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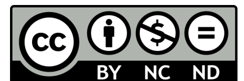

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"Better a Shrew than a Sheep?": Disobedience through Reticence in Shakespeare's Contrasting Models of Femininity

ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's production has depicted female characters according to a dichotomic model of femininity which distinguishes between a talkative, often shrewish, woman and her silent counterpart (Friedman 1990; Boose 1994; Allen Brown 2003; Rackin 2005; Kamaralli 2012). Still, little attention has been given to female silence and reticence as a site of resistance and potential subversiveness of patriarchal control (Luckyj 2002). The present paper analyses two couples of opposite models of female linguistic attitudes – Kate and Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593) and Portia and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* (1595) – to show how silent unruliness may provide women with safer means to disrupt the patriarchal notion of obedience while avoiding the threatful label of 'shrew'.

KEYWORDS: Early modern drama; Shakespeare; gender studies; silence; rhetoric.

1. Introduction

"Better a shrew than a sheep" is at the same time a nod to the well-known early modern distinction between two opposite – yet complementary – stereotypes of femininity and a grateful reference to Pamela Allen Brown's

book on the culture of jest in early modern England and women's role in it (2003)[1]. In her work, Allen Brown's quotation of the early modern proverb "better a shrew than a sheep" questions the preference for meek and obedient women over fiercely talkative ones as such preference started to appear less and less ironical. As contemporary proverbs highlight ("one shrew is worth two sheepe", Tilley, S412), the proto-capitalist and Protestant setting of early modern London seemed to prefer skilled and capable women to keep activities and the household economy running as well as to benefit the family's social standing and harmony[2] (Wilson 1970). Protestant guidelines which delineated marriage as a religious institution, an economic unit and "a source of companionship both intellectual and spiritual" favoured wives who were educated and talkative enough to offer husbands emotional and spiritual support also by means of conversation (McEachern 2016, 40)[3]. Such a context partially rewrites the stereotypically negative judgment associated to female loquaciousness, which has become one of the main focusses in the decades-old and increasingly fruitful research area of rhetorical studies in early modern drama[4]. The study of the subversive role of female speech in a conventionally silencing patriarchal society has also led to concentrate on the figure of the shrew as epitome of this attitude and even suggest how it was deemed preferable to the "sheep", which "sometimes stand[s] for the positive values of resignation and endurance […] but […] generally connote[s] passivity, cowardice, and stupidity" (Allen Brown 2003, 187). Still, by the end of the sixteenth century growing attention was paid to the opposite end of this linguistic spectrum, silence, which started to feel as problematic as talkativeness.

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[1] In her book, Allen Brown shows how the control of women through jesting, which lead to their structural disparagement and categorization, worked at best with talkative ones, reduced to shrews. Silent women were not much of a butt for satire and thus stood for potentially more problematic subjects to inscribe within patriarchal social and cultural order.

[2] Also, "a shrew profitable may serve a man reasonable" (Tilley, S414). Allen Brown comments: "[a] later version (1662) reads: *A Profitable Shrew may well content a reasonable man, the Poets feigning Juno chaste and thrifty, qualities which commonly attend a shrewd nature* (S414)" (2003, 125n.63).

[3] A letter from ca.1645 reads "[i]t is better to marry a Shrew than a sheep: for though silence be the dumb Orator of Beauty ... yet a Phlegmatic dull Wife is fulsome and fastidious" (Wilson 1970, S412).

[4] See Boose 1991; Benson 1992; Gowing 1996; Eliason 2003; Jansen 2008.

