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Fashioning and Negotiating Women's Rights: The Shakespearean Paradigm

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how Shakespeare theatricalised the early modern patriarchal discourse on femininity and challenged gender stereotypes interwoven with outward appearance and demeanour. Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, far from fitting the female model that was being propagandised, seem to mirror the diversity among Renaissance women and the complexity of their roles as active and independent legal subjects able to negotiate their rights in the family and society. These striking female characters, projecting diverse social roles and outward appearance features, bring to the fore the divergence between real life and the discourse that attempted to crystallise an old-fashioned idea of femininity by dismissing the transformation occurring in the early modern period. This analysis spurs us to reflect on whether such questions concerning the construction of womanhood that originated in the Renaissance still affect the achievement of gender equality in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; theatre; womanhood; appearance; discrimination.

1. Introduction

The Renaissance anticipated crucial questions concerning the representation of the human body that are still at the core of controversial

contemporary issues. The word fashioning began to spread with implications related to the shaping of the self and started to be perceived as a "manipulable artful process" that aimed to forge human identity (Greenblatt 1980, 2). Outward appearance and clothing, which were intended as exterior layers mirroring the interior self, had relevance in the acknowledgment of a person's social status and thence rights. Because Renaissance texts were imbued with such discourse, they offer us a wide range of multi-layered material to investigate the bias about human identity and gender that persists (Rackin 2005, 28). In particular, Shakespeare's plays unveil the double layer embedded in the shifting nature of external appearance: although dress and demeanour shape and mark personal identity, they may be misleading or become a means of division, stigmatisation, and discrimination. In this paper, I discuss three characters that demonstrate how the divergence between everyday life and the discourse concerning the depiction of the ideal womanhood were questioned and criticised on the Shakespearean stage. My point is that Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* are striking examples who deserve to be reconsidered in light of the actual role of women in the early modern period that emerges from narratives and legal records. Indeed, looking at them from this angle, the view on the discourse concerning femininity and outward appearance can be seen in all its complexity.

As Greenblatt points out, Shakespeare staged various female characters "who do not conform to expectations" and portrayed in the Sonnets one of the most ambiguous and striking female figures (2010, 45). By comparing their diversion from the norm with the female model that circulated in the early modern times, Shakespeare challenged stereotypes about outward appearance, demonstrating that "Beauty inheres in the beloved's identity including those aspects of the identity – strange, idiosyncratic, imperfect – that do not fit normative expectations" (Greenblatt 2010, 44). The study of these three characters, Rosaline, Kate and Cleopatra, allows us to explore various diversions from female stereotypes both in appearance and behaviour, namely: dark or black skin, insubordination, personal empowerment, and negotiation skills. They offer an insight into diverse social ranks and each of them is the representative of one of the three phases that are conventionally considered

milestones in a woman's life, associated with her roles of wife and mother: Rosaline is on the verge of being engaged, Kate is facing the passage from the status of daughter to that of wife, while Cleopatra is portrayed by Shakespeare as a mature woman on the verge of the downfall of her kingdom and her life. Unlike Viola, Portia, Imogen, and Rosalind, who achieve their purposes by disguising themselves and taking on the appearance of men, Rosaline, Katherina, and Cleopatra face prejudice and conventions performing their roles as women in their female dress. Their unconventional, and I would say threatening, features are underlined and criticised through a language that circumscribes their personhood and that echoes the patriarchal discourse, sermons and ancient customs concerning marriage. However, instead of adhering to these norms, they enter into confrontation with men, showing their independence as legal subjects who perform their role in society with men on equal terms. This might have been of particular interest to Shakespeare's audience in the passage between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, but it appears to be of interest even today. Indeed, my analysis also aims to look through the eyes of these three Shakespearean women at twenty-first-century debates about female self-presentation, since, although gender equality is proclaimed in the Declaration of Human Rights and Western constitutions, as well as in the 2030 Agenda, outward appearance still has a significant effect on the construction of womanhood and on the recognition of women as independent subjects with full legal rights.

2. External Appearance, Law, and Legal Personality

The interrelations between appearance, fashion and social acceptance have been considered by scholarship due to their impact on questions of gender equality and discrimination (Rhode 2010). It is important to note that outward appearance is intertwined with law and in particular with the concept of legal personality, which is "The capacity for being the subject of rights and duties recognised by law" (OED). Indeed, the word *person* comes from the Latin *persona,* meaning an actor's mask, while the Greeks named the mask *prosopon*, a compound of *pro* (towards) and *ops* (eye), which is the same word as face. In a nutshell, each identity is legally relevant when it is represented by a "mask of

legal personality" which is an abstract construction (Watt 2013, 79). Thomas Hobbes was one of the first to note the connection between the legal persona and the theatrical mask, since he believed that "a person is the same as an actor both on stage and in common conversation and to personate is to act or represent himself or another; and he that acteth another, is said to bear his person, or act in his name" (qtd. in Watt 2021, 28).

