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Cristina Paravano

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Cristina Paravano

University of Milan
cristina.paravano@unimi.it

Re-visioning Shakespeare through Jewels: the Case of Marla Aaron

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at Shakespeare through the eyes of an American contemporary designer, Marla Aaron, one of the most original voices in the field of luxury jewellery. Aaron's interest in Shakespeare is more profound than one might expect. The playwright is not evoked as a guarantor of the quality of her jewels but as the embodiment of Aaron's ethos and vision. I examine two aspects of Aaron's engagement with Shakespeare. On the one hand, the designer can be seen as an example of Shakespeare's 'contemporary user', as she purposely appropriates Shakespeare and his works. On the other hand, two pieces in Aaron's collections can be seen as 'Shakescraft' objects which rely on Shakespearean texts, stories, and quotations to create intermediated versions. The paper sheds light on the way a contemporary female artist appropriates and re-visions Shakespeare and his works to resonate her message of love, self-acceptance and inclusion.

Keywords: Shakespeare, jewellery, Shakescraft, appropriation, Sonnet 130.

“Dumb jewels in their silent kind,
more than quick words do move a woman’s mind”

William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
(3.1.90-91)

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have given prominence to the impact of women’s engagement with Shakespeare from the sixteenth century to the present, thus creating a space for voices previously unheard. The spotlight has been turned on women’s influential role in education, textual studies, criticism, performance and reception history and on their creative responses to Shakespeare’s plays¹. Not enough critical attention has been paid, though, to contemporary female artists, who re-visioned Shakespeare and his characters in different art forms and media, ranging from paintings, photographs and engravings to novels, songs and intermedial appropriations² which have been underestimated when compared to those of their male counterparts, if not neglected.³ This essay looks at Shakespeare through the eyes of an American contemporary designer, Marla Aaron, one of the most original voices in the field of luxury jewellery.

After a more than 20-year high-profile career in marketing and advertising, Marla Aaron launched her first collection of jewels in 2012 redefining what fine jewellery means thanks to her transformative and imaginative pieces.⁴ With a potent presence on social media, a magnificent showroom in New York and about forty stores and independent boutiques worldwide selling her jewels, Marla Aaron managed to put herself on the map.⁵ Now she is a recognised and

¹ See Novy 1990; Thompson and Roberts 1997; Callaghan 2000; Sanders 2001; Rackin 2005; Marshall 2012; Kujawinska-Courtney, Penier and Kwapisz-Williams 2013; Ritchie 2014; McMullan, Orlin and Mason Vaughan 2014; Loomba and Sanchez 2016; Duncan 2016; Carney 2021.

² See Iyengar 2000.

³ See Cherry 1993; Ziegler 1996; Remedios 2012; Elam 2014; Smith 2016.

⁴ The designer’s frequently updated website is available at <https://marlaaaron.com> (6/10/2023).

⁵ In 2023 Aaron’s brand was included in the portfolio of THAT Concept Store in the Mall of the Emirates in Dubai thus allowing her to expand in the Middle East.

well-established artist, known for the experimental and original character of her pieces.⁶

The contemporary allure of Aaron's jewels coexists with a noticeable influence of past eras. The jewellery of the Victorian and Georgian periods inspired the industrial look of many of her creations, while the Renaissance, especially Shakespeare's works, contributed to conveying the designer's ethos and vision. As Sujata Iyengar argues, Shakespeare functions "as a creative space for artisans and artists" (2014, 349) like Aaron. The playwright surfaces several times in Aaron's creative output since the beginning of her career as a jewellery designer. On the business card she created when she started her own company there is a Shakespeare quotation from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: "Dumb jewels in their silent kind, / More than quick words do move a woman's mind" (3.1.90-91).⁷ These lines illustrate Marla Aaron's approach, suggesting that jewels may speak louder than words. Each of her creations conveys a potent message, such as an idea, an emotion, a feeling, a value or an issue that matters, from support for single mothers to initiatives for Ukrainian refugees.⁸ As she admitted, she is obsessed with the idea "that jewelry can transform, can be precious and can make a difference in people's lives" (qtd. in Boccacino 2022).

