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To Guilia Cecchettin and to all victims of gender-based violence, with the commitment to turn their silenced voices into a resounding and powerful collective cry for change.

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Introduction

As we are finalizing this special issue of *Linguae &* on "Shakespeare and Women: Voices and Silences", Italy is experiencing an unprecedented response to yet another case of feminicide. Twenty-two-year-old Giulia Cecchettin was stabbed to death by her ex-boyfriend (and university mate) just a few days before the ceremony of her graduation in biomedical engineering.[1] The killer spoke these disturbing words to the prosecutor: "I loved her, I wanted her for myself. I did not accept that it was over"[2]. He could not bear the thought that she had left him nor, presumably, the fact that she would graduate before him. Driven by an urge to control and possess her, he turned her, discursively and materially, from subject into object. The word persona originates from the Latin

[1] A degree in memoriam for Giulia Cecchettin is to be awarded by the University of Padua on 2 February 2024.
[2] https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2023/12/02/i-wanted-her-for-myself-terrible-murder-says-turetta_b37dbbb9-fa9f-451a-b774-11222a15e4ce.html (2/12/2023).

personare, meaning 'to sound thorough'. The killer did not accept her 'sound', so he stopped it by killing her.

Sara Cecchettin pushed back against the Italian government's invitation to hold a minute's silence for her sister. Instead, she called for a minute's noise, symbolically restoring her sister's voice and loudly rebelling against gender-based violence. On 21 November 2023, at eleven o'clock, schools and universities across Italy resounded with noise. At the woman's funeral, mourners boisterously honoured her life, clapping their hands and shaking their keys. Although not presentist-feminist in its approach, this special issue aptly keeps – to misquote Terence Hawkes (1992, 3) – 'making noise *by* Shakespeare'. Sharing Ania Loomba and Melissa Sanchez's idea that "studies of early modern literature, history, and culture can contribute to a rethinking of feminist aims" (2016, 1), it seeks to cast further light on the definitions and interrelations of female voices and silences, subjectivity and objectivity, speech and non-speech, adding to the ongoing feminist debate on these topics.

"Shakespeare and Women: Voices and Silences" is critically located within feminist Shakespeare scholarship. 'Officially' inaugurated almost 50 years ago by Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975), it continues to be a productive and influential approach, representing a widespread gender-conscious way of selecting, rewriting, editing, reading, performing, teaching and investigating Shakespeare's work. The present issue is theoretically grounded in Phyllis Rackin's challenge to "the pervasive scholarly investment in Renaissance misogyny" (2016, 62) and in Christina Luckyj's attempt "to make it more difficult to refer unthinkingly to early modern women as 'chaste, silent and obedient'" (2002, 7). Lucky reveals silence as "a crucial site where gender markers could be reinforced, interrogated or elided on the early modern stage" (ibid. 91). Here, however, the enquiry extends across Shakespeare's early modern texts up to their 'afterlife'. Methodologically, it avoids the sharp "contrast between emphasizing women's agency and emphasizing women's containment" (Novy 2017, 6), concentrating instead on the complex dynamics between the two opposing conditions.

Moving from common meanings of voice as speech and silence as non-speech, thus blurring the oxymoronic relationship between the two terms, the papers collected in this issue focus not only on Shakespeare's "vocal women",

as Anna Kamaralli terms "women who continue to speak their truth about the world, no matter what means others employ to silence them" (2012, 1), but also on women's silent voices and voiced silences, on women ventriloquized by Shakespeare and 'Shakespeares' ventriloquized by women.

The first four contributions examine female speech, offering different angles and methodological approaches. The issue opens with Beatrice Righetti's essay, which investigates the potential subversive role of female speech. As the author demonstrates, female silence and reticence can be seen as powerful forms of resistance to patriarchal authority. Her case studies provide examples of opposite attitudes to language on the part of female characters. The loquacious Kate and the silent Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew* and the talkative Portia and the reticent Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* show that silent disobedience may be much more effective than open opposition. In her essay, Aoife Beville comes to a similar conclusion. Moving from a pragma-stylistic perspective, the author examines acts of verbal deception in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, pointing out how male and female characters use mendacious strategies differently. Her quantitative and qualitative analysis reveals that, unlike men, women significantly prefer off-the-record verbal deception over outright lying. Virginia Tesei tackles another aspect of women's use of language, concentrating on silence. Her essay clarifies the influence of the myth of Philomel, famously recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Focusing on the parallels between Hermia, Titania and Bottom and the Ovidian character, Tesei demonstrates that Philomela's story reverberates in the play and that her silence is a metaphor for the silence imposed by censorship in the Elizabethan period. Finally, Simona Laghi considers the voice 'sounded' by the 'language' of female appearance. She explores the connections between fashion, appearance and social acceptance. Her investigation revolves around three iconic characters from the Shakespearean canon, namely Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew* and Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*, three women who managed to negotiate their role in society by distancing themselves from the early modern stereotypes about outward appearance and obedience. Laghi reflects on the construction of womanhood in the early modern period and on

the achievements of gender equality and women's rights in the twenty-first century.

The following (and last) three contributions deal with reception, both in and of Shakespeare. Maria Elisa Montironi's essay aims at considering Christine de Pizan's voice in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. De Pizan was an influential woman, whose support of the recognition of women's role and equality distinctly resonated in the early modern period. Montironi scrutinizes Shakespeare's play, in particular the characters Theseus and Hippolyta and Pyramus and Thisbe, in light of de Pizan's works, to suggest possible new insights into the comedy and its play-within-the-play. With Gilberta Golinelli's contribution, the issue enters the 'afterlife' of Shakespeare works. The paper discusses the prominent role of Margaret Cavendish, a pioneer as a feminist and a female thinker, in the rise of Shakespearean criticism. Cavendish's insightful reading of Shakespeare's works identified crucial issues, such as the social construction of gender, sexuality and the representation of class, which have been central to feminist theory since the 1980s. The last essay looks at Shakespeare's voice appropriated by a contemporary female designer, Marla Aaron. Cristina Paravano discusses Aaron's appropriation of Shakespeare's words to convey her vision and ethos, illuminating how Shakespeare can be used by a female artist to proclaim her message of inclusion, empowerment and self-inclusion. The collection is closed by the authoritative and passionate voice of Evelyn Gajowski, who has generously accepted our invitation to contribute to this special issue. Her afterword retraces the achievements of Shakespeare feminist studies and the new challenges that we are now facing. As she rightly observes, female voices and silences in Shakespeare's texts are inextricably bound with both female subjectivity and female objectification, which "are deserving of greater theoretical and critical attention in the twenty-first century" (see Gajowski in this issue). We hope that this issue will do its part. Further, we hope to expand this study on female voices and silences, in the near future, to early modern drama beyond Shakespeare.[3]

[3] We are grateful to *Linguae &* and its General Editor, Prof. Alessandra Calanchi, for believing in this project and hosting this special issue, helping us enormously in the editing process. No less grateful are we to the anonymous reviewers, for their very attentive reading of and extremely useful feedback on the proposed papers. Our warm and heartfelt gratitude goes to all

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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].

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[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.

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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Plausible Obedience: Female Strategies of Deception in Shakespeare's Problem Comedies

ABSTRACT

In *Measure for Measure* (*MM*), Isabella is taught to trick her male tormentor by feigning "a plausible obedience", this instruction offers a useful lens through which to examine female characters' negotiation/evasion of, conversational and societal norms of truthfulness both in *MM* and *All's Well That Ends Well* (*AW*). From Lakoff (1973) to more recent studies gender has been considered an important variable in linguistics. There are observable, gender-specific differences in female-talk and male-talk in early modern texts. Quantitative data from the pragma-stylistic analysis of deception in *MM* and *AW* indicates that women prefer ORVD (off-record verbal deception) strategies while their male counterparts privilege blatant (on-record) lying. The present study aims to reveal and account for Shakespeare's female characters' divergent pragmatic strategies in the selected problem comedies, in the light of genre and gender conventions, in order to understand how Shakespeare's women perform pseudo-cooperation within the comedies.

KEYWORDS: pragma-stylistics; linguistic deception; gender variation; Shakespeare; off-recordness.

Go you to Angelo, answer his requiring with
a plausible obedience, agree with his demands to the
point; only refer
yourself to this advantage […].

William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (3.1.226-28)[1]

1.Introduction

1.1 Literature Review

Since Lakoff (1973) gender has been considered an important variable in linguistics. While not all of the ensuing data is consistent (Crawford 1995), nonetheless it has been shown extensively that there are gender-specific differences in female-talk and male-talk in early modern texts (Erman 1992; Nevalainen 2000; 2002; Culpeper and Kytö 2010).

Recent studies have explored how these differences are determined not only by the on-going, linguistically mediated construction of gender identity, but also by factors such as social status, social distance between interlocutors and the context of the interaction (Culpeper and Kytö 2010).

Gender variation has been a fruitful area of research within historical pragmatics; particularly interesting findings have emerged over the past two decades. Biber and Burges (2000) explore the question of how much men and women talk in plays from the late modern period, taking into account the gender of the authors, speakers and hearers in the exchange in order to show variation in perceived talkativeness as represented in drama over time. Nevalainen (2000; 2002) provides data-driven responses to stereotypes about gender divisions in language use over time, drawing on data from early modern English corpora. Romaine collates various findings in a meta-study on the topic of gender variation in linguistics, demonstrating how the field has moved on from "simplistic correlations between language use and sex to focus on the symbolic and ideological dimensions of a language" (2003, 116). These layered

[1] All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from Shakespeare 2016.

complexities are also evidenced in Pakkala-Weckström's research (2003; 2010). She notes that:

> Genre creates a background against which the characters are depicted in a convincing manner. Gender provides its own rules and restrictions, which govern the behaviour of the characters, but ultimately it is the dynamic, ever changing balance of power between the characters that seems to most affect their linguistic choices. (2003, 136)

Thus, gender can be seen as one of the arenas in which such socio-cultural negotiations of power are linguistically embodied. Processes of patriarchal marginalisation of women in early modern England were, as they are today, linguistically constructed and enforced and are, therefore, "reflected in both the ways women [were] expected to speak, and the ways in which women [were] spoken of" (Lakoff 1973, 45).

Gender variation, therefore, is an important phenomenon in the history of English, particularly relevant to historical pragmatics (see Nevalainen 2002; 2000). The data set which emerged from the analysis of *All's Well That Ends Well* (henceforth *AW*) and *Measure for Measure* (henceforth *MM*) reveals a significant gender variation in the use of deceptive language (see Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, below).

1.2 Methodological coordinates

The present paper offers a pragma-stylistic analysis of strategies of linguistic deception in *AW* and *MM*. Pragma-stylistics (or pragmatic literary stylistics) applies pragmatic models in the stylistic analysis and interpretation of literary texts.

Pragmatics is the area of linguistic inquiry concerned with language in use – how speakers produce meanings and how hearers interpret them. Stylistics uses linguistic models in order to understand how (often literary) texts function; it aims to account for how texts are understood and evaluated. Recent pragmatic, stylistic and pragma-stylistic approaches to literature (Chapman and Clark 2014; Kizelbach 2023), and, more specifically, to early modern plays (Rudanko 1993; Kizelbach 2014; Del Villano 2018) have established a model for the linguistic exploration of interpersonal communicative strategies in literary texts.

The choice to lie has to do with the construction of meaning – it is an inherently pragmatic matter. However the foundational studies in pragmatics do not present a clear model for the categorisation and analysis of interpersonal deception. Grice was concerned with the gap between "what is said" and "what is implicated" (or what is meant). He proposed the Cooperative Principle (CP) and the notion of implicature[2] as a means of understanding the interactional nature of meaning.

The CP states: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1989, 26). The maxims of conversation, which result from the CP, are as follows:

> Quantity:
> i. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
> ii. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
> Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
> i. Do not say what you believe to be false.
> ii. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
> Relation: Be relevant.
> Manner: Be perspicuous.
> i. Avoid obscurity of expression.
> ii. Avoid ambiguity.
> iii. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
> iv. Be orderly. (ibid., 26-27)

According to Grice, violations of the maxims give rise to conversational implicatures. Grice does not deal directly with lying, but does state that the speaker by "quietly and unostentatiously violating a maxim [may] be liable to mislead" (1989, 30). Deception, therefore, within the neo-Gricean[3] framework, is seen as a covert violation of the maxim of quality. Dynel (2018) makes the

[2] Implicature is Grice's term for the non-literal meaning ("implied, suggested, meant") beyond the literal meaning of what is said (1989, 24-40). For further explanation of the term and its role within the pragmatic framework see Davis (2019).

[3] Neo-Gricean pragmatics (in contrast to post-Gricean pragmatics) arises from the refinement and expansion of Grice's theories. Within this framework the CP and its maxims remain key reference points. For a comprehensive overview of neo-Gricean pragmatics see Huang (2017, 48-78).

helpful distinction between overt violations of the maxim (metaphor, irony, etc.) and covert violations (giving rise to deception). However, an interpretation of lying as a violation of the maxim of quality does not account for violations of the other maxims which may give rise to deceptive implicatures. In terms of Speech Act Theory (SAT)[4] (Austin 2018 [1962]; Searle 1969; 1975) lying can be seen as a failure to respect the sincerity condition (the speaker's commitment to a belief in the truth of the utterance). However such a definition gives rise to a paradox within SAT, namely "if the perlocutionary act of lying is successful then the illocutionary act of assertion is not successful" (Reboul 1994, 297).

Lying, therefore, has been a much debated topic among linguists. Meibauer (2014) introduces a broad definition of lying which includes "false implicatures". Other theorists (Saul 2012a; 2012b; Dynel 2018) exclude non-prototypical forms of deception (non-assertions used to deceive, false implicatures, etc.) from their frameworks.

This study makes use of the lexicon of pragmatic theories of politeness in order to better account for mendacious conversational strategies. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978; 1987) introduces the on/off-record[5] distinction. This taxonomy is proposed here in order to allow for a pragmatic distinction between two forms of covert untruthfulness.

This innovative pragmatic model will be shown to be a fruitful framework for distinguishing between mendacious strategies: on-record (blatant, direct)

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[4] Speech Act Theory, as first proposed by Austin (2018 [1962]) presents the concept of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts performed by the speaker. The locutionary act is the act of uttering a locution. The illocutionary act is the act made in producing the utterance (asking a question, describing, commanding, etc). The perlocutionary act refers to the effect produced by the utterance (persuasion, annoyance, etc). Searle (1969; 1975) expanded on the classification of speech acts and codified the felicity conditions that Austin had referenced). Searle briefly summarises the "five general categories of illocutionary acts" as follows: "we tell people how things are (Assertives [Representatives]), we try to get them to do things (Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives), we express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations)" (1979, viii).

[5] Brown and Levinson developed this terminology to deal with the complexities of interactional politeness. Their definition specifies that "If an actor goes off record in doing A, then there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 69). This is further explained by Culpeper: "in a suitable context the hearer may be able to infer that the speaker [is saying X] but, if challenged, the speaker could always deny this" (2001, 244-45).

lying and off-record verbal deception (ORVD), whereby the speaker retains a level of deniability. A speaker who goes on-record about the truth of a false proposition is taking a risk. One can mitigate that risk through an assortment of off-record strategies (insinuation, half-truths, deliberate obfuscation, etc.). On-record (On-R), or prototypical lying, therefore involves making a believed-false assertion, with the intent that the hearer believe it to be true. ORVD involves the production of a deceptive conversational implicature.

In a previous study (Beville 2022) the texts were examined according to these categories in order to quantitatively and qualitatively analyse characters' use of mendacious strategies within the plays. The plays were analysed by close-reading in order to observe instances of possible verbal deception. Then, the observable instances of mendacious behaviour were manually annotated[6] according to participants (speakers, hearers, etc.), speech acts (assertives, commissives, etc.) and strategies (ORVD, On-R lying, etc.). The data presented here, therefore, results from the aforementioned study (Beville 2022) which includes a more exhaustive explanation of the methodological framework and its primary findings.

1.3 Research questions and aims

The present paper seeks to explore and explain a notable trend revealed in the quantitative analysis from the abovementioned study: female characters within these plays tend to significantly prefer ORVD strategies, while the male characters either tend to favour on-record strategies or have a more even distribution of On-R and ORVD strategies (see Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, below). Male characters either show a significant preference for on-record lying (Duke, Paroles) or a more balanced use of both on- and off-record strategies (Lucio, Angelo, Bertram).

The texts under examination, *AW* and *MM*, are both comedies from the Shakespearean canon. Recent studies have increasingly revealed Middleton's compositional contribution to both plays (Taylor and Egan 2017; Braunmuller and Watson 2020).

[6] The analysis did not make use of corpus tools but was undertaken manually, in what has been termed as practical stylistics or "steam stylistics" (Carter 2010).

The present study is not an attempt to add to the rich area of attribution studies and further investigation of such considerations must be excluded. However, whether the dialogue excerpts analysed were composed primarily by Shakespeare or by Middleton, what is evident is that they were originally both written and performed by men. This is the nature of the study of early modern plays, and the study of early modern spoken English as a whole[7]. What evidence they contain of female speech is, therefore, not intended as strictly documentary, rather, it has an aesthetic and representational purpose. It is helpful to bear in mind that such cultural texts are shaped by the society around them and, in turn, they shape the cultural landscape.

I argue that the female characters presented here make strategic linguistic choices in order to convincingly perform their gender, social, economic and political identities according to societal expectations, while subtly negotiating a better position in the balance of power. They "fashion themselves", to borrow a suitable term from Greenblatt (1980), according to social norms while engaging in risky linguistic behaviour.

Closely related categories of deception were also analysed. "Non-verbal" deception essentially accounts for disguise – it has been counted when disguises are linguistically marked in the text (i.e., when the Duke refers directly to his friar's habit).

The designation of "embedded" (or reported) verbal deception refers to the acts of verbal deception that are not represented directly in the dialogue but are recounted (by the liar himself or another character)[8]. The strategies labelled as "instructing others to deceive" consist of directives which, if followed, would result in mendacity (e.g. when Helen instructs the Widow and her daughter Diana how to successfully/deceptively accomplish the bed-trick *AW*, 4.2.12-45).

The principal research questions posited here are: What differences are there between male and female strategies of deception within the chosen texts?

[7] With regard to the scarcity and bias of available primary source data see Mendelson and Crawford (1998, 212-18). On the relevance of the available data: Biber and Burges (2000); Nevalainen (2000; 2002); Culpeper and Kytö (2010); Jucker and Taavitsainen (2013).

[8] The acts of verbal deception that are both "shown" and "told" are counted only once. This allows the data collection to account for reported deception while distinguishing it as a separate strategy.

How can the tools of pragmatic literary stylistics account for these interactions? What can these examples tell us about the literary representation of female speakers in the light of historical pragmatics? The qualitative analysis provided here focuses on salient examples of the plays' primary female speakers' linguistic strategies (those of Isabella in *MM* and Helen in *AW*). These excerpts will be analysed in order to account for the form and function of female characters' strategies of verbal deception within the plays.

2. Isabella – "All Shadow and Silence"

Measure for Measure (*MM*) is a "dialectical drama" (Melchiori 1994, 404-63)[9] dated to 1603-4; it is generally agreed that the version present in the 1623 *First Folio* includes significant modifications made by Middleton[10].

The play begins with Duke Vincentio of Vienna feigning his departure from the city and ostensibly entrusting viceregency to Angelo, a puritanical hyper-moralist who is enthusiastic about the opportunity to purge the city of its licentious vices.

The Duke disguises himself as a friar in order to roam the city and observe the results of his absence. Angelo, in violent piety, has begun to enforce the death penalty for fornication, causing the arrest and imprisonment of the young Claudio and his betrothed, expectant, Juliet. Lucio, the witty and morally dubious friend of Claudio, rushes to the convent in order to catch Isabella, Claudio's sister, before she takes her vows. He begs her to intercede on behalf

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[9] Melchiori's (1994, 404-63) insightful classification (of both *MM* and *AW*) expands on the critical category of "problem plays" which first emerged in the late 1880s and has seen a remarkable longevity (Boas 1910 [1896]; Tillyard 1950; Cunneen 1963; Lawrence 1969; Toole 1996; Barker 2005), for further discussion of the grouping see Beville 2022, 32–35. Melchiori's recategorization endeavours to investigate the dialectical nature of the plays asserting that: "la loro vitalità è invece tutta nel dibattito interno al dramma, indipendentemente dagli esiti, sta in un continuo confronto dialettico che acquista valore assoluto di ricerca di una verità che, proprio per essere vera, non può essere unica e univoca" [their vitality is all in the internal debate in the drama, independent of the outcome, it lies in a continuous dialectical debate which acquires the absolute value of a quest for the truth, a truth which, in order to be true, cannot be unique and univocal] (Melchiori 1994, 406 – translation my own). The dialectical nature of the plays is to be understood both in the classical sense of an exchange of contrasting opinions without the necessity of a final resolution and as a linguistic notion of discursivity.

[10] On date and authorship: Taylor and Egan (2017) and Braunmuller and Watson (2020).

of her brother. Isabella's supplications produce an unexpected effect on the zealous Angelo. He becomes infatuated with her, vowing to release her brother if she will assent to his solicitation.

The Duke-as-Friar learns of Isabella's plight and offers a solution. They must persuade Angelo's jilted ex-betrothed, Mariana, to take Isabella's place, thus consummating their sworn marriage. Despite the success of the bed-trick, Angelo still orders Claudio's swift execution.

The Duke fakes Claudio's execution using a look-alike severed head and 'returns' to Vienna to stage a final trial scene.

Table 1. Principal character's deceptive acts (all kinds) per 100 lines in *MM*.

Character	No. lines spoken	Deceptive acts	Lies per 100 lines
Duke	847	45	5.3
Isabella	424	8	1.9
Angelo	320	9	2.8
Lucio	296	11	3.7

Table 2. Strategies of deception employed by the principal characters in *MM*.

Character	On-R	ORVD	Non-verbal	Embedded	Instructing	Tot.
Duke	22	10	4	4	5	45
Isabella	1	4	-	2	1	8
Angelo	4	4	-	1	-	9
Lucio	5	4	-	2	-	11

Isabella is, quantitatively, one of the least mendacious characters in the play (see Table 1) yet the lies she does tell are of great import to the play's comic resolution.