In the Renaissance, the interrelation between outward appearance and legal subjectivity started to be recognised as a way of visually representing society's hierarchical structure. The human body was a powerful metaphor which displayed and justified political and legal theories; thus, not only was the microcosm/macrocosm analogy at the heart of the concept of the state, but it also defined legal personhood. Clothes, countenance, and complexion were signs of a visual language that represented people's gender, rank, and rights. In the passage between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, the theory of the "King's Two Bodies" was still at the core of a fictional representation of power: the monarch crowned and clothed in royal attire incarnated both the immortality of the dynasty and of the body politic, which was a corporation, a *persona ficta,* an artificial entity with a legal personality (Greenblatt 1980, 167). Elizabeth I was aware of this and during her reign performed her role through the clever use of colours and appearance; in particular, her face with red and white cosmetics was a "symbolic register for the body politic" and the English people's national identity (Karim-Cooper 2009, 199). Beauty became "an empowering asset…both a requirement for and a guarantee of power" (Rihel 2010, 37). Elizabeth I's subjects were part of this spectacle, since they were hierarchically classified through their clothes. Indeed, the Sumptuary Laws not only aimed to limit expenditure and the importation of goods from the continent but were also conceived to consolidate social division by prohibiting men from wearing lavish and expensive clothing when it did not correspond to their status (Hooper 1915). In Tudor England, a woman's attire was considered a domestic matter subjected to her father's and husband's control (Hayward 2009, 45), and a wife's clothes, as well as jewels, were part of the paraphernalia that her husband could dispose of and which reverted to her when he died (Erickson 1993, 26).

The need to control the hierarchical structure of society led to categorising people according to a symbolic system of colours and materials that identified and narrated one's identity and legal personality through apparel and accessories as if they were the masks of actors on stage. Thus, fashion and novelties in apparel were seen as threatening the social order whenever they blurred rank or gender divisions. As Hayward argues:

> In the 1540's several masculine traits were absorbed into the female attire, including the male style of flat bonnet, decorated along similar lines with brooches and feathers and the doublet-style bodice of the loose gown. Not surprisingly they provoked adverse comment, but the popularity of these styles with some women may reflect that they took advantage of their clothing being exempt from the legislation. (Hayward 2009, 46)

Doublets were targeted, since they were traditionally masculine attire worn under the cuirass, but then started to be tailored in luxury material and worn by both men and women. Philip Stubbes considered them "a kind of attire appropriate only to man" that, when worn by women, could confuse onlookers in distinguishing the gender of the bearer (Stubbes 1583, 73). Nevertheless, Elizabeth I's portraits are evidence of how her gold embroidered doublets served exactly to project her martial allure, thence the authority of the body politic she represented, so that one might say that her appearance was the mask of the legal personality of the corporation, that is the *persona ficta* she embodied.

However, early modern society had inherited Roman law's patriarchal structure, in which the *pater familias*, mirroring the emperor, had power over the family's members (Raffield 2010, 179). Hence, although differing in rank, men were considered to be in charge within the family. Meanwhile, women's legal personhood was simplified and supposed to be under the control of fathers, husbands or religious institutions. The daughter, the wife, the widow, the spinster, or the nun appeared to be stereotyped masks representing female personalities. The ideal woman was depicted as chaste, obedient, and silent since speech was associated with social and sexual transgression (Rackin 2016, 62). As Newman observes, there is a striking metaphor in the Biblical verse from the Proverb: "A good wife is the crown of her husband" (qtd. in Newman 1991, 15). Interestingly, this implicitly intertwines the status of a married woman with that of her husband, echoing the concept of the body politic and

the macrocosm and microcosm analogy. The female body was seen as an ornament to display masculine agency, and deviation from the norm was feared as a threat both to the order of the family and the body politic. Hence, if "a good wife" bore witness to the honour and achievements of her husband, a wife who transgressed the rules of obedience, meaningfully called "scolding wife", was to be viewed with disdain, and her reputation harmed that of her husband (Amussen 2018, 348). The number of narratives and legal records about women who were accused of being unfaithful or insubordinated to their husbands is evidence of the social alarm that these cases generated. Mocking representations, known as skimmingtons, were set up by other members of the community as both punishment for the culprit and admonition. Even if the target was the unruly wife, her husband was involved in such humiliation (Newman 1991, 35). As Newman points out: "Patriarchalism justified absolutism juridically and constituted desire psychologically; but like femininity, it was a construct, not a given", hence not all men were like "sovereigns" (ibid., 17). The concern that emerges from these narratives reveals the anxiety about subversion in the family structure and thence in the order of the body politic. Thus, it seems that the intersection of patriarchal discourse with the macrocosm/microcosm analogy served to consolidate the sovereign's power (ibid., 15).

