’s use of the “believe me” credit clause rhetorically effective as a technique for reducing suspicion of his character? Jennifer M. Sclafani, author of *Talking Donald Trump* (2018), argues that the effects of the “believe me” command are ambiguous. For Trump’s supporters, it reinforces what they already believe about Trump, but sceptics “are likely to interpret this phrase as coming from an untrustworthy candidate who needs to command his audience to believe him, because he is naturally unbelievable” (Mascaro). This interpretation is precisely the one that many playgoers will reach when they hear Shakespeare’s Brutus demanding of his audience: “hear me for my cause, and be silent, that you may hear. Believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe” (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.13-16). Shouldn’t the honour of Brutus be apparent from his actions without needing the additional testimony of his words? Shouldn’t the credibility of Trump be apparent from his character without his insistent assertions to that effect? Just as the word “believe” has a “lie” secreted in the middle of it, so the use of the “believe me” credit clause might betray the fact of someone insincere lying behind it.

A quick search of YouTube will reveal several edited video compilations of Trump’s excessive use of the phrase “believe me,” but this isn’t the only form of credit clause in his repertoire. Another form that he has used is the credit clause “to be honest.” It isn’t used so often as

“believe me,” but one usage is of particular interest—not only because it appeared in his first ever presidential press conference (Trump) but more so because his use of the phrase on that occasion (at 5’35) was accompanied by the performative flourish of one of his signature precision grip hand gestures. (The one where he pinches thumb to forefinger to form a small circlet). This perhaps speaks of his subconscious endeavour to control audience perceptions. When he needs to pull people towards his side in the political game of Tug-of-War, he engages his hands in taking hold of the rope. The fact that Trump’s major theme in that press conference can be summarised as “the mainstream media are fake news,” shows how keenly he was trying to pull the rope of credibility in his direction and away from his supposed opponents. Trump’s attempt to call out the media as “fake news” also brings us neatly to our next species of spectacle.

Calling out—the spectacle of “don’t believe them” claims

Suspicion operates as a bond between the one who regards and the one who is regarded, so that an effective rhetorical performer has the potential to use the ligature itself as a site of rhetorical influence or persuasion. In other words, the utterance “I am suspicious of you” can have the effect of pulling the rope of influence away from your credibility while also, incidentally, pulling it in favour of my credibility, thereby gaining persuasive ground for my own ethos. This will be the perception we have whenever we interpret the action of “calling out” lies to be evidence of the accuser’s own honesty. I have labelled the “I suspect you” species of spectacle “calling out” because its overt aim is to deprecate others for their suspect behaviour or suspect motives. Donald Trump exemplifies this species of “calling out” when he claims that mainstream media are peddling “fake news.” This, as mentioned earlier, was the claim that dominated Trump’s first presidential press conference (Trump). The ostensible aim of his allegation that the mainstream media are “fake news” is to deprecate them as suspect, but the hoped-for ancillary affect is to enhance Trump’s own credibility according to the sequence mentioned earlier: “I am suspicious of fake news—you should therefore conclude that I am an honest actor—and therefore you should not be suspicious of me.”

Suspicion is at the heart of Donald Trump’s rhetorical method. The showbiz president and master of political spectacle placed “suspectacle” centre stage. Hence Jennifer Mercieca writes at the conclusion of her chapter “Trump and the Distrusting Electorate,” that: “Trump’s rhetorical strategy sought to increase suspicion between his followers and the rest of the nation... Trump took advantage of his followers’ cynicism and gullibility; he told his followers to be suspicious of everyone and to trust no one but him (Mercieca 25-26).

This cynical technique of calling out others and spreading suspicion comes at a potentially high social cost. When we perform suspicion we propagate suspicion, and the inevitable effect of this is to break bonds of social trust. To adopt the terminology of political scientist Robert D. Putnam, it weakens the “social capital” that he defines as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 19). Putnam concludes that Americans are tending to bond more with people who are like them and are building fewer bridges with people who are not like them. When we perform outrage and judgment of others in extreme oppositional mode, the effect is either to draw the susceptible into a close circle of slack complicity, or else to repel those who disagree and in repelling them stretch the rope that connects us to snapping point. This depressing trend is no doubt prevalent across the world, amplified by the entrenched silo mentality and factionalism—the so-called “echo chamber effect”—that is an incident of social media.