Her initial attempts at using truthfulness in her defence ("I will proclaim thee Angelo"; "with an outstretched throat I'll tell the world aloud | what man thou art", *MM*, 2.4.151, 153-54) ultimately fail. She endeavours to appeal to the early modern model of public condemnation and complaint, as outlined by Mendelson and Crawford:

> [Violence] and male sexual immorality were secretly accepted among the fraternity of men but condemned by the public standards of the community at large, and punished through loss of repute when perpetrators were exposed. One way women modified male behaviour was by broadcasting men's covert acts. In so doing, they also established a context of excessive male violence or immorality which might persuade the judiciary to act. Thus, female discourse constructed a collective view whereby accusations became a 'public' concern of which formal authorities were compelled to take notice. (1998, 216)

Isabella, therefore, threatens to appeal to the court of public opinion in order to save both her brother and her reputation. Yet her threats are ineffective; Angelo's position of political power emboldens his counterthreats:

> ANGELO:
> Who will believe thee, Isabel?
> My unsoiled name, th'austereness of my life,
> My vouch against you, and my place i'th' state,
> Will so your accusation overweigh
> That you shall stifle in your own report,
> And smell of calumny. […]
> As for you,
> Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true.
> (*MM*, 2.4.154-59, 169-70)

Thus, due to Angelo's astute counterthreats and his position of institutional power, Isabella cannot adopt the aforementioned model of public outcry. She is, instead, forced to ally herself with the "Duke of dark corners" and his subterfuges of disguise and trickery in order to protect herself from sexual exploitation and save her brother's life. Notably, the only observable instance of Isabella going on-record about the truth of a false claim (outrightly lying) is found in the final act, where she publicly and spuriously denounces Angelo's alleged sexual misconduct:

> ISABELLA:
> He would not, but by gift of my chaste body
> To his concupiscible intemperate lust,
> Release my brother; and after much
> debatement,
> My sisterly remorse confutes mine honour,

And <u>I did yield to him</u>.
(*MM*, 5.1.97-101)

[on-record; false assertion]

However, despite being guilty of libel (she had not yielded to Angelo but sent Mariana in her place) she does not "smell of calumny". Rather through complex strategies of feigned compliance she has inverted her position with Angelo such that her "false o'erweighs [his] true".

The following passage shows the Duke-as-Friar directing Isabella in how to feign "a plausible obedience" to Angelo's despotic demands and to "give him promise of satisfaction".

DUKE:
It is a rupture that you may easily heal, and the cure of it not only saves your brother, but keeps you from dishonour in doing it.
ISABELLA:
Show me how, good father.
DUKE:
[…] Go you to Angelo, <u>answer his requiring with a plausible obedience</u>, agree with his demands to the point; only refer yourself to this advantage: first, that your stay with him may not be long; that the time may have all shadow and silence in it; and the place answer to convenience. This being granted in course, and now follows all. We shall advise this wronged maid to stead up your appointment, go in your place. If the encounter acknowledge itself hereafter, it may compel him to her recompense; and hear, by this is your brother saved, your honour untainted, the poor Mariana advantaged, and the corrupt deputy scaled. The maid will I frame and make fit for his attempt. If you think well to carry this, as you may, the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof. What think you of it?

[directive instructing others to lie]

ISABELLA:
The image of it gives me content already, and I trust it will grow to a most prosperous

perfection.
DUKE:
It lies much in your holding up. Haste you
speedily to Angelo.
If for this night he entreat you to his bed, give
him promise of satisfaction.
(*MM*, 3.1. 220-22, 226-41)

The text therefore, makes Isabella's misleading performance of obedience explicit. The audience is shown how the Duke teaches Isabella to outwardly perform pseudo-obedience in her interactions with Angelo, in order to convince him that she has acquiesced to his request. This advice is key to understanding Isabella's pretence of compliancy within the text. The Duke-as-Friar also offers a moral justification for the necessary duplicity: "the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof".

Notably, the audience does not directly witness such deception on Isabella's part, rather she merely reports her duplicitous interactions with Angelo to the Duke:

ISABELLA:
There have I made my promise
Upon the heavy middle of the night
To call upon him.
[…]
And that I have possessed him my most stay
Can be but brief, for I have made him know [embedded deception]
I have a servant comes with me along
That stays upon me, whose persuasion is
I come about my brother.
(*MM*, 4.1.31-33, 41-45)

This embedded mendacity serves to remove Isabella some degree from the Duke's trickery – she is not actually seen lying to Angelo on stage. She has followed the Duke's orders to feign her acquiescence in a believable manner and recounts her successful deceit to her instructor. She reports having made an infelicitous commissive (false promise) in promising to visit Angelo. She further describes her deceptive discourse, explaining that she has convinced

Angelo that she cannot delay because a servant will be waiting for her – Angelo believes that she has deceived her servant about the matter of the visit, in actual fact Isabella will not be present and therefore there is no servant to deceive. Thus, her active role in the deception of Angelo is implied through her narrative account of the exchange, rather than being explicitly shown on stage. This is in line with her overall preferred strategy of ORVD (see Table 2), she mitigates her deceptive behaviour by maintaining a level of deniability. She prefers not to lie outright, unlike her male counterparts. Instead, her "plausible obedience" is a strategic linguistic device which avails of deceptive means in order to appear to succumb to the despot's perverted will. This is a form of linguistic self-fashioning by which Isabella contrives to bring about the comic ends of the play – the usurping of the tyrannical puritan Angelo in order to restore the "rightful" order of the Duke's reign.

3. Helen – "Whose words all ears took captive"

All's Well That Ends Well (*AW*) is structurally similar to *MM* and is also considered a 'problem play' or 'dialectical drama'. It can be dated to circa 1605 and also contains evidence of Middleton's contribution (Maguire and Smith 2012; Taylor and Egan 2017, 278–384; Taylor and Loughnane 2017, 557–59). The play centres around Helen, the orphaned daughter of a physician, gentlewoman in the household of Roussillon, who secretly loves the young Bertram, heir to his late father's title as Count Roussillon. Bertram departs for court as he has become a ward of the ailing King, he is accompanied by his "equivocal companion" Paroles. At court, Bertram hears news of a war in Italy, but he is forbidden from enlisting due to his youth. Helen follows Bertram, hoping to win the sickly King's favour through her knowledge of medicine. She convinces the King to allow her to treat him and secures his promise that she may choose a husband from his courtiers if she is successful. Her treatment works and she chooses Bertram as her reward. The young Count is offended at the prospective marriage to his inferior, yet he outwardly concedes due to the King's forceful imposition. Bertram escapes to the war in Italy in order to avoid consummating the marriage, swearing that he will not acknowledge Helen as his wife unless she becomes pregnant with his child and wears his signet ring.

Helen, in the guise of a pilgrim, follows her husband and arranges a bed-trick in which she will substitute herself for Diana, with whom her husband is infatuated, in order to fulfil the seemingly impossible demands made. These intrigues culminate in a final trial scene in which Bertram's flimsy tales are unravelled until he swears to love Helen.

Table 3. Principal character's deceptive acts (all kinds) per 100 lines in *AW*.

CHARACTER	NO. LINES SPOKEN	DECEPTIVE ACTS	LIES PER 100 LINES
HELEN	478	22	4.6
PAROLES	373	30	8.0
BERTRAM	277	20	7.2
DIANA	138	10	7.2

Table 4. Strategies of deception employed by the most mendacious characters in *AW*[11].

CHARACTER.	ON-R	ORVD	NON-VERBAL	EMBEDDED	INSTRUCTING	TOT.
HELEN	5	11	2	1	3	22
PAROLES	19	8	-	2	1	30
BERTRAM	11	6	1	2	-	20
DIANA	3	6	-	1	-	10

Helen, in contrast to Isabella, is a much more prolific liar (compare Tables 1 and 3). Throughout the play she is described as eloquent and persuasive ("Methinks in thee some blessèd spirit doth speak / His powerful sound within an organ weak", 2.1.171-72; "whose words all ears took captive", 5.3.17; "vanquished thereto by the fair grace and speech", 5.3.133). Her principal strategy is that of ORVD, yet, as Table 4 shows, she adopts a wide range of strategies. This dexterity in varying her tactics is evident in the following scene:

WIDOW:

[11] A similar table appeared in a previous publication (Beville 2021, 92) reporting slightly fewer instances of strategic deception for all characters. This minor variation is due to the further refinement of the model and a revision of the categories (further detailed in Beville 2022). However, the trends which emerged in the preliminary stage were, nonetheless, indicative of the final results.

Here you shall see a countryman of yours
That has done worthy service.
HELEN:
His name, I pray you?
DIANA:
The Count Roussillon. Know you such a one?
HELEN:
But by the ear, that hears most nobly of him; [on-record; false assertion]
His face I know not.
DIANA:
Whatsome'er he is
He's bravely taken here. He stole from France,
As 'tis reported; for the King had married him
Against his liking. Think you it is so?
HELEN:
Ay, surely, mere the truth. I know his lady. [off-record; false implicature]
DIANA:
There is a gentleman that serves the Count
Reports but coarsely of her.
HELEN:
What's his name?
DIANA:
Monsieur Paroles.
HELEN:
O, I believe with him.
In argument of praise, or to the worth
Of the great Count himself, she is too mean [off-record; false implicature]
To have her name repeated. All her deserving
Is a reservèd honesty, and that
I have not heard examined.
(*AW*, 3.5.40-56)

Having approached the Widow and Diana in the guise of a pilgrim, Helen ably acts the part, seeking hospitality and enquiring about local news. She feigns ignorance concerning her husband and his companion. Her response to Diana's enquiry regarding her acquaintance with Bertram is an On-R lie – she claims to have only heard of him and to not know him personally (false assertion). However, as the conversation progresses, she switches to ORVD strategies: implying that she merely knows the Count's wife (a false implicature resulting from the violation of the Gricean maxim of quantity); asking unnecessary and

insincere questions (also in *AW* 3.5.71-79) producing false presuppositions; and insinuating an ill opinion of her husband's wife (herself).

These indirect strategies serve not only to heighten the dramatic irony for the audience, duly amused by the half-truths, but also to "soften" Helen's continued deception. She retains a certain level of deniability, which, coupled with the play's internal justification of her mendacious strategies, absolves her of the offense.

Her subterfuge is necessary in restoring order to the play-world. In fact, Helen often rationalises her deceptive strategies within the text. She repeatedly reminds the audience, and her interlocutors, that, in her mendacious plot, the end will justify the means. This is particularly evident in *AW,* 3.7.1-45 in which she and the widow provide moral justification for deceiving Betram, they refer to the trick-driven plot as "lawful" four times.

Helen also instructs Diana in how to perform pseudo-consent in order to undertake the bed-trick:

HELEN:
The Count he woos your daughter,
Lays down his wanton siege before her beauty
Resolved to carry her. Let her in fine consent, [instructing others to lie]
As we'll direct her how 'tis best to bear it.
Now his important blood will naught deny,
That she'll demand. A ring the County wears,
[…]
WIDOW:
Now I see the bottom of your purpose.
HELEN:
You see it lawful, then: it is no more
But that your daughter, ere she seems as won, [instructing others to lie]
Desires this ring; appoints him an encounter;
In fine, delivers me to fill the time,
Herself most chastely absent. After,
To marry her I'll add three thousand crowns
To what is passed already.
WIDOW:
I have yielded.
Instruct my daughter how she shall persever,
That time and place with this deceit so lawful

May prove coherent […].
(*AW*, 3.7.17-22, 29-39)

Here, Helen directs Diana's role in the deception, instructing her to "seem as won" and to prepare the appropriate circumstances for a successful bed-trick. These directives are duly followed by Diana in the subsequent scenes, and she succeeds in deceiving Bertram. Diana, heeding Helen's instructions, prefers off-record strategies (half-truths, insinuation, etc.) in her exchange with Bertram. She uses more on-record deception in the final trial scene to secure the case against Bertram. Helen participates in the deception through instances of "instructing others to lie"; she composes the lies which Diana will speak, fashioning her as a false mouthpiece. Helen will substitute Diana in bed with Betram, but in order to orchestrate a successful bed-trick Diana must substitute Helen in the deception of her husband. Much like Isabella's use of embedded deception in *MM*, instructing others to lie is a step removed from directly lying. In Helen's case (*AW*), it is part of her overall strategy of off-record deception (ORVD, non-verbal and embedded strategies).

4. Conclusions

The Duke's instruction to Isabella to "answer [Angelo's] requiring with a plausible obedience" is key to understanding the prevalence of ORVD and similar strategies among these female characters. The off-record mendacious strategies employed by both Helen and Isabella can be viewed as a means of mitigating risk and constructing a semblance of obedience, while underhandedly chipping away at the power structures within the play world and forging a new reality. While it is a contentious point in moral philosophy whether or not off-record strategies can be seen as morally superior to outright lying, they are generally perceived as such (by both the speaker and the audience)[12]. This notion of the presentation-of-self as honest and innocent while secretly plotting a new world order could have strong political

[12] For more on ethics and lying Bok 1999; Meibauer 2019. On the perception of indirectly (off-record) lying as morally superior Saul 2012a; 2012b.

implications if viewed through the lens of the religious conflict of the time[13]. However, here I will limit my observation to the gender divide evident in the strategies of deception employed within the texts. Elsewhere I have discussed the male characters' on-record, blatant lying strategies (Beville 2021; 2022), which are more risky and tend to work well for those in a position of power (Duke) and less well for subordinates (Bertram, Paroles, Angelo and Lucio) who must face the consequences of their dishonesty[14]. The female characters represented in these plays avoid committing themselves to the truth of mendacious propositions (going on-record) whenever possible. Thus, their observable off-record strategies can be seen as part of an overall linguistic strategy of "plausible obedience" – seeming cooperative in conversation while subtly influencing the situation in order to obtain a more favourable position. This strategy serves to mitigate the conversational risk of being deceitful – they are perceived by fellow characters, and ultimately by the audience, as more truthful than the characters who boldly lie on-record.

The complexity of female submission is amply discussed in the critical literature (Mendelson and Crawford 1998; Weisner-Hanks 2019). Mendelson and Crawford offer a striking example which reflects upon the negotiation of wifely submission within Mary Rich's marriage to the earl of Warwick; "embracing a regimen of piety, the countess developed a mode of dynamic obedience that transformed the conflict between herself and her husband into a personal campaign for self-mastery"; such strategic obedience is "neither docile nor passive" (ibid, 137). However, the examples of Helen and Isabella must be understood to go beyond this sort of "dynamic obedience" within the domestic space. The necessary *astuzia* (cunning) and dissimulation in their roles is similar to the performativity required of the Machiavellian prince "he who best knows how to play the fox is best off, but this must be kept well hidden,

[13] Amussen and Underdown note the link between the "prevailing uneasiness about gender relations in early modern England" and the way in which "inversion was intertwined with the religious controversy which followed the Protestant reformation, as each side saw the other as turning the world upside down" (2016, 7-8). For further discussion of dissimulation and religious conflict (Zagorin 1990, 1996; Snyder 2012; Berensmeyer and Hadfield 2015; Hadfield 2017).

[14] Notably, Paroles undergoes a linguistic transformation, he is outed as a braggart and publicly shamed in a sort of comical *chiarivari*, He subsequently changes tack in his approach to mendacity, learning to use ORVD strategies as a means of mitigating risk (see Beville 2021).

and the prince must be a great simulator and dissimulator" (in Snyder 2012, 111). Isabella and Helen bring a similar cunning and calculation to their performance of submission, hiding their true intentions by using covert pragmatic strategies.

Luckyj (1993, 2002) explores the link between reticence and resistance in female characters, positing silence as a multifaceted notion and as a possible means of strategical subversion[15]. In the same way that silence seems, superficially, to be mere passive submission, and yet may prove to be "potentially unruly and chaotic" (Luckyj 2002, 39) so, too, can the performance of subservience, through off-record strategies of deception, be considered a form of resistance. Both Helen and Isabella pragmatically perform particular models of feminine submission while strategically using language to subvert the extant circumstances and power structures within the play worlds. Thus, their performance of compliance serves to re-order the world. It proves to be an effective strategy in both instances. Isabella's threat to publicly proclaim Angelo's attempted sexual misconduct only proves to provoke violent counter-threats. Whereas, her credible compliance, in league with the Duke, undermines Angelo's authority and ultimately brings about her desired "prosperous perfection" (*MM*, 3.1.239), the justice and mercy – problematic as they may be – seen in the final act. So too, Helen performs compliance – pretending to disappear (and die), disguising herself as a pilgrim and successfully training Diana in the art of plausible obedience. Ultimately, these linguistic strategies of pseudo-obedience problematise the unthinking assumption, criticised by Luckyj, that early modern women (and female characters) were "chaste, silent and obedient" (2002, vii).

Thus, the pragma-stylistic analysis of female deception has revealed the female characters' preference for ORVD as a strategic choice which mitigates risk and allows the characters to retain a level of deniability. The representation of such specifically female strategies within the plays can be considered both an expression of cultural anxieties and challenges and as a potentially viable model for inverting the social order. As Amussen and Underdown observe,

[15] On reticence as a form of resistance/unruliness see Beatrice Righetti's contribution to the present issue, "Better a Shrew than a Sheep?": Disobedience through Reticence in Shakespeare's Contrasting Models of Femininity".

> plays were an ideal place to explore the dynamics of an upside-down world because they made room both for the tensions which emerged from the internal contradictions of the gender system and for the ways in which individual behaviour could disrupt it. Each of these added layers of unpredictability to the supposedly ordered world, on stage and off. Theatre is both a product of its culture and helps create that culture. (2016, 78)

In the plays examined here, the purpose of such pragmatic strategies of plausible obedience is the restoration of the right order; Helen wishes to consummate her marriage and Isabella wishes to avoid being sexually exploited and to restore justice to the realm. The generic conventions of the comic structure may be cynically considered the main reason for their respective successes, but it is also possible to view these linguistic strategies as a hitherto unexplored, and likely viable, alternative to the dichotomy of doggedly unquestioning obedience or shrew-like unruliness.

Therefore, further investigation of gender variation within pragmatic strategies is advisable, particularly studies of female mendacious speech patterns in the tragedies and histories.

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Philomel's Silence in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

ABSTRACT:

The myth of Philomel narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* constitutes one of the most frequent classical references in Renaissance literature and theatre. This study analyzes the effects the myth produces in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to demonstrate how Philomel's disquieting appearance in the text overlaps with a meta-poetic reflection linking the silence of the mutilated heroine to that of the poet oppressed by Elizabethan censorship. Specifically, the study focuses on analyzing the events of Hermia, Titania, and Bottom to clarify their connection to sexual violence, speech loss, and poetic censorship. Finally, the study illustrates how Bottom, portraying a Shakespearean Philomel, becomes a caricature of the poet himself. Considering the valuable contribution of critics, the essay proposes an analysis of the play to reveal its nuances and ambiguities.

Keywords: Philomel; nightingale; imposed silence; poetic censorship; rape.

1. Introduction

According to Taylor, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is "arguably Shakespeare's most Ovidian play", the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is "pervasive" (Taylor 2004, 51). Nonetheless, among the numerous mythical references, Philomel's presence has always been surrounded by an aura of

doubt. One legitimately wonders why Shakespeare included in his *comedy*[1] a direct reference to one of the most macabre and violent myths in the entire classical tradition.

In early modern culture, Philomel's tale was undoubtedly a favorite; this is also due to the popularity of the new Golding translation of the myths, which encouraged writers to imitate Ovid and create powerfully revolutionary works by exploiting classical symbols in new and unexpected ways. In *'A moving Rhetoricke'*, Luckyj closely observes how the mute heroine not only serves early modern male and female authors to express the subversive power of feminine silence, but is also adopted as "a figure for the (male) poet" (Luckyj 2002, 168).

In fact, appearing frequently in Shakespeare, the nightingale always assumes a meta-poetic meaning becoming a metaphor for censored poets. Besides the *Passionate Pilgrim* and sonnet 102, where the Bard explicitly identifies with Philomel, in *Titus Andronicus*, raped and mutilated Lavinia denounces her aggressors by showing her family a copy of Philomel's story; her resorting to the Ovidian text makes her a possible metaphor for poets who exploited classical mythology to fight the silence imposed by censorship (Montironi 2020, 64). In *The Rape of Lucrece*, by duetting with Philomel, the protagonist faces the task of narrating an event so traumatic as to be unspeakable. As Lavinia and the silenced poet, Lucrece exploits someone else's work of art, specifically a painting depicting tragic mythological figures, to elaborate her grief (Bate 1993, 75-79). As in *Titus*, in *Cymbeline*, a copy of the *Metamorphoses* figures as a prop: Imogen reads Ovid's story before being metaphorically violated by Iachimus.

[1] What early modern spectators anticipated from *Dream* was a representation in line with the characteristics of the Midsummer (or May Day) festive period: illicit love, chaos, and merriment (see Linley 2016). However, referring to *Dream* as a comedy is controversial, since its dark content is now widely acknowledged. Hutton refers to the play as a "tragedy in comic disguise" (Hutton 1985); Lewis questions whether *Dream* is only a "fairy fantasy" or rather an "erotic nightmare" (Lewis 1969); Chaudhuri sees the play as a "comedy of compromise" discussing its ambiguity and polarity (Chaudhuri 2017, 106). Philomel's bittersweet song fits perfectly within all these strands. Here, tragic elements are only hinted at through humorous *reticence* and ambiguity. Ovid's influence plays a crucial role in shaping *Dream*'s disturbing content since all Ovidian allusions are somehow of tragic nature. First and foremost, one should mention the story shaping the last act, the "most lamentable comedy" (1.2.11) performed by the mechanicals. The Ovidian tragedy unintentionally turned into a farce mirrors the lovers' comic events, which, as the study will prove, inevitably metamorphose into tragic.

Additionally, the textile elements surrounding Imogen and allowing her to react to the injustices she suffered strongly resonate with Philomel's clever tapestry.

A close reading of these texts reveals how Shakespeare places the myth in contexts where violence has happened or is about to happen, as in *Dream*'s case. Nevertheless, Philomel makes her appearance in the play not as a warning but as "a weak talisman" (Hunt 1992, 223) evoked by the fairies to protect the sleep of Queen Titania with her melodious voice:

> Philomel, with melody,
> Sing in our sweet lullaby,
> Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby.
> Never harm, nor spell, nor charm,
> come our lovely lady nigh.
> So good night, with lullaby.
> (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2.2.13-18)[2]

Carroll questions "how appropriate a voice is that of Philomela" in such a context (Carroll 1985, 171); in this regard, "since she herself is a victim", the heroine "may not be the best mythical figure to call upon" (Uman 2001, 75), argues Uman. Admittedly, in a sung lullaby, a reference to the most melodious bird is coherent enough to pass almost unnoticed. "But the nightingale sings melodiously only because Philomel once lost something less musically harmonious but more valuable – her woman's voice" (Hunt 1992, 223). From this standpoint, the presence of Ovid's heroine is a clever clue aimed at unmasking the latent violence concealed behind what appears as a merry comedy. According to Uman, who explored the influence of the Philomel myth in *Dream,* the metamorphosis subtexts underlying the play connect with issues of transformation, rape, and ravishment that, obviously, "must remain hidden from view" (Uman 2001, 74). At the same time, Montironi suggests that in the play Philomel "serves to inspire the expression of outrage against the violation of a person's freedom or body" (Montironi 2020, 64). In *Dream*, the violation of the characters' body could reasonably be a metaphor for the violation of the poet's freedom of expression, a traumatic issue authors could not discuss openly.

[2] Hereafter, quotations from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* refer to the 2017 Arden edition.

By relying on the contribution of critics, the study attempts to interpret *Dream* to demonstrate how a meta-poetic reflection lies behind this disquieting apparition. The essay conducts a content and textual analysis observing the events of Hermia, Titania and Bottom and their connection to mute Philomel, emphasizing the countless elements that link them to the tropes of violence, language loss and censorship[3].