In Thomas' *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* (1587), references to the semantic area of silence show an interesting shift in connotation which transformed it from a positive to an at least ambiguous linguistic habit. While the gloss to the verb *sileo* refers to calm and patience, stillness of the mind and heart, those to *reticentia* and *taciturnitas* lead to the dark side of this linguistic attitude, which peaks at "secretness of tongue" (Mmm5v). This may reflect contemporary Ramist, neo-Platonist and Puritan views on silence as "antisocial, multivalent and profoundly subversive – as, in short, 'inscrutable' and thus potentially ungovernable" (Luckyj 2002, 26)[5]. The disturbing connection between female silence and "secretness" in particular was supported by the growing misogynist belief in women's ability in crafting their *persona* so much that "visible signs" of female virtue, such as silence, "a sober aspect" or "a fixed eye" (C1r) could be used as witty disguises for their moral wickedness (Niccholes 1615). This suspicious reasoning is often to be found among contemporary misogynist writers, such as Joseph Swetnam, who comments "[i]f thou marriest a still and a quiet woman, that will seem to thee that thou ridest but an ambling horse to hell" (1615, F2r), and survives later in the century, as William Gouge argues in *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622) how "[s]ilence, as it is opposed to speech, would imply stoutnesse of stomacke, and stubbornnesse of heart" (T5v). As this last comment seems to suggest, early modern writers started to perceive the ambiguity and potential disruptive powers of silence when used as a conscious technique of appropriation and subversion of a standard patriarchal virtue. In a social context particularly opposed to excessive talkativeness, silence could prove a more efficient linguistic strategy of resistance: when feigned, it would be more difficult to recognize, to control and would grant a more resilient protection of the female speakers' reputation since it would hide their agency behind the conventional

[5] Also, in Tudor England, silence started to be associated with religious dissidents and political rebels, such as Essex, who relied on it to create a safe, private space for their subversive intentions, which remained well disguised behind a seemingly complacent, public attitude (Luckyj 2002, 26-32). In her study on female characters in Shakespeare's Roman plays, Maria Elisa Montironi shows how "[e]arly modern silence swings from feminine decorum to strategic, masculine political tool; from foolish impotence to forms of androgynous wisdom or dissent" (2020, 40). See also Luckyj 1993.

"chaste, silent and obedient" façade (Luckyj 2002, 41)[6]. In this light, the comforting antithesis between female speech/silence, which equated with female disobedience/obedience, starts to show its cracks as both the shrew and the "sheep" appear equally dangerous and potentially subversive figures.

The hypothesis that female silence and reticence can stand for a peculiar linguistic site of resistance is investigated in two couples of Shakespearean female characters which show opposite approaches to language: in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate is the garrulous shrew while Bianca the silent sheep, while in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia plays the talkative woman and Jessica the reticent daughter. The selection of these plays results from the higher presence of shrews in comedies. However, not all of them couple talkative women with their linguistic opposites nor place them, or at least one of the two female characters, directly against an obstructive male authority. The former criteria left out the wordy Anne Page (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*), who is not contrasted with an at least seemingly passive and silent female character, while the latter criteria, that is the presence of a controlling male authority, excluded Adriana and Luciana (*The Comedy of Errors*). Although paired in the shrew/sheep opposition, the latter couple do not struggle against patriarchal constrictions, but rather face the tantrums deriving from the exchange plot involving their husband/brother-in-law and his long-lost twin. Unlike them, Beatrice and Hero (*Much Ado About Nothing*) seem the perfect female couple to exemplify the contrasting linguistic relation between shrewish talkativeness and submissive silence. However, they are not included in the present analysis since Hero's reticence cannot be considered defiant or oppositional to paternal and patriarchal authority, but rather complacent with the stereotypical equation between silence and straightforward obedience[7].

[6] Also, "Catherine Belsey notes that John Phillip's early *Play of Patient Grissell* (1558-61) shows simply 'the good example of her pacience towards her husband,' while the much later version of the story, *The Ancient; True and Admirable History of Patient Grisel* (1619) displays 'How Maides, by Her Example, In Their Good Behavior, May Marrie Rich Husbands'" (Luckjy 2002, 37).

[7] Hero's silence illuminates the downfall of complying with early modern conventions about female respectability. Her bashful attitude not only prevents her from fiercely protesting against Claudio's slanderous accusations, but also allows her male audience to ventriloquise her silence and interpret it as a tacit consent ("[t]hou seest that all the grace that she hath left / Is that she will not add to her damnation / A sin of perjury; *she not denies it*", 4.1.171-73, emphasis added). Quotations from the play are from Shakespeare 2016. As Harvey notices, "ventriloquism on

To carry out this study, two main items have been identified as markers of silent disobedience. The first focuses on the female character's secret agency and illuminates how paternal authority is defied by means of subtle plans and stratagems rather than direct attacks and loud tirades. The second concerns the character's use of language and, in particular, lying. While silence creates blanks which interlocutors can interpret according to dominant discourses, lies actively rely on such conventional expectations only to disrupt them by the end of the play[8]. Secret agency and lying are coupled with verbal wit, whose presence in the female protagonist's language works as a rhetorical indicator that reticence may be considered out-of-character and only functional to her plan. Eventually, this analysis will show how silent disobedience will prove more efficient than outright protestations to female characters, confirming the early modern proverb that "a sheep may kill a butcher", too (Stevenson 1948, 2087).

