



**"Gender Trouble" on the Elizabethan Stage.  
Challenging conventions of femininity and masculinity in  
Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Midsummer Night's  
Dream and Venus and Adonis**

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**► To cite this version:**

Pauline Durin. "Gender Trouble" on the Elizabethan Stage. Challenging conventions of femininity and masculinity in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Midsummer Night's Dream and Venus and Adonis. Literature. 2018. dumas-01891368

**HAL Id: dumas-01891368**

**<https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-01891368>**

Submitted on 9 Oct 2018

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# “Gender Trouble” on the Elizabethan Stage

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Challenging conventions of femininity and masculinity in  
Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*  
and *Venus and Adonis*.

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**2017-2018**

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## Introduction

In Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, Jacques delivers the famous line: "All the world's a stage,/And all the men and women merely players."<sup>1</sup> While Jacques underlines the universality of role-playing in the human existence, interestingly enough he maintains the gender difference. Do we play our role depending on what masculinity and femininity demand of us? Does gender dictate our lines, behaviours, garments, props, or the distribution of speech between us, more than any other defining categories? This is what feminist theorist Judith Butler implies in *Gender Trouble* when she declares that gender is "performative":

Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.<sup>2</sup>

Men and women, all "actors" when it comes to gender according to Judith Butler, thus believe so implicitly that their gender belongs to their nature that they forget they are actually playing a role and that their gender is actually made up of different acts that seem natural but partake in a construction.

Gender, an obvious category it seems, is yet quite a difficult notion to define. It must first be differentiated from "sex" as stated by Butler:

Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, if being male or female refers to *biological* matters and is *innate*, being masculine or feminine on the other hand has to do with *cultural* concerns since it is *constructed*, and thus depends on the era and place an individual belongs to. Valerie Traub, in the introduction of

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You like It* (Ed. Juliet Dusinberre and Richard Proudfoot. London, New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 2009), II.7.140-1.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 191-2.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8.

*The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, adds another distinction to this basic definition:

(...) gender is fashioned relationally through the assertion, elaboration, and enforcement of a male-female binary. Neither masculinity nor femininity exists without the other and neither is intelligible on its own. They are, in a word, diacritical – functioning only by virtue of hierarchical distinctions, including the granting of normative status.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, masculine-feminine concepts are part of a binary scheme and need each other to be defined by negation – the feminine is what the masculine is not and conversely. This notion of constructing a “Self” by defining an “Other” can also be found in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* (1949). The ideas of “hierarchical distinctions” and “normative status” are important since it proves that gender defines someone’s identity as being part of a power relationship. It is about who someone is and who s/he is in relation to others. Moreover, Butler’s theory is considered as a landmark in gender studies because of her definition of gender as “performative,” which means that it is more about acting than being, though it is not reduced to a role one plays. In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, she defines “performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what he/she names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.”<sup>5</sup> Gender is then a notion that is self-generated: because it is considered as existing, it then exists; it is repeated and imposes rules on individuals who abide by them, and consequently gives it existence.

Yet, gender has only been considered since recently and refers to several domains of study, mainly sociology but also psychology, history, and of course literature. Gender studies have grown in popularity since the 1970s, and can be seen as a current whose aim is to enable women and LGBTQ individuals to be more visible and empowered in literature and to feel a sense of belonging in a culture considered as having been created by male authors for male

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<sup>4</sup> Valerie Traub, *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race* (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

readers. Because of Shakespeare's unique position in the canon, as poet, playwright and cultural icon, his work has also been studied from the perspective of gender, but those studies have evolved in several directions. Since the 1980s, and the publication of *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* by Carolyn Lenz, Ruth Swift, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely, feminist readings of Shakespeare have become a thriving field of Shakespearean criticism. *The Woman's Part* was amongst the first works to consider female characters as a central object of study and gender as a constructed notion both in literature and society: "This literature pays acute attention to the woman's part in literature. (...) it examines both men and women and the social structures that shape them."<sup>6</sup> Its question then lies in asking how literature influences gender and vice versa, but there is also a will to denounce patriarchy, not only in the literary work but also in the critical field which had treated until then women as non-essential characters: "The critics in this volume liberate Shakespeare's women from the stereotypes to which they have too often been confined; they analyze the nature and effects of patriarchal structures; and they explore the influence of genre on the portrayal of women."<sup>7</sup> This revaluation of women both in Shakespeare's time and plays also led Juliet Dusinberre to explore the historical context in which Shakespeare's plays had been written and more particularly the influence the Puritans had in defining women's place in society and in Elizabethan drama too. In her mind, the Puritan interpretation of woman as a companion to men instead of a temptress, and with chastity understood as depending on her behaviour rather than her virginity was instrumental into making her an equal to men. In 1982, Linda Bamber also dealt with gender studies in her work, though she focused on what she saw as Shakespeare's misogynistic view of women rather than a defence of them. In *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, she plainly asserts that although Shakespearean criticism can be

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<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely, ed. *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Swift Lenz, Greene and Thomas Neely, ed. *The Woman's Part*, 4.

feminist-oriented, it is obvious that the author was not.<sup>8</sup> So when feminism first emerged in Shakespearean studies, the question was whether Shakespeare defended women through his work or replicated the prejudices of a society which limited women's rights. For Linda Bamber, female characters do not reach the density of their male counterparts, proving Shakespeare's misogynistic views, contrary to Dusiinberre.

Shakespeare saw men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal. He did not divide human nature into the masculine and the feminine, but observed in the individual woman or man an infinite variety of union between opposing impulses.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1980s, psychoanalysis became a lens to question gender research, as to be seen with Coppélia Kahn's *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* for instance, which links her reflections on Shakespeare with Freud's theories. This particular work is all the more interesting as it does not focus only on women, questioning how patriarchy might also oppress men by requiring them to meet standards of virility. In the 1990s, the emergence of New Historicism but also of Marxism<sup>10</sup> in Shakespearean feminist studies was a real watershed, with the influence of Dymna Callaghan's writings for instance. She argues in *The Weyward Sisters: Shakespeare and Feminist Politics* that *Romeo and Juliet* "promote[s] what is to become a bourgeois family form."<sup>11</sup> The main argument of New Historicist research is that studying the relationships between men and women in Shakespeare's work cannot be envisaged without taking into account the historical context in which he was born, that is England during the Renaissance. From 1989 onwards, authors like Ania Loomba linked feminist questioning with others concerning race or class for instance, sometimes linking their

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Juliet Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (3rd ed. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 308.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early modern England* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994); Jean E. Howard, *Marxist Shakespeares* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2001); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988); Pilar Hidalgo, *Paradigms found: Feminist, Gay and New Historicist Readings of Shakespeare* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA : Rodopi, 2001); Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare and New Historicist Theory* (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi Sydney: Arden, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Dymna Callaghan, *The Weyward Sisters: Shakespeare and Feminist Politics*, (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1994), 88.

work with intersectionality, that is to say the study of crossing discriminations that an individual can undergo (“Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways.”<sup>12</sup>): for example, Ania Loomba studied the figure of the Dark Lady in the sonnets, as a potential victim of both racism and misogyny. More recently, feminist critics like Valerie Traub or Phyllis Rackin have brought new ideas to the field of Shakespearean gender studies, insisting on the need to study relations of gender far beyond the sole focus of women’s oppression. According to Valerie Traub, men’s situation and possible oppression must also be studied:

Scholars across the disciplines thus have recognized that ‘attending to women’ is not limited to a focus on patriarchal oppression, figurations of femininity, women’s voices, and female agency, but involves attending as well to men and masculinity.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, in her book *Shakespeare and Women*, Phyllis Rackin defends the idea that denouncing women’s oppression is necessary but must not be reductive or *cliché*, and must not oppose men and women but should allow a more nuanced portrait of patriarchy, showing for instance the important role women already had in society. Dymphna Callaghan, in *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, thus argues that recent feminist studies have defended the participation of women in history and unveiled their presence and role in different events – “feminist revisionism,” as she defines it, “stresses women’s agency and participation in culture and pulls back from the more traditional feminist emphasis on women’s oppression and subjugation.”<sup>14</sup> Somehow, she warns that the “graver danger” of feminist revisionism would be to be “oblivious to, or in denial about, the structural inequities in early modern and, for that matter, contemporary patriarchy.”<sup>15</sup> To overstep this danger while denouncing women’s exclusion without victimizing them, she advocates “post-

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<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 294.