2. Hermia

Hermia is the first to meet Philomel's fate. Like her Ovidian parallel, the young Athenian is trapped in a patriarchal system where her voice, "more tunable than lark to shepherd's ear" (1.1.184) (the reference to singing birds is obvious), carries no weight against men. Like most of Shakespearean women, Hermia does not reflect the ideal of the *pia filia*. She is neither silent nor measured in her speech; on the contrary, she is so shameless as to ask Theseus the punishment she would face if she refused to marry the man her father considers most worthy. "Either to die the death, or to abjure / For ever the society of men" (1.1.65-66). The alternative to death is a sad life of austerity and seclusion spent singing "faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon" (1.1.73). The moment she refuses to channel her passions into the object her father has chosen for her, these same passions will be permanently suppressed or repressed and confined with her.

In this regard, I agree with Marshall when he suggests that "Hermia and Hippolyta are in effect tongue-tied in the same way: their fate is to have others dictate their sentiments while they are silent or silenced" (Marshall 1982, 551). The play begins with one woman reduced to silence and ends with four (plus Bottom). The voice of the Amazon who speaks in the first scene and then falls silent until Act Four is, in its absence, more significant than it seems. Hippolyta is a prisoner of war forced into marriage with the man who defeated, raped and

[3] Philomel's tale became a useful device for Shakespeare's predecessors to describe what it meant to produce poetry in a politically oppressive context. It follows that the Bard's reception of the myths was not only Ovidian, but was also influenced by the use that politically engaged poets had made of the myths before him, most notably George Gascoigne (see Maslen 2006). On the functioning of censorship in Elizabethan times, see Clare (1999), Clegg (1997), and Dutton (1991).

threatened her with death. She speaks with restraint, dignity, and diplomacy as is appropriate to her position (ibid., 548), but it is also true that she has no choice. Also, should Hippolyta be so bold as to speak in favor of Hermia, her voice would carry no weight.

Patriarchal power is obviously among the premises directing the story. However, the picture described in the play is not completely valid from a historical viewpoint. Certainly, the idea that children (especially daughters) were property of their fathers was widespread at the time ("as she is mine, I may dispose of her", 1.1.42) but, as several sources report (Greaves 1981, 160-61; Chaudury 2017, 83; Linley 2016; Tennenhouse 2013 [1986], 73), there were limits to the impositions they exercised.

Thus, one could interpret the oppression that male characters exert on female ones in a metaphorical key: Philomel embodies the parallelism between the violence with which patriarchal/male power crushes defiant women and the violence that censorship exerts on texts it deems immoral. However, if women at the end of the play are made docile and reduced to silence (through marriage), the poet ventriloquizing through Philomel is not.

Back to Hermia, it is interesting to note how Shakespeare presents the two suitors because, in fact, neither of them seems all that worthy. The first to come forward is Demetrius. Although he is initially presented as a respectable party, we learn from his rival, Lysander, that Demetrius has a discredited and inconstant character and that he abandoned Helena in favor of Hermia.

Nonetheless, what the text first reveals about Lysander – the man who Hermia favors – is that, according to her father, he deceived his daughter by offering her "rhymes" and "love-tokens", singing to her with "faining voice, verses of feigning love" (1.1.28-31). Among the first things a reader learns when approaching Ovid is that never, under any circumstances, should a woman trust a man's words of love. It seems that Lysander, like many before him, thoroughly studied the *Ars Amatoria*, appearing as an excellent rhetorician. In fact, one of Ovid's main pieces of advice to conquer a woman is "Make promises! They do no harm, so who can chide us?" (*Ars Amatoria* 1.443).

Nevertheless, Hermia seems strangely 'cautious' in promising to attend her appointment with Lysander. One should pay attention to the promises Hermia anaphorically lists. If the former are conventional and in line with the

optimistic tone of the dialogue (1.1.168-71), the following seem in stark contrast to it. The girl is promising on all the oaths that men like Aeneas have broken. Hunt noted how Hermia's speech amounts to a linguistic act that is not only counterproductive and ineffective but "self-defeating" (Hunt 1992, 220). Hermia loses control of her voice as if she herself doubts Lysander's nature.

After Philomel's appearance (2.2.13) the play simply collapses. Like Titania, who in her sleep will be attacked by Oberon, Hermia and Lysander decide to stop and rest. Again, the girl seems circumspect when refusing to sleep next to Lysander, who obviously defends his good intentions: "Then by your side no bed-room me deny; / for lying so, Hermia, I do not lie" (2.2.55-56). The pun "lying"/"deceiving" does not escape Hermia who insists on sleeping apart as befits a virtuous man and a virgin maiden.

Although the play's hilarious tone misleads, the audience is well prepared to grasp the tragic veiling to which these elements allude. Indeed, classical mythology is studded with heroines deceived and abandoned by untrustworthy men, first and foremost Philomel and her sister Procne betrayed by Tereus.

When it comes to broken promises, one thinks immediately of Ovid's *Heroides*. Specifically, the tenth letter tells the story of Ariadne and Theseus, now betrothed to Hippolyta. In later versions of the myth, including Chaucer's, Theseus's promises are hyperbolic, and his tendency to break them is amplified. According to Ovid, after rescuing Ariadne from the Minotaur, Theseus takes her to an island, spends the night with her, and then inexplicably abandons her by setting sail with his ship. Ariadne recounts the moment she woke up and how not finding Theseus by her side in her bed, she shouted his name, but in vain:

> And all the while I called your name, and all
> The cliffs around the bay returned my call:
> 'Theseus!' the scenery when I
> cried out would sympathetically reply.
> (*Her.* X, vv. 23-26)

These verses obviously remind us of one of the most tragic moments in the whole comedy, that of Hermia's awakening.

> Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best
> To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast!
> Ay me, for pity! What a dream was here!
> Lysander, look how I do quake with fear.
> Methought a serpent eat my heart away,
> And you sate smiling at his cruel prey.
> Lysander! What, remov'd? Lysander! Lord!
> What, out of hearing gone? No sound, no word?
> Alack, where are you? Speak, and if you hear;
> Speak, of all loves! I swoon almost with fear.
> (2.2.149-58)

The most popular analysis of Hermia's dream is undoubtedly the Freudian one, which interprets the vision in a sexual key: the snake clutching her breast would be a sign of the insecurity underlying her love (Holland, 1979). Without excluding this interpretation, Hermia's dream can be read symbolically as a vision representing the pressures that censorship exerted on Elizabethan poets. Like Philomel, albeit in a dream, Hermia suffers a sexual assault followed by a speech loss.

In fact, here the serpent recurs frequently. Not surprisingly, the "spotted snakes with double tongue" (2.2.9) are the first creatures Philomel is supposed to keep away from Titania's bed. However, it is in Puck's final monologue that the nature of the oft-mentioned serpent becomes apparent.

> If we have unearned luck
> Now to scape the serpent's tongue,
> We will make amends ere long;
> Else the puck a liar call.
> (5.1.422-25)

The association between the serpent and slander, closely linked to the sin of envy, is common in early modern culture. As Chew notes, Spenser writes that a "hatefull snake" lies secretly in Envy's bosom. The poet also says that "Envy hates good works and virtuous deed, and 'backbites' the 'verse of famous Poets witt', spewing poison 'on all that ever writt'" (Chew 1973, 109-10).

Hence Philomel is evoked. Hermia's dream denounces the poet's concerns by appearing tragically prophetic. As Philomel and the poet, Hermia sees her

voice suppressed by the slanders of the other lovers. In 3.2., under the spell of the flower, Lysander insults her with epithets such as "Ethiop", "vile thing", "dwarf", "bead", and "acorn" (3.2.257-330). Before her mutilation at the hands of Tereus, Philomel has the power to speak and the determination to use that power to publicly recount the truth but, after the violence, the woman is no longer able to produce articulate speech, finding herself isolated, both physically and linguistically. Hermia lives the same condition, by metaphorically dissolving into the most insignificant elements of nature, and losing both her humanity and expressive power.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle explains how language is intrinsically linked to humanity, civilization, and the idea of community (*Politica I*) The moment a member of the community loses his ability to produce verbal messages, it is as if he regresses to a primitive and irrational state much more akin to that of the beasts than that of his fellow humans, who will automatically tend to isolate him. Analyzing the myth in terms of speech loss, Natoli explains that Ovid sets Philomel's tale in the context of a human community, from which the heroine moves to the animal realm. This transition "results in her entry into a state of 'wavering identity' between human and animal schematically associated with the isolation of speech loss" (Natoli 2017, 66). Also in *Dream*, the story moves from a civilized context to a 'wild' one (the forest). Hermia perfectly mirrors the consequences of this shift, which is followed by isolation and a state of 'wavering identity' closely linked to language loss. Indeed, Hermia, isolated and unheard, begins to doubt her identity: "Am I not Hermia?" (3.2.273). Eventually, she despairs and falls silent: "I am amazed, and know not what to say" (3.2.344). When she wakes up by loudly calling for Lysander, Hermia is as mute because no one can hear her. As Jane Hiles (cited in Lugo 2007, 409) indicates, speaking without being heard –or listened to, in this case– is like not speaking at all.

The stories of both heroines trace the events of Ovid's exile. It is well known that Augustus condemned Ovid's poetry as immoral and adulterous and relegated him to the margins of the empire. Like his heroine, he is deprived of his voice and forced to leave his homeland. In Tomis, where no one speaks Latin, Ovid meets the fate of his character suffering a form of mutism and linguistic isolation from which he manages to redeem himself, paradoxically,

only through the very poetic production that condemned him. As a 'weaver of poetry', Philomel becomes an alter ego of the poet who, through her story, denounces the violence of Augustan censorship.

In this context, Philomel's presence in *Dream* is perfectly justified. Hermia is abandoned to the silence of the forest like many other violated Ovidian characters before her, included metaphorically Ovid himself. Nonetheless, the tragic nature of Hermia's awakening is immediately masked by the comic vicissitudes of the mechanicals. After all, *Dream* is a comedy, or so it seems. In truth, it is time to discover the consequences of Oberon's violence on Titania. The queen in turn will subdue Bottom, who will thus lose his voice.

3. Titania

Jealousy, adultery, power abuse, and metamorphosis used as a punishment allow Titania and Oberon to earn their rightful place among the classical divinities. The fairy queen's characterization has always been an object of curiosity for critics who proposed associations with multiple figures. In particular, Barkan sees the meeting of Bottom and Titania as "the fullest example in Renaissance literature of the Diana and Actaeon story" (Barkan 1980, 352). Nonetheless, as Staton argues: "Shakespeare's Titania is actually an amalgam of several classical goddesses: besides Diana, [...] she resembles Juno, and [...] Venus. Thus, the name "Titania" is well chosen: it can stand for any daughter of a titan" (Staton 1963, 167). While not excluding any of the characters that fuse and clash to construct Titania, the analysis justifies the reference to Philomel's song by highlighting the links between the queen and Ovid's nightingale.

As already said, invoking Philomel as protection from the dangers of the forest is highly unusual. However, considering the violent nature of her story, the queen is as much a victim as Philomel. Uman argues that Titania suffers a form of rape by Oberon who violates her intimacy by pouring juice on her eyes at a time when the queen is completely helpless (Uman 2001, 76). Through the potion, Oberon exerts his control over Titania's sexuality by subduing her, humiliating her and making her lose her humanity, just as Tereus did to Philomel.

As already mentioned, in the play, violence is always followed by an imposed silence, which Philomel's appearance confirms and foretells. In Titania's case, language loss is manifested in three ways. Firstly, Titania herself recounts how Oberon's "brawls" (2.1.87) interrupted her propitiatory dances, unleashing natural catastrophes such as floods and famine. The hopeless villages are silenced by hunger and "No night is now with hymn or carol blest" (2.1.102). Secondly, under the effect of the drug, Titania falls in love with Bottom and addresses him words of love so Petrarchan and conventional as to be profoundly empty (Carroll 1985, 34). The result is comical but also reveals the lack of weight Titania's voice has after Oberon's spell. The last form of muteness the queen suffers appears when Oberon silences Titania preventing her to speak: with his brutal "Silence a while" (4.1.79) Oberon is similar to Tereus when he cut Philomel's tongue (Uman 2001, 77).

Finally, reminding readers that the origin of the fairy couple's dispute is the possession of a changeling boy, Marshall argues that the Indian "page" (2.1.185) (note the meta-poetic pun) "represents an impression of Titania's fantasy" (Marshall 1982, 552). In a censorship-like process, the king wants to author Titania's fancies ("I'll make her render up her page to me", 2.1.185) just like Theseus and Egeus when they tell Hermia to "fit her fancies" to her father's will (1.1.118). Here, both Titania and Hermia are mute Philomels playing the part of the disobedient poet who is controlled, punished, and silenced by the government.

4. Bottom

Yet, poor Bottom is the character who most explicitly calls to mind Ovid's heroine. "Nick Bottom, the weaver" (1.2.16). Even his trade refers to Philomel and her tapestry.

The womanly art of weaving has always been a metaphor for poetic production, especially in the Ovidian universe. Semantically, although it has lost its metaphorical charge, the word 'text', from the Latin *textus*, derives precisely from the semantic field of weaving. In this sense, Philomel's tale clarifies the nature of this catachresis that the poet exploits in a meta-poetic key. Several stories in the *Metamorphoses* (prologue included) link to weaving. In each of

these 'textile' mise en abymes, the act of weaving mirrors the act of creating poetry, and the work of art, always taking on a subversive perspective, embodies the conflict between victims and oppressors. In the myth, through her weaving, Philomel rebels against her rapist; in the story of Arachne, the weaver incurs the wrath of Minerva by producing a dangerously ironic tapestry; or again, in the tale of the Mineads (also present in *Dream* as the inspiration for the last act), the three women tell stories while weaving and spinning.

Reflecting on their semantic and symbolic link, 'weaving' and 'writing' become synonyms. Bottom 'the weaver' could be a humiliating caricature of Shakespeare 'the writer', or rather 'the playwright', or 'the poet'. In fact, just as the artisans prepare the entertainment for the Duke's wedding, the creator of *Dream* has precisely the same task in real life. Admitting this connection, Bottom's story, equally comic and bitter, becomes yet another Shakespearean attempt to denounce the plight of the Elizabethan poet "made tongue-tied by authority" (Sonnet 66, v. 9)[4].

Bottom is undoubtedly an Ovidian victim and his connection to Philomel is tragically evident. Indeed, he is the only character in Shakespeare's entire oeuvre to perform a physical man-to-beast metamorphosis on stage (Carroll 1985, 148). According to the principle directing all metamorphoses, Bottom becomes an ass on the outside because he was already an ass on the inside – like Philomel, who turns into an animal because revenge and pain consumed her humanity. Bottom's translation is not surprising because, although he changes, he paradoxically remains the same. Now he only has a form, both "liberating and constricting" (ibid., 37), that suits him better and in which he is disturbingly comfortable to the point of getting used to it without even realizing it.

As in Ovid's woods, also in Shakespeare's, metamorphosis is the result of the whims of the gods, but if in Ovid it follows a traumatic event or an unbearable excess of suffering, here in the play, metamorphosis precedes it. Plus, besides linking Titania's violence on Bottom to the rape of Philomel, Starks-Estes argues that "the change of gender roles and the cross-species eroticism [...] also extend beyond it, drawing from other Ovidian erotic narratives involving fantasies of zoophilia or bestiality as well as domination

[4] Edmondson and Wells date Sonnet 66 around 1594 and 1595 (2020, 97). *Dream* was supposedly composed in the same years, between 1594 and 1596 (Chaudhuri 2017, 109).

and submission." (Starks-Estes 2014, 166). "Shakespeare was a competitive author", writes Lugo (2007, 405). In fact, Bottom is a more Ovidian victim than those of Ovid himself. At the same time, Shakespeare's change of gender roles constitutes a form of adaptation of the myth to his specific circumstances. To the Bard, who wrote under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, government, authority, and censorship were not represented by a male monarch, but by a female one. Therefore, in *Dream*, censorship violating the male poet (Bottom) is embodied by a woman, the Fairy Queen of the play. Hunts contends that the appearance of the second installment of Spencer's *The Faerie Queene* in 1596 amplifies the idea of a political allegory in the play where Titania is the fairy correspondent of Elizabeth I (Hunt 2000, 425).

The animal component, pointed out by Starks-Estes, also unites the weaver and Philomel's stories through the image of the nightingale, which Bottom himself mentions along with a significant number of birds. The word 'nightingale' appears explicitly in the comedy only once and does so by coming right out of Bottom's mouth, who declares:

> I grant you, friends, if you should fright
> the ladies out of their wits, they would have no more
> discretion but to hang us. But I will aggravate my
> voice so, that I will roar you as gently as any sucking
> dove; I will roar you and 'twere any nightingale.
> (1.2.74-78)

Amid the errors, malapropisms, and terrible puns, we read the determination of a playwright aware of the risks of censorship. As Dent writes, the readers are perhaps more inclined to associate Shakespeare with Quince (and his mechanicals with the Chamberlain's Men), "yet Bottom by his irrepressible initiative tends to usurp even the authorial role. He is indeed the play's 'weaver'" (Dent 1964, 125). Bottom tells the artisans that if their play is not appreciated (either because too violent or immoral) the sentence would be death. Thus, the lion character cannot roar fiercely, as a real lion would, but must do so "gently" (1.2.77) like a "sucking dove" (1.2.77-78). Bottom, who never seems to master his language, confuses and mixes up two harmless creatures, two preys: a 'sitting dove' and a 'suckling lamb'. Nevertheless, Bottom's malapropism is not random because both animals appear in Ovid's

myth, precisely referring to Philomel. Furthermore, Bottom will also be associated with the dove in 5.1., when the weaver plays the role of Pyramus, dead. The dove and the tropes of violence, death, and silence are all condensed into a few lines:

> *Thisbe*: Asleep, my love?
> What, dead, my dove?
> O Pyramus, arise.
> Speak, speak. Quite dumb?
> (5.1.317-20)

These are rather subtle allusions perhaps only spectators or readers with deep knowledge of the Ovidian text could grasp. However, the reference to the nightingale, which one can only interpret as an allusion to Philomel, must have seemed more immediate.

"But I will aggravate my voice so, that [...] I will roar you and 'twere any nightingale" (1.2.76-78). Here again, what seems a silly malapropism on Bottom's part is, in truth, very telling: one might think Bottom meant 'to moderate' rather than 'to aggravate'. On the contrary, I argue that Bottom-poet deliberately and consciously chose to say what he said. The verb 'to aggravate' juxtaposed with the seemingly oxymoronic image 'to roar like a nightingale' renders the devastating consequences that the presence of a figure like Philomel potentially has on the perception of a work and perfectly represents its symbolic power. Considering the violence and pain that move it, it is not inconsistent to state that Philomel's song, as well as that of the poet, is as expressive and fearsome as the 'roar' of any lion.

Yet, through Bottom's tragic acting skills and the chaotic atmosphere created by his clumsy companions, we strongly perceive the Bard's skepticism towards his craft. As already mentioned, Bottom is a bitter caricature of Philomel-nightingale on one hand, and of the poet ridiculing himself on the other. Bottom is by no means a nightingale and his musical ear is as fine as that of a donkey.

Believing to be played for a fool, metamorphosed Bottom wants to show that he has not fallen for the joke and that he is not scared at all. Unflustered, he stays at his post and starts singing. He does this to distract the spectators

and fill an otherwise deeply upsetting silence, namely the same silence in which Hermia was imprisoned: "No sound, no word?" (2.2.156). It is the silence of a deserted theatre or an empty stage from which the actors (like the mechanicals) flee in fear.

Braying a meaningful song about birds, he wakes the sleeping Titania. In the song, after a roundup of *songbirds* (3.1.126-30), also appears the cuckoo (3.1.127-29), calling to mind the word cuckold, a man whose wife is unfaithful. Shakespeare plays on the saying: "Do not set your wit against a fool's" (Dent 1981, 547). The cuckoo song, symbolizing amorous betrayal, imposes a "negative silence" (Hunt 1992, 224) because men do not dare to contradict it, and if they did, by shouting "cuckoo" too, they would look as foolish as the bird. The song thus ends with an essentially enforced silence, but, as Hunt has pointed out, ironically, Titania desires to hear it again (ibid.).

Before Titania silences Bottom, the Bard gives a glimpse of the weaver's voice and its 'public' component. Every time he speaks, Bottom acts to be heard by an audience. Just as Philomel threatens to reveal Tereus's faults publicly, Bottom sings full-throated about the queen's adulteries, both the past ones and those about to take place. Indeed, the song introduces what will happen shortly afterward.

Ruled by her desire for the donkey, Titania takes him prisoner. Considering Philomel's story, the verses at the end of the scene become profoundly eloquent. Titania orders her fairies to lead Bottom to her bed and adds: "Tie up my lover's tongue, bring him silently." (3.1.192). Uman argues that "with her command, Titania again translates the myth of Philomel, but now it is Bottom the weaver who is silenced [...], and thus he becomes Philomel while Titania occupies the position of Tereus the rapist" (Uman 2001, 77).

Just as Hermia was attacked by the serpent symbolizing slander, somehow Bottom-Philomel-poet also suffers the same fate. Indeed, Rambuss noted how Titania, in her predilection for boys in bondage (Rambuss 2003, 247), resembles the nymph Salmacis from Book Four of the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid recounts that Salmacis violently coils Hermaphroditus like a *snake* in the beak of an eagle. The serpent wraps its tail around the bird's talons and wings, imprisoning it and switching from prey to predator (like Titania and Philomel). Moreover, Ovid

compares Salmacis to the ivy imprisoning the trunks in its tangle (Met. IV, vv. 449-55), an image retrievable almost identically in *Dream*:

> and I will wind thee in my arms.
> Fairies, be gone, and be always away.
> So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle
> Gently entwist; the female ivy so
> Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.
> (4.1.39-43)

Staton compares this passage to the rape of Adonis by Venus in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (Staton 1963, 175-76). The similarities between the two texts, both inspired by Salmacis's myth, are striking. Venus silences and violently entangles her prey, who is again a *bird*: "Look how a bird lies tangled in a net, / So fasten'd in her arms Adonis lies" (vv. 67-68). In a few short lines, the presence of captured, raped and silenced birds is pervasive. Philomel's presence no longer seems so incoherent. By exploiting the nightingale's song, Shakespeare shows the barbarity of censorship on the poet's voice, which in the play is embodied by Hermia, Titania, and Bottom, *Dream*'s most representative victims.

"I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was" (4.1.203-05). Although he is unable to express what he suffered, Bottom remembers, and it is enough to generate a change in him. Seeing Bully Bottom struggle with words is extremely funny, and the part "Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream" (4.1.205-06) cannot but elicit a laugh.