2. Bianca's art of disguise in *The Taming of the Shrew*

At present considered one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew* opens with a reference to the linguistic diversity between the two Minola sisters. Kate is immediately linked to the semantic field of shrewishness as one of her detractors plays on the consonance between "court" and "cart" ("to cart her, rather", 1.1.55), hinting at the shaming practice of carting shrews from village to village in order to publicly expose their anti-social behaviour[9]. Contrariwise, Bianca is described according to her silent attitude, which is considered an exterior sign of her modesty and obedience to her father ("[b]ut in the other's silence do I see maid's mild behaviour and sobriety", 1.1.70-71). Bianca's depiction as the ideal early modern woman, and Kate's opposite, is reinforced by the use of adjectives such as "fair" (1.2.165, 174), "sweet" (1.1.109, 139) and "good" (1.1.76), which characterise her

men's behalf is an appropriation of the feminine voice, and that it reflects and contributes to a larger cultural silencing of women" (1992, 12).

[8] For a pragma-stylistic analysis of lying in Shakespeare's female characters see Aoife Beville's contribution to the present volume, "Plausible Obedience: Female Strategies of Deception in Shakespeare's Problem Comedies", and her recent book (2022). See also Culpeper (2001, 270-78) and Del Villano (2018, 151-58).

[9] All quotations from the play are from Shakespeare 2002.

throughout most of the play. Also, during Kate's protestations against her father's decision of marrying her before her sister ("I pray you, sir, is it your will to make a stale of me amongst these mates?", 1.1.57-58), Bianca speaks only once and submits to her father's will, which she is promptly praised for:

> BAPTISTA
> Gentlemen, that I may soon make good
> What I have said – Bianca, get you in;
> And let it not displease thee, good Bianca,
> for I will love thee ne'er the less, my girl.
> KATHERINA
> A pretty peat! It is best put finger in the eye,
> an she knew why.
> BIANCA
> Sister, content you in my discontent.
> –Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe:
> My books and instruments shall be my company,
> on them to look, and practise by myself.
> LUCENTIO
> Hark, Tranio, thou mayst hear Minerva speak. (1.1.74-84)

This stark differentiation between the two sisters seemingly runs smoothly throughout the play. Kate is well-known for her tantrums against Petruchio in their "wooing" scene ("[g]o, fool, and whom thou keep'st command", 2.1.259) as well as for her resistance against his authority during the taming process ("I like the cap, and it I will have, or I will have none", 4.3.86-87). Even her final monologue can be read as an ironic mock praise of patriarchal order and thus a confirmation of her wordy, stubborn refusal of suffocating conventions[10]. Contrariwise, Bianca is seldom heard as her name echoes onstage in the mouths of other characters only ("[d]o make myself a suitor to your daughter, unto Bianca, fair and virtuous", 2.1.89-90).

Bianca's silent and demure attitude seems to start crumbling as soon as her father leaves her alone onstage. While in the first two acts his presence required

[10] For attentive studies on the so-called "revisionist" reading of Kate's conclusive monologue, see Blake 2002; Crocker 2003; Spencer Kingsbury 2004. For the division between revisionist and anti-revisionist readings of *The Shrew* see Heilman 1966 and Bean 1980. In his analysis, Bean offers a third reading of Kate's monologue which acknowledges both gender hierarchies and mutual affection between Petruchio and Kate. The latter, however, is eventually read in terms of wifely obedience.