<sup>13</sup> Traub, *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Dymphna Callaghan, *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Callaghan, *The Impact of Feminism*, 6.



revisionism”<sup>16</sup> which is the latest theory in Shakespearean gender studies and would consider gender as a serious subject of study without merely seeing women as victims or deny the oppression they have undergone. To conclude, different points of view may be adopted in Shakespearean gender study, as summed up in the introduction of *The Woman’s Part*:

Critics differ in their estimate of how much conscious control is apparent in Shakespeare’s depiction between the sexes. Some claim that Shakespeare, at least in certain plays, exploits the disjunction between the male characters’ fantasies about women and the portrayed nature of the female characters in order to question or explore sexist attitudes toward women. Others think it unlikely that Shakespeare’s own attitudes can be so clearly separated from those of his gender, his male characters, his period; they see the profound fear of female sexuality and the desperate attempt to control it in the plays as reflections of male ambivalence rather than criticisms of it.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, they all consider the notions of masculinity and femininity as central to their analysis of gender and underline the need to focus on patriarchy as a system in which Shakespeare’s works have been produced and which is thus reflected on stage. Considering the evolution of Shakespearean studies about gender, my aim is to focus on gender studies and not merely on women studies. The following study seeks not to produce a female-centred work but rather to explore the notion of gender and the plurality it encompasses in Shakespeare’s plays and poems, and more particularly in three of them.

Between 1593 and 1595, Shakespeare wrote *Venus and Adonis* (1593),<sup>18</sup> *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), and *Romeo and Juliet* as well as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* between 1594 and 1595.<sup>19</sup> Critics have long remarked on plot similarities between *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*: the play within the play about Pyramus and Thisbe is reminiscent of the last act of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the first Quarto, the full title of *Romeo and Juliet* was *The Most Excellent Tragedie of Romeo and Iuliet*, which recalls “The most lamentable comedy

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<sup>16</sup> Callaghan, *The Impact of Feminism*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Swift Lenz, Greene and Thomas Neely, ed. *The Woman’s Part*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*. (Oxford Shakespeare Topics. Oxford, England ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 75.

and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe.”<sup>20</sup> Their plots are alike – a young man killing himself because he thinks his lover died, and that very lover then committing suicide too: “Thus with a kiss I die”<sup>21</sup> echoes “Thus die I, thus, thus, thus,”<sup>22</sup> likewise “Eyes, look your last”<sup>23</sup> recalls “Tongue not a word,”<sup>24</sup> “Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavoury guide”<sup>25</sup> is reminiscent of “Come, trusty sword./Come, blade, my breast imbrue.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* both present young couples in love against their parents’ wishes; only their endings differ, so that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* seems to be the comical counterpart of *Romeo and Juliet*. *Venus and Adonis* presents similarities with those two plays since it concerns a young man – Adonis - who eventually dies too, but also a mature woman that is Venus. Helena’s line “Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase” could apply for this poem too since it is actually Venus who woos Adonis. Being a narrative poem, it allows a third character to intervene through the lyrical voice. Susan Snyder compared these works to one another at the very beginning of *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (1979)<sup>27</sup> for instance. They belong to the different genres of comedy, tragedy and narrative poem, which may depict female characters in different ways, for each of them has a specific historical manner to represent women, especially in Shakespeare’s time. Poetry had been influenced by Petrarch, comedies used archetypes like the shrew as laughing stock characters, and tragedy often portrayed them as monstrous characters. Although those works are characterized as comedy, tragedy and narrative poem, their genres are actually porous, disrupting traditional structures and mixing different genres into one piece of work the way Philip Sidney describes it. “Now in his parts, kinds, or species (as you list to term them), it is

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<sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri New York: Arden Shakespeare, 2017), V.1.336-7.

<sup>21</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (Ed. René Weis. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2012), V.3.120.

<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.293.

<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.112.

<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.335.

<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.116.

<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.336-7.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1979).

to be noted that some poesies have coupled together two or three kinds, as tragical and comical, whereupon is risen the tragi-comical.”<sup>28</sup> Shakespeare also mixes poetry and theatre; sonnets for instance are to be found in *Venus and Adonis* and in *Romeo and Juliet*; there is a failed tragedy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with “Pyramus and Thisbe.” One can but wonder whether *Venus and Adonis* is the comic counterpart of *The Rape of Lucrece*, mocking the fact that a woman woos a man, or the tragic narration of Adonis’s death, and most of all, *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy which begins like a comedy, as underlined by Sasha Roberts. “Only after the death of Mercutio in 3.1 (usually described as the ‘turning point’ in the play) does *Romeo and Juliet* begin to behave more like a tragedy.”<sup>29</sup> This is all the more interesting as it is unusual:

For an Elizabethan audience accustomed to more uniformity in dramatic styles (think of the more conventional gravity of opening scenes in Shakespeare’s other tragedies), *Romeo and Juliet* may have disrupted audience expectations of tragic form, mood, and decorum – and in so doing called into question the limits and limitations of genre.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the type of tragedy the play can be associated with is also difficult to discern. It is interesting to consider that Roberts’s reflection about the “limits and limitations of genre” could have applied to the word “gender.” The two notions seem to be among the themes of the works mentioned above. They all present young characters on the edge of adulthood and yet reluctant to submit to patriarchal rules and to the feud that are supposed to make men and women out of them by assigning them gendered roles – Hermia, Helena, Juliet are all young girls to be married and Demetrius, Lysander, Romeo, and Adonis are young men who are supposed to become adults through love and marriage. Female characters are particularly interesting because they try to resist the patriarchal system imposed on them. Women are depicted as neither silent nor submissive; they speak for themselves and seem to be characters

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<sup>28</sup> Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, Or, The Defence of Poesy* (Ed. Geoffrey Shepherd and R.W. Malsen. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 97, l. 5-8.

<sup>29</sup> Sasha Roberts, *William Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 11-2.

willingly deciding their own fate; yet they all end up being abandoned, dead, or married, which can put the relevance of this resistance into question.

Gender division was of course different in Shakespeare's time, especially at the theatre: the fact that young men often played women parts on Elizabethan stage has been widely discussed and is an important aspect of the gender trouble – that is the non conformity of some characters to gender norms and rules - I would like to explore. Yet, although I will address this question, I will rather focus on the text and on the different possible interpretations and staging that can be drawn from it. Indeed, poetry and theatre seem to be particularly adequate to question gender. It would be ironical then if theatre were the place where, by playing a fictional role, actors reminded the audience that gender is “a performative accomplishment” rather than something they were born to be. The performativity of gender makes it a particularly suited object of study for the stage as Bruce Smith reminds us: “Because theatre is also a matter of performance, plays provide a perfect means of investigating cultural and historical differences with respect to gender identity.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, as Juliet Dusinberre underlines: “The years between 1590 and 1625 – Shakespeare's years – were the most creative and fertile years for English Puritanism.”<sup>32</sup> Knowing that the Puritans saw women as being companions to men rather than figures of temptation or submissive servants and that they endorsed the education of girls, the Renaissance can be seen as a decisive moment concerning women's rights, claims and representation. One can but wonder whether these views of women may have had an influence on Shakespeare and be perceived in his work or not. Although it is anachronistic to designate Shakespeare as feminist since this movement was not yet theorized. “The word ‘feminism’ first appeared in English in 1895, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, (...)”<sup>33</sup> Dusinberre designates him as “feminist in sympathy” because in his work, gender and the inequalities related to it are themes widely

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 1.

depicted and discussed. Shakespeare reflects a patriarchal society in his plays - by displaying strong father figures, misogyny or the imperative of virility imposed on men - but that does not mean he validates it. Representing and displaying some injustice or malfunction may be a way to criticize them. Moreover, I would like to examine the notion of gender, testing Sasha Roberts's hypothesis about *Romeo and Juliet*: "Far from simply reproducing orthodox ideals of gender, sexuality, and romantic love, the play seems to me to complicate those ideals in practice."<sup>34</sup> Thus, the following questions arise: how is gender presented and questioned in Shakespeare's writings? To what extent does Shakespeare's work expose gender rather as a spectrum than a binary opposition between femininity and masculinity? To what extent does the revolt of the young characters against their families can also be considered as a will to get rid of old gender conventions to create their own identity according to their individuality instead of playing the role masculinity and femininity expect of them? How does Shakespeare present the construction of those notions and how does he challenge them? To what extent were stage and poetry privileged genres to question gender? How are genres and gender related, is one genre partial to certain gendered stereotypes? How do the characters of this corpus challenge the notions of femininity and masculinity by reinventing them and not necessarily submit to them? And finally, to what extent are gender "performativity" and "trouble" prone to be represented in Shakespearean work?

First, I shall study the construction of the notions of "feminine" and "masculine" and how they create gender division as well as the way Shakespeare represents patriarchy and its stifling power on young characters to denounce it. Then, I shall show that blurred lines between genres also echo blurred lines between gender that can even lead to a gender inversion, or at least, gender trouble on Shakespearean stage. Finally, I shall insist on reception and examine how sexist practices in editing or staging Shakespeare's works

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<sup>34</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 57.

coloured our understanding of his plays whereas stage and literary creation not only question the gender of the characters but also that of the audience and of the writer.