Still, Bottom is the only one who truly encountered the fairies. He was their victim and is aware of it (albeit unconsciously). Compared to the others, Bottom was lucid; he was not under the influence of any potion. Yet, he can't tell about his experience because no human words can describe it. In the *Metamorphoses*, "humans who were experiencing high levels of emotion tended to be described as temporarily bereft of the ability to speak" (Natoli 2017, 35). Like Philomel mutilated and later transformed into a nightingale, Bottom is a victim of violence who has lost his voice because any language would be inadequate. It is the surrender of the poet who no longer knows how to express himself.

Miller argues that "by speaking so generally of man and human capacities, Bottom reconfirms himself as a comic mirror for the general human condition" (Miller 1975, 264). In this sense, Bottom represents all those who struggle with dangerous truths they are unable to repeat. It is Philomel's *fassusque nefas* (Met. VI, v. 524). Calderwood (cited in Hunt 1992, 237) writes that "Bottom lacks Hamlet's gift of speech, and because he can neither word nor reword it, the 'matter' of his fairy experiences fades into incommunicable subjectivity, into a wordless 'dream'". The poet, however, possesses this gift. Again, "Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream" (4.1.205-06). It is the dream Shakespeare has been telling so far, even at the cost of making a fool out of himself, even at the risk of being silenced.

5. Conclusion

Silence is the foundation of *Dream* because what could be said, which would be profoundly destructive, is hushed or cleverly disguised to ensure order between the artist and authority. Nevertheless, as Ovid and Shakespeare knew, silence can prove dangerously eloquent.

Dream welcomes Philomel to show how the patriarchal order that drives the story purposefully hints at something else. In a maelstrom of images and sounds, Philomel guides the interpretation by giving meaning to the characters and the silence imposed on them.

Violated in a dream by the serpent of slander, betrayed, and abandoned, Hermia loses herself in the woods to which she entrusts her weeping. Like the poet, Hermia has lost her voice and herself. From a powerful fairy queen, Titania becomes a slave to Oberon, who humiliates her, reduces her to bestiality, and deprives her of her freedom. The queen shifts from prey to predator by violating poor Bottom, whose naive and foolish nature elevates him to the role of the play's true protagonist.

Repeatedly compared to the nightingale and the field of weaving, Bottom is more than any female character a Shakespearean Philomel. Mimicking both the heroine and the poet, Bottom shares their fate of struggling with language and being ultimately silenced. Becoming the inept spokesperson for oppressed

humanity, the weaver sympathizes with the playwright, allowing him to bring his sorrows on stage.

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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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Lost in Reception: Christine de Pizan's Voice and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

ABSTRACT:

This paper considers Christine de Pizan's works as an influential part of the early modern horizon of expectations and of its discursive intertextuality generating the interpretative frameworks within which to read the texts of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. After a brief overview of the existing research on the reception of de Pizan in England from her lifetime up to the 16th century, the role of de Pizan's voice in intertextual and discursive interconnections is investigated with reference to William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The pairs of characters Theseus and Hippolyta as well as Pyramus and Thisbe from Shakespeare's text will be read in light of de Pizan's oeuvre to suggest possible new insights into Shakespeare's comedy and into Peter Quince's play-within-the-play.

KEYWORDS: Christine de Pizan, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, medieval Shakespeare, Pyramus, Thisbe, Theseus, Hippolyta.

1. Introduction

This paper searches for the flow of Christine de Pizan's voice in Shakespeare's work, selecting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a case study. This choice is purposely made outside the group of plays that can be immediately labelled as 'medieval', in light of a broader appreciation of 'medieval

Shakespeare' that refers not only to Shakespeare's representation of the Middle Ages but also his being part of an intertextual context that cannot ignore the so-called medieval classicism or medieval reenactments and reappropriations of certain discourses[1]. The present investigation, in line with some recent research (Malcolmson 2002; Hoche 2003; Long 2012; Johnston 2014), considers de Pizan's works an influential part of the discursive intertextuality that generates the interpretative frameworks within which to read the texts of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

The notion of the Middle Ages as "an uncanny but continuous presence in the early modern period both culturally and textually" (Kenel 2013, 11), which emerged in the 1970s[2], has been gaining ground in the last few decades. What is commonly defined as medieval flows into the early modern period, providing important semantic and thematic patterns. Texts are a particularly effective means of cultural transmission and contamination. In early modern England, medieval works circulated both as manuscripts, hunted for and preserved by very different kinds of people, from competent collectors to devotional readers[3], and as printed texts, representing "a high proportion of the books printed in the sixteenth century" (Cooper 2013, 9). This awareness of a cultural tie between the Middle Ages and the early modern period has also been impacting the field of Shakespeare studies, in which medieval influences had often been overlooked in favour of classical ones, an attitude resulting from Jacob Burckhardt's idea of the Renaissance as a new age opposed to its recent past and built on the revival of antiquity, whose medieval mediation is often left unnoticed (see Cooper 2013, 6; Coldiron 2016 [2009], 56-57).

From this continuity perspective, Shakespeare can be seen as a "medieval invention" (2009, 3), to use Perry and Watkins's words, or, as Helen Cooper puts it, "a writer deeply embedded in the Middle Ages, who inherited many of his shaping ideas and assumptions about everything from stagecraft to language from the medieval past" (Cooper 2013, 1). This paper contributes to supporting

[1] As Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray state when introducing the collection *Shakespeare and The Middle Ages*, "Shakespeare medieval plays include those set in the Middle Ages or those drawing directly on medieval sources, criteria that include almost every play" (2009, 9).

[2] See Thompson 1978, Jones 1977.

[3] See Watson 2004.

this idea by tracking the flow of de Pizan's voice into the intertextual and discursive interconnections of early modern English literature. This medieval voice is particularly challenging compared with common perceptions of the differences between the Middle Ages and early modernity. This is not only because de Pizan writes "the first robust defense of women written by a woman", shattering "facile readings of the 'darkness' of the Middle Ages" (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xix), but also because she provides a female contribution to what Walter Ullmann defined as the "medieval foundations of Renaissance humanism" (1977) through her appreciation of Dante and Petrarch and her theoretical arguments on politics, chivalry and military issues.

The aim here is to consider Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* within a cultural context that includes de Pizan's works, following Anne E. B. Coldiron's methodology, which means:

> [looking] beyond source-and-influence, since pervasive medieval content formed a ground or baseline, a medieval 'horizon of expectations' (Jauss 1982), with which, and often against which, Shakespeare and other authors worked. Shakespeare often took an old idea or trope that had been steadily present in the culture in various, medievally mediated forms, and even if not using it as a direct source, seems to have assumed audience knowledge of it that would make his use of it the more pointed. (Coldiron 2013, 57)

After a brief overview of the reception of de Pizan in England from her lifetime up to the 16th century, here used as external evidence of her being part of Shakespeare's cultural context, the characters Theseus and Hippolyta as well as Pyramus and Thisbe from Shakespeare's text will be read in light of de Pizan's oeuvre to suggest possible new insights into Shakespeare's comedy.

2. Christine de Pizan's early reception in England

This section provides an account of Christine de Pizan's incredibly successful reception in England between the 15th and 16th centuries. She was a prolific and pioneering writer who benefited from and contributed to the thriving literary and scholastic culture of humanist Europe. She was born in

Venice and defined herself as *femme ytalienne*[4] throughout her life, even though she moved to Paris, at the court of Charles V, when she was just four years old. She left Italy because her father, Tommaso de Benvenuto da Pizzano, a celebrated lecturer at the University of Bologna, was appointed physician and astrologer by the French king. Charles V was, at that time, committed to the development of knowledge and the arts through his Sapientia Project, which led, among other things, to the construction of the Louvre Library and the commissioning of books[5].

Her career began out of necessity. After the death of Charles V, her father lost support at court and died in 1387. Three years later, her husband Etienne du Castel, secretary to the king, died too, leaving her in a strained financial situation while in charge of her widowed mother, three children and niece. Writing professionally was a means to earn a living for her and her family, a condition she allegorically described as a passage from womanhood to manhood[6]. The topics she wrote about challenge gender stereotypes, as they range from courtly love to chivalry and war. Gender was also an issue in the reception of her works (more on this at the end of this section). Pizan herself, in *Le livre de l'advision Christine* (1402), ascribes her success within literary and aristocratic circles, both in France and elsewhere, to the marvel elicited in readers by her being a woman[7]. The French court offered her the opportunity to be in touch with powerful and aristocratic people. "Her patrons and

[4] She uses this phrase in the prologue of *Le livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie*. When the focus turns to specific versions of de Pizan's books, they will be explicitly referred to either by their French titles or Middle English and Early Modern English titles. Otherwise, modern English titles will be used. The same holds true for quotations.

[5] Within this incredibly flourishing and inspiring cultural milieu, Christine de Pizan was encouraged to study by her father. Her husband likewise supported her bent for erudition; nevertheless, she was well aware of the limits imposed on her education just because of her gender (see Willard 1984).

[6] In *Fortune's Transformation*, she writes: "I felt that my flesh was changed and strengthened, and my voice much lowered, and my body harder and faster [...] I felt that I had become a true man" (de Pizan 1997, 106).

[7] Christine de Pizan states: "[…] since they were benevolent and most compassionate princes, they were pleased to see [my books] and delighted to receive them, more, I think, because it was unusual for a woman to be an author (since that had not happened for a long time) than because of the merit of the texts. And so, in a short span of time, my books came to be discussed in and transported to various places and countries" (2018, 14).

dedicatees", Geri L. Smith points out, "occupied the highest strata of society, and included such luminaries as King Charles VI, Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, John of Berry, Philip the Bold of Burgundy, John the Fearless of Burgundy, and Louis of Orléans" (Smith 2017, 4).

In England, her name was well known throughout her lifetime. On the occasion of the marriage between Richard II and Charles VI's daughter, Isabelle, Christine de Pizan met John Montagu, Earl of Salisbury. He became her patron and, according to some courtly rumours, also her lover (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xiv, 14). In 1398, he invited her son Jean de Castel to travel with him and his son to England and sojourn with him. It has been demonstrated that on this occasion, they took some copies of her works to England. When the Earl, a supporter of Richard II, was executed in 1400, Jean de Castel was first under the care of Henry Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, before going back to France, as his mother astutely declined the invitation from the new king to join her son at the English court[8]. In any case, she sent him copies of her works, and it has now been established that other manuscripts of hers circulated in England during the 15th century (Downes, 2009), to which translations and, later, incunabula should be added.

As early as 1402, Thomas Hoccleve translated her *L'epistre au dieu d'amours* (1399) into English (*The Letter of Cupid*) – with cuts and additions, mainly from Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* (c. 1386), so much so that the work was often attributed to Chaucer, particularly the 15th century editions (Mairey 2016, 495). A good number of de Pizan's works came through John of Bedford, who was regent of France after the death of Charles VI in 1422 and who, three years later, acquired the libraries of both Charles V and Charles VI. Among such precious books was the famous "Book of the Queen" (British Library, Harley MS 4431), which contains a collection of de Pizan's works – including *La Cité des dames* (1405) – produced under the author's supervision for Isabeau of Bavaria, wife of Charles VI, and later owned by Jacquetta of Luxembourg, second wife of John of Bedford, who, soon widowed, married Sir Richard

[8] As she herself revealed: "To make a long story short, I managed, by dint of great effort and my books to obtain permission for my son to come and fetch me to take me to this country I had never seen before. And so I refused to allow that fate to befall me and him, because I could not believe that a traitor might come to a good end" (de Pizan 2018, 15).

Woodville. Her son, Anthony Woodville, inherited the manuscript and translated *Les proverbes moraux* (1400-1401) from it in 1478. He had his translation printed by William Caxton as *The Morale Prouerbes of Cristyne*, making de Pizan "the first woman writer to be printed in England" (Long 2012, 526). The last known owner of the manuscript was Henry Cavendish[9], son of William Cavendish: this means, as posited by Cristina Malcolmson (2002), that the volume was available to Margaret Cavendish too, possibly influencing her proto-feminist works.

The Woodville coterie was central to the spread of de Pizan's works. Bedford's lieutenant, John Fastolf (1380-1459) – famous for being the probable source for Shakespeare's Falstaff – commissioned his stepson, Stephen Scrope, to translate the *Épître d'Othéa à Hector* (1407-1409): *The Epistle of Othea to Hector; or, The Boke of Knyghthode*. This English version, which was published around the 1440s-1450s without the name of the French author, was followed by a second anonymous translation of the same book[10]. Around 1536-1545, Robert Wyer also translated the book into English. This print edition does not mention de Pizan as author and provides a new title to the text, whose popularity in England is also testified to by its influence on authors such as John Lydgate (Schieberle 2020, 8-9). Fastolf's secretary, William Worcester, translated selections from *Le livre de faits d'armes et de chevalerie* (1408-1409) in a manuscript titled *The Boke of Noblesse*. Both Scrope and Worcester cast doubts on de Pizan's authorship and attributed her works to "a company of nameless clerks from the University of Paris" (Summit 2000, 75). Elizabeth Woodville's husband, Edward IV, was interested in French manuscripts and contributed to the enrichment of the royal libraries. He followed in the footsteps of his father, Richard, third Duke of York, who is likely to have been the owner of a manuscript *Cité des dames* (Royal MS. 19 A.XIX), whose author's name does not appear. Elizabeth Woodville's daughter, Elizabeth of York, married Henry VII, who was so interested in Christine de Pizan's work as to ask William Caxton to

[9] After the death of Anthony Woodville in 1483, the manuscript passed to Louis of Bruges and was brought to the Continent, where the duke must have acquired it, either in Paris or the Netherlands (Malcolmson 2002, 24).

[10] It is possible that Lady Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII' s mother, was given Scrope's translation as a gift.

translate and print *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye* (1489). In 1521, a translation of *Le livre du corps de policie* (1407) was published by John Skot (*The Booke of the Body of Polycye*). In the same year, Henry Pepwell published Brian Anslay's translation of the *Cité des dames* under the auspices of the third Earl of Kent, Ann Woodville's son, Richard Grey. De Pizan's 'female utopia' was originally prompted by the debate around the Salic Law of succession, which excluded women from the throne (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xxix). Similarly, Anslay's *The Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes* was part of the royal household's preoccupation over the lack of a male heir for Henry VIII and the resulting need to prepare the ground for the possibility of a female sovereign, which meant providing Mary with an education suitable for the role: a "humanist program of studies" that, as Hope Johnston notes, "would set an important precedent for her sister Elizabeth and other noblewomen in England" (Johnston 2014, xxiv). Paradoxically enough, Pepwell's English print edition omitted Christine de Pizan's name from the title page.

As Bernice A. Carrol points out, it seems that de Pizan's authorship was often suppressed, her work attributed to male authors, and she "ridiculed or dismissed with contempt" (1998, 24). Considering the paratextual apparatus of de Pizan's texts, Jennifer Summit notes that "while the French manuscripts in English libraries announce Christine's authorship in dedicatory epistles and illuminations, the English translations of the same works […] almost universally reassign authorship of her works to men" (2000, 62). She posits that this happened because her works were adapted to the English cultural context following the Hundred Years War, when a new literate aristocracy emerged. Her works were thus "produced by, and packaged as models for, not literate women but gentlemen" (Summit 2000, 68): a new class of literate gentlemen that identified themselves with the female position of de Pizan to find their own position as authors "outside the medieval institutions of *clergie* and *chevalerie* […] refiguring aristocratic masculinity" (ibid., 70, 72). Her name may have been known only to a few by the 16th century, but her works were definitely part of English culture, mainly for the discourses of war, body politic and the woman question[11]. Reflecting on de Pizan's importance in the culture of early English

[11] In 1965, Lily B. Campbell mentioned Caxton's *The Book of Fayttes of Armes* among the four most influential books on war advocating "military theory over experience" (Hoche 2003, 212),

print, Anne E. B. Coldiron disagrees with the points made by other critics and states that the medieval French author was "an authoritative voice […] preserved, publicized, and praised" (2016 [2009]), although not for her most challenging gender issues, which are of special interest to contemporary scholars. "Her early modern English fame," Coldiron maintains, "was greater as a political advisor, a mythographer, and an authoritative wisdom-writer" (ibid.). It is in this very capacity that her voice resonates in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as will be shown in the next section of this paper.

3. "These antique fables": medieval *Dream* and de Pizan's texts

In 5.1 of Shakespeare's *Dream*, Hippolyta and Theseus comment on the young lovers' account of their adventure in the woods and Theseus judges it "more strange than true" (5.1.2) and assimilates it to "antique fables" (5.1.3)[12]. The word "antique", Peter Holland points out, means "old" and puns on "antic", which means "grotesque". As he further explains: "While 'antique' has strong links to the ancient world – 'antique fables' are classical myths, the world which Theseus mocks but to which he himself belongs – 'antic' suggests a world of performance, the theatrical context of a play which this Theseus will

which could have informed plays such as *Henry IV*, yet she was not aware that the French author, whom she calls Christine du Castel, was a woman. Recently, this point has been further developed by Dominique Tieman Hoche (2003), in her doctoral thesis on de Pizan in early modern England, and Paola Pugliatti (2010) has considered de Pizan's ground-breaking theories on the just war to read Shakespeare's treatment of the theme of war in his plays. Not "[hunting] for verbal parallels" but rather piecing together the "remediation and expanding circulation of the pretexts to a then-pressing problem" (2013, 70), Anne E. B. Coldiron discusses the belly fable in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in relation to three medieval versions, including de Pizan's interpretation of it in her *The Book of the Body Politic*. Cristina Malcolmson (2002, 17) has shown that *City of Ladies* had a good currency in early modern England, where it circulated beyond its textual boundaries as testified also by the six tapestries picturing this work, "probably dating from the early sixteenth century" (Campbell 2007, 248), hung in the Wardrobe of Prince Edward and Lady Elizabeth. The same subject was formerly recorded in the Wardrobe of Princess Mary. These tapestries are no longer extant and, to date, it has been impossible to determine the exact topics represented in them (see Bell 2004). Thomas P. Campbell's studies of tapestries at the Tudor court mention other items depicting de Pizan's subjects (2006, 140, 424; 2007, 112, 248, 325).

[12] All references to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are to the Arden edition, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri 2017.

watch but also the one in which he is a character" (1998, 230)[13]. Also, Catherine Belsey underlines that the polysemy of the word 'antique' "implies both 'ancient' and 'antic' (theatrical), and ironically Theseus himself is both"[14]. Theseus's statement, opening the final act and, thus, the resolution of the play, fits well with the rest of the characters too, who are part of an intertextual web coming from the past, masterfully reworked by Shakespeare, who creates, as it were, an "antike work". This phrase, listed by Edward Phillips in his *The New World of English Words* (1658) as a term used in art meaning "a disorderly mixture of divers shapes of men, birds, flowr's, &c."[15], is quite consistent with the mixture of mythical, fairy, fictional and real characters that populate the play, as well as with its intertextual fusion of several sources and discourses from the past.

"Antique fables" are central in *Dream*, and critics have noted and explored them. As Kurt A. Schreyer points out, focusing on the modernity of Shakespeare, one "may miss the extent to which *Dream* is looking backward rather than forward" (2014, 94). Despite its classical allusions, the medieval legacy is overwhelming in the play and this is exemplified by its metatheatrical subplot. Georg Brandes interpreted the representation of the mechanicals as a satire addressed to older forms of theatricalities (1999 [1898]), and Schreyer has recently traced the pre-Reformation origins of the ass's head as linked to the biblical figure of Balaam, arguing "that it is a piece of theatrical artisanry […,] an artifact, and thus a material link, between the mysteries and the London stage" (2014, 74). In her comprehensive study on Shakespeare and Chaucer, Ann Thompson identified *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the play which, together with *Romeo and Juliet*, shows "the most substantial and pervasive influence of Chaucer in the whole canon" and as the most investigated play "in respect of its Chaucerian borrowings" (1978, 88)[16]. In her conclusions, she stresses the fact that, in the play, "as many as four Chaucerian works are used in

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[13] On the "Spenserian resonance" of the word 'antique' in Shakespeare's Sonnet 106 see Cheney (2001, 356) and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.3 see Bednarz (1983, 87-88).

[14] https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/a-midsummer-nights-dream/a-midsummer-nights-dream-a-modern-perspective/ (30/08/2023).

[15] https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/lexicon/entry/497/771 (30/08/2023).

[16] First noted by Hales in 1873.

different ways: *The Knight's Tale* for the framing action and parts of the main romantic plot, *The Legend of Good Women* for Pyramus and Thisbe and a brief reference to Dido, *The Merchant's Tale* for the quarrel between Oberon and Titania, and perhaps *The Parlement of Foules* for Theseus's reference to St Valentine's day" (1978, 217). More recently, Martha W. Driver has studied the characterization of the young lovers, the fairies and the mechanicals and concluded that "Shakespeare was more closely familiar with Middle English romance than has been noted previously" (2009, 141). Notwithstanding this wide awareness of the medievalism of *Dream*, de Pizan's work is not taken into account. Yet, Theseus and Hippolyta, Pyramus and Thisbe (and Dido), all stemming from classical literature, had been remediated in the Middle Ages by de Pizan too.

Her version of the story of Theseus and Hippolyta belongs to the first part of the *City of Ladies* (chapter 18), a book explicitly advocating ideas against misogyny and misogamy, so well in tune with the spirit of *Dream*, where the battle of the sexes supplies material for both hilarious comedy and serious considerations and where marriage is central to both the main and subplots and, according to some, even the occasion of its first performance. Hippolyta is one of the foundation stones of de Pizan's allegorical city, where the Amazons are given momentous importance. As Hope Johnston notes, de Pizan conceives of her city within the conceptual framework of the *translatio imperii et studii* but reshapes it by highlighting the significance of legendary women. Introducing the book, the allegorical character of Reason, who leads the argumentation in Part I, equates the foundation of the city with classical (masculine) foundation stories but "allocates twice as much space to her recollection of the formidable status that the Amazon Empire achieved" (Johnston 2014, xxviii).

As many as four chapters are devoted to the renowned warriors of Amazonia, the "best representative[s]" of the virtues and qualities highlighted in Part I, devoted to women who found themselves in the position to hold power because circumstances left them without men, showing aptitude, "courage, boldness, and good judgment" (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xxix). "As one of the foundational and iconic examples of the City of Ladies," Kingston and Bourgault claim, "the community of the Amazons and how it is interpreted sets much of the tone for the rest of the work" (ibid., 51). This also

holds true with respect to the "mutually beneficial partnership between the sexes" (Johnston 2014, xxix) promoted by the book: the Amazons are exemplary women, they banish men from their domain but they are not against men. Hippolyta's story, as a matter of fact, concludes with marriage and she is depicted as matching "in cunning and force" with "the great legislator Theseus" (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xxix). De Pizan defines their relationship in terms of balance, although the prowess of Hippolyta is emphasized.