Bianca to wear the mask of the obedient daughter, from Act 3 onwards his absence frees her from this role and enables her to safely express her true intentions without publicly showing her deceitful nature or crossing her father's authority. As soon as the scene opens and she is left alone with her tutors, Bianca's secret agency in managing her love life surfaces in her subtle encouragements or discouragements of her suitors by means of wordplays and rhetorical stratagems. To secretly communicate with Lucentio, disguised as her Latin teacher, she wittily turns the Latin text they are studying into a shared secret language which hides behind Latin sentences the true meaning of their intentions. In reply to Lucentio's wooing, Bianca mingles the Latin text with her own concerns about his courtship:: "[n]ow let me see if I can construe it: 'hic ibat Simois' *I know you not-* 'hic est Sigeia tellus' *I trust you not-* 'hic steterat Priami' *take heed he hear us not-* 'regia' *presume not-*'celsa senis' *despair not*" (3.1.21-24, emphasis added).

Likewise, Bianca's secret agency surfaces in minor passages of the play where her actions rather than words confirm her favour for Lucentio. First, she delays Hortensio's lesson by finding faults in his instrument: in asking him to tune it again she makes time for answering to Lucentio through their coded language ("[l]et's hear. O fie, the treble jars", 3.1.38). Then, when Lucentio steps onstage, still disguised as tutor, Bianca follows him and lets him kiss and woo her under the nose of the old suitor, who recoils at the scene and decides to interrupt his courtship. Her agency is confirmed by Tranio's deliverance of such good news as he first reports it to Bianca rather to his master, seemingly taking for granted her knowledge of and involvement in Lucentio's plan as well as her satisfaction at its desired outcome. Eventually, Bianca's silent defiance of paternal authority and independent managing of her love life peaks at her secret marriage with Lucentio (4.4), which Baptista is informed of only after its official celebration. In this light, Bianca's seemingly harmless remark "[m]y books and instruments shall be my company, on them to look, and practise by myself" (1.1.82-83) may be read retrospectively as a subtle hint to her suitors to come and woo her in disguise. Baptista unconsciously follows her remark ("[a]nd for I know she taketh most delight in music, instruments and poetry, schoolmasters will I keep within my house […] If you, […] know any such, prefer them hither", 1.1.92-94, 95-97) and provides Gremio, Lucentio and

Hortensio with the perfect plan to visit his daughter as they please ("[y]ou will be schoolmaster and undertake the teaching of the maid: that's your device", 1.1.190-93).

From a linguistic point of view, Bianca's latent unruliness is highlighted by the contrast between her silent presence in front of her father and her verbal wit displayed with her suitors. At the beginning of her lessons with Lucentio and Hortensio, Bianca appropriates the metaphor of the school-master to state her will to direct the courtship irrespectively of her tutors' intentions: "I am no breeching scholar in the schools: I'll not be tied to hours nor 'pointed times but learn my lessons as I please myself" (3.1.18-20). Later in the play, during her staged exchange with Lucentio, she follows Lucentio's reference to Ovid's *The Art of Love* and plays on it to hint at his abilities as lover (LUCENTIO: I read that I profess, *The Art to Love.* BIANCA: And may you prove, sir, master of your art", 4.2.8-9).

Overall, if closely investigated, Bianca's transformation is neither sudden nor unexpected given the presence of literary references which link her to ambiguous mythological figures[11]. In Act 1 Scene 2, Lucentio compares himself to Dido, the queen of Carthage in love with the inconstant Aeneas: "[a]nd now in plainness do confess to thee / That art to me as secret and as dear / As Anna to the Queen of Carthage was: Tranio, I burn, I pine; I perish, Tranio, / If I achieve not this young modest girl" (1.1.151-155). While Tranio is compared to the queen's sister, Anna, in closeness and confidence, Bianca ("this young modest girl") is turned into the amorous object of the suffering Lucentio/Dido, who often proves insensitive to his lover's prayers and desires. While the male figure of Aeneas reflects on Bianca's true nature and her active, domineering role in her love life, the female figure of Helen of Troy ("Leda's daughter"), mentioned in a later comparison by Lucentio, speaks for the way Bianca managed to disguise her true colors to her male suitors ("[s]he [Bianca] may more suitors have, and me for one. / Fair Leda's daughter had a thousand wooers, / Then well one more may fair Bianca have", 1.2.242-44). Often mentioned in writings related to the woman's question[12], Helen stood for the epitome of women's damning beauty and, more at large, ability in deceiving