Aaron's interest in Shakespeare is more profound than one might expect. The playwright is not evoked "as a guarantor of the quality" of her jewels (McLuskie and Rumbold 2014, 152) but as the embodiment of Aaron's ethos and vision. The essay examines two aspects of Aaron's engagement with Shakespeare which reflect her experiences as a communication manager and a designer. On the one hand, Aaron can be seen as an example of Shakespeare's "contemporary user", according to Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes's apt definition (2017, 4). Among the variety of users, she stands as "an intentional or deliberate seeker of Shakespeare", as she purposely makes reference to

⁶ Her jewels were displayed at the "Gold: Worth its Weight" exhibition at the Museum of American Finance in New York between 2015 and 2016.

⁷ In a private e-mail exchange, Marla Aaron shared with me some of the 'secrets' of her successful career.

⁸ On Mother's Day, the brand runs its #lockyourmom campaign, asking people to nominate single mothers who deserve a free jewel. Aaron was also involved in a campaign to support New York City's restaurant industry during the COVID-19 pandemic and in one to provide meals to refugees leaving Ukraine (see Boccacino 2022).

Shakespeare and his works, even though her engagement is not constant or exclusive. Shakespearean quotations are associated with Aaron's jewels on multiple social media platforms to promote her work and strengthen her message of love and female empowerment.⁹ Her appropriation exemplifies how Shakespeare can be experienced, re-produced and re-defined "far beyond the reach of the academy" (Fazel and Geddes 2017, 4). Moreover, if we look at Aaron's recourse to Shakespearean quotations as an advertising strategy, we realize that she partially defies expectations. "Almost all global Shakespearean advertising", Douglas M. Lanier remarks, "dwells on one of three *topoi* – Shakespeare himself, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet* – the last of which offers by far the most fruitful territory for marketers" (2012, 514). Aaron, instead, does not mention the tragedy of the two lovers from Verona but relies on works which have been appropriated less frequently in the history of advertising.¹⁰

On the other hand, two pieces in Aaron's collections can be seen as "Shakescraft" objects, as Iyengar puts it, "which use Shakespearean texts, stories, and quotes to produce intermediated versions of the brand in ways that travel between the high and low culture divide" (2014, 348). While on one piece we may spot Shakespeare's visage, the other features Sonnet 130 engraved on the inside and images from the sonnet on the outside. Aaron's piece acts as a physical reminder of the designer's interpretation of the sonnet as a message of love and inclusion. In a short film for the advertising campaign "Love is everything" (2019), the sonnet is recited by a group of children. The young protagonists of the film powerfully convey a message of inclusivity and their spontaneous approach to the poem makes Shakespeare's words even more relatable. The essay will shed light on the way a contemporary artist re-visions Shakespeare and his works to resonate with her message of love, self-acceptance and women's empowerment. The analysis of Aaron's engagement with Shakespeare in her creative output may contribute to defining

⁹ There is no differentiated use of social media: the same post can be found unaltered on multiple platforms.

¹⁰ The critical history of how Shakespeare has been exploited for promotional purposes is long and rich. See, for instance, Holderness and Loughrey 1991; Lanier 2012; Iyengar 2014; Holderness and Loughrey 2016; Holderness 2018; Blackwell 2018; Paravano 2021.

Shakespeare's status as an icon in the 21st century and to answering the question of what Shakespeare really is and how a female artist may determine it.

2. Shakespeare and social media

Aaron relies on social media to help her business grow; she exploits the skills in storytelling acquired in her previous experiences in marketing and communication to popularise her creations and develop brand awareness. Her team and Aaron herself are very active on multiple platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), TikTok and the visual discovery engine Pinterest. Her presence is massive on Instagram, which she uses to make direct sales to consumers and to keep in touch with them (Heebner 2015). Her brand attracts a variety of women, including celebrities like Blake Lively and Julianne Moore, who appreciate Aaron's high-quality jewellery and embrace her vision. More recently, Aaron created jewels for men but, as she clarifies in a post about Father's Day, "jewelry has no gender" (Aaron 2023).