Chapter 18 tells "[h]owe the stronge Hercules and Theseus wente upon the Amozones, and howe the .ii. ladyes Menalope and Ypolyte had almoost overcome them" (de Pizan 2014, 79)[17]. In describing the event, Reason first lingers over the endowments of Hercules, "the mervayllous stronge man whiche in his tyme dyde more mervaylles of strength than ever man dyde that was borne of woman" (ibid.). It is he who decides to attack the Amazons and Theseus, "worshypfull and wyse man whiche was kynge of Athenes" (ibid., 81), joins him. In the battle they are confronted by two "worshypful[18] maydens of soverayne strength of chevalrye and hardynesse and wyse above many others […]" (ibid., 83), more precisely Hercules by Manalyppe and Theseus by Hippolyta. De Pizan specifically reports the extraordinary merits of the two Amazons: "so strongly these maydens hurte them and by so grete encountre, eche of theym bete theyr knyght, and they also fell on the other syde. But as soone as they myght, they recovered themselfe and ranne upon them with good swerdes" (ibid.).

Reason praises this incredible deed and interestingly notes how those who reported it tried to find excuses for the Greek warriors, in particular for Hercules. "These .ii. knyghtes were ashamed to be thus beten of these. .ii. maydens. Notwithstandynge, these maydens fought with theyr swerdes ayenst these .ii. knyghtes strongly and the batayle endured longe, yet at the last and what mervayle that these maydens were taken, for there ought not to be lyke strokes bytwene them. Of this pryse they thought them gretely honoured […]" (de Pizan 2014, 83, 85). The two Amazons were made captives and then

[17] All references to de Pizan's *City of Ladies* are to Hope Johnston's edition (2014), with Brian Anslay's 1521 translation.

[18] Both spellings are used by Anslay: 'worshypful' and 'worshypfull'.

released after a peace agreement was reached with the Greeks. Theseus, who fell in love with Hippolyta, was not happy to leave her, "[s]oo Hercules", de Pizan affirms, "prayed and requyred the quene so moche for hym that she graunted Theseus to take Ipolyte unto his wyfe, and so sholde lede her into his countre" (ibid., 85). There followed "weddynges made worshypfully" (ibid.).

Analyzing Shakespeare's Theseus and Hippolyta in relation to Plutarch's/North's and, in particular, Chaucer's versions, Sukanta Chaudhuri identifies a couple of Shakespearean idiosyncrasies. Whereas Chaucer's Theseus is "a judicious and humane ruler [… whose] martial ardour and prowess are never in doubt, […] Shakespeare's Theseus is a low-key figure by contrast, no longer the determining force behind the events" (Chaudhuri 2017, 64). She also notes the numerous, though subtle, hints at the patriarchal attitude of Theseus and more specifically states that "there is much to question but little to seize on Theseus' relations with Hippolyta" (ibid., 66). Chaudhuri suggests different possible readings of the couple's underlying dynamics, taking into account distinct classical accounts of the war between Theseus and the Amazons. She singles out the first scene as the only one in *Dream* in which Hippolyta shows "implicit dissent" (ibid., 67) and then pins down scenes where Hippolyta shows, instead, a certain degree of worthiness, independence and equality with Theseus. Yet, she concludes that any reading of the relationship between the Greek and the Amazon in *Dream* undoubtfully confirms "his dominance [… and] her past exploits are merely a foil to set it off" (ibid., 68). A different conclusion can be reached by contemplating de Pizan's presentation of the couple, which is more coherent with the self-secure attitude of the female character, detected by critics in most of the scenes in *Dream* but the first one.

The proto-feminist medieval account of how the future spouses met, made available by de Pizan, sheds new light on the dialogues between the two of them, in particular the very first. Theseus's "Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries; / But I will wed thee in another key, / With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling" (1.1.16-17), followed by the woman's enigmatic open silence (see McGuire 1985), is often quoted to exemplify the duke's patriarchalism and interpreted as a metaphoric rape (Levine 1996, 210), but it can also be read as a hyperbolic statement followed by an ironic silence. The man actually won the woman, but only after being first

unhorsed and temporarily defeated by her and also after his friend Hercules interceded for him because he fell in love with her. To the detriment of Theseus's martial masculinity, this female success did not fall into oblivion but was recorded by "so many antentyke doctours" (de Pizan 2014, 83). The word "triumph", more than suggesting that "Theseus' defeat of Hippolyta in war lurks behind their new relationship" (Chaudhuri 2017, 277), seems to be used literally: it implies "another key", i.e. a different attitude, with respect to the un-triumphant victory he achieved.

This first scene, showing an anxious bridegroom and a much more indifferent bride, can imply as much irony as 4.1.111-17, when Theseus's boastful attitude is confronted by Hippolyta, who not only "talks with Theseus as an equal (possibly in a competitive spirit) on the traditionally masculine topic of hounds and hunting" (ibid., 67) but explicitly compares her (apparently not promising) present experience with him with a superb past experience of hers in male company (Hercules and Cadmus). Indeed, his pride is clearly wounded when Hippolyta mentions the musical harmony produced by the dogs using oxymorons that denote eroticism and he feels the need to defend the honour of his hounds (and his own) through a 9-line speech, commending how his dogs are "matched in mouth like bells" (4.1.122). This reading is also coherent with the characterization of the same legendary figures in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, where Hippolyta is credited by the Second Queen to be the one that was "near to make the male / To [her] sex captive" (1.1.80-81) and with "much more power on him [Theseus] / Than ever he had on [her]" (1.1.87-88)[19].

Regarding Pyramus and Thisbe, critics agree on the intricacy of Shakespeare's use of multiple sources. Considering them closely, Kenneth Muir suggests, "may help us to know a little more about Shakespeare's methods of work" (1954, 141). Among the texts mentioned as available to Shakespeare to give the Ovidian tale a new form for the stage, there are many versions by medieval and early modern writers (see Chaudhuri 2017, 60). Surprisingly, although not so much, Christine de Pizan is never mentioned. In her corpus, Pyramus is quickly named (together with Leander, Achilles and others) by the older knight in *The Debate of Two Lovers* (*Debat de deux amans*, 1400), a love

[19] All references to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* are to the revised Arden edition, ed. Lois Potter (Fletcher and Shakespeare 2015). This scene is attributed to Shakespeare.

debate poem dedicated to the Duke of Orléans, which discusses love casuistry just as Lysander and Hermia do in *Dream* 1.1.132-55, and as the play itself does more broadly. Pyramus is referred to when the knight, against the more optimistic ideas advocated by Christine and the younger squire, defends his point that love, which always entails woe, is a tricky emotion that often leads to foolishness and jealousy.

A more extended narrative of Pyramus and Thisbe by de Pizan can be found in two of her other works. Part 2 of *The City of Ladies* includes a chapter titled Thisbe, who is broached as an example of women's faithfulness in love, after Dido, who is praised for the same reason. The story contains all the iconic elements of other sources often mentioned in relation to Shakespeare's work: the wall, the mulberry tree, the lion and the moonlight[20]. Worthy of note is the dramatic monologue of Thisbe, who finds the crack in the wall immediately after begging it to be compassionate and crack, as if to imply a personification of the wall and a direct response to the woman's plea (in Shakespeare Bottom/Pyramus asks the wall to "[s]how [him its] chink, to blink through with [his] eyne", 5.1.175). In Chaucer, the lovers address the wall, but there is no hint of a reaction from it. In addition, de Pizan's text mentions Thisbe's mother as the one who locked the girl in her rooms, a character that is present in Shakespeare in the role of Robin Starveling (1.2.56). Although noteworthy as evidence of the participation of de Pizan in the medieval discourse around Thisbe, this version of the story and its connotations are very close to Chaucer's and are thus not particularly interesting for the purpose of this paper.

More remarkable is the application of the Pyramus and Thisbe story in *The Epistle of Othea*. The story is very similar to the version of the *City of Ladies*, but the context in which it is embedded is significantly different. In this book – a mirror for princes that achieved popularity in the late Middle Ages and was widely circulated in England as both a manuscript in French and in translation – each of the one hundred stories included are used to proffer instructions on knighthood for "a young man of fifteen" (Willard 1984, 94). The main narrative is told in prose in the "gloss", introduced by a four-line "text" (aabb) succinctly summarizing the didactic message meant to be conveyed and

[20] Differences with respect to Shakespeare's version of the same story are the spring as the meeting point instead of Ninus' tomb and the wimple instead of the mantle.

followed by a section called "allegory" (in prose), which further explains the moral of the story. In the case of Pyramus and Thisbe, the account focuses on Pyramus's experience. The man's misinterpretation of the wimple stained with blood prompts the author to exhort the reader in the text with "Trust nothing to be in certainté / Unto that the trouth well knowen be" (Scrope 2020, 73), and with the words of "the wise man" in the gloss: "Yelde thee not to thingis the which ben in doute, afore that thou have had dewe informacion" (ibid., 74). The allegory, instead, identifies Pyramus's mistake in his breaking of the fourth commandment[21]: "Wurschip fadir and modir", "Honora patrem tuum, et gemitus matris tue non obliviscaris" (ibid.)[22].

Both of these didactic objectives are coherent with *Dream*. Filial obligation is an issue in the play (see Hawkes 1992, 32) and the fact that Quince singles out Thisbe's mother and Pyramus's father as characters for his short interlude is quite meaningful in this regard. Since they are absent at the final performance, however, it is difficult to make a case for the role of the biblical commandment in Quince's script. Yet, it is interesting that, at the final performance, "the restrictive devices which keep the lovers apart", as Terence Hawkes states, "find themselves materially represented by a wall (played, curiously, by Snout, who was originally cast to play Pyramus's father) aided and abetted by a moon (played by Starveling, originally cast as Thisbe's mother)" (ibid., 29). It is also difficult to determine whether the biblical commandment was meant to be satirized or supported, because of the different finales in the quarto and Folio editions of *Dream*. Instead, it is easier to link Shakespeare's interlude with the teaching extrapolated from the story by de Pizan/Othea in the text and the allegory: things can be different from what they appear.

The complexity, multiplicity and confusion of identity is omnipresent throughout the play and undoubtedly a theme in the interlude of the mechanicals, which can be considered a comic, yet meaningful, *mise en abyme* of the main plot. In Stuart Millar's reading, there is in *Dream* "a comic and serious discussion of identities in the theatre […]" that reaches "its climax in the play

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[21] There are cautionary accounts for each of the Ten Commandments.

[22] References to *The Epistle of Othea* are to Misty Schieberle's edition (2020), with Stephen Scrope's translation, also available at https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/schieberle-scrope-epistle-othea (30/08/2023).

of the mechanicals" (2015, 176). They carefully plan to warn the audience about the difference between their performed and real identities, well aware of the potential risks of misunderstanding. Bottom asks Quince for a prologue explaining "that Pyramus is not killed indeed" (3.1.16-17) and adds: "[F]or the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear" (3.1.18-20). Similarly, Snout suggests the audience should be reminded by another prologue that the actor playing the lion "is not a lion" (3.1.32), and thinking this would not be enough, Bottom advises that the actor's personhood should be visually graspable behind the costume. Following the same principle, Snout as Wall tells the audience: "I, one Snout by name, present a Wall" (5.1.155); and Starveling as Moonshine explains that the "lanthorn doth the horned moon present" (5.1.234). Further suggestion that the interlude can be linked to Pizan's/Othea's admonition is Quince's caveat addressed to the audience: "Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show; / But wonder on, till truth make all things plain" (5.1.126-27).

Chaudhuri states that "the style and staging of Quince's play seem to exclude any serious treatment of love, let alone other historical, philosophical or mystical concerns" (2017, 57), but assuming that de Pizan's wise advice is implied in the production and reception of this comic interlude lends it meaning. It can be seen as a metatheatrical reference to the illusion of the stage but also a reminder of the perils of illusions in the real world, as the main play is. One of the most important themes of *Dream* is, indeed, that "things are not questioned enough, that complexities are glossed over by the play of fancy" (Chaudhuri 2017, 67). De Pizan's versions of Pyramus and Thisbe can thus be coherently considered part of what Sillars calls "the network of learned, serioludic reference" (2015, 171), which forms the texture of *Dream*.

4. Conclusion

The popularity and circulation of de Pizan's works in late medieval and early modern England cannot be disputed. Her texts offered female role models that helped support the recognition of women and the importance of female education, albeit in the restricted context of royal and aristocratic milieus. They also provided fundamental theories on just war and chivalry, while

at the same time redefining the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Most of all, she was read and appreciated for her wisdom narratives, which applied, as it were, old myths and legends within pragmatic contemporary contexts.

Although her name is rarely mentioned in intertextual studies of early modern literature, it seems safe to assume that her works were part of the horizon of expectations of both early modern writers and audiences. The representations she gives of Theseus and Hippolyta and Pyramus and Thisbe, as well as the applied significance she confers them for the reader's edification, can further illuminate the complexities of such references in *Dream* and in its enigmatic rudimental interlude. Further studies on de Pizan's voice in early modern texts by Shakespeare and others may provide useful data to determine her most influential texts and the types of interdiscursivity involved. What seems to be a voice lost in reception is definitely worth recovering in more detail.

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"But leaving *Shakespear*'s Works to their own Defence, and his Detractors to their Envy". Women's Early *Defence* of Shakespeare and their Role in the Rise of Shakespearean Criticism: the Case of Margaret Cavendish.

ABSTRACT:

Moving from the debates within women's and gender studies and Shakespeare studies, and in dialogue with the studies dedicated to the analysis of the relationship between the plays of Shakespeare and the writing of Margaret Cavendish, the essay investigates Cavendish's reading of Shakespeare's plays and its role within the rise of Shakespeare criticism at a time when Shakespeare's plays started to be adapted for the stage but only few people encountered them as texts. The aim is to show how Cavendish's reading of Shakespeare's plays not only focuses on aspects that would be at the core of Eighteenth-century Shakespeare criticism, but also on issues crucial for future feminist readings of Shakespeare which, since the 1980s, have been unpacking the plays of Shakespeare, exploring the representation of gender, class, race, sexuality, and their hold on women in Shakespeare's time and beyond.

KEYWORDS: gender, performance, reading, authorship, Margaret Cavendish.

1. Introduction

After the publication of the first anthology dedicated to women as readers of Shakespeare's plays by Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts (1997), the influence of women in the rise of Shakespeare criticism has become of great interest for women's and gender studies and Shakespeare studies, and their fruitful interconnection. Unlike the scientifically recognized 'male' criticism, expressed across time through those genres established within the academy such as essays, articles, and literary compendiums, the contribution of women has been heterogeneous from its very beginnings. Excluded from the domain of literary criticism, and from those emerging academic disciplines such as aesthetic, philosophy and history, women expressed their opinions on and interpretations of Shakespeare's plays in letters, prefaces, poems, and prologues.

Fiona Ritchie's studies of women's responses to Shakespeare also confirms that a crucial element within this process was the role of female playgoers and actresses who, with the reopening of the theatres in 1660, could for the first time interpret Shakespearean female characters, thus giving them new emphasis and power. Indeed, "adapters recognised this and worked to enhance the possibilities for the Shakespearean actress by increasing the relatively small number of female characters in Shakespeare's plays and by expanding existing female roles in the canon" (Ritchie 2014, 9). In so doing, they authorized women to occupy a prominent place in the theatre of the time, implicitly contributing to the first interpretations of Shakespeare's plays and characters on stage. The introduction of actresses played an important role in the rise of a new sensibility thanks to their ability, unlike those of boy-actors hitherto employed to perform female roles, to affect "the drama of the period profoundly. Love and marriage and adultery could be enacted with a frankness and realism impossible in a theatre where all performers were male" (Pearson 1988, 26). This new 'realism' possibly influenced the criticism of Shakespeare's plays in the first articles dedicated to Shakespeare that were published in the emergent journals and essays of the Augustan age, when the "performance had a far greater impact" also on the formation of the English taste than the

nascent and still unstable criticism itself which appeared in prefaces, introductions, or proper essays (Dugas 2006, 2).

Moving from these studies, and in dialogue with one of the very first volumes entirely dedicated to the analysis of the relationship between the plays of Shakespeare and the writing of Margaret Cavendish edited by Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice in 2006, I will interrogate Cavendish's reading of Shakespeare's plays and its role within the rise of Shakespeare criticism at a time when Shakespeare was not only read by women as "a prominent part of 'Love's Library'" (Scheil 2000, 116) but when his plays started to be put on stage in various and new adaptations. Cavendish was one of those female readers who became acquainted with Shakespeare's work more in print rather than on stage, contributing through the heterogeneous literary production that she outrageously published under her own name to the development of Shakespeare criticism in print. Far from considering Shakespeare's texts as "the favorite reading of amorous girls of the mid-seventeenth century" (Wright 1931, 674), as it was for many aristocratic women who mainly read Shakespeare's poems[1], Cavendish was one of the first female readers who focused on Shakespeare's plays and on some of their aspects that would be at the core of eighteenth century Shakespeare criticism. Her reading also anticipates issues that would be developed by future feminist readings of Shakespeare which, since the 1980s, have been unpacking his plays, exploring issues concerning the representation and performance of gender, class, race, sexuality, and their hold on women in Shakespeare's time and beyond[2]. Moreover, unlike many of her contemporaries who were becoming familiar

[1] In one of the very first articles on the reading of English women during the seventeenth century, Louis B. Wright draws from John Johnson's allegorical description in *The Academy of Loue describing ye folly of younge men, & ye fallacy of women* (1641), to show that Shakespeare's texts were mainly read as a sentimental reading (1931, 671-88). Shasa Roberts has demonstrated that the most popular Shakespeare texts read by women were his poems, in particular *Venus and Adonis*, which was not only "Shakespeare's best-selling work during his life time, running to an astonishing ten editions by 1617", but also saw "a further five reprints by 1636" (Roberts 2003, 2). On the reading habits of early modern women, see also Katherine West Scheil (2000, 116-17).

[2] On this specific aspect, apart from some pathbreaking works such as Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, originally published in 1975, and Lisa Jardine's *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (1983), of particular significance are Dympna Callaghan's, *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* (2000) and Phyllis Rackin's *Shakespeare and Women* (2005).

with Shakespeare's plays by mainly watching their adaptations on stage, Cavendish encountered them on the page through what could be today defined as their textual version[3]. In other words, she read plays that were neither amended to be accepted by the emergent neoclassical taste, nor performed by actors or actresses and thus inevitably interpreted according to the fashions of the Restoration stage.

2. Margaret Cavendish's access to Shakespeare's work

Considered by many of her peers a ridiculous lady whose writing reflected her eccentricity and madness, Cavendish came under attack from many quarters. Samuel Pepys, in defining Cavendish's biography of her husband William, declared in his diary that the text "shows her to be a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman and he an ass to suffer her to write what she writes of him and for him" (2000, 123 [18 March 1668]).[4] Nowadays, however, Cavendish is being reassessed and unanimously seen as a proto-feminist eclectic writer and, although her plays were not performed in the theatre, one of the very first female dramatists (see Williams 1988, 94-107). She is considered one of the first advocates of women's literary empowerment and cultural agency, overtly denouncing, despite her conservative and royalist beliefs[5], those false prejudices which, in the name of a natural and unchangeable superiority of men, had relegated women to an inferior position, excluding them from a proper

[3] Although nowadays critics agree with the idea of the multiplicity of the Shakespearean text, the publication of the First Folio meant that a literate and wealthy audience could read Shakespeare in what, at the time, were seen as authoritative texts. Therefore, as Stephen Orgel reminds us, it was with the reopening of the theatres in 1660 that "the revised versions, 'as presently performed,' were published and could be compared with the plays in the folio, and critics from Dryden's time on observed, with varying degrees of regret, that the revisions weren't the same as the originals" (Orgel 1988, 12).

[4] Some years before, in one of her letters, Dorothy Osborne had written: "Sure the poore woman is a little distracted, she could never be soe ridiculous else to venture at writeing book's and in verse too" ([1652-54] 1903, 83, Letter 18).

[5] Particularly thought-provoking in this respect is Katherine M. Romack's essay on Cavendish as Shakespeare critic. According to Romack, even Cavendish's approach to Shakespeare reflects her privileges as an aristocratic woman since she "neutralized the problems for Royalism […] by attributing to Shakespeare an androgynous, abstracted, and decommercialized wit, a wit to which the aristocratic woman of quality could lay claim. Cavendish thus 'purifies' Shakespeare" (2016, 45).

education, from the opportunities offered to men, and from the possibility of being recognized as subjects and especially as writers and literary critics. Regardless of her rank, which made her a privileged woman in comparison to other women of her time, she "was both a royalist and a feminist who raised some of the most profound questions about the intersection of women's place in government, the common law, marriage, and motherhood during the 1600s" (Smith 1998, 2).

Cavendish's access to Shakespeare's "authoritative texts" (Orgel 1988, 5) would probably not have been possible had she not been Maid of Honour to queen Henrietta Maria and the wife of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, a celebrated general in the army of Charles I, tutor of Charles II, patron of letters of important Jacobean and Caroline playwrights, and himself an "amateur professional playwright" (Steggle 2020, 88). Although it is difficult to verify whether she possessed her own copy of Shakespeare's Folio, it is highly likely that she had access to her husband's Folio, whose possession seems to be confirmed by one of his plays, *The Country Captain*, written and performed between 1638 and 1642. In this play, not only is there a reference to Shakespeare's characterization of soldiers in his chronicle plays and to *Henry V*, but there is also an overt reference to Shakespeare's work, thus to the concrete volume, which is not only evoked by a character but is also literally, and thus visibly, brought on stage as a prop (see Pasupathi 2006, 129).

Margaret Cavendish's knowledge of Shakespeare's plays is instead confirmed by the prefaces and prologues she wrote to her own plays in which the name of Shakespeare gives shape to several meanings and undertakes different functions. It is also demonstrated in her defence of Shakespeare in her *Sociable Letters* (1664) and by the content of most of her plays, which literally 'play' with the practice of cross-dressing – vital in the Shakespearean comedies – and re-elaborate Shakespeare's characters and dramatic situations to experiment with gender roles and give voice to her proto-feminist views.

Cavendish evidently became familiar with Shakespeare's plays by reading the First Folio of 1623, since her view of Shakespeare is initially influenced by Heminge and Condell's epistle to the variety of readers and Jonson's poem dedicated to Shakespeare, which are both included in the Folio edition. As we know, the introductory pages of the Shakespeare Folio are not only concerned

with establishing Shakespeare as the "happie imitator of nature", as Heminge and Condell define him, who "was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together. […] Reade him therefore, and againe and againe and if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger not to understand him" (qtd. in Wells and Taylor 1994, xlv), or as a poet whom "Nature herself was proud of his designs and joined to wear the dressing of his lines" as Ben Jonson declares (ibid., xlvi), but also with setting him in opposition to Jonson, who was crowned as poet laureate by his own Folio of 1616. This image of Shakespeare, and in general of the Renaissance theatrical canon inherited from the Restoration, is, as Dobson reminds us, further enhanced by Sir John Denham's dedicatory poem in the Folio edition of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Comedies and Tragedies* published in 1647, in which he speaks of a Triumvirate of English dramatic poets, where Jonson stands for Art, Shakespeare represents Nature, and the university-educated Fletcher embodies Wit (see Dobson 1994, 29-30).