[11] In Act 4 Scene 1, "haggard" is used by Petruchio to Kate during the taming process ("[a]nother way I have to man my haggard", 4.1.182).

men through appearance. Reference to her, thus, recalls the misogynist correlation between women's deceptive looks and nature and suggests a lack of correspondence between outward, spotless and alluring appearance and inward inconstant nature not only in Helen, but in Bianca too. The potential lack of alignment between her outward and inward personae is also suggested by Hortensio as he last comments on Bianca's deceiving fairness before abandoning his suit ("[k]indness in women, not their beauteous looks, shall win my love", 4.2.41-42). Both Lucentio's and Hortensio's comments speak for their probable knowledge of Bianca's latent unruliness and highlight how they acquired such awareness only after falling for her pleasant appearance, which duly disguises her dangerous unruliness. The uneven power balance between Aeneas and Dido as well as between Helen as her suitors foretells Bianca and Hortensio's at the conclusion of the play. At their own marriage, Lucentio acts as the troubled queen in the constant pursue of his Bianca/Aeneas, who exerts her supremacy in the wager scene by refusing to comply with her husband's commands. The ideally perfect Bianca reveals herself to be truly unruly as she compares herself to a swift bird fooling its hunters ("[a]m I your bird? I mean to shift my bush, / And then pursue me as you draw your bow", 5.2.47-48). Bianca not only makes Lucentio lose his bet because of her now publicly unruly attitude, but also reproaches him for having taken her obedience for granted:

> BIANCA
> Fie! what a foolish duty call you this?
> LUCENTIO
> I would your duty were as foolish too:
> The wisdom of your duty, fair Bianca,
> Hath cost me a hundred crowns since supper time.
> BIANCA
> The more fool you for laying on my duty. (5.2.131-35)

This scene not only enacts the inversion of sexual roles implied by the mythological simile of Dido and Aeneas, but also reveals Bianca as a more

[12] See Fonte (1600); Sowernam 1617. Also, in paradoxical writing touching upon the debate on women, such as Ortensio Lando (1544) and later adaptations and translations by Charles Estienne (1553) and Anthony Munday (1593).

successful shrew than her sister. While Kate leaves aside her tantrums to either subject herself to Petruchio's will or comply with patriarchal discourses only to subtly undermining them from within – according to the anti-revisionist or revisionist reading applied, Bianca's silence allows her a smoother path towards marrying a man of her own choice and vehemently asserting her independence while avoiding the charges of shrewishness her sister had to suffer.

3. Between the li(n)es: Jessica hidden loquaciousness in *The Merchant of Venice*

A minor figure in Shakespeare's tragi-comedy, Jessica is Shylock's only daughter, tied to him by blood and religion. However, unlike her father, she feels an outcast more in her own house than in the Christian world of early modern Venice, which she dreams of entering through her secret marriage with Lorenzo, a friend of the protagonist Bassanio. Like Bianca offers a counterweight to the shrewish Kate, so Jessica is coupled with Portia, the wealthy maid of Belmont who is to marry any man who solves the three-casket riddle devised by her father before his death. Conventionally, Portia is considered one of the wordiest female characters in Shakespeare's dramatic production given her fundamental role in her husband's trial. Cross-dressed as a Roman judge, she succeeds in clearing Bassanio of all charges and punishing Shylock thanks to her rhetorical skills which led her to a clever interpretation of the law ("this bond doth give thee here no jot on blood: … if thou dost shed / One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods / Are by the laws of Venice confiscate", 4.1.302, 305-07)[13]. Although not confronting the same paternal/patriarchal authority as in *The Shrew*, the characters of Portia and Jessica show how two divergent approaches to language may disrupt patriarchal conventions and grant female characters a happy ending. Still, while Portia is assisted by (dramatic) fate, which allows her to have Bassanio as husband, Jessica weaves her own destiny through silent disobedience to her father's rule. Possibly hinted at by her own name[14], Jessica shows sufficient signs of silent

[13] All quotations from the play are from Shakespeare 2011.