## I. Staging patriarchy in Shakespeare's plays.

Judith Butler and feminist theorists are keen to distinguish male and female as biological matters, from masculine and feminine, which are social constructions. Butler, in particular, analyses the complex play at work between the two sets of categories:

The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female.'<sup>35</sup>

With the opposition between "masculine" and "feminine" understood as a "production," it remains to be seen the conditions of this very production and the elements it includes. The opposition is "asymmetrical," which means that differences are instituted and may lead to power relationships. In a patriarchal system for instance, the "masculine" is supposed to dominate the "feminine;" Dymna Callaghan defines this process as follows:

Patriarchy is a system organized around the gender hierarchy, and while that system largely benefits men at the expense of women, it is not, as indeed revisionists rightly point out, applied evenly everywhere and without exception.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of "system" and "hierarchy" is important, because it means that there is a distribution of roles and power in society, and then on stage too, which must be examined. Callaghan's caveat, that patriarchy though dominant may not be universal, must be kept in mind. It is then crucial to understand how it applied in Shakespeare's time and how it is portrayed in Shakespeare's work. Indeed, although there was no feminist theory in Shakespeare's time, Catherine Belsey indicates:

What we do find, however, is a series of contests for the place of women in the family and in society, which may in turn be understood as struggles to install women as subjects. In the

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<sup>35</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Callaghan, *The Impact of Feminism*, 6.

course of these struggles women found a number of forms of resistance which we should not be anxious to identify as feminist.<sup>37</sup>

Such struggles may be found in Shakespeare's work. Thus, this first part will examine the production of gender norms and rules, their applications and their representations on stage.

## 1. Genre and gender norms.

The construction of masculinity and femininity implies that those two concepts are supposed to have specific features and attributes. Men are "expected to propagate, provide, and defend"<sup>38</sup> where women should be modest, obedient to their husband and silent. As a matter of fact, religion had a large influence on the consideration of women during the Renaissance, as pointed out by Juliet Dusinberre:

Theology authorised a view of woman as a separate and inferior species, a view which pervaded the popular culture of proverbs, ballads and folk wisdom, but which also determined women's political and social position.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, women were mocked, considered as wicked, deprived of power and subjected to their husbands; the use of the word "species" shows that they were considered as naturally inferior and fundamentally *other*. The masculine then represented, and still represents the norm – as language amply confirms, when we talk of "mankind" for instance. "Il est le Sujet, il est l'Absolu : elle est l'autre."<sup>40</sup> As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, women represent difference, or rather the "Other," so that this difference can only be judged by comparing it to what is considered as the norm: "Elle se détermine et se différencie par rapport à l'homme et non celui-ci par rapport à elle; elle est l'inessentiel en face de l'essentiel."<sup>41</sup> However, as a man,

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<sup>37</sup> Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London ; New York: Methuen, 1985), 150.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 305.

<sup>40</sup> "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute: she is the other" (My translation). Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Vol. 1. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 15.

<sup>41</sup> "She determines herself and differentiates herself in relation to the man, and not he in relation to her; she is the inessential facing the essential" (My translation). Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 15.



can Shakespeare be expected not to perceive women as Others and to be able to reflect their minds, their issues and struggles? In short, could he present them as part of mankind instead of seeing them as outside of it? Did he speak from a privileged position in a patriarchal society or did he criticize patriarchy as a system that presented women as “Others” and thus as inferior? Linda Bamber, in *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* holds that Shakespeare incorporated the distinction between Self and Other in his work: “the feminine in Shakespeare may or may not be associated with nature, but it is always something unlike and external to the Self, who is male.”<sup>42</sup> It seems all the more difficult to imagine him taking women’s part since the different literary genres at the time conveyed a specific vision of them. Comedy for instance, presents a classical scheme that would be expected by the audience. Hopkins notices that because of its ending with marriage, it actually reinforces patriarchy more than it challenges it, and she uses *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as an example: “the world not only remains fundamentally the same, but is indeed reinforced by the reaffirmation of that most basic of all props of social and patriarchal order, marriage.”<sup>43</sup> She shows that fleeing from patriarchal order, the lovers go into the wood where another patriarch – Oberon – rules (although his wife defies him, he finally defeats her) and then “willingly return to the society from which they had fled to take their allotted parts as leading members of it and, no doubt, to assist in its perpetuation.”<sup>44</sup> The comic genre then seems to support patriarchy and the order of things, since it necessarily requires marriage and perpetuation of this order. Snyder however opposes tragedy and comedy explaining that we must see “the comic as a common raw material, and the tragic as a series of individually shaped expressions.”<sup>45</sup> If we link this assumption to gender, tragedy would then be expected to be more appropriate to explore women’s mind and to pose them as “selves.” Linda Bamber

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<sup>42</sup> Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Lisa Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1998), 18.

<sup>44</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, 8.

disagrees: “The Self is masculine, then, in Shakespearean tragedy, and women are Other.”<sup>46</sup> She argues that most tragic heroes are male. In the introduction of *The Woman’s Part*, this misogyny that permeates tragedy is further explained: “In tragedy (women) are condemned for acting, accused of being deceitful even when they are not.”<sup>47</sup> It is true that in *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo practically accuses Juliet of having her share of responsibility in Mercutio’s death because of her beauty:

O sweet Juliet,  
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate  
And in my temper softened valour’s steel!<sup>48</sup>

It is also indicated that women are “relegated to the position of audience to male acting,” and indeed, in the scene following Mercutio and Tybalt’s deaths, Juliet who could not have any influence on it - although she is unjustly accused - is narrated what happened: “Ay me, what’s news?”<sup>49</sup> “O God, did Romeo’s hand shed Tybalt’s blood?”<sup>50</sup> Finally, “the women in the tragedies almost invariably are destroyed, or are absent from the new order consolidated at the conclusions”<sup>51</sup> which is clearly Juliet’s position as well. On the one hand, comedy first seems to be the story of women’s failure, and of how they are forced to comply with patriarchy. On the other hand, tragedy seems to blame them, diminish them or destroy them. Yet, I will examine if Shakespeare may have used genre conventions in another way, to better explore women’s oppression. In short, questioning genre conventions that are present even in Shakespeare’s plays can lead to explore gender ones. For instance, tragedy necessarily implies a focus on the individual as isolated from the rest of society, which leads women to be particularly interesting characters, fit for this genre. Dusiemberre confirms this theory: “Tragedy is supposed to deal with the isolation of the human spirit, and one of the reasons for

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<sup>46</sup> Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Swift Lenz, Greene and Thomas Neely, ed. *The Woman’s Part*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.115-7.

<sup>49</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.2.36.

<sup>50</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.2.71.

<sup>51</sup> Swift Lenz, Greene and Thomas Neely, ed. *The Woman’s Part*, 6.

the Elizabethan and Jacobean preoccupation with heroines is that that isolation is more terrible in a being conditioned to dependence on men.” It is possible then to use tragedy as a way to study women’s place in a system that rejects and oppresses them. More specifically, women’s isolation is widely discussed in the plays under scrutiny: “Shakespeare’s theatre offers instead a consistent probing of the reactions of women to isolation in a society which has never allowed their independence from men either physically or spiritually.”<sup>52</sup> That goes against Linda Bamber’s idea that women are more fit for comedy than tragedy. On the contrary, their being submitted by men and thus isolated makes them perfect tragic characters. This is the case of Juliet who is progressively abandoned by all the characters who cared for her, like Romeo, because of his banishment: “Art thou gone, so, love, lord, ay husband, friend?”<sup>53</sup> This is reinforced by her father’s rejection: “For, by my soul, I’ll ne’er acknowledge thee,/Nor what is mine shall ever do thee good.”<sup>54</sup> Then her mother abandons her: “Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee”<sup>55</sup> and she even gets away from the Nurse, whom she was yet so close to: “Go, counsellor,/Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain.”<sup>56</sup> Her isolation reaches a peak in act IV, scene 3, after she rejects all company and declares: “My dismal scene I needs must act alone,”<sup>57</sup> and in act V, scene 3, when she turns away the Friar before dying: “Go, get thee hence, for I will not away.”<sup>58</sup> Yet, if tragedy seems particularly adequate to explore and denounce female isolation in society, Shakespeare seems to have found other genres appropriate as well. *Venus and Adonis* is all about Adonis rejecting Venus and trying to get rid of her: “She’s Love, she loves, and yet she is not loved.” The polyptoton accentuates Venus’ isolation by presenting it as illogical. Shakespeare also presents women’s isolation in comedies; Dusiinberre mentions *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

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<sup>52</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 92.

<sup>53</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.43.

<sup>54</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.194-5.

<sup>55</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.204.

<sup>56</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.240-1.

<sup>57</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV. 3.19.