In her "General Prologue to all my Playes" (1662), Cavendish recommends her readers not to expect a work of the quality of the great Renaissance poets: "But Noble Readers, do not think my Playes Are such as have been writ in former dais; / As Johnson, Shakespear, Beaumont, Fletcher writ; / Mine want their Learning, Reading, Language, Wit". She also outlines the difference between her plays and those of Jonson "who could conceive, or judge what's right, what's wrong" (Appendix A in Shaver 1999, 265) and then recalls the image of Shakespeare as the imitator of nature. According to Cavendish, Shakespeare "had a fluent wit although less learning" than Jonson, and "that notwithstanding, he full well writ, for all his playes were writ by Natures light, which gives his readers, and Spectator sight." (ibid., 265). The undergraduate Shakespeare is therefore evoked not as a master of learning but on account of his unique ability to imitate a personified nature that is "proud", as also Jonson wrote in his celebration of Shakespeare, "to wear the dressing of Shakespeare's lines" (qtd. in Wells and Taylor 1994, xlvi). This is a definition that has also been reinforced through its continuous recurrence in prefaces – also in the new editions of the Folio of 1632 and 1664 that Cavendish was perfectly familiar with – and in letters published throughout the whole Commonwealth (see Miller 2006, 7-29). Yet, unlike the previous comments on the originality of

Shakespeare, Cavendish, who like Shakespeare lacked a university education, praises Shakespeare's talent also to justify the publication of her own plays which, like most of her literary productions, do not respond to any form or rule. Many of Cavendish's works, from her plays to her romances, scientific and philosophical observations, and utopian writing are in fact introduced by apologetic and self-justifying prefaces, in which Cavendish humbly, but artfully, explains her rejections of form and accepted rules.

"There are many Scholastical and Pedantical persons that will condemn my writings, because I do not keep strictly to the Masculine and Feminine Genders, as they call them. [...] If any dislike my writings for want of those Rules, Forms, and Terms, let them not read them", she wrote in her preface to the 1662 edition of her *Playes*, in which she declared herself unlearned and undisciplined, as well as not interested in restricted gender forms (Appendix A in Shaver 1999, 259).

Her praise of Shakespeare's talent is thus a way to claim a sort of authorship that, until then, had been recognised only to poet laureates and, exceptionally, to Shakespeare. At the end of her prologue, Cavendish creates an analogy between herself and the dramatist, showing how it is Nature rather than education which makes her a dramatist who, despite her being a woman excluded, due to her sex, from university education and any form of cultural authorship, feels free and justified to attempt the pen: "Just so, I hope, the works that I have writ, / which are the building of my natural wit; / My own Inheritance, as Natures child" (ibid., 266). Cavendish is placing herself in relationship to well-established male writers and uses the cultural discussion around Jonson and Shakespeare to outline a debate (see Miller 2016, 7-29) on her own aesthetic as writer and dramatist that she compares with that of Shakespeare. Like her, Shakespeare owns a natural wit and is a "Natures child", able to generate plays by following a natural, and not artificial or acquired, wit. If it is true, as Shanon Miller has demonstrated, that wit is seen by Cavendish in natural terms, I argue that it might also be possible that wit, for Cavendish, is 'ungendered'. Like the soul or the mind, as other women writers of the second

half of the seventeenth century were trying to demonstrate, also wit, a distinctive male quality, seems, for Cavendish, to have no sex[6].

In this respect, it is significant that in the "Introduction" to her plays she challengingly dramatizes the difficulties faced by women writers, inventing a dialogue between three gentlemen who, talking about a play written by a Lady, expound the idea that women hardly write good plays because, being women, they cannot naturally pretend to possess wit:

> 3. Gentleman: Why may not a Lady write a good Play?
> 2. Gentleman: No for a womans wit is too weak and too conceited to write a Play.
> 1. Gentleman: But if a woman hath wit, or can write a good Play, what will you say then.
> 2. Gentleman: Why I say nobody will believe it, for if it be good, they will think she did not write it, or at least say she did not, besides the very being a woman condemns it, were it never so excellent and rare for men will not allow women to have wit, or we men to have reason, for if we allow them wit, we shall lose our prehemency. (Appendix B in Shaver 1999, 270)

It is evident that Cavendish is also one of the first among the emergent female authors to use Shakespeare's plays as a tool for cultural empowerment, seeing the dramatist as a precedent or an example they could refer to. The belief that Shakespeare had very little knowledge of rules, allowed female writers, who were usually thought less learned than their male peers, to claim an affinity with Shakespeare and to enter the realm of public theatre. Aphra Behn, for example, in the preface to her *Dutch Lover* (1673), famously justifies her profession as a dramatist by declaring: "We all well know that the immortal Shakespeare's Plays (who was not guilty of much more of this than often falls to women's share) have better pleas'd the World than Jonson's works" (2016, 162).

But Cavendish's praise of Shakespeare is not only employed for her cultural empowerment and authorship in an age in which women are silenced due to

[6] Emblematic, in this specific respect, is what Anna Wooley declared in her *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1675) about the existence of a sexless mind: "Certainly Mans Soul cannot boast of a more sublime Original than ours; they had equally their efflux from the same eternal Immensity, and therefore capable of the same improvement by good Education. Vain man is apt to think we were merely intended for the Worlds propagation, and to keep its humane inhabitants sweet and clean" (qtd. in D'Amore and Lardy 2012, 100).

their sex or are easily forgotten due to social and legal mores, as emerges from an epistle that appears just before her autobiography written in 1656 in which she explains that she wrote it "for the sake of after ages, which I hope will be more just to me than the present" (1903, 155). Her praise is rather one of the first attempts to understand Shakespeare's work critically by examining its textual corpus and focusing on the potential of the plays that she encountered as text. It is an attempt to produce what would be later defined as literary criticism in which the critic explores and is confronted with a text, the play-text, that is written but not yet performed. Cavendish therefore tries to explain what the image of Shakespeare as a 'happie imitator of nature' – which she read in the Folio, repeated in her prologue, and used to explain her own aesthetic – not only implied but could mean for those women writers, like herself, who were experimenting with different forms of writing[7]. The description of Shakespeare that emerges from Cavendish's preface in fact suggests how she read the Shakespearean plays also to contemplate new possibilities for women writers willing to participate in the creation of culture, investigate different aspects of human nature and experiment, as a writer and a dramatist herself, with different gender roles so far denied to women[8].

In general, as Marta Straznicky argues, "whenever Cavendish comments on drama, she is far more likely to do it in terms of reading rather than playgoing" (1995 note 98, 389) confirming, once again, that Cavendish's interpretation of

[7] Cavendish was a prolific writer who explored many of the available genres of the seventeenth century – poetry, romance, drama, utopia and scientific treatise – to examine issues concerning gender, nature, culture, education and authorship.

[8] In this respect, if it is true that Cavendish, like other women writers of the Restoration who followed her, looked at Shakespeare without the aim of reading his texts in a political way, thus contributing to a process of "depoliticization of culture" (Romack 2016, 57), it is also true that the writer Cavendish was not only well aware of the advantages linked to her class position, but also that women at the time were not considered political subjects. In Letter 16 of her *Sociable Letters*, she overtly declares that "As for the matter of Governments, we Women understand them not; yet if we did, we are excluded from intermedling therewith, and almost from being subject thereto; we are not tied, nor bound to State or Crown; we are free, not Sworn to Allegiance, nor do we take the Oath of Supremacy; we are not made Citizens of the Commonwealth, we hold no Offices, nor bear we any Authority therein; we are accounted neither Useful in Peace, nor Serviceable in War; and if we be not Citizens in the Commonwealth, I know no reason we should be Subjects to the Commonwealth; And the truth is, we are no Subjects unless it be to our Husbands" (1997-2012 [1664], 25).

Shakespeare is also a way to legitimate her consideration of the 'play-text' and of her own plays which were written first of all for publication, rather than for a performance in a public theatre. They were in fact published for a delight (see Tomlinson 1992, 136) that Cavendish, as dramatist, spectator, reader and actor of the theatre of her mind, could feel for herself and produce not for a spectator but for a reader of a (her) textual corpus. In the dedication to the first book of her plays (1662) she explains that they were written for:

> My own Delight, for I did take
> Much pleasure and delight these Plays to make;
> For all the time my Plays a making were,
> My Brain the Stage, my thoughts were acting there.
> (Appendix A in Shaver 1999, 252)

It is also telling that Cavendish invariably speaks about her experience of Shakespeare's plays and his greatness and exceptional wit, primarily in terms of reading. As Stranznicky once again remarks in focusing on Cavendish's *Sociable Letters*, Cavendish refers four times to reading and only once to performance in her Letter 123, which contains a long critical passage on the peculiarity of Shakespeare's plays (1995, 389). Indeed, Cavendish measures Shakespeare's genius by the way his texts are able to reproduce within the mind of the reader, and thus within her own mind as reader and critic, the experiences described in the plays:

> in his Tragick Vein, he Presents Passions so Naturally, and Misfortunes so Probably, as he Pierces the souls of his Readers with such a true sense and Feeling thereof, that it Forces Tears through their Eyes, and almost Perswades them, they are Really Actors, or at least Present at those Tragedies." (Cavendish 2012, 130-31)

The famous Letter 123 that starts as a defence of Shakespeare's characters against a neoclassical detractor who has had the "Conscience, or Confidence to Dispraise Shakespeare's Playes", accusing them of being only "made up with Clowns, Fools, Watchmen and the like" (ibid., 130), then turns into a significant example of what could be defined as a first model of critical analysis in which Shakespeare's advocacy is convincingly argued through a close-reading and a textual criticism of his way of producing plays and characters independently from their interpretation by the actors on stage.

Although Shakespeare's wit might be able to answer for itself, since it is the ignorance of the reader and not of Shakespeare that makes his plays deplorable, as Heminge and Condell had already declared in their Preface to the First Folio, Cavendish goes further and demonstrates that Shakespeare's written language is able to "properly, rightly, usually, naturally" depict low characters, "a Fool's or Clown's Humour, Expression, Manners" and in general "their Course of life". This ability is, for Cavendish, just as good as that of portraying the "Words and course of life of Kings and Princes" (ibid.). Cavendish focuses on Shakespeare's original capacity to substitute empty characters with credible and authentic persons, "to express naturally, to the life, a mean country Wench as a Great Lady; a Courtesan, as a Chast woman; a Mad man, as a man in his right Reason and Senses" (ibid.). She also adds that it is even more difficult to grasp and depict irregular and non-static characters, such as those portrayed by the wit of Shakespeare, since it is more challenging and complex "to express Nonsense than Sense, and that tis harder and requires more wit to express a Jester, than a Grave Statesman" (ibid.). It is hard to deny that in these lines, in which a general overview of Shakespeare's characters is accurately outlined, Cavendish elects Shakespeare as the true painter of the variety of human beings able, as she herself argues, "to Express to The Life all Sorts of Persons, of what Quality, Profession, degree. Breeding, or Birth soever" (ibid.). For Cavendish, the definition of Shakespeare as a "happie imitator of nature" also implies his ability to convey "the Divers, and different Humours, or natures, or several Passions in Mankind" (ibid.), generating, like nature itself, true human beings with true and mutable human passions.

Cavendish's praise also foresees what would be at the core of Shakespeare criticism in the second half of the eighteenth century when critics would ignore the neoclassical problem of what and how Shakespeare should have written – and the attempt to correct his plays for the stage according to neoclassical taste – and turn instead to what Shakespeare actually did write, thus to a real analysis of the language of Shakespeare's characters, seeing in their original creation Shakespeare's greatest genius and innovation. "To pay a regard", as John Upton would write in his *Critical Observations of Shakespeare* (1748) "to what Shakespeare does write", rather than "guessing at what he should write" (1748, 8).

I also argue that Cavendish's reading of Shakespeare is even more important since with her focus on the passions explored by Shakespeare through the characterization of his diverse characters[9], she anticipates that kind of criticism which would represent a great innovation within the trend of Shakespeare criticism that emerged between the first and the second half of the eighteenth century when Shakespeare, like other ancient poets and writers, started to be considered a great classic and to be included in the nascent English literary canon (see Ross 1998; Kramnick 1998).

It is in fact from the second half of the eighteenth century that literary critics would see and theorize how the new individuals created by Shakespeare were the most successful representation of the complexity and mutability of the human subject, using his multifaceted characters and their passions to define the many-sided aspects of human nature and its feelings[10]. And it is again from the second half of the eighteenth century that these same critics, as Kramnick points out, would also secure literary criticism, and I would add, Shakespeare criticism as well, to "a restricted group of male experts and professionals" from where women readers (and possible critics) of the past, of their age, and of the future had to be duly excluded (1998, 102). In this respect, I believe that Cavendish's original focus on Shakespeare's characters is also a clear example of how the gender of the reader/critic has always underpinned the mechanisms of inclusion in and exclusion from a broader vision of the history of literature and critical thought which, as gender and women's studies remind us, and as the until now almost neglected role of Cavendish and of women as literary critics seems to confirm, have never been neutral.

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[9] With reference to the importance of Shakespeare's characters within the development of Shakespearean criticism, Vickers reminds us that a significant turning point occurred during the second half of the eighteenth century since "What is new in the last quarter of the eighteenth century […] is that essays and whole books are devoted to individual characters, and those alone" (1989, 197).

[10] They elected him as the true inventor "of the human", to borrow a definition by Harold Bloom in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998).

3. Shakespeare's protean nature and the power of metamorphosis

Although Cavendish's criticism clearly refers to reading Shakespeare rather than to watching his plays, I believe that in her analysis she also confirms her ability to handle the dramatic structure, to be perfectly confident with the potential of the performance and to own a deep dramatic imagination, recognizing the performable nature of Shakespeare's play-texts. In her praise, she in fact imagines a dramatist able not only to describe, but also to perform each one of those persons he portrays "as one would think he had been transformed into every one of those persons he hath described" (Cavendish 2012, 130). And this not only regards male characters but also female, offering a microcosmic mirror for Nature's "fluid unity", as Brandie Siegfried reminds us (2006, 64), and of its perpetual transformative and generative power that a protean figure like Shakespeare is able to express. "One would think" Cavendish states in her Letter 123, "that he had been Metamorphosed from a man to a woman, for who could Describe Cleopatra Better than he hath done, and many other Females of his own Creating, as Nan Page, Mrs. Page, Mrs. Ford, the Doctors Maid, Bettrice, Mrs. Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, and others, too many to Relate?" (Cavendish 2012, 130).

Cavendish certainly read Shakespeare through the idea of self-fashioning, which pervaded not only the Elizabethan culture, but was still at the very core of the Stuart court culture of which she was both a user and an agent, as well as a promoter. "The idea of staging or recreating oneself through performance," Rebecca D'Monte reminds us, "was one that was endemic to seventeenth-century culture" (2003, 109). Indeed, if it is undeniably true that Cavendish was deeply familiar with the potential of the performance having been Maid of Honour to Queen Henrietta Maria and taking part in courtly performances or masques (see Peacock 2003, 89) that allowed the Queen to adopt various identities and personae, it could also be said that Cavendish herself, as a writer and a woman of court, recognized how the writing of plays implied the use of the performance as an unpredictable strategy which could allow her not only to imagine but also to experiment with different identities and gender roles. In this respect, it is notable that she does not seem

particularly interested in Shakespeare's poems but instead focuses on his plays and on his capacity to create reliable characters traversing each social level, from the lowest to the highest classes.

The great novelty of Cavendish's observations on Shakespeare's protean nature, on his being both a dramatist and an actor, as Thomson and Roberts (1997) and Ritchie (2014) have shown, lies in having recognized Shakespeare's ability to understand the variety of the nature of men and, for the first time, that of women. It also lies, I would add, in having recognized how through his plays the dramatist and actor Shakespeare managed to express the fluidity of human nature itself, and to show what would be defined today as the mutability or instability of human identity. Cavendish, who mostly read Shakespeare's plays rather than watching them, saw Shakespeare as a writer able to simulate the performance in the mind of the reader, as well as a dramatist exploiting the potential of a play-text that is performable and thus completes its meaning once it is interpreted on stage. This was a potential that Cavendish, as a writer and a woman, but also as a critic who wanted to compete with the men of letters of her time, was exploring to elaborate strategies and models which could better unveil the false preconceptions that for centuries had relegated women to a lower position due to their allegedly weak and inferior nature. Emblematic in this respect, I suggest, is the use of the verb to 'metamorphose', which is employed to highlight Shakespeare's ability to be and to shape different male and female identities, spanning from high to low characters, from Cleopatra to Nan Page or from a clown to the great Henry V.

Undoubtedly used as a homage to Ovid, a poet whom Cavendish passionately loved alongside Virgil and Shakespeare, as emerges from Letter 162[11], the verb to 'metamorphose'[12] is also employed to create a link between

[11] In her Letter 162 Cavendish declares "Madam, Remember, when we were very young Maids, one day we were Discoursing about Lovers, and we did injoyn each other to Confess who Profess'd to Love us, and whom we Loved, and I Confess'd I only was in Love with three Dead men, which were Dead long before my time, the one was Caesar, for his Valour, the second Ovid, for his Wit, and the third was our Countryman Shakespeare […]" (173).

[12] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* this verb which appears also as 'metamorphise', appeared in the English language during the second half of the sixteenth century as a borrowing from the French 'métamorphoser', and it generally meant "to change in form; to turn to or into something else by enchantment or other supernatural means" (1989, 674). It is interesting to see the way in which Shakespeare employed the verb in his *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* since it

the power of metamorphosis – the action or process of changing in form, shape or substance – and that of the performance which is based on artifices that allow actors to be transformed into someone else, to change shape, a device that dramatists often exploit to depict situations, characters and even events they want to be believed as real. Indeed, Cavendish depicts Shakespeare not only as a poet of nature, but also as an actor in his ability to perform his own characters and thus to metamorphose from a man into a woman, revealing the performative nature of gender which the stage is able to make evident[13]. Masculinity, femininity, class, race, body size and even sexuality are traits that actors – also boy-actors during the time of Shakespeare and now, for the first time, women – were expected to perform, making aspects of his or her character visible and credible. Aspects, as Cavendish would demonstrate through her own plays, that are the result of a metamorphosis, of a performance that makes them appear as if they were natural.

In this respect, if it is true that Cavendish's proto-feminist works explore various categories of women[14], it is also true that she never exactly explains what a woman is, giving us a single and unambiguous definition. Instead, she sets the content of the concept in continuous motion as if wanting to resist the static nature imposed on women by patriarchal rule. Indeed, it is interesting to note how much Cavendish was fascinated by the liquid-like adaptability of the new female actor, who regardless of their sex, could successfully perform the masculine or feminine parts with equal success. In Letter 195 she declares how greatly she was impressed by an actress she saw in a play performed in Antwerp, who "acted a Man's Part so Naturally as if she had been of that Sex,

appears when Speed accuses Valentine of having been transformed into a woman due to his lack of those aspects which would make him a Master and a man: "And you are metamorphise'd with a Mistris, that when I look on you, I can hardly think you my Master" (2.1.28-30).

[13] Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell remind us that crucial to the "multivocality that characterized the English Renaissance theatre was its pervasive fascination with gender, a category of signification which, through the stage conventions of cross-dressing and the deployment of boy-actors to play women's parts, was represented as protean and ambiguous" (1999, 1).

[14] In Cavendish's works, from her romances to her *Plays Never Before Printed* or *Female Orations*, we find the representation of different kinds of women: orators, travelers, warriors, daughters, devoted and unfaithful wives, and even empresses. These women question the burden of custom and their own nature as women without however focusing on a clear definition of what a woman really is, without trying to define their sex.

and yet she was of a Neat, Slender Shape; but being in her Dublet and Breeches, and a Sword hanging by her side, one would have believed she had never worn a petticoat, and had been more used to Handle a Sword than a Distaff; and when she Danced in a Masculine Habit, she would Caper Higher, and Oftener than any of the Men" (Cavendish 2012, 206).

Further confirmation that Cavendish read the plays of Shakespeare critically comes, in my opinion, from the composition of her own works. Rhetorically constructed as a public performance, but written, as she declared, to be read, Cavendish's plays present deep analogies with Shakespearean comedies, which, as we know, deal with marriage and misogyny, and rely on misunderstanding, deception, and mainly cross-dressing. Having recognised the way in which the dramatist and actor Shakespeare exploits the potential of the performance to depict the mutability of gender, Cavendish read and re-elaborated his plays both to experiment with forms of female emancipation, and as a paradigm to express her own conception of the fluidity and mutability of human identity, both male and female, and the performative nature of gender. In *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), in a retreat similar to that of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, where the king of Navarra had decided to spend three years separated from material temptations amongst which women clearly play a crucial role, a group of rich virgins convinced by Lady Happy decide to withdraw from the public world by literally "encloistering" themselves in a convent, which is conceived as "a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them" (Cavendish 1999, 220). Here, women experiment with different forms of pleasure and spend their time performing theatricals in which, disguised in different male and female roles, condemn the real dangers of marriage for women. This choice is not only a form of resistance to a patriarchal ideology whereby women were considered "married or to be married and their desires are subject to their husband", as emerges from the anonymous *The Law's Resolution of Women's Right* (1632), one of the first legal books concerning women's rights published in England (qtd. in Aughterson 1995, 155). It also reveals a conception of a female desire which is no longer exclusively linked to women's role as wife and mother, and is for the very first time overtly based on the fulfillment of the senses and on the reappropriation of the female body. Another emblematic example is *Loves Adventures* (1662),

which like Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* focuses on the cross-dressing of the female protagonist and her final marriage to the master she serves in male disguise. Unlike the Shakespearean heroine Viola, whose disguise is motivated by self-protection, Cavendish's heroine, Lady Orphant, chooses to disguise herself as a boy to pursue her love for Lord Singularity but also and mainly (and once again unlike Shakespeare's Viola) to show herself as an independent woman, able, like men, to fight, to strategically think, to be wise, and to be equal to men, thus to show how much gender inequality is the product of custom.

Fully aware that her work and her plays would not have been understood and appreciated by the "envious" and "malicious" readers of her time, as is clearly confirmed in the Epistle to the readers contained in her second collection of plays, *Plays Never Before Printed* published in 1668, in which she declares that "I regard not so much the present as the future Ages, for which I intend all my Books" (Appendix D in Shaver 1999, 273), Cavendish imagines that in the future wiser and more generous readers, those for whom she probably wrote, would understand her plays and find them interesting. Indeed, it is hard to deny that today wiser and more generous readers recognize that Cavendish's writing and ideas do not only prove her pioneering role within the development of a female genealogy of writers and dramatists, but also her function as a literary (Shakespearean) critic. Her observations on Shakespeare's characters, on his ability to metamorphose into men and women, together with her re-elaborations of Shakespeare's comedies and appropriation of his use of cross-dressing, anticipate the eighteenth century interpretation of Shakespeare's greatest originality and also seem to indicate, some three centuries earlier, what a gender and feminist approach to Shakespeare would later look for and disclose in its re-reading of his plays: the social construction of class, desire, masculinity and femininity, the social construction of gender.