Trump’s brand of extreme suspicion slumped to a new low when he cast doubt on the outcome of the 2020 US Presidential election. New nadirs are sought by conspiracy theorists every day. What we see in so-called “anti-vax” activism against Covid-19 vaccines is the culmination of decades of withering trust in so-called “elites.” In 2016, the year that Trump became president, a Gallup poll found that trust in the media was at an historic low, especially amongst Republican voters. Americans’ trust and confidence in the mass media “to report the news fully, accurately and fairly” dropped in 2016 to a mere 32% who said they had a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media, down eight percentage points from the preceding year. Gallup’s annual assessment of the public’s perception of the ethical integrity of various professions also makes sobering reading. In the December 2021 iteration, nurses scored highest with 27% of respondents rating them “very high” and 54% of respondents rating them as “high” on the scale of honesty and integrity. Medical doctors, grade schoolteachers, and pharmacists were the next three most highly rated professions, followed by military officers, police officers, day care providers, judges, and clergy. At the bottom of the list in ascending order from the least trusted profession we find lobbyists, Members of Congress, and advertising practitioners. Only 9% of respondents regarded Members of Congress as having very high or high ethical integrity (Gallup). Public trust in politicians in the UK is no better. YouGov, the online pollsters of public opinion in the UK, conducted a survey in 2012 to see “*What voters really think of Parliament and our politicians*” (Kellner). That was the survey’s sub-title. Its main title was “*Democracy on trial.*” Judging from its reported findings, democracy was found guilty on all charges. The main indictment was the charge that politicians are untrustworthy. The report tells us that two-thirds of respondents believed that “however they start out, most MPs ‘end up becoming remote from the everyday lives and

concerns of the people they represent” (Kellner 6). Shockingly, almost the same proportion agreed that “politicians tell lies all the time—you can’t believe a word they say” (6). Probably the picture of political mistrust is similarly bleak in many other countries where people are free to voice misgivings about their rulers. We live in an age of suspicion, and maybe it is because “our own hard dealings teach us to suspect others”.

Countenance—the spectacle of making a social face

As with “credit clause” (the first species of spectacle) and “calling out” (the second), the third category—“countenance”—has the two-sided quality of a persuasive Tug-of-War, for when a social actor performs their persona it may or may not be believed. The public face is made (Latin: *facere*), but its social reception—its persuasiveness—depends upon what others make of it. A public persona entails a sort of doubling of the self. The actor wears a mask and the spectator wonders to what extent the mask is identical or integral with the human performer behind it. As “credit clause” walks the tightrope between my being suspect and your being susceptible, and as “calling out” performs the double action of stealing ethical ground from you to enlarge my own ethical standing, so the third species of spectacle—“countenance”—is a performance that works only when the spectator is sufficiently taken in by it.

Given that the public mask of a performed persona produces a sort of doubling or layering of the social self, it almost inherently demands a double take from the spectator in the sense that the spectator is likely to look once at the performed persona and look again to see if the performance is sincere. Looking under the mask in this way is literally to “*sous-spect*.” I have chosen the word “countenance” to describe this performance of persona not just because, like the others, it begins with the letter “c,” but more importantly because the etymology of the word “countenance” indicates that the performer is *containing* their public performance—holding it in, as it were—in order to close, or even to remove, the apparent gap between the performed persona and the character of the performer. By containing myself I purport to exercise control over the performance of the spectacle of my physical and social face. Containing the countenance within my control is necessary because, on the other hand—at the other end of the rope of our Tug-of-War—the spectator experiences the countenance as a crafted thing to be regarded and critiqued. A thing to look at twice. A thing to suspect. It is hard work to maintain a face, but it is also hard work to suspect a face. The Tug-of-War operating in the context of countenance is one in which the performer is creatively making their face appear as natural as they can, while the spectator is creatively attempting to discern where the performer’s nature ends, and the art begins. It is an impossible task, for face-making

is an art that comes naturally to humans. When Duncan said in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that "There's no art/ To find the mind's construction in the face" (*Macbeth* 1.4.12-13), he was lamenting his inability to discern the truth of another person's face, but the task is surely just as difficult in relation to one's own performed social front. How can anyone know to what extent their face as they present it to society is a natural one, since it is in our human nature not only to make up our social face but also to greater or lesser extent make it fit with our sense of what others want to see.