However, this discourse was dense with contradictions and did not perfectly fit the variety and complexity of human reality (Amussen 2018). Many women were involved in a range of activities external to their household or they did not marry, while men did not always have a leading role in the family as the reported cases of unruly women reveal. All this shows that the masks that circumscribed the female legal personality did not represent women properly, since they played a multiplicity of roles both in the family and society. An interesting example is given by the old Common Law doctrine of *femme couverte*. A married woman was said to be "covered" because her legal identity was "suspended during the marriage" and "incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband" on the assumption that they were "one person" (Watt 2013, 79). This also implied that the property she brought to the marriage as a dowry came under the control of her husband (Erikson 1993, 25). However, marriage could be negotiated for an "economically viable household", so women's

property could be protected in a marriage settlement to "circumvent the most uncongenial effects of coverture" (ibid., 26). Thus, although women permanently lost control of their dowry and movables with the marriage, thanks to an agreement they could actively participate in the administration of the family's property. Moreover, widows were entitled by common law to become the owners of the leases and lands of their husbands, while many of them were named as executors (ibid., 129). If they stipulated a jointure, they were economically protected with a "cash annuity or lands" (ibid., 220). As Hayward points out:

> Tudor widows had a degree of financial independence that single and married women did not. They could control their property, belongings, and business interests. In London, if their husband had been a freeman of the city, they could elect to become a free woman of their own rights. (2009, 245)

Those at the lower social levels who did not marry were involved in trades or in apprenticeships to make a living, such as plumbers, cordwainers, silversmiths, house painters, and whittawers, the same trade as John Shakespeare, or housewifery, flax dressing or knitting (Erickson 1993, 53; Rackin 2005, 35-36; Rackin 2016, 68-69). Hence, even if women were ideologically subjected and conceived as passive legal subjects, they actually had an active role in society, and they "had authority over men, servants, children, or over the less wealthy and well born" (Newman 1991, 18).

As far as outward appearance and the cult of fairness are concerned, the "aesthetic of fairness", which pivoted around the binarism of black and white, started to be particularly meaningful in discerning gender and status (Hall 1995, 8-9). Black and white became "systems of values codified to produce dubious but enduring senses of difference" (Karim-Cooper 2021, 18). Fair faces were associated with positive values while black faces with folly, sartorial pride, and ignorant speech. In particular, the cult of the fair complexion strengthened this dichotomy, and whiteness became the ideal outward appearance of womanhood according to the Western Christian model (Hall 1995, 8-9; Hornback 2018, 24-25). The binarism of black and white circumscribed gender in a polarity of dark and light that was emphasised in the representation of white women as opposed to black men and vice versa (Newman 1991,71; Hall

1995, 240). While fair femininity was represented as the personification of the national cultural identity, of which Elizabeth I was the icon, the black woman's body was seen as seductive but threatening towards the white male body. Indeed, black womanhood was perceived as "an extreme of otherness" imbued with a "metaphoric politics of colours" that pivoted around the relationship between the "European male" and the "foreign female" (Hall 1995, 69). Although in poetry the black woman was celebrated, this meant "to refashion her into an acceptable object of Platonic love and admiration" and this rhetoric, rather than underlining the lady's seductiveness, seemed to reinforce a renewed masculine agency, that is the "poet's power in bringing them to light" (ibid., 67).

It is worth noting that the celebration of black or dark femininity mirrored the early modern multi-ethnic society. Because of mobility in Europe and colonial trade, communities of immigrants lived in London. Literature and archives prove that people belonging to diverse geographical areas and ethnicities had relationships and children (Karim-Cooper 2023, 153). These changes spurred playwrights to represent this heterogeneity on stage too. If a thick layer of white paint was used to give the illusion of perfect white skin, cosmetics made of burnt walnut shells or the stones of cherries mixed with oil could imitate a wide spectrum of dark complexions (Karim–Cooper 2021, 25-26). Dark clothes, like sleeves or leggings, were useful props to imitate black skin. Hence, the theatre started to be the space where these groups of people not only could be part of the audience but could also see their images on stage as characters. Moreover, women of all ranks enjoyed plays either alone or with other women, and all this made the audience heterogeneous in terms of status and gender (Gurr and Szatek 2008).