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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 plays[1]. 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 appropriations[2] 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

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[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

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[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 Julienne 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 Kinsley-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 Levenglisk 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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Afterword: Subjectivity v. Objectification

In view of the US Supreme Court's Dobbs decision overturning Roe v. Wade, it is difficult to understand how anyone, inside or outside academia, could claim that we in the twenty-first century exist in a post-feminist world. Indeed, is it possible to think about the rape and silencing of Lavinia in Shakespeare's dramatic text, *Titus Andronicus* – without simultaneously thinking about the rape and silencing of the ten-year-old Ohio female who sought an abortion in post-Roe US? Conversely, is it possible to think about the rape and silencing of the ten-year-old Ohio female who sought an abortion in post-Roe US – without simultaneously thinking about the rape and silencing of Lavinia in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*? When we undertake to study issues of women's violation and silence in Shakespeare's texts, we cannot help but be influenced by the many instances of women's violation and silence in historical and contemporary societies around the globe. Present history has the effect of galvanizing our consideration of fictionalized texts. There are two things that women are silent about: "their pleasure and their violation", as Barbara Johnson puts it. "The work performed by the idealization of this silence is that *it helps culture not to be able to tell the difference between the two*"(1996, 136 emphasis hers).

Theoretical and critical work remains to be done in differentiating women's pleasure from women's violation.

"To be a subject is to be able to speak, to give meaning", as Catherine Belsey points out (1985, x). Dramatic instances of female voices and silences in Shakespeare's texts are inextricably bound up in theoretical issues of female subjectivity and objectification. On the one hand, female characters' speech, action, and, thereby, their ability to construct meaning constitute their subjectivity. On the other hand, female characters' silence, passivity, and, thereby, other characters' ability to inscribe meaning upon them constitute their objectification. Both female subjectivity and female objectification in Shakespeare's texts are deserving of greater theoretical and critical attention in the twenty-first century.

When considering female silences on the part of Shakespeare's female characters, Isabella at the end of *Measure for Measure* and Hermione at the end of *The Winter's Tale* come to mind, as well as Lavinia. Lavinia's silence is – brutally – externally imposed upon her, while the silences of Isabella and Hermione are self-imposed (or seemingly self-imposed by Shakespeare). What are we to make of Isabella's silence in response to Vincentio's marriage command? Marcia Riefer is the first Shakespeare scholar to problematize the play's ending by raising this question (1984). What are we to make of Hermione's silence in response to her reunion with Leontes? Adrian Kiernander points out that idea of the happy reunion of Hermione and Leontes is nothing more than a heterosexual male fantasy of forgiveness (1997). The externally imposed and self-imposed silences have differentiated implications for female objectification and female subjectivity – and therefore for the construction of meaning, generally construed. To what extent does Shakespeare invite audience members and readers to participate in male characters' objectifications of female characters as silent, passive objects upon whom others (i.e. characters and critics alike) impose meaning? To what extent does Shakespeare invite audience members and readers to sympathize (even identify) with female characters as speaking, acting subjects who are granted the ability to construct meaning? Elsewhere, I have coined the term, *theatrical subjectivity*, to convey audience members' and readers' awareness of the gap, or disparity, between female subjectivity as enacted onstage, on the one hand, and

male characters' simultaneous objectification of female characters, on the other (1992). Desdemona is a good example of this phenomenon: the utter innocence of her every word and deed onstage stands in sharp contrast to the male lies about her guilt of marital infidelity – initially, on the part of Iago, and, finally, on the part of Othello.

It is surprising to learn that only five female protagonists in Shakespeare's texts speak more than 500 lines, as Jeanne Addison Roberts points out: Portia and Rosalind in the romantic comedies; Juliet (who speaks 509 lines) and Cleopatra (who speaks 622 lines) in the tragedies; and Imogen in the romances (2002, 201). When it comes to profoundly felt love eloquently expressed, both Juliet and Cleopatra come to mind. "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep: the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite" (2.2.133-35) Juliet declares to Romeo in the most famous of all love scenes in Western literature. Throughout the dramatic action of *Romeo and Juliet*, she resists Romeo's attempts to construct her as a silent, passive beloved object on a pedestal in accordance with the centuries-old Petrarchan discursive tradition. "There is nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting moon" (4.15.69-70) Cleopatra mourns as Antony dies in her lap. Throughout the dramatic action of *Antony and Cleopatra*, her "infinite variety" (2.2.246) inheres in her ability to defy delimiting Roman stereotypes that would construct her as an inferior colonized female in accordance with discourses that are simultaneously idealizing, denigrating, and orientalist.

Critical evaluations of Shakespeare's work have focused on the issue of female subjectivity since the seventeenth century. In the first critical essay published on Shakespeare, Margaret Cavendish celebrates what she calls the "realism" of Shakespeare's female characters. One would think, she observed, that Shakespeare had actually been transformed into every one of the characters he portrayed, even "that he had been Metamorphosed from a Man into a Woman". Cavendish singled out eight characters as examples of Shakespeare's superlative representations of women, including Cleopatra, Beatrice, Alice Ford, and Margaret Page (1664, 246).

Groundbreaking book-length feminist studies in the 1970s and 1980s opened up new meanings in Shakespeare's texts that had been silenced for nearly four centuries. The first feminist monograph, *Shakespeare and the Nature of*

Women by Juliet Dusinberre (1975), constructed Shakespeare as a proto-feminist and appropriated him as a political ally in the international women's movement of the time. "Shakespeare saw men and women as equal", she observes, "in a world which declared them unequal" (1975, 308). Others followed suit, emphasizing the autonomy, agency and power of Shakespeare's female characters, particularly in the romantic comedies. The histories and the tragedies, on the other hand, were viewed as bailiwicks of male characters. Monographs such as Linda Bamber's *Comic Women, Tragic Men* (1982) encapsulate this binary of gender and genre. The first collection of feminist essays, *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (1980), edited by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely, enunciated four goals: (1) to liberate female characters from the stereotypes to which traditional liberal humanist criticism had confined them; (2) to examine relationships between and among female characters; (3) to analyze the effects of patriarchy on female characters; and (4) to explore the implications of genre for Shakespeare's depiction of females (1980, 4).[1]

However, generalities about early modern Europe came under scrutiny. Historical research differentiated men's lived experience and women's lived experience: that which was true of males was not found to be true of females. 'No' was the answer to the question that historian Joan Kelly posed, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" (1984 [1977]). British feminist scholars such as Kathleen McLuskie offered a counter-argument to Dusinberre's proto-feminist Shakespeare: he was, instead, a "patriarchal bard". "Feminist criticism of this play [*Measure for Measure*] is restricted to exposing its own exclusion from the text", she notes.

[1] Following Dusinberre (1975), Lenz, Greene and Neely (1980) and Bamber, book-length studies of Shakespeare from a feminist standpoint include the following: Irene Dash (1981), Coppélia Kahn (1981, 1997), Lisa Jardine (1983), Marianne Novy (1984, 2017), Linda Woodbridge (1984), Carol Thomas Neely (1985), Dympna Callaghan (1989, 2000a, 2000b), Valerie Wayne (1991), Evelyn Gajowski (1992, 2009, 2015), Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (1994), Kim Hall (1995), Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps (1995), Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether (1996), Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin (1997), Naomi Liebler (2002), Joyce MacDonald (2002), Phyllis Rackin (2005, 2015), Kay Stanton (2014) and Ania Loomba and Melissa Sanchez (2016). This list is suggestive, rather than exhaustive.

> It has no point of entry into it, for the dilemmas of the narrative and the sexuality under discussion are constructed in completely male terms [...] and the women's role as the objects of exchange within that system of sexuality is not at issue, however much a feminist might want to draw attention to it. (1994 [1985], 97-98)

Regardless of the subversion that Shakespeare's female characters manage to pose to patriarchal imperatives, patriarchy inevitably contained that subversion. Although his intelligent, articulate, autonomous female characters possess agency, particularly in the romantic comedies, they inevitably end up disempowered, submitting to the institution of male supremacist marriage. Feminist criticism attempted to transcend the 'Shakespeare as proto-feminist' vs. 'Shakespeare as patriarchal bard' standoff by examining early modern English documents that gave rise to it. Under the influence of new historicism, feminism became preoccupied with the relationship between text and context, exploring the position of women in early modern English society as well as in literary texts.

Feminism took its place among cultural materialism, new historicism, and psychoanalysis as one of the dominant theoretical and critical approaches challenging traditional liberal humanism and interpreting Shakespeare afresh in a poststructural, postmodern theoretical and critical climate. By the 1990s, however, new historicism evolved into hegemony, as Hugh Grady points out, marginalizing other theoretical and critical approaches to analyzing Shakespeare's texts (1996, 4-5). Under the influence of historicism, it became unfashionable and naïve to celebrate the power and agency of Shakespeare's female characters and their subversion of patriarchal imperatives. It became fashionable, instead, to emphasize how any subversion, including female subversion, is inevitably contained by patriarchal power structures. Lena Cowan Orlin points out that contemporary new historicists used the phrase, "chaste, silent, and obedient", to describe the status of women in early modern English society. Yet, new historicists themselves cite the refrain more frequently than early modern English conduct books, marriage sermons, and household manuals did (2001). Building upon Cowan's work, Phyllis Rackin points out a curiosity in contemporary Shakespeare studies: scholars, including feminist scholars, give more theoretical and critical attention to Katherine's mistreatment

by Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* than, for example, Alice Ford's and Margaret Page's empowerment in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2000, 54).[2] Why is this the case?

Approaching the millennium, feminist studies began to focus on the intersectionality of gender and race, postcolonialism, nationality, sexual orientation and class. The collection of essays, *Women, 'Race', and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (1994), co-edited by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, and Kim Hall's monograph, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender* (1995), broke ground in this regard. Dympna Callaghan articulated the aims of her edited collection, *The Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*: "to demonstrate feminist visibility – even to the point of conspicuousness – *and* its integration into the broader field of Shakespeare studies by way of overlapping categories: the history of feminist Shakespeare criticism, text and language, social economies, sexuality, race and religion" (2000, xv).[3] More recently, in their co-edited collection of essays, *Rethinking Feminism in Early Modern Studies: Gender, Race, and Sexuality*, Ania Loomba and Melissa Sanchez focus on the relationship of feminism to scholarly work since the millennium on race, postcolonialism, affect, sexuality, transnationality and posthumanism that challenges earlier definitions of "women" and gender (2016). Marianne Novy's monograph, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory* (2017), for the Arden Shakespeare and Theory Series, provides a comprehensive survey of feminist theoretical and critical developments, analyzing female characters' embodiment of various social roles – lovers, wives, mothers, friends, allies and workers – in Shakespeare's texts. Early feminist Shakespeareans were concerned to emphasize the innocence of Shakespeare's female characters in opposition to male characters' lies about their sexual guilt, particularly in Shakespeare's texts that dramatize the issue of the true woman falsely accused, such as *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*. In recent years, however, a shift emerged to an

[2] In our co-edited collection of essays, *The Merry Wives of Windsor: New Critical Essays* (2015), Rackin and I attempt to correct this imbalance.

[3] See Rackin's contribution to the essay collection, *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare* (2009), edited by Evelyn Gajowski, for a fuller analysis of feminism vis-à-vis historicism, on the one hand, and feminism's relationship to contemporary political, social and economic developments in the US, on the other.

emphasis on female characters as sexual subjects rather than sexual objects. Critical studies such as Kay Stanton's monograph, *Shakespeare's 'Whores': Erotics, Politics, and Poetics* (2014), which includes chapter-length studies of Cleopatra, Rosalind, and Venus, perhaps best exemplifies this shift.

Because feminist critical practices are grounded in the political, economic and social forces of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, they have a particular responsibility to acknowledge these origins. Rackin is foremost among Shakespeare scholars in understanding this inherent responsibility:

> Our own experience of Shakespeare's women is conditioned not only by the accumulated tradition of Shakespeare scholarship and reception but also by the present history of the world in which we live: both of these histories help to shape our experience of the plays, whether we study them in an academic setting, see them on stage or screen, or read them in the privacy of our own rooms. (2005, 5-6)

Both of these histories – scholarly tradition and the twenty-first-century world in which we are enmeshed – are in need of feminist intervention.

Feminism's critique of new historicism's erasure of gender issues, especially the theoretical issue of female subjectivity, originates in the 1970s and 1980s. Lynda Boose condemns both new historicism and cultural materialism for their indifference to gender issues:

> When gender is not being simply ignored in the materialist critiques, it repeatedly ends up getting displaced into some other issue – usually race or class – and women are silently eradicated from the text, leaving only one gender for consideration. This kind of displacement and erasure [...] is, in effect, a modern day re-silencing taking place even as Renaissance strategies of silencing are being discussed" (1987, 728-29). She criticizes Stephen Greenblatt for his declaration that "on stage there is in fact but a single gender. (1986, 52)

"Suddenly, there is one gender and there are no more women in Shakespeare's plays", she notes (1987, 730). Carol Thomas Neely criticizes both new historicists and cultural materialists for erasing the female subject in early modern literature and society that feminists had laboriously brought to life: "The denial of subjectivity and identity are pleasurable", she notes, "especially to those who have had the luxury of indulging in and benefiting from them. But for feminist criticism, this decentering is a decapitation. If feminist criticism abandons the notion of the subject, replacing it with the much more

slippery concept of subject positions, [...] the ground for its critique is eliminated" (1988)[4]. Boose's and Neely's concerns with female subjectivity in the 1980s resonate with an even greater sense of urgency today.

Hugh Grady scrutinizes new historicist theories of the relationship between the subject and the power structures within which the subject is situated. He finds the theorizing of the subject as "monolithically determined by all-containing structures of ideology and power" to be an inescapable "straitjacket" (1996, 216-17). He instead envisages and theorizes the possibility of a less constricted subjectivity, one that is "an active agent", not merely "a passive effect". Grady, from a presentist standpoint, and Neely, from a feminist standpoint, both theorize similar kinds of subjectivity. Like her, he deems new historicism's deployment of Jonathan Dollimore's "consolidation/subversion/containment" paradigm (1994 [1985], 10-15) insufficient – particularly its privileging of power structures' containment of any possibility of subversion on the part of a subject. In theorizing a subjectivity that possesses a potentially critical rather than a merely complicit relation to early modern English power (1996, 14, 219), Grady theorizes a subjectivity that accommodates the concerns of feminist theorists and critics, allowing for the possibility of successful subversion and social change – in Shakespeare's texts as in twenty-first-century societies.

At the moment of this writing in 2023, transgender studies and asexuality studies are theoretical and critical developments at the forefront of feminist, gender, and sexuality studies. Transgender studies interrogate and challenge the socially-constructed gender binary – 'masculine'/'feminine' – as inadequate to convey the complexities of actual lived human experience. Alexa Alice Joubin's monograph, *Shakespeare and Transgender Theory*, forthcoming in the Arden Shakespeare and Theory Series, exemplifies these traits. Similarly, asexuality studies take into consideration human experience that transcends sexual desire – whether gay, lesbian, bi, trans, queer, homo, or hetero. Indeed, riffing on

[4] In addition to Boose and Neely, other Shakespeare scholars who critique new historicism from a feminist theoretical/critical standpoint include the following: Peter Erickson (1987), Marguerite Waller (1987), Carolyn Porter (1988 and 1991), Sarah Eaton (1991), Ann Thompson (1991), Valerie Wayne (1991a), Evelyn Gajowski (1992, 2009), Lisa Jardine (1996), and Phyllis Rackin (2000, 2005, 2009).

Adrienne Rich's groundbreaking article, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1986), asexual studies interrogate and challenge what it calls "compulsory sexuality". Simone Chess is notable for spearheading work in this area.

Feminist theory and criticism continue to build upon the fresh insights gained from intersectional, global studies of women, GLBTQ+ people, non-white people and indigenous people that inhabit the twenty-first century world, as they inhabit Shakespeare's texts.[5] Indeed, in view of a conservative backlash in societies around the globe, a sense of urgency pervades current feminist criticism as it continues to interrogate, challenge and deconstruct the objectification of women, GLBTQ+ people, non-white people and indigenous people. Feminist criticism insists, instead, on illuminating their subjectivity. A sense of urgency also pervades current feminist criticism as it expands its recognition of the subjectivity of entities that have, historically, been objectified: nonhuman species of animals chief among them – territory that ecofeminists, posthumanists, and ecocritics, in particular, have staked out for analysis.[6] It is not hyperbolic to realize, and admit, that the existential crisis that confronts the human species in the twenty-first century – nothing less than the survival of life on earth – depends upon intervention, in Shakespeare criticism as in the present moment, into the 'strong man' politics that are currently spreading across the globe, celebrating tyranny and violence and eradicating democracy in its wake.

[5] *White People in Shakespeare: Essays on Race, Culture and the Elite* (2023), a collection of essays edited by Arthur L. Little, Jr., and Jyotsna Singh's monograph, *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory* (2019) for the Arden Shakespeare and Theory Series, provide recent examples of this kind of intersectionality and globalism.

[6] In their co-authored monograph, *Shakespeare and Ecofeminist Theory* (2017), for the Arden Shakespeare and Theory Series, for example, co-authors Rebecca Laroche and Jennifer Munroe argue for decentering the monarch in our theoretical and critical responses to Shakespeare's *King Lear,* as well as a focus on traditionally marginalized individuals and groups: the poor, the homeless, female characters and nonhuman animals.

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REVIEWS

Domenico Lovascio,

John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the Classics. Manchester: Manchester University Press, The Revels Plays Companion Library 2022.

"How often do you think about the Roman empire?" Should it be possible to ask this question – at the origin of a 2023 storm of viral videos on social media app TikTok – to early modern English playwrights, I suspect some of them would give not too dissimilar an answer from those that flabbergasted the female partners of the TikTok interviewees: "several times a week", or even "every day". Pervasively informing the imagination of the English early moderns, the history of ancient Rome was to them "not simply a past but the past"[1], a model and touchstone for the present, linked by the English chronicles to the founding of Britain itself, and, as such, "a discourse that one could not afford to ignore"[2]. Long acknowledged by critics, the relevance of the Roman

[1]George Kirkpatrick Hunter, "A Roman Thought: Renaissance Attitudes to History Exemplified in Shakespeare and Jonson", in Brian S. Lee (ed.), *An English Miscellany: Presented to W.S. Mackie*, Cape Town, O.U.P., 1977, pp. 93-115 (p. 95).

[2]Richard Burt, "'A dangerous Rome': Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and the Discursive Determinism of Cultural Politics", in Marie-Rose Logan and Peter L. Rudnytsky (eds), *Contending Kingdoms: Historical, Psychological, and Feminist Approaches to the Literature of Sixteenth-Century England and France*, Detroit, Wayne State U.P., 1991, pp. 109-27 (p. 111).

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past to early modern literary – and more specifically dramatic – output has been the object of many studies, whose number has dramatically increased in recent decades. These studies have revealed much of the early modern reception of Roman history and culture, but they have also, as always happens, somewhat construed it, shaping its outlines in accordance with their critical perspectives, aims, and interests. As Domenico Lovascio writes, "the most immediate association that the phrase 'Roman plays' would arouse at a gathering of early modernists would be with Shakespeare and his *Titus Andronicus* (1584-94), *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07), *Coriolanus* (1607-09), and *Cymbeline* (1609-11). Then, someone would be likely to think of Johnson and his *Poetaster, or His Arraignment* (1601), *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), and *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611). Very few people, if any, would think of Fletcher" (pp. 1-2). Lovascio's observation would hardly find any opposition among those who have, in fact, taken part in a gathering of early modernists. This has of course something to do with the vast shadow cast by Shakespeare's figure upon so many – if not all – of his contemporaries; a shadow whose thickness has increased with time, leading to what could be considered a disproportion between the attention devoted to the Bard and that dedicated to his fellow dramatists, whose fame and popularity was, in their own time, often comparable to his. This is in fact the case with John Fletcher, whose success as a dramatist was equal, if not superior, to Shakespeare's, and who, though usually not considered an author keen on revering the classics, wrote four plays classifiable as Roman – only one less than Shakespeare, and more than were written by Johnson. These four plays, *Bonduca* (1613-14), *Valentinian* (1610-14), *The False One* (1619-23, with Massinger), and *The Prophetess* (1622, with Massinger), represent the object of Domenico Lovascio's *John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the classics*, the first study to analyse them as a group and, as such, the first to attempt a comprehensive and consistent outlining of Fletcher's vision of Rome.

Clear in its premises and aims, John Fletcher's Rome embraces a variety of perspectives in order to delineate and explain Fletcher's distinctive construction of a grim and unheroic Rome, related to and yet essentially different from Shakespeare's: a decadent city far from its glorious past, confronted with a crisis of values that affects its every aspect. At the same time, Lovascio casts new light on such seldom-explored aspects of Fletcher's intellectual life as his

conception of classical antiquity and history, giving us a portrait of the author as "a much sharper observer of reality than is usually recognized, not only in the immediacy of the here and now but also in terms of the larger changes and tendencies that are continually at work in history and politics" (p. 17).

After an essential Introduction, in which the role of the Roman plays in the Fletcher canon is discussed with lucidity and method, the study is structured in four chapters, all of which are endowed with a clever two-part title, combining the directness of the informative second part with the evocative power of a well-chosen quotation. Dealing with Fletcher's choice and use of sources, and offering an unprecedented survey of the author's relationship with classical texts, the first chapter, "'Take your lily / and get your part ready': Fletcher and the Classics", defines a characteristic modus operandi which is both symptomatic of Fletcher's intention in approaching the Roman past and responsible for the vision of this past emerging in the plays. Mixing classical and early modern accounts, well-known materials and recently published works, Fletcher's choice of the sources for his Roman plays reflects, as Lovascio convincingly shows, a will to select texts that deviated from the celebratory representation of Rome usually offered by golden-age authors, favouring instead historians belonging to Late Antiquity, not usually part of the grammar school curriculum, and of Greek origin.

The second chapter, "'I am no Roman, / nor what I am do I know': Fletcher's Roman Plays as *Trauerspiele*", focuses on the vision of Rome emerging from the four Roman plays: an essentially pessimistic depiction of a corrupt and degraded world, ignored by the Gods and lacking suitable political leaders, disoriented and disorienting. Through a masterful reading of *Valentinian*, *Bonduca*, *The False One*, and *The Prophetess*, Lovascio shows how Fletcher's representation of the Roman past reflects the author's pessimistic view of history, debunking the myth of an exemplary Rome so often found in early modern literature. Lovascio traces a most original and revealing parallel between Fletcher's plays and the seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel* as discussed by Walter Benjamin in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), highlighting a series of similarities between the two sets of plays, especially for what concerns the perception of history as an eternal return of the same, devoid of any religious perspective as well as any eschatological sense. The

work of an actual philosopher of history, Fletcher's Roman plays appear as loci for the playwright's deep reflection on the disorder and opacity of history, affecting the classical past just as much as the Jacobean era.