Her use of social media has evolved over time. At first, Aaron let her jewels do most of the talking; then, she started to associate pictures and videos of her pieces with anecdotes from her past, support for female entrepreneurship, personal thoughts and free advice, especially to women. In some of her posts, Aaron's jewels are paired with some of the most cited and appropriated Shakespearean quotations.¹¹ As Stephen O'Neill remarks, Shakespeare's works in the form of tweets and posts "become networked digital objects that can be easily shared, deployed as conduits for connection, as metacommentaries [...], or as an expression of emotion" (2018, 277).¹² Aaron picked up the lines which seemed to describe the feelings or the values she wished to convey, such as self-confidence, female empowerment, ambition and freedom. As Carol Thomas Neely notices, "Shakespeare may be especially susceptible to women's appropriation" because of "the richness, the density, the power, and the polysemousness" of his language (1990, 246). In fact Aaron's engagement with Shakespeare does not fit in with a growing trend in Shakespearean adaptation

¹¹ For studies on Shakespeare and quotations, see Bruster 2000; Maxwell and Rumbold 2018.

¹² As for studies on Shakespeare and social media, see Desmet 2008; O'Neill 2013; Carson and Kirwan 2014; O'Neill 2015; Calbi and O'Neill 2016.

to update his works, replace his language with a contemporary idiom or translate it into something different (emoji, tweets, memes...),¹³ as the designer relies on quotations from Shakespeare's plays. Her recourse to Shakespeare seems to reflect her approach to jewels. Her style is transformative: at the beginning of her career, she turned an industrial cabiner into a piece of very fine jewellery and then created pieces which could be reutilised and worn in infinite ways (a ring, for instance, may open up and turn into a pendant). In the same way, Shakespearean quotations are transformed and their meaning is reconstructed. For Aaron "to use Shakespeare is not to merely reproduce or recycle but to engage in a larger discourse" (Fazel and Geddes 2017, 7). Aaron's personal selection of Shakespearean quotations is undoubtedly an act of cultural appropriation which provides an answer about how we theorise Shakespeare's essence and locate his cultural value.

In an Instagram post, in September 2018, Aaron quoted Shakespeare when presenting one of her creations, the "Satirical Lock Series": "The very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream. – William Shakespeare" (Aaron 2018). The quotation (from *Hamlet* 2.2.256) is paired with an impressive jewel, an 18-karat piece "adorned with sapphires, brown and yellow diamonds, pearls, turquoise inlay, and hot and cold enamel to create a veritable garden" (Davis 2018). The line, delivered by Guildenstern in the tragedy, has been variously glossed. According to Jan H. Blits, it means that "Ambitious deeds [...] are imitations of dreams" (2001, 151). Aaron appropriates the line to express her views on the relationship between ambition and dreams: jewel is an ambitious piece, amazingly elaborated and suggestive, which reflects one of the designer's creative dreams. The quotation may have been taken from a website or an app which allows people to choose passages and lines that suit them. In the post, the line is attributed to Shakespeare but there is no specific reference to a play, supposedly because it was not mentioned in the online source.

In January 2022, the quotation from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* previously mentioned is used in a Facebook post; it accompanies a video featuring a shining ring with mixed sapphires:

¹³ See Lanier 2011.

“Dumb jewels often, in their silent kind, more than quick words, so move a woman’s mind.” Shakespeare— *The Two Gentleman for Verona* (the title is not italicised).

(May I add that when dumb jewels meets clever thoughtful words we may be on a separate universe of excellence?). (Aaron 2022a)

The quotation erroneously reads “so move” instead of “do move” and also the title is incorrectly reported and not italicised. This suggests that it was not a generated quotation. At the same time, it was not “creative misquotation” (Rumbold 2016, 1294), as it was more likely misremembered or inaccurately transcribed. The grammatical incorrectness in the comment (“meets” and “on”) may suggest hasty writing. Unlike the previous example, the designer added a comment which clarifies why she selected this quotation. Her dumb jewels speak through Shakespeare’s clever and thoughtful words and encourage the customers to enjoy an experience beyond their ordinary life, transporting them into an artistic dimension of beauty and excellence. Even far from their original context, the lines acquire a proverbial status as a symbol of Shakespeare’s wisdom. The transformative power of Shakespeare’s words is thus combined with the transformative nature of the jewels. As Lanier notices, in popular culture “the overriding concern is often not what the passage ‘really’ means” (2002, 53) but how it relates to people’s lives. Shakespeare’s lines are re-interpreted in light of Aaron’s experiences and her emotions.