3. Rosaline, Katherina, and Cleopatra: "a whitely wanton", "a shrew", "a tawny front"

Rosaline, Katherina, and Cleopatra deserve to be reconsidered as representatives of an alternative narrative to the patriarchal discourse since from this angle they give an insight into early modern London and the complexities of the impact of outward appearance on gender divisions. In

Love's Labour's Lost, Rosaline's complexion is not fair; nevertheless, like Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the lady of the Sonnets, she is irresistibly attractive to Berowne, who is ashamed of his feelings:

> BEROWNE And among three to love the worst of all,
> A whitely wanton with a velvet brow,
> With two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes. (3.1.190-92)[1]

According to Hall, Berowne conflates the rhetoric that strengthens male agency and the "painted rhetoric" according to which those women who hide their true face under makeup are threatening, since they deceive the onlookers with artifice, changing the features given by God and nature (Hall 1995, 91). Indeed, Berowne adds: "Fie, painted rhetoric! O, she needs it not" (4.3.235), referring to the refusal of artifice both in his rhetoric and in Rosaline's face. The reference to cosmetics is in the form of a metatheatrical play on words. The word "whitely" might refer to the boy actor's face, which was probably painted with white cosmetics in order to perform the role of a woman according to the fashion of fair skin. Thus, when Berowne refers to Rosaline's velvet brow and her eyes, he might be punning; he might be both underlining that brown brows and eyes are clues to a dark or black complexion and that the role is performed by a boy actor who is wearing makeup.

The opposition between dark and fair female skin is at the core of the competition about the ladies' beauty and virtues in which Berowne and the King are involved. The model of this dialogue is the comparison between the two opposite poles of fairness and darkness according to the rhetoric of the white and black binarism, and it echoes Stubbes's attack of makeup and praise of natural skin. Indeed, while Berowne praises Rosaline's dark skin, the King adheres to the canon of fairness:

> BEROWNE Is ebony like her? O word divine!
> A wife of such wood were felicity.
> O, who can give an oath? Where is a book?
> That I may swear beauty doth beauty lack
> If that she learn not of her eye to look.

[1] All quotations from the play are from Shakespeare 1998.

> No face is fair that is not full so black .
> KING O paradox! Black is the badge of hell. (4.3.244-50)

According to Hall, this dialogue mirrors both the early modern fashion of fairness and the new fashion of celebrating in poetry dark or black female skin as a way of strengthening male agency (1995, 69); whereas Karim-Cooper considers this to be an example of how in Shakespeare's theatre "misogynoir is detectable even in the most seemingly benign moments" (Karim-Cooper 2023, 494-95).

Berowne rebuts that not only does Rosaline challenge traditional beauty, but that she is a new model to imitate:

> BEROWNE And therefore, is she born to make black fair.
> Her favour turns the fashion of the days,
> For native blood is counted painting now;
> And therefore red, that would avoid dispraise,
> Paints itself black, to imitate her brow. (4.3.257-61)

Berowne elevates Rosaline by overturning the early modern stereotypes related to the correspondence between complexion and inner nature. Although fair skin symbolises a good inward nature, Rosaline's ebony is not less valuable, since it epitomises both beauty and inner fairness. Moreover, black beauty is on the verge of becoming "the fashion of the days", that is, it is inaugurating a new trend to which everyone will adhere. This change in the perception of beauty evokes the first stanza of Sonnet 127: "In the old age black was not counted fair, /Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name; /But now is black beauty's successive heir" (1-3).[2] According to Edmondson and Wells, who edited Shakespeare's Sonnets, Berowne's words actually form a sonnet encapsulated in the play and this is not surprising because, being performed in a period of fashion for sonnets, *Love's Labour's Lost* is "the most heavily sonnet-laden" (Shakespeare 2020, 11). Rosaline seems to echo the lady of Sonnet 130, too. However, while the Sonnet "seems to be a cameo, a miniature portrait in words" since it is the poet who portrays the mysterious lady marking her unique identity, that is her being "rare" (Laghi 2023, 363), Rosaline competes with Berowne through a language that shows her female agency, as we shall see. It

[2] All quotations from the Sonnets are from Shakespeare 2020.

seems as if Rosaline embodies a female personality already embedded in the Sonnets that Shakespeare developed in *Love's Labour's Lost* for the wide, heterogeneous and multi-ethnic audience of the theatre.