The third chapter, "'Had Lucrece e'er been thought of but for Tarquin?' The Inadequacy of Roman Female Exempla", explores Fletcher's depiction of female characters in the Roman plays. Here, the non-Roman women, particularly the Egyptian queen Cleopatra and the Icenian queen Bonduca, along with the Celtic druidess Delphia, emerge as more powerful and dynamic characters than the Roman ones, the latter passively entrapped in the roles assigned to them by an essentially patriarchal system. Indeed, even such a positive character as Lucina in *Valentinian*, a touchstone of integrity and chastity, appears essentially dominated by a passivity that deprives her even of the chance to actively procure her own death, thus falling short of her archetype's example, that of Lucrezia. This, combined with the way in which Fletcher challenges the untouchability of such Republican paragons as Portia and Lucrezia (the quotation in the chapter's title, from *A Wife for a Month* (1624), being a clear example of this), indicates, Lovascio argues, the author's scepticism about the viability of the Roman female exempla, perceived as no longer adequate for the development of a valid female ideal.

The fourth chapter, "'To do thus / I learned of thee': Shakespeare's Exemplary Roman Plays", focuses on the role of Shakespeare's Roman plays in Fletcher's imagination and in his construction of the Roman world. Through a subtle analysis that reveals Lovascio as no less refined and penetrating a reader of Shakespeare than of Fletcher, the author shows how not only are Shakespeare's plays considered by Fletcher on the same level as classical sources, but how some of the latter's characters appear deeply related to Shakespeare's, and are even endowed by the Shakespearean example with a heightened awareness of themselves and a kind of prescience of future events. Thus, for instance, Fletcher and Massinger's Diocletian appears modelled more after Shakespeare's Antony than the historical figure of the emperor, while the death of Shakespeare's Cleopatra reverberates in the suicide of Bonduca, who shares the Queen of Egypt's terror of being taken and led in triumph by the Roman enemy, and appears to have learnt from her the only way to avoid it. At the same time, the young and fair Cleopatra of *The False One*, the prologue of

which openly presents the play as a kind of prequel to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, is markedly different from her Shakespearean antecedent and yet gains depth from her relationship with it. And how clever Fletcher is to play with his audience's expectations, as when, possibly imagining the unsatisfied curiosity raised by the Shakespearean Enobarbus's hurriedly cut short mention of Cleopatra's being brought to Caesar in a mattress (*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.4.68-70), makes of this episode a pivotal scene of his play. As if to say: Shakespeare just alluded to it, but I will show it to you.

Finally, the conclusions do what conclusions should always do, that is, clearly summing up and reaffirming the book's main claims, while also adding new material to confirm the study's general tenets. This new material is an interesting analysis of the allusions to the Roman legend of Marcus Curtius – the brave horseman who saved Rome by jumping into the chasm opened on the Forum – found across the whole Fletcher canon, which, as Lovascio argues, perfectly exemplify Fletcher's general approach to classical history and exempla.

Dense with information yet remarkably fluid and engaging to read, in dialogue with a vast and well selected panorama of critical voices yet never in danger of being suffocated by them, Lovascio's study shines for its originality, clarity, and insight. It fills a genuine gap in the field of study concerned with the reception of classical antiquity in early modern England, and has many merits. By spotlighting a playwright whose relevance in his own time has long been inadequately recognized, Lovascio joins a recent scholarly trend aimed at reassessing Fletcher's work, and does so in a significant way. Through an approach that combines unexceptionable scientific rigour with an intellectual vivacity manifest in the evident gusto with which the author not only explores the plays, but brilliantly speculates about such issues as the theatrical dynamics possibly activated by the King's Men's staging of them, or the relationship between Fletcher's biographic experience and his creative mechanisms, Lovascio offers us a work that, without being limited to a close reading of the Roman plays – which would be a remarkable achievement by itself – enlightens several aspects of Fletcher's personality, thought, and art. This appears particularly true when one considers that Lovascio's exceptional grasp of the entire Fletcher canon allows him to make his discussion of the Roman plays relevant to a deeper understanding of Fletcher's output at large, contributing to

its overall reappraisal. On the other hand, *John Fletcher's Rome* represents a timely and much-needed corrective to the widespread notion of a perfect overlap between Shakespeare' vision of Rome and that of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre in general. In fact, Lovascio's treatment of Shakespeare appears exemplary of the author's intelligent approach to the question. Without downplaying the relevance of Shakespeare's Roman plays, the author manages to restore to its right proportions the interplay between Fletcher's works and the Bard's, highlighting a series of dynamics in the reception of the Shakespearean texts which makes his study no less appealing to Shakespeare scholars than to scholars of Fletcher. At the same time, the differences between the two authors' representation of the Roman past emerge clearly from Lovascio's analysis, debunking the idea of a univocal and monolithic vision of Rome in early modern theatre and imagination, and replacing it with a more complex and multifaceted view. It is this new vision that represents, in my opinion, the ultimate gift that *John Fletcher's Rome* offers its readers, together with a renewed awareness of the plurality of perspectives that characterize early modern thought.

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Mary-Jane Rubenstein,

Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2022.

I confess I am a member of the Mars society. I have been attending their international meetings for a few years – *From simulation to reality* 2016, *Rising together* 2020, *Taking Flight* 2021, *Searching for Life with Heavy Lift* 2022 and *Mars for All* 2023. In my defense I can only add that my friend Simonetta Badioli and I feel we have a mission, that is the dissemination of a Martian literary Canon which was totally different from the sci fi corpus of invasions of the mainstream, but which, on the contrary, spoke of utopian societies based on justice, gender equality, and environmental awareness. Our first three cases concerned *Unveiling a Parallel* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (1893), *Journeys to the Planet Mars* by Sara Weiss (1903), and *The Man from Mars* by William Simpson (1891 and 1900). Why the Society accepts our papers is a mystery (of which I am grateful), since we usually find ourselves surrounded by eager space colonialists who do not really care about utopian literature or anti-colonial claims, and can only think of space economy, resources, and profit. Yet we persist.

This introduction was necessary in order for the reader to understand my surprise in meeting this wonderful book by Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Professor of Religion and Science in Society at Wesleyan University, who expresses – far better than I was and will ever be able to do – the same worries, complaints, and claims I have been writing in my essays in the recent years (e.g. "An Eco-Critical Cultural Approach to Mars Colonization" with A. Farina, R. Barbanti 2017; "Green Studies for the Red Planet? A lesson from the past" 2018; "Eco-men from the Outer Space? Mars and Utopian Masculinities in the *fin-de-siècle*" 2018; "An Interplanetary Transplantation, Or, Reloading the Anthropocene on the Red Planet" 2021).

Curiously, the occasion to read this book was offered to me by Robert Zubrin, the president of the Mars Society, who feeling under attack responded with vehemence and belligerent tones to Rubenstein's book. The author does actually mention him, but she also cites Musk, Bezos, and many others, so I

think Zubrin ought not to take it as a personal offence. I am embarrassed to admit that many things she says are very similar to what I myself wrote in a book (*Alieni a stelle e strisce* 2015) of which I unwisely gave him a copy when we met in 2016, but probably I got away with it because I suppose he cannot read Italian. Better that way.

In his "Declaration of Decadence" (30 May 2023), which was published in the website and sent to all members worldwide, Zubrin accuses Rubenstein of rejecting "everything that Western humanist civilization stands for or has ever stood for. If you think that the world has had quite enough of freedom, progress, science, and reason, this is the book for you." Even worse, "Rubinstein insists we need to not only avoid harming other living creatures but also inanimate matter as well" and she wonders "whether rock themselves have rights". Of course, this is too much for Zubrin, who takes Rubinstein literally instead of understanding the big picture. He reports her saying that "the personhood of the Moon is demonstrated by the fact that its rocks contain records of past events, and its dust can harm astronauts. Therefore, the Moon has both memory and agency. In fact, the Moon might even desire things."

What he omits (among other things) is how and why she gets to this. The fact is that men are doing what they want in space with no regard and respect for places, as they have always done on planet Earth. The history Rubinstein recounts is a history of wars, invasions, colonization, slavery, and fight for supremacy. She speaks of the Moon in regard to a project called "Preserving Outer Space Heritage", since she is scandalized in learning that "they consider to comprise historically significant human or robotic landing sites, artefacts, spacecraft […] The Moon has no heritage of its own" (p. 146).

To Rubinstein's accusation of social injustice, Zubrin responds by reminding readers that (race has two meanings which is not irrelevant) "America achieved its greatest advances in racial equality since the Civil War precisely during the period of its reach for the Moon". If we substitute reach with race (space race, race to the Moon, etc.) we'll see very clearly the two different but intertwined meanings of 'race'. Basing himself on the wonders of the "space frontier", the president of the Mars Society thinks he is walking on the path of the Founding Fathers and defending the fundamental human rights. However, this vision of history has no objectivity and simply echoes the

rhetoric (and violence) of expansion, invasion, and colonization. Something we know very well, which is being planned or already performed, again and again, on Earth as well as in space. And when Zubrin accuses her of falsehood because she says that humans have destroyed the Earth he is so naif as to counteract by declaring that he is 71 and alive. But I want to quote her words from the Preface: "Earth is becoming inhabitable, so a wealthy fraction of humanity hitches a ride off world to live in a shopping mall under the dominion of the corporation that wrecked the planet in the first place […] and the oligarchic control of information, water, and air" (p. ix).

True, the conditions of life on Earth have improved in time. Yet not everywhere, and not for everyone. This, Zubrin should know. As well as it is unreasonable to deny that social justice has *never* been in the global political agenda; that wars *are* worldwide and under everybody's eyes; and that the catastrophic events caused by climate change are *not* natural but have been mostly provoked by man. Anthropocene (or better, Capitalocene as it has been renamed) is quickly leading to a deep crisis, if not to the extinction, of the human species, and I cannot but agreeing with Rubenstein that there should be actions to be taken rather than falling into the "dangerous religion" of looking away and imagine salvation in space settlements.

In her book, Rubinstein refers to historians (Lynn White) philosophers (Nietzsche), writers (Isaac Asimov, Octavia Butler), pop singers (David Bowie) film directors (George Lucas), presidents (J. F. Kennedy) and so on to substantiate her thought, but she essentially wants to express her thesis which can be resumed like this: "the intensifying 'NewSpace race' is much a mythological project as it is political, economic, or scientific […] the escalating effort to colonize the cosmos is a renewal of the religious, political, economic, and scientific maelstrom that globalized Earth beginning in the fifteenth century" (p. x). Mythology and religion are not usually to be found in conventions regarding space race, and yet Rubinstein's arguments sound strong and agreeable. Western monotheism and Greek philosophy are the pillars of the missions of today as it were in the past. The Manifest Destiny, the Frontier, colonization – and I should add Crèvecoeur's "transplantation" – have always implied "Salvation through imperialism" (p. 3). Rubinstein is worried about NewSpace since "In their promises to get a few humans off this doomed

planet, billionaire utopians are selling the same old story of domination hidden under lofty religious language" (p. 4). In her vision, the astropreneurs' project of making humanity a multiplanetary species does not regard humanity but just a few lucky ones. And I do like her definition of Terraforming: "having trashed one world, we're storming off to ransack another" (p. 6). And later continues: "Do you really expect that the billionaires who can't find any cause worth supporting on Earth will finally redistribute their wealth once they get deeper into the final frontier? […] And what about all the ecological damage they're doing in the meantime to Earth?" (p. 157).

Rubinstein is worried about the majority of humanity as the first thing, but she is also about the land – territory, stones, place, whatever we can call it. She reminds the reader that the story of the American frontier was violent, genocidal, and ultimately ecocidal" even though rhetorically justified with the lexicon of "destiny, freedom, salvation, and even divine will" (pp. 7-8). While Musk projects of establishing a "self-sustaining city" on Mars, thinking that *Earth is done*, Rubinstein wonders "how we can hope to make a habitat out of Mars when we can't even preserve the habitability of Earth" (p. 16). The answer was suggested by Marx many years ago: "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (p. 19).

There is also, of course, an "eco-destructive legacy of Christianity", as Rubinstein calls it: though contemporary theology is deeply concerned about the environment and the Pope himself has admitted that sometimes the Scriptures have been interpreted as justifying "the unbridled exploitation of nature" Western religions have strong political responsibilities (p. 39). As she underlines, "the theme is constant: 'America has been elected by God for a special destiny in the world'" (p. 51). In the Old Testament, God tells that humans will have dominion over all other creatures and things. America easily became a new version of the Promised Land (after Canaan) and did not hesitate in removing and destroying in order to occupy the territories that appeared (but were not) empty: "Of course, the colonizers didn't really think the land was empty. It clearly contained both human and animal inhabitants along with seemingly infinite quantities of what the modern world calls 'resources'" (p. 60).

After polluting earth and seas, now we have started to direct our folly, not only our dreams, to space. The fact that "US space travel is a vertical extension of the Manifest destiny […] [an] extension of earthly imperialism […] [an act of] Requisition" (pp. 76, 81-82) is not news. Neither is recollecting Ronald Reagan's dream of a "cosmic gold rush" (p. 106). Rather, it is puzzling that in the words of NASA's 2020 Artemis Plan, "the Moon to Mars approach will assure that America remains at the forefront of exploration and discovery […] The NASA authors seem to assume it's self-evident: we've got to get to Mars, and fast" (p. 110). *Self-evident* reminds us of the glorious incipit of the *Declaration of Independence* and since I started by quoting Zubrin's "Declaration of Decadence" I want to make things clear. Going to Mars is not self-evident. To rebel to a tyrant is (or ought to be) self-evident. To follow a dream of liberty. To work for the good of all humanity. And – maybe – to explore space *without* sending up "the growing pile of garbage around us" is self-evident (p. 113). According to the ESA (European Space Agency), "the skies are riddled with thirty-four thousand objects greater than ten centimeters, nine hundred thousand objects between one and ten centimeters, and 128 million objects between one millimeter and one centimeter. And 95 percent of it is garbage" (p. 114).

In the words of astrobiologist Lucianne Walkowicz, "If we truly believe in our ability to bend the hostile environments of Mars for human habitation, […] Why not put all that money, energy, and manly frontierism into bringing our own ecosystem back to life?" (p. 137). Some philosophers have joined the discusison: as Holmes Rolston III puts it, we should assure space a respectful treatment, while Robert Sparrow states that terraforming Mars would reduce us into cosmic vandals (pp. 140-42). And Rubinstein mentions the "anticolonial spacewave" which in 2020 finally led to the publication of a paper written by the Equity, Divesrsty, and Inclusion Working Group of the Planetary Science and Astrobiology Decadal Survey for 2023-2032 (p. 177). That's good news. We are not alone.

One of the most crucial points in Rubinstein's argumentation is the respect we owe to the "inanimate world" (my inverted commas). Her vision being holistic, she mentions many cultures: for some of them the Sky is full of spiritual entities; others place God in the Heavens; and others consider animals,

trees and stones legitimate *beings*. Rubinstein provocatively defends sacred spaces and even the "right of rocks" not to be converted in resources and commodities against the dangerous religion of salvation promoted by the sponsors of space colonization.

Allow me to add a couple of final, small suggestions for Rubinstein and for the readers. Firstly, as an advocate of utopia, I refuse to apply this category to contemporary billionaires who project to destroy space after leaving an inhabitable planet. Utopia has a strong tradition even in the United States (e.g. Edward Bellamy, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ursula LeGuin) and not many people know about a corpus of romances which were published in the *fin-de-siècle*. According to these stories, all based on utopian thought, travelers to Mars found (in different ways and measure) social justice, gender equality, sustainable economy, and liberty of expression and religion. No wars existed. People were vegan. These novels have been forgotten but they deserve to be known and here is a partial list of them: *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (1893), *Journey to Mars the Wonderful World* by Gustavus W. Pope (1894), *The Certainty of a Future Life in Mars. Being the Posthumous Papers of Bradford Torrey Todd* by Louis Pope Gratacap (1903), *Journeys to the Planet Mars* by Sarah Weiss (1903), *Through Space to Mars, or The Longer Journey on Record* by Roy Rockwood (1910). Secondly, I recommend three books which were published in the same years by astronomer Percival Lowell. In his latest one (*Mars as the Abode of Life*, 1908), written half a century before Rachel Carson's and Lynn White's works, he explicitly accused man of wrecking the planet: "He has enslaved all that he could; he is busy exterminating the rest […] Already man has begun to leave his mark on his globe in deforestation, in canalization, in communication".[1]

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[1] https://www.loc.gov/item/08036795/ (01/12/2023).

Giancarlo Petrella,

Scrivere sui libri. Breve guida al libro a stampa postillato. Salerno Editrice, Roma 2022.

Chi potrebbe affermare di non aver mai scritto su un libro? A matita, magari, per un senso di rispetto verso l'oggetto su cui si scrive, o a penna o addirittura passando un evidenziatore sulle righe che, alla lettura, appaiono le più interessanti o da memorizzare. E se il libro è di chi lo sta leggendo, forse non ci sono sensi di colpa legati all'operazione di scarabocchiarlo, chiosarlo, sottolinearlo, mentre – se è di qualcuno che ce l'ha prestato (o addirittura di una biblioteca da cui l'abbiamo preso a prestito) – ecco che scatta l'autocensura che ci trattiene la mano ogni volta che vorremmo sottolineare una parola o segnalare con righe a lato la rilevanza di specifici termini, di un passaggio o di un paragrafo.

Quello che si prova oggi di fronte a un libro non è certo qualcosa di nuovo, come dimostra Petrella nel suo volume che, dal solo titolo senza prendere in considerazione il sottotitolo, appare persino giocosamente ambiguo, perché "scrivere sui libri" potrebbe significare fare recensioni e rassegne da pubblicare. Invece no: il sottotitolo ci rivela che il titolo va preso nella sua spiazzante materialità, dove "scrivere sui libri" significa semplicemente quanto dice, cioè prendere carta e penna e scrivere: la 'carta' che abbiamo davanti, cioè il libro che si sta leggendo, e una 'penna' (meglio una matita) e usarla. E Petrella ci mostra che è stato sempre così (e non solo da quando esiste la stampa, perché anche su certi manoscritti medioevali si trovano testimonianze di appunti, commenti e note), in particolare, comunque, da Gutenberg in poi grazie alla carta di supporto.

La realtà analizzata dall'autore è costituita soprattutto da incunaboli e cinquecentine reperiti nelle più svariate biblioteche italiane, volumi che presentino interventi manoscritti di lettori coevi o successivi alle date di stampa. E qui sta uno degli aspetti più interessanti del libro perché lo sguardo è rivolto non alla particolare edizione in sé, non ai testi stampati, ma al lettore, vale a dire alle tracce di ricezione di quel determinato testo presso autori molto spesso rintracciabili – e rintracciati – tra personalità più o meno illustri del mondo

culturale italiano dei secoli XV e XVI (con percorsi che, tuttavia, possono arrivare oltre e più vicino a noi nel tempo). Petrella, in altre parole, studia il libro come oggetto materiale, acquistato, letto, postillato appunto, come dichiara il sottotitolo, prestato, venduto ad altro lettore e così via. Si delinea, in questo modo non solo un vivace mercato tra bibliofili, ma una mappa molto interessante dei movimenti fisici, che poi stanno a indicare anche movimenti socio-culturali, dei volumi presi in considerazione.

L'abbastanza recente ricerca e la valorizzazione di testi postillati ha influenzato anche il mercato librario indirizzato a bibliofili e biblioteche. Se, infatti, sino a pochi decenni fa si reclamizzava un esemplare "immacolato, ricondotto a colpi di sbiancamento a una pretesa verginità astorica" (p. 13), ora la presenza di annotazioni, in particolare se di lettore illustre, conferisce valore aggiunto a un volume, così che la traccia socioculturale diviene valore merceologico.

L'autore, docente di Bibliografia e Biblioteconomia presso l'Università "Federico II" di Napoli, deve aver vissuto entro le biblioteche storiche per parecchio tempo, alla ricerca dei volumi postillati, i cui *marginalia* possono davvero raccontare molto sul processo di lettura e comprensione di quanto i vari lettori stavano sfogliando. Così le pagine annotate possono rivelare interventi di censura di quanto si legge, o segni di apprezzamento, o rimandi intertestuali che notificano ai lettori contemporanei l'ampiezza delle conoscenze degli antichi lettori/possessori. Petrella fornisce una ricca tipologia di *marginalia*, dalle indicazioni di proprietà alla apposizione vera e propria di "ex libris", alla correzione di refusi, ai commenti veri e propri, e a schizzi e disegni, sino all'utilizzo delle carte di guardia in genere in fondo ai volumi per "aggiornare la contabilità di casa" di un certo possessore (p. 235), mostrandone esempi nelle trentatré illustrazioni raggruppate a fine volume.

Quanto possa essere rilevante uno studio come questo trova riscontro anche in altre culture. Ad esempio, una copia del primo Folio dei drammi di William Shakespeare (1623), ora nella Free Library di Philadelphia, è oggetto di studio recentissimo nel mondo anglosassone perché si è dimostrato, dalle postille in esso presenti, che sia appartenuto a John Milton, ben prima che si desse alla composizione di *Paradise Lost*. Questo getta luce sia sulla ricezione di Shakespeare nella prima metà del Seicento, sia sulla sensibilità letteraria e

poetica di Milton stesso. Come si può immaginare, in ogni biblioteca storica potrebbero esserci 'tesori' di questo tipo in attesa di essere scoperti. Ma come fanno i lettori, anche esperti, a scoprire copie annotate di incunaboli e cinquecentine senza dover passare molto tempo dentro una biblioteca? Petrella afferma che alcune biblioteche e librerie antiquarie stanno cominciando a integrare i propri cataloghi con informazioni sulla presenza di postille negli esemplari in loro possesso, così da facilitare i ricercatori con collegamenti ipertestuali, aumentando la multi-dimensionalità delle raccolte. Un lungo e complesso lavoro che può veramente rivelarci aspetti ignoti della cultura del passato, della sua trasmissione e della storia del libro.

Nel libro di Petrella non mancano annotazioni curiose e anche buffe, come quando riporta postille secondo cui, ad esempio, "[a] metà Cinquecento rischiava la scomunica chi non avesse restituito entro trenta giorni i libri presi in prestito dalla biblioteca di S. Domenico di Bologna" (p. 79). Ancora: chi osasse rubare il *Compendium grammaticae* di Juan de Pastrana (incunabolo del 1490) "subirà la pena delle fiamme ardenti dell'inferno" (p. 81). Forse, traducendo queste minacce in termini adeguati alla nostra contemporaneità, si potrebbe limitare il fenomeno delle appropriazioni indebite, dell'apposizione di segni deturpanti (che non sono certo suggeriti da *Scrivere sui libri*) o dei ritardi cronici nella riconsegna dei libri presi a prestito!

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Utopian Masculinities in the fin-de-siècle", in R. Cenamor, ed., *Ecomasculinities in Real and Fictional North America: The Flourishing of New Men*, 2019; "Green Studies for the Red Planet? A lesson from the past", in R. Ferrari e L. Giovannelli, eds, *A Green Thought in a Green Shade*, 2020.

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Quacks (2015) deals with linguistic aspects of medical practitioners' advertisements.

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