In 2016, US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton gave an interview for photoblog *Humans of New York* in which she offered a fascinating insight into the hard work that goes into making a public persona seem natural:

I'm not Barack Obama. I'm not Bill Clinton. Both of them carry themselves with a naturalness that is very appealing to audiences. But I'm married to one and I've worked for the other, so I know how hard they work at being natural. It's not something they just dial in. They work and they practice what they're going to say. It's not that they're trying to be somebody else. But it's hard work to present yourself in the best possible way. (Clinton)

If Hillary Clinton is correct, it would appear that Presidents Clinton and Obama have mastered a key aspect of the art of rhetorical performance—which is to make the crafted countenance appear natural and unstudied. Get the art wrong, and suspicion will follow. As Aristotle observed:

Wherefore those who practise this artifice must conceal it and avoid the appearance of speaking artificially instead of naturally; for that which is natural persuades, but the artificial does not. For men become suspicious of one whom they think to be laying a trap for them, as they are of mixed wines. (Aristotle 1404b.10)

A recent legal case in England brought the issue of the natural and artificial person into fine focus. It concerned daytime television presenter Lorraine Kelly. The tax authorities had claimed that Ms Kelly appeared as herself when presenting television programmes and therefore should not receive tax exemptions available to a performer. The tax tribunal found against the tax authorities and in favour of Ms Kelly, saying:

We did not accept that Ms Kelly simply appeared as herself; we were satisfied that Ms Kelly presents a persona of herself; she presents herself as a brand... All parts of the show are a performance, the act being to perform the role of a friendly, chatty and fun personality [...] for the time Ms Kelly is contracted to perform live on air she is public

“Lorraine Kelly”; she may not like the guest she interviews, she may not like the food she eats, she may not like the film she viewed but that is where the performance lies. (*Albatel Ltd v HMRC* para [193])

Those last three words—“the performance lies”—produce a telling pun that points to the fact that all performance of persona is inherently suspect because the doubling or layering of personality—the natural and the artificial (to the extent that such a distinction can exist)—prompts the observer to do a double-take and to look under “*sous-spect*” the mask.

Cargo—weighing up the suspectacle

The “suspectacle” of my title was chosen to connect the idea of things that are suspect (doubtful) with the idea of spectacle (show). I am concerned with rhetorical performances that put belief in issue. In other words, performances that provoke suspicion. However, despite the syllable “spect” that joins “suspect” to “spectacle,” it is not my intention to limit the discussion to sight and visual aspects of shows. The visual is important to our sense of suspicion, but I want to engage with suspect performances in their entirety—not only with sight, but also with sound, and touch, and potentially every sense. An entire sensory appreciation for rhetorical performance will often come down to the total feel of a performance. Machiavelli warned in the chapter “How a Prince should keep his word,” in *The Prince*, that “Men in general judge more by their eyes than their hands... Everyone sees what you seem to be, few touch upon what you are... ordinary people are always taken in by appearances” (Machiavelli 62).

J. R. R. Tolkien identifies the same human tendency in *The Fellowship of the Ring* where he has Aragorn say to Frodo: “I look foul and feel fair. Is that it? *All that is gold does not glitter*” (Tolkien 184). As well as confirming Machiavelli’s point, that line is interesting because the last part is an inversion of Shakespeare’s “All that glisters is not gold” (*The Merchant of Venice* 2.7.71). Where Shakespeare’s line warns that we should not be pulled towards seductive sights, Tolkien’s line cautions that we should not be repelled by unattractive appearances. As in the game of Tug-of-War, a disjunction between appearance and substance can persuade in one direction or in the exact opposite direction. What the lines in Shakespeare and Tolkien agree on is that the wise judge should rely not upon the superficiality of sights but upon more substantial qualities. One of those qualities, particularly relevant to gold, is weight. Why are you being pulled towards the other side? Is it because of your weakness—your susceptibility—or is it because you can feel that the other side’s argument has a solid weightiness that you cannot pull against? If the reader will forgive a purely personal anecdote, I can reveal that while writing this essay, a chance incident reminded me of the concrete reality of excessive

reliance on sight and insufficient attention to feel and weight. I was taking a seat in a car when I heard the solid thud of something falling out of my coat pocket. I looked down and saw a folded paper which I knew had been in my pocket, and so I picked it up and for a while thought no more about it. What I should have thought was “why would a folded paper make such a heavy thud upon hitting the floor of the car?” It was only later in the day that I discovered that my wallet was missing whereupon it dawned on me that the wallet might have fallen from my coat pocket at the same time as the folded paper. When I went to search the floor of the car, I couldn’t see the wallet. I did eventually find it, but only by closing my eyes and feeling under the seat where I had been sitting. This a rather anodyne tale, but it brings home tangibly the need to resist the easy seduction of sights and to attend to truths that can only be perceived by appreciating the weight and feel of a matter.