<sup>58</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.160.

to illustrate it: “But Shakespeare’s comedies evince the same fascination with women on their own (...) Helena and Hermia [are] alternatively exiled from the trio of competing lovers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”<sup>59</sup> Helena is the first rejected, then Hermia, and even when loved they are abandoned:

O weary night, O long and tedious night,  
Abate thy hours. Shine, comforts from the east,  
That I may back to Athens by daylight  
From these that my poor company detest;  
And sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow’s eye,  
Steal me a while from mine own company.<sup>60</sup>

Hippolyta is no exception, as proved by Garner: “Shakespeare heightens her isolation by presenting her without any Amazon attendants.”<sup>61</sup> Yet, isolation and woe can hardly arouse laughter, whereas *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is supposed to be a comedy. Thus, only male characters are to be laughing stocks in this play. Bruce Smith confirms that idea when he designates *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as “(playing) out parodies of serious models of masculinity.”<sup>62</sup> This might indicate the authority of those “models of masculinity,” because mocking power or order and diminishing them is a way to provoke laughter. Actually, Lysander and Demetrius allow the audience to laugh at patriarchy, because they ridiculously fight for the possession of one woman. When they should woo Helena, they leave her to fight instead:

LYSANDER  
Now follow, if thou dar’st, to try whose right,  
Of thine or mine, is most in Helena.

DEMETRIUS  
Follow? Nay, I’ll go with thee, cheek by jowl.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 93.

<sup>60</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.431-6

<sup>61</sup> Shirley Nelson Garner, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: ‘Jack shall have Jill;/Nought shall go ill,’” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Richard Dutton (New Casebooks. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 89.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.336-8.

They speak a lot but do nothing, since Puck leads them to separate ways. Their display of virility is clearly mocked because they fail both in their amorous conquest and in their manly contest. Then, Puck's line "We'll try no manhood here"<sup>64</sup> although he pretends to be Lysander at that moment, is truly said from his own point of view since he prevents the characters from fighting, and thus trying "manhood." Their fight is all the more ridiculous since it could easily be resolved:

(...) their contention can be resolved by a simple solution (since Demetrius did in fact pay court to Helena before the play began, and need only return to his original comic discrepancy between their anger and its lack of objective cause).<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, women are more faithful to their lovers and honest, so that their situation is more pitiful than laughable. Condensing the foregoing ideas, Bamber's title could be turned upside down when studying those plays: there are tragic women, who strive to understand who they are as individuals and are continually abandoned, and comic men, whose desperate need to prove their virility is mocked.

Yet, although men are ridiculed, they are shown as being less vulnerable to patriarchy than women are:

Nevertheless, neither Demetrius nor Lysander is threatened with anything like the dreadful choice that is offered to Hermia, and both Theseus and Oberon end the play with very much the upper hand in their relationships: Titania has been thoroughly humiliated by the discovery of her love for an ass (...), and Theseus at the banquet firmly overrules Hippolyta's distaste for the mechanicals' play with her first lesson in theatre criticism and public behaviour.<sup>66</sup>

Obedience is expected of the four women, they must please first their fathers who then give them to their husbands, which they must please in their turn. Stallybrass notices: "(...) 'Woman,' unlike man, is produced as a *property* category"<sup>67</sup> and indeed women are often referred to as possessions. For example Helena's father is never present on stage, and yet

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<sup>64</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III.2.412.

<sup>65</sup> David Bevington, "'But We Are Spirits of Another Sort': The Dark Side of Love and Magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Richard Dutton (New Casebooks. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 30.

<sup>66</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 27.

<sup>67</sup> Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories," 127.

when he is mentioned it is only to present him as the owner of his daughter, as to be seen with the genitive form: “Demetrius, I’ll avouch it to his head,/Made love to Nedar’s daughter Helena,”<sup>68</sup> “My lord, this my daughter here asleep,/And this Lysander, this Demetrius is,/This Helena, old Nedar’s Helena.”<sup>69</sup> Helena’s name, unlike Demetrius’s and Lysander’s, is repeated, because there is something more to say about her - she is not a mere individual, she is someone’s property. Women are seen as objects that are to be sold into marriage as confirmed by Capulet or Egeus:

Scornful Lysander, true, he hath my love,  
And what is mine, my love shall render him;  
And she is mine, and all my right of her  
I do estate unto Demetrius<sup>70</sup>

The perfect iambic tetrameters reinforce the parallelism between line 96 and 97: “And what is mine (...)/And she is mine.” The polysyndeton, with the repetition of “and” at the beginning of the lines, adds emphasis, but also suggests a logical reflection. Those segments are both isolated before the caesura, and the words “what,” “she” and “mine” are stressed which creates a link between those words. “What” and “she” can thus be associated, reinforcing the idea that Hermia is a mere object, and the possessive pronouns are both stressed and repeated, insisting on the power Egeus has on his daughter. The same use of the possessive pronoun in a similar structure is also used by Capulet to threaten Juliet:

An you be mine, I’ll give you to my friend;  
An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets.<sup>71</sup>

This time the polysyndeton presents an opposition between the two options presented to Juliet – marriage or death, obedience or abandonment. The possessive pronoun “mine” is stressed again and linked to “you,” and the idea of possession is reinforced by what comes after the caesura: “I’ll give you to my friend.” Juliet is the object of the sentence, what is given, and

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<sup>68</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.1.106-7.

<sup>69</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV.1.127-9.

<sup>70</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.1.95-8.

<sup>71</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.192-193.

symbolically imprisoned between the subject, her father (“I”) and the indirect object, Paris (“my friend”). This idea is reinforced by the chiasmus (“you,” “mine,” “I,” “you”), which conveys the idea that Juliet is imprisoned and depends on her father’s will. The following sentence (“An you be not”) is not only a threat - if she is not her father’s, she will be abandoned - but it is also a negation of her existence, as if Juliet did not exist except as her father’s daughter, or maybe underlying that she will no longer exist for her father if she does not obey him. Capulet’s turns violent and insults Juliet: “Out, you green-sickness carrion! Out, you baggage,/You tallow-face!” “Hang thee, young baggage, disobedient wretch!” But his words also imply physical violence, “My fingers itch,”<sup>72</sup> which directors have often chosen to display:

Capulet resorts to insult, humiliation, even blackmail in order to procure his daughter’s obedience; in Trevor Nunn’s 1976 RSC production Capulet, played by John Woodvine, subjected his daughter to both mental and physical abuse in the scene.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, the theatre is the place where the violence internal to patriarchy is to be seen, displayed and then denounced. Shakespeare lets patriarchal abuse be seen; he exposes paternal violence through his plays. According to DusiBerre, “The dramatists took the concept of a man’s domination over his wife and daughters, and explored what it was like to be a woman under these conditions.”<sup>74</sup> Contrary to what Theseus says to Hermia,<sup>75</sup> fathers are forced to see their daughters’ woe in a theatre and the playwright then fulfils Hermia’s wish: “I would my father looked but with my eyes.”<sup>76</sup> Egeus and Theseus finally comply with Hermia’s choice –when Theseus lets her marry Lysander - but this happy ending is not to be associated with her gaining freedom. Although she tries to protest, she knows she is not supposed to do so: “I know not by what power I am made bold,/Nor how it may concern my modesty/In such a

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<sup>72</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.156-7, 160, 164.

<sup>73</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 21.

<sup>74</sup> DusiBerre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 92.

<sup>75</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.1.57.

<sup>76</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.1.56-7.

presence here to plead my thoughts.”<sup>77</sup> According to Butler who uses Monique Wittig’s analysis, women can hardly challenge patriarchy, because of language:

Domination occurs through a language which, in its plastic social action, creates a second-order, artificial ontology, an illusion of difference, disparity, and, consequently, hierarchy that *becomes* social reality.<sup>78</sup>

Language being a powerful way to oppress, this weapon is denied to the oppressed who cannot answer back: “In [Wittig’s] view, there are historically contingent structures characterized as heterosexual and compulsory that distribute the rights of full and authoritative speech to males and deny them to females.”<sup>79</sup> Speech, be it on stage or in real life, is recognized as giving power to the speaker, and giving that power to women would threaten patriarchy, as underlined by Belsey:

To speak is to possess meaning, to have access to the language which defines, delimits and locates power. To speak is to become a subject. But for women to speak is to threaten the system of differences which gives meaning to patriarchy.<sup>80</sup>

Religion is often a starting point to look at for understanding the origins of women’s oppression: “St Paul had made it clear that women should not speak in church: if there was anything they wanted to know they should ask their husbands at home (I Cor. 14:34-5). This principle was easily extended to other areas.”<sup>81</sup> Speaking then becomes a masculine feature and silence a feminine one, the aim clearly being to keep on denying the status of subject to women and to maintain them as “Others”: “To speak from a place of independence, from an autonomous position, to be, in other words, a subject, is to personate masculine virtue.”<sup>82</sup> Maintaining women in silence can be observed in *Romeo and Juliet* when Capulet rebukes his daughter: “speak **not**, reply not, **do not answer me**.”<sup>83</sup> The first “not” may be stressed, with an opening spondee, accentuating the negation on the speech verbs. The imperative form

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<sup>77</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.1.59-61.

<sup>78</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 161.