[14] In early modern England, "jess" was the common word for "[a] short strap of leather, silk, or other material, fastened round each of the legs of a hawk used in falconry; usually bearing on its

unruliness to require a partial dramatic reconfiguration from Shylock's disobedient daughter to – as Lorenzo calls her – the "little shrew" (5.1.21) of the play.

Jessica's deceiving nature is first unwillingly hinted at by Gratiano as he comments his own loquacity ("silence is only commendable / In a neat's tongue dried and a maid not vendible", 1.1.111-12). These lines involuntarily offer a warning to the audience once they are presented with Jessica's silent attitude. If silence suits unappealing maids, even spinsters, then Jessica, who is far from being considered "not vendible" given her young age, beauty and family's wealth, should display a wordier attitude. As in Bianca's case, her suitor is ironically the first to unconsciously raise some doubts on the actual meekness of the young girl. While Lucentio relies on the mythological figures of Helen of Troy and Aeneas to hint at Bianca's double nature, Lorenzo inadvertently plays with language as he states that "[i]f e'er the Jew her father come to heaven, / It will be for his gentle daughter's sake" 2.4.34-35). On the one hand, "gentle" may refer to "gentileness" and mark Jessica's newly acquired status as a Christian ("gentile") once she marries Lorenzo[15]. However, it could also point to "gentleness", cypher of a good-hearted nature, and thus ironically comment on her faked obedience to her father and her active part in his suffering. Few scenes later, Lorenzo's passionate description of his beloved includes doubtful expressions which, if read retrospectively, may suggest how he may have already spotted some unruly traits in his future wife: "[b]eshrew me but I love her heartily, / For she is wise, *if I can judge of her*, / And fair she is, *if that mine eyes be true*, / And true she is, as she hath proved herself; and therefore, like herself, wise, fair and true, / Shall she be placed in my constant soul" (2.6.53-58, emphasis added). Whether Lorenzo had "judge[d] of her" correctly, Jessica's lack of speech feels out-of-characterand will eventually prove to be so as her relationship with him unfolds.

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free end a small ring or varvel to which the swivel of the leash is attached" (OED sub voce 'jess', 1a) (19/05/23). This etymological detail "demonstrates her likeness to other Shakespearean women who wrestle with their ties with male authority figures" (Tiffany 2002, 362). As in *The Shrew*, women's problematic relationship with male control and power is depicted through hawking and falconry images, especially using the metaphor of a trained or unruly falcon to convey the obedience or disobedience of a particular female character.

[15] OED (sub voce "gentile", 2a) (04/04/2023).

As in the previous play, Jessica's silent disobedience to paternal authority is signalled by her secret agency, revealed when she is alone on stage or accompanied by her servant Launcelot. Aware of the possible dangers ahead, she exhorts her servant to secrecy as she asks him to deliver to Lorenzo a letter containing not only the details of their elopement, but also her future and reputation ("[g]ive him this letter, do it secretly", 2.3.7). Jessica's use of a private means of communication, that is the letter, may recall Bianca's Latin textbook in the creation of a coded language shared with her lover only. However, Jessica increases the secrecy of such communication by avoiding spoken language and entrusting to writing her directions to her suitor. By doing so, she takes Bianca's agency one step further: she not only consents to the courtship of a suitor not of her father's choice, but also provides him with all the necessary information for their elopement and livelihood thereafter. In Act 2 Scene 4, Lorenzo himself pictures Jessica as the sole organizer of such a plan:

> LORENZO
> She hath directed
> How I shall take her from her father's house,
> What gold and jewels she is furnished with,
> What page's suit she hath in readiness.
> […]
> Come, go with me, peruse this as thou goest.
> Fair Jessica shall be my torch-bearer. (2.4.30-33, 39-40)

However, to make the plan succeed, Jessica needs to resort to both secret agency and lying to maintain her modest and meek façade, which must appear unshaken in her father's eyes until her elopement. Jessica's feigned obedience to Shylock is made explicit in her own instructions to Launcelot, who should promptly leave her since she "would not have my father / See me in talk with thee" (2.3.8-9). A few scenes later, she will again try to cover the traces of their collaboration as Shylock starts having doubts about her conversation with Launcelot. Her readily concocted reassuring reply covers up her servant's hint to her future flight and cancels any suspicion from her father's mind. She does not lie on the act of speaking with Launcelot, but subtly twists what really happened by exchanging Launcelot's overt indication of Lorenzo's arrival ("[m]istress, look out at window, for all this; / There will come a Christian by, /

Will be worth a Jewess' eye", 2.5.39-41) with a reassuring and plain answer which satisfies Shylock's sense of decorum ("[h]is words were 'Farewell, mistress,' nothing else", 43). The true intention hidden behind her moder appearance, forged by such a ready and effective lie, is disclosed only once she is left alone onstage ("[f]arewell, and if my fortune be not crossed, / I have a father, you a daughter, lost", 54-55).