Rosaline's dark skin does not imply foulness according to the early modern stereotypes but, far from being "the badge of hell", as the King says, does not impede her from having a fair inward nature. Indeed, like the Princess and the other ladies, Rosaline appears to be fair in negotiating Berowne's proposal. The ladies' request, which aims to prove their suitors' reliability with a series of demanding tasks, projects a form of agency that possibly mirrored that of the women who were attending the play. In early modern society, the relationships between people were structured according to rank, class, and gender, both in public and in private, and ideally, such relationships were supposed to be "reciprocal", since obedience was given in exchange for protection (Amussen 2018, 3). Many women who lived far from their parents' homes negotiated their marriage independently, choosing their spouse on their own (Rackin 2016, 68).

According to Newman, the reciprocity in marriage was not in contrast with "patriarchist discourse": if anything, it reinforced the construction of gender hierarchies because 'the economy of binary opposition' was 'itself a ruse for a monologic elaboration of the masculine' (Newman 1995, 23). However, providing that a negotiation implies the interaction of two parties with opposite interests, the agreement aims to satisfy the expectations of both of them by balancing their interests. This principle seems to be represented in the play. The princess, pressed by the king to answer the marriage proposal, replies: "A time, methink, too short /To make a word-without-end bargain in" (5.2.782-83). Hence, even if reciprocity in marriage was constructed as an exchange of female obedience and protection, this play represents the active role played by women in balancing both parties' interests and requests. Although Rosaline's appearance mirrors the discourse about the binarism of black and white, she shows her inner fairness and independence from male authority by being able to manage her choice autonomously like the other ladies and on equal terms with men.

If Rosaline has to cope with courtship, Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew* has to face a marriage agreement that has actually been made by her father Baptista. This play has been widely discussed as proof of misogyny in

Renaissance England; yet, reconsidering it from an alternative critical perspective, as Rackin suggests, may offer new insights into the early modern conception of women and marriage. Although it projects the men's anxiety about unruly wives, it is worth remembering that many women were in the audience and might have found Katherina's story and her final speech a parody of an ancient marriage custom instead of an approval of patriarchal discourse. Katherina's new clothes, which have just been tailored according to her requests following the latest fashion, bring intriguing legal implications connected to the balance of the bride and groom's economic interests. Petruccio aims to limit how much money is spent on fashionable clothes but also to circumscribe his wife's legal personality and to literally and metaphorically "cover" her according to the common law doctrine of the *femme couverte*. On the other hand, Katherina aims to present herself according to her rank and new status of wife. Katherina's small cap, which leaves her head un-covered, and her gown's slashed sleeves, which let onlookers see the softer embroidered cloth beneath them, seem to be metaphors for her attempt to loosen the strictness of the coverture. Petruccio ridicules the fashionable cap, which he considers too small, and in his mockery, he increasingly reduces it to "a velvet dish", "lewd and filthy", "a cockle" "a walnut-shell", "a knack, a toy, a trick, a baby's cap" (4.3.67-69)[3] in an attempt to emphasise that the "coverture" is excessively loose. However, Katherina loves the cap and replies: "I'll have no bigger: this doth fit time, /And gentlewomen wear such caps as these" (4.3.71-72). Moreover, she claims her right to speak and to wear such an item, positioning herself at the same level as her husband:

> KATHERINA Why sir, I trust I may have leave to speak,
> And speak I will. I am not a child, no babe;
> Your betters have endured me say my mind,
> And if you cannot, best you stop your ears. (4.3.75-78)

Underlining that she is not a child, she is indirectly saying that she has the legal capacity and authority to lawfully express her will with a form of "linguistic freedom" (Newman 1991, 44) that makes her appear equal to her husband. Indeed, although her rebuttal seems to be focused on a mere question

[3] All quotations from the play are from Shakespeare 2010.

of fashion, it addresses the negotiation of her rights in the marriage agreement represented by her right to wear a kind of apparel that suits her role and legal personhood in society. Although Petruccio justifies his opposition to her clothing with the excuse of loving her, saying: "Why, thou sayst true – it is a paltry cap, /A custard-coffin, a bauble, a silken pie; /I love thee well in that thou lik'st it not" (4.3.83-85), Katherina sticks to her point: "Love me or love me not, I like the cap, /And it will have, or I will have none" (4.3.86-8). She retorts that, if anything, Petruccio's criticism of her new clothes springs from the will to make a puppet of her, that is to limit her rights as a wife, not from his love:

> KATHERINA I never saw a better-fashioned gown,
> More quaint, more pleasing, nor more commendable.
> Be like you mean to make a puppet of me. (4.3.103-05)