<sup>79</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 156.

<sup>80</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 191.

<sup>81</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 178.

<sup>82</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 181.

<sup>83</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.163.



reveals the violence behind the order, and this deprivation of speech can be observed with the masculine ending. The line ends with a stressed “me,” underlining Capulet’s power – nothing is to be pronounced after him. Even Lady Capulet seems to have interiorized this prohibition as she says to Juliet: “Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word.”<sup>84</sup> The chiasmus (Talk – not – me/I – not – speak a word) first means that Lady Capulet is done with her daughter, and might also be understood as an injunction to follow her model and not to speak. Butler’s supposition that “Discourse becomes oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression – that is, take for granted the speaking subject’s own impossibility or unintelligibility”<sup>85</sup> is clearly validated by Lady Capulet. Butler adds that not only are women deprived of speech, but that even when they speak, they have internalized the hierarchy that denies them as subjects, so they do not use the personal pronoun “I.”<sup>86</sup> It seems to be the case of the Nurse when she tries to defy her master, although she first says “I speak no treason,”<sup>87</sup> with a strong “I” pronoun and an affirmative form. But Capulet ends the line by mocking her attempt to defend Juliet “O, Godgigoden!” and from then on, she does not use “I” anymore nor “we” but “one,” which is much less specific and might indicate her progressive disappearance, “May one not speak?”<sup>88</sup> Her use of an interrogative and negative sentence shows her diminished confidence – her question is actually rhetorical, she only observes the situation without wanting to accept it. Capulet ends the line again, insulting and silencing her with “Peace, you mumbling fool!” Whereas she claimed a right to speak, in a formal turn of phrase uncharacteristic of her former garrulity, he designates her as “mumbling.” Silence thus becomes a way to create power relationships between individuals and then to recognize the authority of men since women are “enjoined to silence, discouraged from any form of speech which was not an act of submission to the

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<sup>84</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.203.

<sup>85</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 157.

<sup>86</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 159.

<sup>87</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.172.

<sup>88</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.173.

authority of their fathers and husbands.”<sup>89</sup> In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for instance, Helena and Hermia become silent upon becoming wives: “Since Helena and Hermia are evidently married between Acts IV and V, their silence suggests that in their new roles as wives they will be obedient, allowing their husbands dominance.”<sup>90</sup> Women are not even judged by what they say, but by the mere fact they say something, which is considered as indecency: “The connections between speaking and wantonness was common to legal discourse and conduct books.”<sup>91</sup> Then, not only were women not encouraged to speak, but if they did, men did not see them as rebels but as whores. Roberts explains that in the Renaissance, there was a common belief that open organs, namely the mouth, induced wild sexuality.<sup>92</sup> In *Venus and Adonis* for instance, Venus clearly speaks more than Adonis does, and it seems to illustrate her insatiable desire. Her body is made grotesque with details, which are usually hidden in literature: “By this the love-sick queen began to sweat.”<sup>93</sup> A lot of details present her as sick indeed, from the very beginning, her epithet is “sick-thoughted Venus”<sup>94</sup> and she is presented as unleashing her passion, “trembling in her passion,”<sup>95</sup> “Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force,”<sup>96</sup> “red and hot as coals of glowing fire.”<sup>97</sup> All those images present her as suffering from an excess of blood, making her determined and lustful. It helps to illustrate her inappropriate behaviour – she is not supposed to be so outgoing and uninhibited. The fear of lustful women like Venus led to the constraining of female desire. This control over women’s sexuality was assured by their being enclosed, as explained by Roberts: “In other words, fears circulating in patriarchal society about uncontrolled female

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<sup>89</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 149.

<sup>90</sup> Garner, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” 95.

<sup>91</sup> Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories,” 126.

<sup>92</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 40.

<sup>93</sup> William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Poems: Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece, and the Shorter Poems* (Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, H. R. Woudhuysen. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2007), 1.175.

<sup>94</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1.132.

<sup>95</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1.27.

<sup>96</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1.29.

<sup>97</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1.35.

sexuality led to women being confined to the home.”<sup>98</sup> This is obvious in Juliet’s line: “Where is my mother! Why, she is within./Where should she be?”<sup>99</sup> Juliet herself must have permission to leave home before doing so: “Have you got leave to go to shrift today?”<sup>100</sup> According to Phyllis Rackin, this enclosure was established during the Middle Ages: “The household was redefined as a private, feminized space, separated from the public arenas of economic and political activity, and women were increasingly confined within the rising barriers that marked its separation.”<sup>101</sup> Her distinction between the words “private” and “public” is reminiscent of the theory of the separate spheres, which contributes to set men and women even further apart by assigning them specific areas, thus giving them completely different roles and preventing them from meeting and being together, unless they are part of the same family. Yet, it does not follow that women exert authority in the private sphere, on the contrary: “Once the distinction between public and private, state and family, is established, the position offered to a man is clear, single and non-contradictory: he is subordinate to the state and in control in his household.”<sup>102</sup> The situation is clearly shown in a musical largely inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*. At the beginning of *West Side Story*, Gino hesitates to enter a room and advocates that this is a woman space. It proves that there are separate spheres - men belong to the street, and women to flats. Roberts underlined that “the street becomes identified with men and the feud.”<sup>103</sup> The fights in the beginning of the play (Act 1, scene 1) or when Mercutio and Tybalt are killed (Act III, scene 1), all occur in the street, and when Benvolio insists that they should “withdraw unto some private place”<sup>104</sup> Mercutio answers: “Men’s eyes were made to look, and let them gaze.”<sup>105</sup> Mercutio insists on

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<sup>98</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 36.

<sup>99</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.5.58-9.

<sup>100</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.5.66.

<sup>101</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford Shakespeare Topics. Oxford, England ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39.

<sup>102</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 154.

<sup>103</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 37.

<sup>104</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.50.

<sup>105</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.53.

the importance to fight in public. Porter thus summed this distinction as such: “The servants in the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet* establish the play’s initial public, male, pragmatic space as one of edgy quarrelsomeness (...)”<sup>106</sup> and “The play’s other (and as it were tonic) main pragmatic space (...) is the withdrawn, private female and domestic space of the Capulet household (...)”<sup>107</sup> It is then interesting to see that the further we go into the play, the more private space we enter – from the street we move to Capulet’s House, to the orchard and Juliet’s balcony, and finally to her room, which Roberts designates as “the site of independence and disobedience, as well as restriction and enclosure.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, enclosure does not prevent Juliet from consuming her love with Romeo, leading to hope for resistance and opposition to patriarchy. To sum up: “The surveillance of women concentrated upon three specific areas: the mouth, chastity, the threshold of the house.”<sup>109</sup>

For all those reasons, Lisa Hopkins associates women to “subaltern figure[s],”<sup>110</sup> along the lines of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s following analysis: “Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of ‘woman’ seems most problematic in this context.”<sup>111</sup> The question is whether woman can still have agency, or if they always act according to men’s decisions. In this essay, Spivak gives a specific example: “A young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, hanged herself in her father’s modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926.”<sup>112</sup> The woman, deprived of speech and choice, chose death and her own body - she waited for her menstruation to prove that her suicide had not been caused by an unwanted pregnancy – to express herself. Death and control over one’s body then seem to be the last recourse women have to resist patriarchal domination. Their last mark of resistance is self-erasure, depriving

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<sup>106</sup> Joseph A. Porter, *Shakespeare’s Mercutio: His History and Drama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 101.

<sup>107</sup> Porter, *Shakespeare’s Mercutio*, 101.

<sup>108</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 37.

<sup>109</sup> Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories,” 126.

<sup>110</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 14.

<sup>111</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 294.

<sup>112</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 307.

men of that power over themselves. Juliet considers that solution: “If all else fail, myself have power to die.”<sup>113</sup> In this case, her affirmation of “power” is underlined by the use of “myself” instead of “I,” and the word “die,” being her last word before her exit and closing act IV, not only shows tragic irony, because this will indeed be her final decision, but also that it is the last resort she has. Later on in the scene, when she grows impatient with Friar Lawrence “Be not so long to speak. I long to die,/If what thou speak’st speak not of remedy,”<sup>114</sup> once again, “die” is underlined because it is part of a run-on-line and shows that she still has one last option. Yet, Juliet is an exception; tragedy ends with death, so her will is not incompatible with the genre used. But in comedies, which cannot accommodate the death of its main characters, patriarchy is particularly overwhelming since not only are women deprived of speech, but also of choice over their destiny and body. This is the case of Hermia when Theseus pretends to give her a choice:

Upon that day either prepare to die  
For disobedience to your father’s will,  
Or else to wed Demetrius as he would,  
Or on Diana’s altar to protest,  
For aye, austerity and single life.<sup>115</sup>

Hermia cannot, as Juliet could, choose death as the last possibility to affirm her identity, because instead of being interpreted as an act of rebellion, it would on the contrary reaffirm patriarchal power by associating it to a punishment “for disobedience to [her] father’s will.” Furthermore, as Louis Montrose notes, Theseus actually threatens her of depriving her of the last power she has on herself: “Theseus appropriates the source of Hermia’s fragile power: her ability to deny men access to her body. He usurps the power of virginity by imposing upon Hermia his own power to deny her the use of her body.”<sup>116</sup> Men’s power is then total, and

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<sup>113</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.1.243.