Another quotation appeared in May 2022, when she cited some of the most iconic lines from *Macbeth*:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.”— *Macbeth*, Shakespeare. (The title is not italicised) But it’s also this. Life can be this too. (Aaron 2022b)

Under Aaron’s comment stands out the image of the same ring associated with the quotation from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and a lock from the same series. The remark suggests some awareness on the part of the designer of the meaning of these lines in their original dramatic context: *Macbeth* is here lamenting the transitory nature and meaninglessness of life after he has learnt of his wife’s death. Aaron does not question the actual meaning of *Macbeth*’s words as she acknowledges the harshness of human existence but invites us to

embrace a less pessimistic view of life, looking at the bright side, which is embodied by her beautiful jewels. The designer uses Shakespeare's poetic words about anguish and desperation to encourage her customers to be hopeful while offering them the possibility to find beauty and joy.

Some months later, in December 2022, she reproduced an excerpt of the previous quotation: “‘A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.’—Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. But also me sharing our excitement over the very special pieces in our showroom that should leave” (the title is not italicised) (Aaron 2022c). Here Aaron explicitly relates the quotation to her personal experience, giving it an ironic turn: she sees herself as an idiot, who rants because she is unable to contain her excitement in front of the new pieces which are going to be released. Her observation distorts the perspective as the anguish and loss of hope which deprive *Macbeth*'s life of meaning are turned into a moment in which the designer cannot articulate a meaningful thought as she is stunned by positive emotions. As in the previous post, Aaron stimulates her followers and customers to look at the events of their lives from another perspective, more optimistic and hopeful. Aaron's response to Shakespeare, borrowing Neely's fitting definition, is compensatory, as it leads to “identify with and rewrite aspect of the Shakespeare text which enable women's assertiveness, agency, resourcefulness” (1990, 242-43).¹⁴

At the same time citing Shakespeare is undoubtedly an opportunity to increase the prestige and popularity of her creations through the playwright's privileged iconic status. His words are used to amplify her messages, while providing an aura of grandeur and exclusivity. Aaron's comments are not meant to propose new readings of Shakespeare's play-texts but they are an expression of her engagement with his works. The quotations are not chosen only for commercial and exploitative reasons, but because they relate to her personal experience, her mood and her jewels. One of the consequences, as O'Neill acknowledges, “is a form of quoted Shakespeare that moves away from the anchoring authority of a stable text toward a far more diffuse, democratic understanding of what the Shakespearean encompasses” (2018, 285).

¹⁴ See Neely 1981 for a more thorough analysis.

2. Shakespeare and jewels

Two creations in Aaron's collection can be considered as "Shakescraft" objects. These items are designed to target a variegated group of women in terms of age, gender, economic, social and cultural background. An entry search on Google images of the words "jewels" and "Shakespeare" confirms their popularity, retrieving countless examples of earrings, pendants, necklaces and bracelets featuring quotations from plays or Shakespeare-related images. Unlike most of the jewels sold on websites such as Amazon and Etsy, which are not handcrafted or personalised, Aaron's creation invites a more profound level of participation.¹⁵

The first piece I will discuss is a hand-made gold bracelet called "English eccentricity cuffling" and created to celebrate England" (Aaron 2020). Aaron recognises Shakespeare as a defining character of British culture as he is one of the forty-one emblems of Britishness engraved on the jewel besides places like Tower Bridge and Big Ben, food like digestive biscuits and custard cream and icons like Sherlock Holmes and Shakespeare, who stands next to his Globe Theatre. Interestingly, Shakespeare is the only real-life character, besides Her Majesty the Queen, who is portrayed on the jewel. The playwright is perceived at home and abroad, as Michael Dobson argues, "as normatively constitutive of British national identity as the drinking of afternoon tea" (1992, 7). The visage engraved seems to be inspired by the Chandos portrait (c. 1600-10), which is the standard portrait of the playwright, immediately recognisable as an image of Shakespeare. His face evokes tradition, erudition, high art and hand-crafted quality. It works, Tarnya Cooper notes, as "a matrix that has generated a vast progeny" of imitations in pop culture and "at the level of high art" (2006, 224). The playwright's face stands out in the central part of the cuffling suggesting his role at the core of the British cultural identity and the closeness with his theatre reinforces his role as the leading playwright of his age.