This is not the sole instance of Jessica's ready tongue, cypher of a sharp mind. In one of her conversations with Lorenzo, Jessica wants to give him her opinion about his worth as husband and insists after his initial refusal:

> LORENZO
> Even such a husband
> Hast thou of me, as she is for a wife.
> JESSICA
> Nay, but ask my opinion too of that!
> LORENZO
> I will anon; first, let us go to dinner.
> JESSICA
> Nay, let me praise you while I have a *stomach*.
> LORENZO
> No, pray thee, let it serve for table talk,
> I shall digest it.
> JESSICA
> Well, I'll set you forth. (3.5.76-83, emphasis added)

The word "stomach" also appears as a figurative reference to the seat of passions and secret thoughts in Kate's final monologue. There, the shrew advises unruly women on and off stage to "*veil* their stomachs" implying either to lower their pride or conceal their true nature to their husbands according to the interpretative reading adopted[16] (Kingsbury 2004, 78). In *The Merchant*, Lorenzo replies by asking Jessica to "serve" her comment on his worth "for table talk" so that he will be able to "digest it", possibly implying the stinging quality of his future conversation with his wife. His concern is justified in Act 5 Scene 1, where Jessica herself confirms having a sharp tongue as she expresses her self-assuredness in "out-night[ing]" (5.1.23) Lorenzo in their teasing repartee. Like Bianca, who eventually transforms into a "haggard", Jessica too

[16] See also Smith 2002.

is given a new title by her husband, who defines her "a little shrew" (5.1.21). Etymologically referring to the small rodent whose bite was believed to be venomous, Lorenzo may have chosen this label to ironically highlight Jessica's inclination towards a typical shrewish activity, that of slandering ("[i]n such a night / Did pretty Jessica, like a little *shrew*, / *Slander* her love, and he forgave it her", 5.1.20-22, emphasis added). Similarities in the common silent unruliness between Bianca and Jessica are also to be found in the use of falconry images, which conventionally depicted power struggles within couples. While Bianca, and Kate before her, was described as a "haggard", Jessica is associated to a less troublesome bird who has naturally left its nest ("the bird [Jessica] was fledge", 3.1.26-27). However, these two female characters show one major difference. While at the end of *The Shrew*, Bianca unveils her true colours and, together with the Widow, replaces Kate as the shrew of the play, in *The Merchant* Jessica seems to occupy a far more ambiguous position.

After their repartee, Lorenzo and Jessica arrange a welcoming celebration for Portia's return to Belmont with the aid of musicians. Such festive setting contrasts with Jessica's unexpected melancholy as she comments "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" (5.1.69). Although Lorenzo readily dismisses her feelings ("[t]he reason is your spirits are attentive", 5.1.70), this comment should be given more resonance since it stands for Jessica's last line in the play. Following *The Merchant*'s comic and romantic nature, Jessica's "attentive" spirits may hint at her "intent, heedful, observant" attitude towards sounds and music[17]. In previous scenes, Jessica's hearing was so refined by love that it could not "stop my house's ears" (2.5.33), as her father would have wanted to, and led her to readily recognise Lorenzo by his voice ("swear that I do know your tongue", 2.6.28), which she follows in her flight to Belmont (Slight 1980, 367). This interpretation of Jessica's "attentive spirits" may illuminate Lorenzo's conclusive comment on the relationship between music and human nature: "[t]he man that hath no music in himself, / Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, / Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils; … let no such man be trusted" (5.1.83-85, 88). Jessica's acute sensitivity to music sets her apart from the group Lorenzo refers to, which consists of those who are indifferent to this