<sup>114</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.1.66-7.

<sup>115</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.1.86-90.

<sup>116</sup> Louis Adrian Montrose, “‘Shaping Fantasies’: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture,” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Richard Dutton (New Casebooks. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 109.

women have absolutely no way to escape it; until the end of the play, Hermia's fate depends on Theseus's good-will. An issue Spivak sadly verifies when she says: "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" and "The subaltern cannot speak."<sup>117</sup> Somehow, in this case, she focuses on "the subaltern as female" but she also examines different figures of "subaltern" and links her reflection with racism, which is not absent either from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and can be linked to sexism, another kind of oppression, particularly when Lysander exclaims: "Who will not change a raven for a dove?"<sup>118</sup> Ania Loomba commented this line as such: "What distinguished the two birds is not just their color but also their temperaments – ravens being quarrelsome and doves meek."<sup>119</sup> Lysander would then express his will to have a meek partner rather than a quarrelsome one; he wants his partner to have what are thought to be feminine qualities. But it must not be forgotten that Lysander speaks under a charm, he is not true, and it might suggest that Shakespeare disapprove that discourse by having a charmed character deliver it. As Novy mentions: "We know it is potion and not reason."<sup>120</sup> Yet she goes on by noting that Lysander also calls Hermia "Ethiop" and "tawny Tartar" at the moment he does not love her anymore and these are clearly meant to be insults: "Away, you Ethiop,"<sup>121</sup> "Out, tawny Tartar, out!"<sup>122</sup> Lysander's feeling of disgust is clearly associated to the black colour, which may also have a racist undertone that adds to sexist ones. Ania Loomba studied intersectionality - that is the different forms of oppression an individual might undergo because s/he belongs to different oppressed groups. Although Hermia is not said to be black, the insults Lysander throws at her show the patriarchal dimension of the scene, because he both imposes on her a vision of woman as being necessarily meek, and rejects her as Other by designating her as black and associating beauty with whiteness. This is

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<sup>117</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 308.

<sup>118</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.2.120.

<sup>119</sup> Ania Loomba, "The Great Indian Vanishing Trick," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympha Callaghan (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 5. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 4.

<sup>120</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 138.

<sup>121</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III.2.257.

<sup>122</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III.2.263.

not the only moment in the play during which gender and racism are linked. The mere fact Oberon and Titania fight over “A lovely boy stolen, from an Indian king”<sup>123</sup> is relevant of the imperialist dimension of the play, which must not be separated from the patriarchal one, as underlined by Loomba.<sup>124</sup> It must not be forgotten indeed that although Titania presents the child as being an orphan, Puck says he has been “stolen” and the fact the king is “Indian” is not simply exotic, but proves Oberon’s will of domination both over his wife and that Indian king. Then, imperialism as well as sexism display a will of domination and submission of who is perceived as Other, be it a woman or an Indian king. Loomba captures this idea when she says: “The patriarchal will is thus also an imperialist will.”<sup>125</sup> Those two terms can also be linked because of the dimension of conquest they imply. To that extent, Theseus is a good example of a patriarchal figure too. At the very beginning of the play, he addresses his bride as such: “Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword/And won thy love doing thee injuries”<sup>126</sup> It does not only take the notion of love conquest too literally, it proves that wooing a woman was perceived as colonizing a new territory: “Within the dominant discourses of early modern England, then, woman’s body could be both symbolic map of the ‘civilized’ and the dangerous terrain that had to be colonized.”<sup>127</sup> Wooing a woman is then less a will to seduce someone than to subject someone, to make of that person one’s own possession. By scanning the line, it is obvious that although Theseus is addressing Hippolyta, her presence is undermined: neither “thee” nor “thy” are stressed, but the words referring to violence and wooing are: “wooed,” “sword,” “won,” “love,” “injuries.” It is all the more relevant since Hippolyta is the Queen of Amazons. By abusing her, Theseus showed his power over the embodiment of a female-centred society in order to make patriarchy triumph instead.

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<sup>123</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.22

<sup>124</sup> Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick,” 166.

<sup>125</sup> Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick,” 166.

<sup>126</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.1.16-7.

<sup>127</sup> Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories,” 133.

Shakespeare's plays and poem thus reflect the misogynistic world in which they were produced, which does not mean that they endorse patriarchy. The poet-playwright uses genres, which the audience is used to but only to illustrate women's isolation, identity, struggles and to show the usually hidden violence that maintains them into submission. He also uses comedy to mock men's necessity to prove their virility. Snyder indicates that the theatregoer would watch plays that actually criticize ordinary injustices:

He would be used to seeing the playwright overturn his everyday varieties – the demands of retributive justice, the inexorable progress of time, the authority of parents over children, the superiority of men over women, the law of averages, even the basic processes of cause and effect – seeing this not with discomfort but with delight.<sup>128</sup>

Shakespeare is aware of the power relations gender implies as well as of their arbitrariness and he denounces them, as Michael Bogdanov puts it: "Shakespeare lays the blame at the door of society for the way in which women are treated."<sup>129</sup> Yet Shakespeare does not only criticize patriarchy and display its main features, he also tries to understand how it is established, how gender progressively becomes violent and tries to understand the anxieties and desires that can dwell behind it. To show how arbitrary those rules are, a play may show the way they are constructed, how people are educated according to their gender and are supposed to achieve it, to perfectly perform it once they reach adulthood.

## 2. Liminality, rite of passage and gender.

When Jacques in *As You Like It* declares that we all act according to our role, and makes a distinction between men and women, he also draws a distinction between the different ages of life:

And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first infant,

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<sup>128</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 36-7.

<sup>129</sup> Michael Bogdanov, ed. *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* Ed. John Elsom (London ; New York: Routledge in association with the International Association of Theatre Critics, 1989), 70.



Mewling and pucking in the nurse's arms,  
 Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel  
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
 Unwillingly to school; and then the lover,  
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
 Made to his mistress' eyebrow (...) <sup>130</sup>

He focuses on the different stages of childhood, and considers being a lover as a decisive step, a moment when someone becomes an adult; hence the importance of the youth of Shakespeare's lovers in *Venus and Adonis*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare emphasised how young the characters are. For instance, Adonis often refers to his "unripe years"<sup>131</sup> to explain his disdain for Venus. He is often compared to a fruit "The mellow plum doth fall, the green sticks fast,/Or being early plucked is sour to taste,"<sup>132</sup> "The text is old, the orator too green."<sup>133</sup> He is also associated to a "forward infant."<sup>134</sup> Likewise, different characters insist on Juliet's youth, likening her growth to that of a fruit, like her father for instance:

My child is yet a stranger in the world;  
 She hath not seen the change of fourteen years.  
 Let two more summers wither in their pride  
 Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride. <sup>135</sup>

As Smith notes: "Juliet and Romeo each has a counterpart to point up their extreme youth – the old Nurse for Juliet and Friar Laurence for Romeo."<sup>136</sup> Juliet's age is also known, with a degree of specificity, which is unusual for Shakespeare's drama.<sup>137</sup> Then, if he specifies it, this must be no detail, but an important feature of the play, all the more so as this is something he added. Juliet is 16 in Brooke's version of the story (1562), yet Shakespeare lowered her age to 13.<sup>138</sup> This is the age of puberty for girls. Juliet is then introduced to us in a moment of

<sup>130</sup> Shakespeare, *As You like It*, II.7.140-150.

<sup>131</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 524.

<sup>132</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 527-8.

<sup>133</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 806.

<sup>134</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 562.

<sup>135</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.2.8-11.

<sup>136</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 79.

<sup>137</sup> Stanley Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 152.

<sup>138</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 14.

transition and more precisely, the moment when she evolves from childhood to adulthood.