The second jewel taken into account is one of Marla Aaron's favourite pieces, which is a bracelet designed for the DiMe series of jewels, featuring Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 engraved. The jewel exemplifies a different approach to the Shakespearean text on the part of Aaron as the designer does not

¹⁵ For an analysis of Shakescraft objects sold on Etsy, see Blackwell 2018.

reproduce tiny fragments of text but the entire sonnet; in this case, Shakespeare's words are not merely used to attract potential customers but are knowingly presented to convey her message. Aaron consciously selected the sonnet which best represents her vision of beauty and love thus turning her creation into an aesthetic manifesto. As David Schalkwyk contends, sonnets are "especially open to subsequent appropriation and projection" (2002, 27), even though Phyllis Rackin found these poems particularly "resistant to feminist appropriation".¹⁶ Nevertheless, sonnets influenced numerous writers, from Virginia Woolf to the American contemporary poet Henryette Mullen, to make just a few examples.¹⁷ Aaron has taken up "the invitation to speak through the Sonnets" like centuries of readers (also female readers) have done before her (Kingsley-Smith 2019, 11).

Both Shakespeare and the designer provide an unconventional definition of beauty. Rackin notes a feminist approach *ante-litteram* on the part of the playwright as the poem "seems to anticipate modern feminist critiques that identify the inherent misogyny of the Petrarchan tradition" (2005, 109). Sonnet 130 takes an anti-Petrarchan stance, emphasising the woman's imperfections to discredit the Petrarchan ideal while claiming the sincerity of his love. It provides a message of love and acceptance since the poet loves his beloved for what she is and praises her beauty in realistic terms. Aaron, on the other hand, describes the poem as "funny and deeply moving, about the nature of love" (Taylor 2021). The vision guiding Aaron's work is that true beauty comes from basic forms. Her art is deeply informed by ideas, shapes and objects that are not related to jewels but is rather inspired by items she has seen in hardware stores in New York.

The same sonnet appears again in an advertising campaign in 2019. After a trip to Japan, Aaron was inspired to improve her marketing strategies and reinvented her way of selling: she decided to sell her jewels through a vending machine, which also displayed a short film entitled "Love is everything" as a celebration of love.¹⁸ It features children ranging from 3 to 13 years old, who are reciting Shakespeare's Sonnet 130. The piece was created to celebrate

¹⁶ Vincent Broqua (2001) discusses the interpretation of Sonnet 130 by two American female poets, Jen Bervin and Harryette Mullen. See also Kingsley-Smith 2019.

¹⁷ See Kingsley-Smith 2019.

Valentine's Day and mark the installation of a Marla Aaron Jewellery vending machine at MZ Wallace's flagship store in New York's Soho neighbourhood. The short film was also available online (Aaron 2019b). When presenting the film on her social media platforms in January 2019, Aaron gave a key to its interpretation: "Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 celebrates the power of unconditional love. Not beauty" (Aaron 2019a). In another post, she clarifies her idea: "Shakespeare's poem makes the point that love has nothing to do with beauty; its essence is much more ephemeral" (qtd. in Miller 2019).

Aaron genuinely reveals the inspiration for the film, showing that she was not driven by a commercial strategy:

I want to tell you a bit of the back story about this. Because for me it had nothing to do with the jewelry and it was just a burning obsession with this Sonnet and this idea of seeing children recite it— about the purest of loves— love devoid of artifice. I had some vague idea about putting it in our vending machine.... (literally just another rudderless idea.) So I texted my college roommate Patti, who happens to be a (serious ass) producer and I asked, "can we do something like this?" And she basically said some salty version of "you are so lucky that I love this... let's do it". Like most ideas, I was clueless about what it takes to put a little production like this together. In my mind we just grab a few kids off the street and I use my iPhone to record them reciting the Sonnet. Thank god Patti, Tommy, Meghan and Garrett of Something Different laughed at this suggestion, patted me on my head and told me to "step aside Lovey—we've got this!" And boy did they ever. (Aaron 2019b)