The word "puppet" is also used by Stubbes to criticise women in fashionable clothes. As he explains: "So that when they have all these goodly robes upon them, women seem to be the smallest part of themselves, not natural women, but artificial women, not women of flesh and blood, but rather puppets" (Stubbes 1573, 75). Hence, it seems that Katherina is opposing such discourse by saying that clothes do not make a woman a puppet, but this is done by those husbands who dictate their wives' appearance in order to control them as if they were puppets, that is, passive beings unable to manage their lives. Although this was a condition experienced by many women, since, as mentioned earlier, female clothes were a domestic affair at their husband's disposal (Erickson 1993, 26), this did not mean that it was silently accepted by all women. If anything, the issue of a wife's apparel might have been the object of a negotiation with the husband as shown on stage by Katherina. Indeed, while Petruccio insists on his opposition to expenditure on garments even on the wedding day, Katherina insists on wearing the appropriate attire for her rank. Petruccio presents himself at Baptista's door in "unreverent robes" (3.2.111), answering Tranio's observation: "To me she's married, not unto my clothes" (3.2.116). Then, after the marriage, he invites Katherina to leave her father's home in humble clothes:

PETRUCCIO Well, come, my Kate we will unto your father's,
Even in these honest mean habiliments:
Our purses shall be proud, our garments poor,
For 'tis the mind that makes the body rich. (4.3.168-71)

However, Petruccio has just ordered Hortensio to pay the tailor; hence, this implies that Kate will have her clothes.

Katherina's last speech is one of the most controversial in Shakespearean criticism. Generally, it has been represented on stage from a patriarchal point of view, since it contains many references to early modern beliefs on a wife's duties, material derived from the Bible and homilies. However, the ancient custom according to which the wife has to prostrate herself at her husband's feet was seen as 'anachronistic' in Shakespeare's time, since it had been outlawed by the Act of Uniformity forty years earlier (Boose 1991,184). Hence, it seems that Katherina's speech is less a simple oath of obedience than a parody of such obsolete and humiliating rules. At the beginning of the play, Bianca represents the model of femininity in opposition to her sister Katherina. Bianca, which means "white" in Italian, is praised as the "good" (1.1.76) "beautiful" lady (1.2.118) and her "silence" enchants Lucentio, who falls in love with her (Lucky 1993, 37). However, after the marriage, she reveals her shape-shifting nature by changing into a scolding wife; she is described by Petruccio as "froward" (5.2.125) and "headstrong" (5.2.136). Instead, Katherina seems to be 'tamed' and giving wise advice about wives' duties to Bianca and the Widow who has just been remarried to Hortensio. Katherina suggests that, as wives, they have to "unknit that threatening unkind brow" (5.2.142) and be kind to their husbands, who are, she says, "thy lord, thy king, thy governor" (5.2.144). Katherina explains: "A woman moved is like a fountain troubled, /Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty" (5.2.148-49). According to her speech, women must be concerned about the preservation of their beauty, because "fair looks and true obedience" are the tokens of exchange contained in the marriage agreement:

KATHERINA Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe,
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks and true obedience –
Too little payment for so great debt. (5.2.157-60)

However, although these words quote the patriarchal discourse about female appearance and the family hierarchy, this does not imply Katherina has been tamed by Petruccio. If anything, her words appear as an attempt to tame the husbands by mocking them. Far from strengthening the husband's role in the family, her words address the clash between patriarchal discourse and real life, as Bianca and the Widow's disobedience appears to show. This is because, first, although Petruccio orders Katherina to deprive herself of the cap as a sign of obedience, "that cap of yours becomes you not:/Off with that bauble – throw it underfoot" (5.2.127-28), there is no trace of her acceptance of her husband request; second, if she is wearing her small cap in the last scene, this means that she managed to wear it after Hortentio paid the tailor's bill. Finally, it is worth remembering that the story of Katherina and Petruccio is a play within the play that starts with an induction; hence, the submission of the wives appears more to be in Sly's dream than in reality. Thus, Katherina's reference to an ancient custom that had been suppressed forty years before the play serves to underline the divergence between past and present habits, as well as to mock those who regret the suppression of such a humiliating rule for a wife. Neither Katherina nor Bianca nor the Widow are obeying their husbands or prostrating themselves at their feet. In other words, the quotation of this old rule appears to be like an unfashionable garment that no woman wants to wear any longer. Looking at the play from this angle, the title *The Taming of the Shrew* appears to be a wordplay; it seems that Petruccio is tamed by Katherina who, by emphasising the lack of adherence of the ancient custom to real life, cleverly brings to the fore the contradictions embedded in patriarchal discourse. The three husbands on stage do not catch the point, but the audience might have been aware of the underlying meaning of Katherina's words.