Bruce Smith considered the theatre as particularly adequate to represent such a moment:

For actors and audiences, as Victor Turner points out, the theatrical performance itself takes place 'on the threshold' (Latin *limen*), in a state of liminality between life before the play and after the play. In this sense, *every* theatrical performance is about life passage.<sup>139</sup>

What is particularly interesting is that this transition is related to gender. Judith Butler explains why, quoting Rubin: "before the transformation of a biological male or female into a gendered man or woman, 'each child contains all of the sexual possibilities available to human expression' (189)."<sup>140</sup> Hence the fact all the main characters of the works studied should be so young - they are not children anymore but they are still to become men and women. Rubin discusses the pre-Oedipal child, but I would like to extend her reflection to puberty, since this is when biological difference becomes visible and when gender norms become all the more powerful. However, it does not imply that gender norms and rules do not apply to children. When discussing gender, education must be taken into account, because the children go through a process that will teach them the role they are supposed to play:

In particular, [Rubin] understands that the 'sex/gender system,' the regulated cultural mechanism of transforming biological males and females into discrete and hierarchized genders, is at once mandated by cultural institutions (the family, the residual forms of the 'exchange of women,' obligatory heterosexuality) and inculcated through the laws which structure and propel individual psychic development.<sup>141</sup>

Family is indeed the first social circle a child is acquainted with, and parents expect their children to become adults, or more specifically, men and women. During childhood indeed, there was no difference between boys and girls in early modern England: "Up to age 7 boys and girls were dressed alike in 'coats' (gowns) and aprons."<sup>142</sup> There is no real physical difference between a baby girl and a baby boy, and until the age of seven, culture respected this absence of difference in nature. When boys and girls grew and started to be expected to

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<sup>139</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 86.

<sup>140</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 100.

<sup>141</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger*, pp. 267-319 quoted in Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 99-100.

<sup>142</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 76.

behave differently, clothing became gendered. Education then creates differences where nature did not put any yet.

Putting boys into doublets and hose at age 7 – the so called ‘breeching’ of boys – marked the beginning of a gendered distinction in child-rearing that might also include removing a boy from his mother’s care and consigning his keeping and education to a male authority figure.<sup>143</sup>

This explains why Oberon is so reluctant to having Titania keep the changeling boy with her. The boy must leave the feminine, mother space to find a more masculine, father one. Ania Loomba presents this separation of mother and child in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as “(...) a psychoanalytic analysis of overbearing mothers, jealous fathers, and male children who need to be torn away from one to the other.”<sup>144</sup> It is as if the mother would had a bad influence on her male child and would make him effeminate, “But she perforce withholds the loved boy,/Crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her joy”<sup>145</sup> whereas Oberon wants to make the child “Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild.”<sup>146</sup> This distinction between the maternal world and the paternal one is made particularly obvious in Elijah Moshinsk’s adaptation of the play for the BBC in 1981. Helen Mirren is Titania and all the fairies are children, which she takes care of, whereas grown-up men, dressed as knights, surround Oberon. Titania actually challenges the paternal right and power that Egeus embodies at the beginning of the play:

Titania’s intimacy with the Indian boy’s mother highlights the contrast between that female-centered world from which fathers are excluded and an Athens in which, as Montrose points out, fathers have absolute right over their daughters and are seen to be the sole creators of their children.<sup>147</sup>

Shakespeare’s work depicts the wood as a world upside down where other possibilities than the father’s almighty power may exist. It is no coincidence that the play should take place in Athens, which is historically the epitome of patriarchy: “Athenian patriarchal structures in the

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<sup>143</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 76.

<sup>144</sup> Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick,” 165.

<sup>145</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.26-7.

<sup>146</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.25.

<sup>147</sup> Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick,” 173.

play are established in implicit opposition to this spectre of female and racial otherness.”<sup>148</sup> This is a subject that has been widely explored by Nicole Loraux in *Les Enfants d’Athéna*, in which she studies the position of women in this patriarchal world, the fact that the Athenians worshipped Athena for being her father’s daughter whereas they had scorned Hephaestus for being his mother’s son. This is reminiscent of the difference between Titania’s changeling boy and Egeus’s Hermia. First, Loraux notes the ambiguities the Athenian law may present: “il y a la loi péricléenne qui dit que l’on naît de deux et il y a la déesse poliaide qui est née d’un (...).”<sup>149</sup> The myth of the single-parent birth illustrates the Athenian fantasy of a masculine society with no woman, and in which even reproduction could exist without female agency. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus describes Egeus as having conceived Hermia all alone - throughout the play, there is absolutely no mentioning of her mother:

To you your father should be as a god,  
One that composed your beauties; yea, and one  
To whom you are but as a form in wax,  
By him imprinted, and within his power  
To leave the figure, or disfigure it.<sup>150</sup>

Montrose designates those lines as “a fantasy of male parthenogenesis”<sup>151</sup> which echoes Loraux’s reflections about Athens. Moreover, Hermia is described as a work of art, which helps to designate her only as a physical envelop and denies her feelings, as the restrictive sentence shows “but as a form in wax” or “the figure” and the pronoun “it” instead of “you.” Presenting her as such separates the father’s creation from the mother’s: “The father’s daughter is shaped from without; the mother’s son comes from within her body.”<sup>152</sup> Titania’s child is associated to mystery and chance whereas Hermia is associated to culture and achievement, which leads to describe Egeus through several hyperbolic formulae: “god,” “by

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<sup>148</sup> Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick,” 173.

<sup>149</sup> “There is on the one hand the Periclean law, which says one is born out of two and on the other the Polias goddess who is born out of one” (My translation). Nicole Loraux, *Les enfants d’Athéna: idées athéniennes sur la citoyenneté et la division des sexes*. (Points Sciences humaines 214. Paris: Points Seuil, 2007), 18.

<sup>150</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.I.47-51.

<sup>151</sup> Montrose, ““Shaping Fantasies,”” 113.

<sup>152</sup> Montrose, ““Shaping Fantasies,”” 114-5.

him imprinted,” “his power/To leave the figure, or disfigure it” thus affirming patriarchal power that was dominating in early modern England: “Patriarchalism is a regular feature of family life in which the natural event of procreation becomes an extension of male prerogative and male power.”<sup>153</sup> There is an endeavour to erase women even from the very process that requires them –maternity – by presenting them as a mere container. Yet, in the play, not only is there a supremacy of the father in reproduction, but also a total erasure of the mother in the rest of the plot: “(...) the play seems specifically to marginalise, if not exclude, the nurturing, vessel-like relationship of mother to child, which traditionally tempers the inseminating, constitutive and ‘imprinting’ role of the father.”<sup>154</sup> All mothers are absent. Titania’s votaress, the real mother of the child is dead: “But she, being mortal, of that boy die;”<sup>155</sup> we know absolutely nothing of Helena’s and Hermia’s mothers and Hippolyta’s marriage represents the failure of matrilineal society. In the mythology, Hippolyta is Queen of Amazons, a society of female warriors with no men in which only baby girls are kept. Yet, although Hippolyta marries Theseus and although Titania finally gives up the child to her husband, they challenge patriarchy by merely existing and proposing another scheme of society, denying any right to husbands over their wives and children. Montrose thus says of the play that there is “a proposition about the genesis of gender and power: men make women, and make themselves through the medium of women.”<sup>156</sup>

Yet, Montrose’s analysis could also be understood in another way. Men “make themselves through the medium of women” of course imply that they need women for reproduction, but also that they need them to validate their manhood. As a result, men’s need for power over women might actually be a way to counterbalance some fear men have of

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<sup>153</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, “Fatherly Authority: The Politics of Stuart Family Images” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early modern Europe*, ed Margaret W., Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 16.

<sup>154</sup> Terence Hawkes, “Or,” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Richard Dutton (New Casebooks. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 227.

<sup>155</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.135.

<sup>156</sup> Montrose, “‘Shaping Fantasies,’” 115.

women, not because of their capacity for reproduction, but for their dependence to them. The presence of Hippolyta, once again, embodies this fear:

Amazonian mythology seems symbolically to embody and to control a collective anxiety about the power of the female not only to dominate or reject the male but to create and destroy him. It is an ironic acknowledgement by an androcentric culture of the degree to which men are in fact dependent upon women: upon mothers and nurses, for their birth and nurture; upon mistresses and wives, for the validation of their manhood.<sup>157</sup>

Paradoxically, after a necessary separation between mother and child, boys would be made men thanks to women. To evolve from child to adult, there must be a rite of passage, in which gender is accomplished in a way, and in which a child fully becomes a man or a woman. Yet there are different manners to achieve that rite. The first one seems to be heterosexual love, as mentioned in Jacques's speech. All the characters evolve towards marriage, or at least union.

What Shakespeare's marrying couples *do* experience is liminality. It is the characteristic of in-betweenness (...). Hence the strange fictional worlds in which Shakespeare's husbands- and wives-to-be find one another (...).<sup>158</sup>

The worlds mentioned can be associated to the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for instance, in which the love of the characters for one another will be questioned. This moment is perceived as a difficult one; the lovers have to deserve marriage after having endured obstacles. B. Smith considers those moments as "instances of service or apprenticeship, as lessons in living that prepare boys to be men."<sup>159</sup> He advocates that those moments are even more crucial for boys than for girls because "Boys are constantly being challenged to 'prove' their masculinity in ways that girls are never challenged to prove their femininity."<sup>160</sup> Despite differences between eras and places, what remains constant is that "(...) masculinity must be *achieved*."<sup>161</sup> Romeo's despair suggests as much when he cries after Tybalt's death:

Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art.  
Thy tears are womanish, thy wild acts denote

<sup>157</sup> Montrose, "Shaping Fantasies," 108.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 86-7.