Other marketing specialists have tapped into Shakespeare's sonnets to convey messages. In 2015 British celebrities like Stephen Fry, David Harewood and Emilia Fox joined the "Show the love campaign" by taking part in a short film in which they recited Shakespeare's Sonnet 18. The video was part of a campaign to heighten people's awareness about climate change on St. Valentine's Day and turned this sonnet into a love poem for the planet (Rideout 2015). Aaron's film deploys a similar strategy but without relying on celebrities with impeccable diction. The children's performance of the sonnet was not rehearsed but they performed spontaneously. This strategy gave a sense of freshness and spontaneity. Their imperfect delivery made the message more

¹⁸ The film was created in collaboration with the agency "Something Different" and was directed by its main creative Tommy Henvey. See Miller 2019.

heartfelt. The film uses children to increase the consumers' affinity with the brand without promoting any product but expressing the brand's positive values.

"In our commercial culture", Annamari Vänskä comments, "children are increasingly also used as models for advertising products or services" (2017, 3), both to target other children but also for adult-oriented products, as in this case. Even if they are not active endorsers, they contribute to promoting the brand by creating emotional bonds. Their innocence makes them credible vehicles of positive values and conveys the idea of Shakespeare's accessibility. The short film features kids from diverse ethnic backgrounds, as in many popular ads by Benetton since the 1980s: this is a "concrete indication of the cultural changes that started taking place in fashion advertising" (Vänskä 2017, 3).

The idea of having children performing Shakespeare is not new in advertising. In 2016 Apple launched a commercial promoting the iPhone7 camera which is shown while recording a school performance of two children acting out *Romeo and Juliet*.¹⁹ The approach is completely different in Aaron's short film. Even though nothing in the execution explicitly points to the brand itself, the ad successfully promotes it, mainly through Shakespeare's words. Relying on Shakespeare's cultural power, the ad emphasises the connection between the sonnet and the designer's vision.

4. Conclusions

Looking at Shakespeare from Marla Aaron's perspective offers the opportunity to interpret the playwright's work and situate his cultural capital through the gaze of an eclectic female artist. As Fazel and Geddes notice, "[w]hat is collectively represented or defined as Shakespeare is continuously being reimagined and reconstructed in accordance with the affordances of the medium in which he appears and the purposes to which he is put to task" (2017, 2). In Aaron's creative output, Shakespeare emerges as a symbol of a celebrated literary tradition and as the emblem of the uniqueness and excellent craftsmanship which characterise the designer's creations. The playwright offers

¹⁹ For an analysis of the ad, see Holderness 2018 and Paravano 2021.

no reassurance about the quality of the product but about the reliability of the brand itself and the authenticity of its message.

Aaron goes against the trend of updating Shakespeare's works by giving his words centre stage. On the one hand, in the designer's social media posts, the fragments of Shakespearean plays accompanying her jewels mix up with her comments and thoughts in a creative stream of consciousness. On the other hand, Shakespeare's lines become part of her creation when engraved on the bracelet. His words, which "stick like velcro on the soul" (2015, xvii), as Jeanette Winterson puts it, amplify Aaron's message of love, inclusivity and female empowerment and turn the piece into a physical reminder of the values that really matter. Marla Aaron is only one of the numerous female artists all around the world who re-visioned Shakespeare and his works in different artistic fields. There are still many voices waiting to be heard and pieces of art waiting to be admired. The German multimedia artist Annina Roescheisen (1982-), for example, got international attention with "What Are You Fishing For?", a potent show (presented at the Elliott Levenskiss Gallery in New York) composed of a video and photographs which feature a melancholic woman in the water strongly reminiscent of Ophelia. Another example is the Italian painter Elisa Montessori (1931-), whose paintings inspired by *The Tempest* were displayed in the late 1980s in Rome or the South-African-born figurative painter Marlene Dumas (1953-). In 2015, this Amsterdam-based artist illustrated a new Dutch translation of Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis*. Female re-visioning like these are acts of creativity which may provide new insights and enable us to see many new and unexpected faces of Shakespeare in the 21st century.

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