In one of Hollywood’s most memorable movie trial scenes, the military lawyer played by Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men* (Dir: Rob Reiner, 1992) demands to hear the “truth” only to receive from the defendant (played by Jack Nicholson) the famous reply “you can’t handle the truth.” On the contrary, the practical reality—forensically and rhetorically speaking—is that we can and do handle the truth. In a passage in the Second Part of *Henry VI* (a passage that is thoroughly excavated for other “suspicious” significations in Lorna Hutson’s, *The Invention of Suspicion*), the king hears a charge of treason levelled against the Duke of York. The charge is founded on an allegation made by Peter, apprentice to the Duke of York’s armourer, Horner. Peter alleges that Horner had called the Duke of York the rightful king:

KING HENRY (*to Horner*)

Say, man, were these thy words?

HORNER

An’t shall please your majesty, I never said nor thought any such matter. God is my witness, I am falsely accused by the villain.

PETER [*raising his hands*]

By these ten bones, my lords, he did speak them to me in the garret one night as we were scouring my lord of York’s armour.

YORK

Base dunghill villain and mechanical,

I’ll have thy head for this thy traitor’s speech!

(*To King Henry*) I do beseech your royal majesty,

Let him have all the rigour of the law.

HORNER

Alas, my lord, hang me if ever I spake the words. My accuser is my prentice, and when I did correct him for his fault the other day, he did vow upon his knees he would be even with me. I have good witness of this, therefore, I beseech your majesty, do not cast away an honest man for a villain's accusation.

KING HENRY (*to Gloucester*)

Uncle, what shall we say to this in law?

GLOUCESTER

This doom, my lord, if I may judge by case:

Let Somerset be regent o'er the French,

Because in York this breeds suspicion.

(*Indicating Horner and Peter*)

And let these have a day appointed them

For single combat in convenient place,

For he (*indicating Horner*) hath witness of his servant's malice.

This is the law, and this Duke Humphrey's doom. (2H6 190-213)

Horner pulls the rope away from materiality by retreating from what he “said” to what he “thought,” whereas Peter pulls towards material feel with a reference to his hands (“these ten bones”) and with it the sense of “manifest” truth in the conjectured etymological sense of “hand-grasped” (Latin: *man-festus*) truth. He amplifies this material, manual sense by bringing in the further—and perhaps clinching evidence—that the suspect words were spoken while their hands were busy scouring York's armour. Peter's testimony has the veracity of tangibility. I have argued elsewhere that armour is a metaphor favoured by Shakespeare in the elucidation of concerns of probation and proof (Watt 2013 56). In *Othello*, where we find what is surely the most famous of Shakespeare's references to proof, Othello challenges Iago to provide incontrovertible evidence of Desdemona's marital infidelity in the following terms: “Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof... / Make me to see't, or at the least so prove it / That the probation bear no hinge nor loop / To hang a doubt on, or woe upon thy life!” (*Othello* 3.3.363, 367-9). Successive editors of the Arden editions of *Othello* recognised the deliberate nature of Shakespeare's metaphorical language but could not discern its significance (Honigmann 232; Ridley 115). My own suggestion is that the signification of Shakespeare's metaphor of “probation,” “hinge” and “loop” lies in an analogy to military armour and the processes by which armour was probed and declared “sword proof” and “bullet proof” against assault (Watt 2013 56-59). “Probation” is the very word by which medieval and early modern armourers tested or “proved” their finished work for weaknesses; a process which required the

armour to be, quite literally, “probed” by a range of weaponry. The “hinge” and “loop” in Othello’s quote refer to the weak points in a suit of armour—these are, as Othello puts it, the main sites of “doubt.” No suit of armour could function without the loops or buckles by which it was strapped together, and in certain places sections of armour were joined by metal hinges. (Ffoulkes 54-55)