If Rosaline represents the overturning of the conventions of fairness and Katherina challenges marriage rules through the metaphor of clothes and countenance, Cleopatra is the representation of a mature woman who subverts the early modern rules on femininity both in outward appearance and social role. In this way, she appears to echo Elizabeth I as a woman in power but she differs from her in the colour of her face and her otherness in relation to English nationhood. The first image of Cleopatra is depicted by Philo who calls

her "a tawny front" (1.1.6)[4] and "gipsy" (1.1.10) implying that her exterior appearance corresponds to a dark inwardness according to the Renaissance discourse on the symbolism of colour and on black skin (Karim-Cooper 2023, 200). The association of "tawny" with "gipsy" reinforces the negative view of her threatening otherness in relation not only to the white man, embodied in this play by Antony, but also towards the Roman body politic that represents western culture. Cleopatra does not hide her face under a layer of white makeup; instead, she portrays herself as tanned and wrinkled when she addresses Antony before he comes back to Rome: "Think on me /That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black /And wrinkled deep in time?" (1.5.28-30).

Though generally Shakespeare saw wrinkles as the opposite of beauty, on Cleopatra's face they mark her identity, allowing her to escape from the impersonality of the expressionless and simplistic female mask, distancing her from stereotypes (Greenblatt 2010, 41-42). From this point of view, she seems to be at the opposite pole to Elizabeth who hid her wrinkles under a layer of makeup in order to project an aura of beauty and youth as an "empowering asset" (Rihel 2010, 37).

Nevertheless, Cleopatra's clothes lend her body a fashionable martial image appropriate to the monarch of the Egyptian body politic, particularly since they evoke Elizabeth's similar habit of wearing a kind of attire, like doublets, that evoked martial imagery in order to empower herself. As Jones and Stallybrass point out, clothing is an instrument of power and the act of investiture gave the person "a form, a shape, a social function, a 'depth'", so on stage it is when the boy actor wears the tire and the mantle that he becomes Cleopatra (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, 2). In Act 1, when Cleopatra orders Charmian to "Cut my lace!" (1.3.72), there is an intriguing clue about the kind of costumes that were worn on the Shakespearean stage. As Tiramani points out, although there is no direct evidence, these words might refer to the habit of cutting off the aglets or the row of laces that fasten doublets, a technique that was also used in theatre for quick changes of costumes (2016, 88-93). Hence, these words suggest that the boy actor was wearing a tight bodice or a doublet of the same forge as

[4] All quotations from the play are from Shakespeare 1995.

those worn by Elizabeth I. Then, when Enobarbus describes Cleopatra on the Cydnus river, he notes that "she did lie / In her pavillion, cloth-of-gold of tissue" (2.2.208-09); there is an implied comparison with the gold embroidered doublet worn by Elizabeth I in the royal pictures, although Cleopatra is clearly depicted as having an exotic otherness and thus as a threat (Karim–Cooper 2023, 77). Antony appears feminised under the effect of Cleopatra's seductiveness (ibid., 71). The Egyptian queen can overturn the gender roles because she tells Charmian that she used to exchange her clothes with those of the Roman leader: "Then put my tires and mantels on him, whilst /I wore his sword Philippan" (2.5.22-23). Wearing female clothes might be heard by the early modern audience as a form of adulteration of Antony's male natural body, while Cleopatra's handling of the sword might be seen as a threatening act against the Roman body politic. Finally, in Act 5, before meeting Antony for the last time, Cleopatra asks to be dressed "like a queen" (5.2.226) with her "best attires" (5.2.227) and to "Bring our crown and all" (5.2.231). Hence, not only does Cleopatra challenge the Renaissance female stereotypes with her dark and wrinkled skin, but she also shows the unreliability of exterior appearance in defining legal personality and legal capacity, denying any suggestion that in these respects she is inferior to Antony, through an act of cross-dressing. Cleopatra seems to remind the audience that a female body may have the power to represent the body politic corporation as Elizabeth I used to do. The Tudor queen was clearly aware of the power embedded in outward appearance; however, she was also aware of the stereotypes that constructed female identity and legal personality. She had offered the same argument in her speech to the troops at Tilbury: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king" qtd. in Levin (1994, 144).