[17] OED (sub voce 'attentive', 1.a).

art and therefore deserving of contempt and mistrust, much like Shylock. Opposed to this reading, Jessica's lack of changing attitudes, from negative to positive, contradicts Lorenzo's archaic account of wild beasts turning docile when hearing sweet sounds ("[t]heir savage eyes turned to a modest gaze / By the sweet power of music", 5.1.78-79). As Lanier observes, "Jessica is describing how she *always* responds to music, rather than just to this particular song or situation" (2019, 159). If she is never pleased by music, never positively touched by it, then Lorenzo's conclusive remark seems to fittingly describe not only her father, but herself too. In his seemingly naïve comment, Lorenzo may unconsciously recognize the unreliability and subversiveness of those who don't appreciate the musical art in his wife, who after all, feigned obedience and silence to plan her escape and betray her father. Although both interpretations may be further discussed, Jessica's prolonged silence which accompanies her until the end of the play, marks her still as an, at least partial, outsider in the Venetian company and reinforces the pensive and melancholic vein of a play where dualistic categories of good and bad, justice and injustice are unsettlingly blurred.

4. Conclusions

This study, part of a larger work in progress, has aimed to analyse reticence as unruliness in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* to contribute to the decades-long investigation on early modern female rhetoric, question its more common assumptions and offer a less conventional perspective on linguistic practices of resistance to patriarchal authority. In particular, it has demonstrated how silence and reticence could prove a successful strategy to defy paternal control while protecting women's reputation from problematic labels, such as 'shrew'. Bianca and Jessica succeed where Kate and Portia fail, that is marrying a suitor of their own choice, thanks to their reliance on secret agency and lying rather than direct attacks against unjust paternal decisions. Kate's tantrums and loud protestations not only prevented her from achieving her much-desired freedom of choice, but also consigned her to paternal – and then marital – control due to her status of shrew of the play, thus of a subject to be controlled and disciplined. Thanks to her meek posture, Bianca avoids her

father's controlling measures as she appears to pose no threats to the patriarchal status quo, and is free to manage her love life as she wishes. Unlike Kate, Portia avoids the uncomfortable identification as a talkative woman only thanks to her cross-dressing as a male doctor of law, without which her charges against Shylock might have proved useless and, possibly, unbecoming. Nonetheless, her open refutation of male (legal) supremacy places her on the talkative end of the linguistic spectrum, where Jessica stands for its silent opposite. Although sharing with Portia the same desire for a happy marriage, Jessica chooses action and its consequences over blind obedience and heartbroken lamentations ("[o] me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father", 1.2.21-24) and seemingly finds her happy ending, which is granted to Portia by fate, and dramatic necessity, only.

These considerations bear two main conclusions. First, they highlight and confirm Shakespeare's well-known habit of defamiliarising and questioning widespread assumptions which, in this case, emphasize a growing discomfort with the rather weary idea that silence in women was to be preferred to speech. Bianca and Jessica show how "misleading and historically inaccurate [it is] to locate power in speech alone – or even to construct speech and silence as binary opposites" and suggest "that silence in early modern England was an unstable and highly contested site", also of resistance and rebellion (Luckyj 2002, 39). Borrowing from Montironi, silent female characters in Shakespeare do not reflect stereotyped literary and cultural assumptions, but rather embody the ambiguous and multifaceted "early modern feminine tropes of silence and the contemporary debates on the subject" (2020, 59). Secondly, such conclusions call for a redefinition of the category of the "unruly woman" to include those female figures who are not necessarily characterized by its garrulity and bitter prolixity. After all, as Robert Burton notices in the revised edition of his *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1651), "*pauciloqui*", that is, being "of few words, and oftentimes wholly silent", could be a sign of repressed anger as much as aggressive speech (Aa3v). By opening the category of "unruly women" to silent women, then, the "shrew" could become a sub-group of this more inclusive label which would show the whole range of linguistic strategies women could rely on to counter patriarchal discourses. In this light, further

studies may be advisable as they may concentrate on other female characters in Shakespeare's comedies who do not have a loquacious alter-ego, as it is the case with Ann Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and/or test the consistency of the trope of silent disobedience in other comic heroines outside the Shakespearean canon.

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