One purpose of the present focus on “cargo” is to reinvigorate a dead metaphor in the legal and rhetorical language of suspicion. When we examine the standard language of weight and ponderance as it is employed in the law of evidence, we are immediately confronted with a tension between the sense of sight and the sense of weight. The word “evidence” suggests something that can be judged by sight alone, but the more specific challenge to “weigh the evidence” and judge on the “preponderance of evidence” indicates that what is required is not to judge by sight, but by weight. Returning again to *Othello*, where Othello’s error was judging according to merely visual or “ocular” proof (3.3.363), Desdemona talks of love suits in the superior language of heaviness: “when I have a suit / Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed / It shall be full of poise and difficult weight / And fearful to be granted” (3.3.80-3). Evidence is something that a judge, whether in a court of law or in the trials of everyday life, must assay not only by seeing but by weighing. This metaphor naturally brings in the image of the scales in which the evidence on one side of an issue is weighed against the evidence on the other side to bring about a judgment as to the relative weight of each side’s arguments. Since ancient times, the balance or scales has been employed as a metaphor for weighing a person’s character or soul against a divine standard. The image was popular with the ancient Egyptians and Greeks and in the Old Testament its most famous appearance is in the story of King Belshazzar’s feast, where the spectral writing on the wall warned the King “You have been weighed in the scales and found wanting” (Book of Daniel 5: 27). In disputes between humans, including those in politics and law, the assessment is less idealistic. In human disputes the weightier side wins regardless of the transcendental merits of their claim. The same is frequently true in Tug-of-War.

Conclusion—seeing double

We have learned two surprising things about suspicion. The first is that despite the visive sense inherent in the language of the sus-“spect”, there is more to the concept of suspicion than sights alone. The second is that suspicion is not the singular or unidirectional idea we might have supposed. It is not enough to think in simplistic terms of A regarding B with suspicion.

There is always a doubling to be considered. Suspicion is not always about seeing, but it always entails doubling.

As to the first aspect—sight—it is undeniable that the visive sense dominates the surface language of “suspicion” and the “suspect,” but we should not be fooled into thinking that sight is the end of the matter. The idea of “suspicion” appears to be a visual idea, but this is to judge it at first sight. What is required is to take a second glance and to look more deeply. In other words, “suspicion” is itself suspect, for by its etymology it pretends to concern a visual assay of the merits of social performance, but suspicion cannot be discharged (that is un-cargoed) without a more weighty, more material assay of the matter at hand. This paper has explored four provocations on the topic of suspicion. Three of them—“credit clause,” “calling out,” “countenance”—are modes of rhetorical performance to which I have given the collective label “suspectacle.” That label indicates that each of these three is a form of show—a performance designed to enhance the standing of the performer. As forms of show they are presented as spectacles to be witnessed. Despite this, the first two—“credit clause” and “calling out”—are typically performed through and operate in an auditory rather than a visual register. “Countenance” evokes a more thoroughly visive sense, as reflected in many of our words for face (for example, the French *visage*, which was adopted into English, and the German *angesicht*). Yet the word “face” itself denotes something *made* (from the Latin *facere*) and this is a clue to approaching the face as a crafted thing having substance and feel beyond the merely visual. The face as social front—reflected in the language of “personality” (from the Latin *persona*, meaning “mask”)—invites us to take stock of the face as a solid matter and not merely to trust to surface appearances. We must ask, in short, whether the performed “countenance” that we see is at one with the substance of the individual carrying off the performance. My fourth provocation on the topic of suspicion is “cargo.” Whereas the other three concern modes of rhetorical performance (i.e., modes of “suspectacle”), “cargo” concerns the need to resist the seductiveness of the rhetorical show by attending to the substance of the person performing and the substance of the matter presented.

What all four of my provocations have in common, and this is the second surprising discovery we have made about suspicion, is that each of the four entails a doubling or concern for a duality. To recap, we have learned with regard to “credit clause” that the phrase “believe me” (and similar such) creates an ambiguity, for the hearer will either be susceptible to the invitation (that is, taken under its spell) or the hearer will subject the speaker to a double-take and ask, “if you need to command belief, I suspect that you lack credit.” In relation to “calling out,” we discovered a different type of duality—one with the potential to raise the speaker’s credibility even as the speaker puts another person down. If the speaker calls out another

person or entity as being dishonest, the performance might give the impression (however inaccurate) that the speaker is personally of honest character. The third provocation, “countenance,” brings in a doubling of a different and subtler sort. It can be summarised by saying that the successful presentation of social front is a performance that depends upon the performer maintaining a plausible and persuasive connection between their underlying character and the social mask that they hold forth (which is to say, etymologically, the social mask that they *pre-tend*). Doubling is a feature of countenance because the performance of social front entails a holding out but at the same time a withholding (etymologically a “countenance”) in the nature of control and containment. The seemingly static nature of a performed social mask is therefore static only in the sense that it is held in stasis between the opposite actions of putting it out there and holding it in. Accordingly, the stasis of the social self—the performed front—has a quality akin to that of a rhetorical statement. The presenter hopes that you will believe them when they say, “this is who I am.” The audience will either believe what is put forward or they will question what is being contained within the countenance and ask, “who are you really?” It is through this double-take or doubting-take that suspicion enters.