4. Appearance and Discrimination: A concluding question

At a time when widespread patriarchal discourse on femininity and outward appearance circumscribed identities, minimising and dismissing a woman's role in society, Elizabeth I ruled England. On stage, Rosaline, Katherina and Cleopatra departed from the early modern female stereotype in terms of outward appearance and obedience, representing women who empowered

themselves by negotiating their rights in the family and state. These three Shakespearean characters, far from strengthening patriarchal discourse, seem to highlight the contradictions embedded in it by addressing the multi-ethnic and heterogeneous early modern audience and challenging the propagandised structure of society. Their unconventional outward appearance and behaviour show us that discrimination can be hidden in the fold of a dress or under a layer of makeup. Hence, Shakespeare seems to offer us a paradigm to interpret the discourse about women's outward appearance and its interrelation with their roles in society even today. Although gender equality is at the core of the political agenda, women's competence, their equal treatment, and equal opportunities appear to still be dependent on and entangled with criteria regarding outward appearance. Despite feminist scholarship questioning how women's self-presentation is intertwined with gender discrimination, this issue must be constantly monitored and reconsidered, since it has a shifting nature; fashion changes, making the threshold between what is socially accepted and what is stigmatized blurred and shifting. As Rhode points out, in public life, in the working environment and in interpersonal relationships, requirements about outward appearance are a means to judge people's ability with a consequent "individual and social cost" (Rhode 2016, 701-02). The need to be socially accepted and positively judged leads people, in particular women, to represent themselves by adhering to certain standards regarding outward appearance. In order to successfully perform their roles in society, women are still required to dress by following rules that change according to context and culture, as if they have to wear stereotyped masks corresponding to their diverse personalities in public and private spaces: the mother, the wife, the manager, the politician. Failing to meet such demands means being socially stigmatised and in the working environment being dismissed, underestimated, judged negatively, excluded from opportunities, or expected to take on senior roles with a consequent inequality in income and respect. Interestingly, discourse on clothing, outward appearance and fashion is still perceived as a trivial and womanly pursuit, or as a feminist issue, or associated with effeminacy. Instead, questions of dress involve human identity in a broader sense, especially when they are the cause of discrimination. Furthermore, although the most targeted people still appear to be women, the increasing number of those who ask to

represent themselves without adhering to the canon on appearance and to the gender binarism makes this question even more severe and complex in the future. What is worrying, is that, although appearance discrimination creates concerns in the legal field, since it hurts equal opportunities and individual dignity, it is hard to protect it by law because appearance is a multifaceted concept intertwined with sex, race, gender, age and disability, and it changes according to context and legal systems (Rhode 2010, 137).

The proof that the questions embedded in these plays are still unresolved and are still able to raise debate is given by how Rosaline, Kate and Cleopatra are represented in recent theatrical productions. Indeed, as Karim-Cooper points out, although Shakespeare "provides us with more than a hint in the text" from which we can infer that Cleopatra was imagined as having an identity "other than white", many scholars and directors do not acknowledge this feature. Indeed, only in 1991 did a black actress perform this character in an entire play for the first time, but since then the productions in which Cleopatra is represented as having dark or black skin have been few, leading us to interpret such a choice as "a denial of race in the play, or race in Shakespeare's imagination and a denial of the capabilities of performers of colour" (Karim-Cooper 2023, 91). A similar approach has been taken with Rosaline's character. While in 2010 the Globe production, faithfully to the Shakespearean language, assigned the role to Thomasin Rand, in 2014 the Royal Shakespeare Company featured a white actress. Furthermore, as Karim-Cooper argues, in order to protect the originality of the play, the references to Rosaline's skin are performed as humorous but these might be perceived as insults and hurt people. Hence, actors should have the chance to discuss in the rehearsal room "how to be in control of the interpretation" (2023, 198). As far as *The Taming of the Shrew* is concerned, it is worth mentioning that the Royal Shakespeare Company's production in 2019 by Justin Audibert staged a "gender swapping" version of the play set in a matriarchal society where women hold the power. The swap in power dynamic challenged the gender stereotypes and the misogynistic tradition also by means of the actors' gestures, poses and in particular costumes (Thom 2019). While the female characters' clothes

conveyed an idea of domination due to their sumptuous material and elaborate shape, those of the men were tailored so as to appear "delicate" and "subtle".[5]

From these findings, it emerges that these plays and these three female characters are still able to stir discussion about how to face persistent gender discrimination and identity stereotypes that are affecting people's lives. Hence, it is apparent that Shakespeare's women are still able to help us to become aware of how the construction of identity originated and how to loosen the tight laces of the masks that represent human beings on the stage of their lives.

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[5] https://www.rsc.org.uk/news/archive/gender-swapping-shakespeare-on-stage (1/11/2023).

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