My fourth and final provocation is “cargo.” Attending to cargo entails the rejection of judgment based on sight alone. It calls instead for the visually “evident” to be weighed in hand and mind. As the countenance of performed face is crafted, so the call to consider cargo is a call to engage the hand in feeling the contours of the performer’s craft. In resisting the rush to judgment at first sight, cargo says, “wait, hold on”—it asks, in other words, if the performance has heft when we hold it. Cargo entails doubling in the sense that the performer advances their performance—it might be the mask of their social countenance—and as they put it out, so the spectator, audience, judge, takes it on and weighs it up. Cargo also entails doubling in the further sense that it requires the surface of the show to be pierced. The testing or probation of the matter will prove it to be either solid or hollow, deep or shallow, substantial or insubstantial, weighty or light. The armour may be highly polished and attractive to the eye (it might even be gilt), but in attending to cargo we are reminded that not all which glisters is gold—still a very basic axiom of the suspicious critic—and that the surface layer of armour is only the first layer of any judicious inquiry. By prying within, we add a material depth or doubling to what would otherwise have been a surface perusal—the language of “*in-spection*” and “*sous-spicion*” gestures to this. When we probe, we might chance to strike upon some solid matter within—a doublet beneath the armour, so to speak. If we delve deep and find nothing beneath, the fabric of the performed front will be shown to be baseless. Our suspicions on the other hand will prove well-founded.

Bibliography

- Albatel Ltd v HMRC* [2019] UKFTT 195 (TC). First-Tier Tribunal (Tax Chamber). Para 193. 16 March 2019.
- Aristotle. *Art of Rhetoric*. Translated by J. H. Freese. Revised by Gisela Striker. Loeb Classical Library 193. Harvard University Press, 2020.
- Brook, J. "Inevitable Errors: The Preponderance of the Evidence Standard in Civil Litigation." *Tulsa Law Journal*, vol. 18, 1982, pp. 79-109.
- Clinton, Hillary. Interview for humansofnewyork.com. 8 Sep 2016.
- Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. 1930. Peregrine Books, 1961.
- Ffoulkes, Charles. *The Armourer and His Craft*. Methuen, 1912.
- Gallup. *Honesty/Ethics in Professions*. December 2021.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin Books, 1959.
- Hutson, Lorna. *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Kellner, Peter. *Democracy on trial: What voters really think of Parliament and our politicians*. YouGov, The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. March 2012.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. 1532. Translated by Peter Bondanella. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Mascaro, Lisa. "Believe me': People say Trump's language is affecting political discourse 'bigly.'" *Los Angeles Times*. 12 September 2016.
- Mercieca, Jennifer. *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump*. A&M University Press, 2020.
- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Salky, S.M. and B.G. Brown. "The Preponderance of Evidence Standard at Sentencing". *American Criminal Law Review*, vol 29. 1991-1992, pp.907-918.
- Sclafani, Jennifer. *Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style, Metadiscourse, and Political Identity*. Routledge, 2018.
- Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Edited by Daniell, David. The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series. Bloomsbury, 1998.
- . Honigmann, E A J. The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series. Bloomsbury, 2001.
- *Othello*, Ridley, M R. Arden Shakespeare, 1965.
- . *The Merchant of Venice*. Drakakis, John. The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series. Bloomsbury, 2011.
- The Book of Daniel 5: 27. The New Scofield Reference Bible*. Edited by C. I. Scofield. Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 906.

- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring—Being the First Part of The Lord of the Rings*. George, Allen & Unwin, 1954.
- Trump, Donald. “First Presidential Press Conference.” *Guardian News* YouTube channel. Accessed 10 January 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNnHnRRhY7E>. Accessed 16 February 2017"
- Viser, Matt. “Donald Trump relies on a simple phrase: ‘Believe me.’” *The Boston Globe*. [Epub]. Accessed 24 May 2016.
- Watt, Gary. “‘That ugly treason of mistrust’: Rhetoric of Credit and the Credit of Rhetoric in *The Merchant of Venice*.” *The Merchant of Venice: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Hatchuel, Sarah and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin. Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2020, pp. 145-170.
- Watt, Gary. “Shakespeare on Proof and Fabricated Truth.” Gary Watt. *Dress, Law and Naked Truth: A Cultural Study of Fashion and Form*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, pp. 51-78.