<sup>159</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 85.

<sup>160</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 58.

<sup>161</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 2.

The unreasonable fury of a beast.  
Unseemly woman in a seeming man,  
And ill-beseeming beast in seeming both!<sup>162</sup>

The polyptoton (unseemly/ seeming/ ill-beseeming/ seeming) here lays emphasis on the appearance, and this passage could then be linked to Butler's idea that gender is performative. Romeo's identity as a man depends on his behaviour and on what he *seems* to be. Not playing the role of man, by shedding tears which are associated to women, Romeo is denied the status of man, and thus represents an "ill-seeming beast," proving that masculinity and femininity are completely opposed notions and that anything that should be positioned in-between is abomination. Shakespeare found this notion of in-betweenness in Brooke's earlier version of the story: "'Art thou,' quoth he, 'a man? Thy shape saith, so thou art; /Thy crying, and thy weeping eyes denote a woman's heart'"<sup>163</sup> Brooke's opposition between "shape" and "heart" prove that being born a male is not enough to be a man, this must be accomplished, or rather, performed. This idea is also to be found when Venus says to a scorning Adonis: "Thou art no man, though of a man's complexion."<sup>164</sup> According to Coppélia Kahn: "Shakespeare's interest in masculine identity centers on this adult struggle to achieve a second birth into manhood."<sup>165</sup> This is particularly obvious when studying *Venus and Adonis*. Adonis is supposed to become a man through his union with Venus. Her being associated both to a mistress and a mother then emphasises this "second birth." She often tries to embrace him the way a mother would: "So fastened in her arms Adonis lies,"<sup>166</sup> "Sometimes her arms enfold him like a band."<sup>167</sup> The transition is made particularly obvious with the line "(...) milk and blood being mingled together." Milk is clearly associated to infancy whereas blood can represent the loss of virginity. Sexuality is perceived as a rite of passage that would make of

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<sup>162</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.3.108-112.

<sup>163</sup> Arthur Brooke, *Romeus and Juliet* (New Shakespeare Society. Publications. Ser. III: Originals and Analogues. London: Trübner, 1875), 1.353-4, p. 50.

<sup>164</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1.215.

<sup>165</sup> Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 12.

<sup>166</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 68.

<sup>167</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 225.

Adonis a man through reproduction: “Thou wast begot: to get it is thy duty,”<sup>168</sup> “By law of nature thou art bound to breed.”<sup>169</sup> Since Adonis rejects her, Venus reminds him that his virility is at stake by mentioning “the stern and direful god of war”<sup>170</sup> as well as phallic symbols: “Over my altar hath he hung his lance.”<sup>171</sup> This moment proves how “Paradoxically, [men’s] power over women also makes them vulnerable to women”<sup>172</sup> because even the god of war needs Venus to validate his masculinity but also for sexual intercourse and then becomes somewhat overruled by her: “Yet hath he been my captive and my slave,/And begged for that which thou unasked shalt have.”<sup>173</sup> However Adonis refuses this rite, not just because of his youth, but because of its form: “‘I know not love,’ quoth he, ‘nor will not know it,/Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it.’”<sup>174</sup> The reference to the boar shows that Adonis prefers an activity, seen as masculine to women. Through Venus, he rejects Love: “He does not merely shun her as a particular woman, for she is a goddess and represents love, no matter how realistically Shakespeare portrays her. Rather, in repudiating her, he repudiates love itself.”<sup>175</sup> Because of it, and since it means he will not reproduce himself, he is compared to Narcissus, which foreshadows his death to come:

Is thine own heart to thine own face affected ?  
 (...)
 Narcissus so himself himself forsook,  
 And died to kiss his shadow in the brook.<sup>176</sup>

This comparison made Coppélia Kahn say: “he is punished for his resistance by being robbed of his individuality, and in his case, of his manhood.”<sup>177</sup> He is indeed compared to feminine

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<sup>168</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 168.

<sup>169</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 171.

<sup>170</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 98.

<sup>171</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 103.

<sup>172</sup> Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, 17.

<sup>173</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 101-2.

<sup>174</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 409-410.

<sup>175</sup> Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, 29.

<sup>176</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 157-162.

<sup>177</sup> Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, 37.



creature: “Thy mermaid’s voice”<sup>178</sup> and is compelled to obedience (“Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,”<sup>179</sup> “He now obeys and no more resisteth,”<sup>180</sup>) and the mere fact he called “Adon”<sup>181</sup> instead of Adonis, which may induce that he is diminished. Since he cannot achieve this “second birth into manhood,” Adonis eventually dies, killed by the boar. According to Coppélia Kahn, “Shakespeare is saying that the life apart from eros is death, and that for a man, sexual love of woman is vital to masculinity.”<sup>182</sup> Since Adonis failed to love Venus, he cannot live on and is thus changed into a flower – representing virginity – and kept by Venus who is associated to a mother again: “Lo, in this hollow cradle take thy rest,/My throbbing heart shall rock thee day and night”<sup>183</sup> proving Adonis’ failure to become an adult. Women to him shall never be mistresses, only mothers. In the mythology, Adonis does love Venus, so Shakespeare changed the original story, which shows an interest in men and women relationships and how “structures of male dominance grow out of and mask fears of female power and of male feminization and powerlessness.”<sup>184</sup>

These “fears” may explain male violence towards women, as well as their desire to keep power over them. It is made particularly obvious in Brooke’s *Romeus and Juliet* that inspired Shakespeare. When Romeus sees Juliet for the first time, she is described as “a maid, right fair, of perfect shape,/Which Theseus or Paris would have chosen to their rape.”<sup>185</sup> Interestingly enough, Theseus and Paris are important characters of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, willing to force young girls to marry someone without consent. Rape takes an important place in Shakespeare’s plays. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Demetrius threatens Helena several times:

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<sup>178</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 429.

<sup>179</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 549.

<sup>180</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 563.

<sup>181</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 769.

<sup>182</sup> Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, 42.

<sup>183</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1186-7.

<sup>184</sup> Swift Lenz, Greene and Thomas Neely, ed. *The Woman’s Part*, 9.

<sup>185</sup> Brooke, *Romeus and Juliet*, l. 197-8, p. 8.

You do impeach your modesty too much,  
 (...)
 To trust the opportunity of night  
 And the ill counsel of a desert place  
 With the rich worth of your virginity.<sup>186</sup>

Further on, he adds: "Or if thou follow me, do not believe/But I shall do thee mischief in the wood."<sup>187</sup> Those threats are among the first words Demetrius addresses to Helena, presenting their relationship as violent. Likewise, the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* starts with Samson and Gregory's threats towards the Montague girls: "'Tis true, and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall (...)"<sup>188</sup> "Me they shall feel while I am able to stand, and 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh."<sup>189</sup> The word "stand" obviously refers to an erection and "piece of flesh" to the penis. The association between sexual parts and violence (the two men carry the metaphor when drawing their swords: "Draw thy tool,"<sup>190</sup> "My naked weapon is out"<sup>191</sup>) plays a "dramatic function," as Molly Mahood underlines: "here its purpose is to make explicit, at the beginning of the love tragedy, one possible relationship between man and woman: a brutal male dominance expressed in sadistic quibbles."<sup>192</sup> According to Coppélia Kahn, the violence the men then display allows them not to be separated from their fathers – whose house they defend against the other family – and to escape women's influence: "(...) it is phallic violence that ties men to their fathers, the violence of the feud. This violence also serves as a defense against women, love, and sex, as the hunt did for Adonis."<sup>193</sup> This violence is associated to the feud, and proves just as deadly as Adonis' will to go hunting: "The feud is the deadly rite-de-passage which promotes masculinity at the price of life."<sup>194</sup> To a certain extent, men try to pass their rite-of-passage

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<sup>186</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.1.214-9.

<sup>187</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.1.236-7.

<sup>188</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.14-5.

<sup>189</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.27-8.

<sup>190</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.30.

<sup>191</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.32.

<sup>192</sup> Quoted in Roberts. *William Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet*, 61-2.

<sup>193</sup> Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 83.

<sup>194</sup> Coppélia Kahn, "Coming of Age in Verona." *Modern Language Studies* 8, no. 1 (1977), 5.

towards manhood by doing the exact contrary of what Venus suggests, instead they reject women and womanish behaviour. It fosters violence, not only towards women, but also towards other men, through the quarrel that opposes the Capulets and the Montagues. The reason of their “grudge”<sup>195</sup> is never revealed, because it is a mere pretext to show the results of violence to prove one’s masculinity; it is a way to introduce the feud, which is at the core of the play and can be defined as such: “The feud fosters a culture of masculinity which is defined by violence, identified with fathers, and performed by the assertion of a man’s aggressive (hetero)sexual power and prowess.”<sup>196</sup> This association of violence and loyalty to the father clearly links the feud to patriarchy, “which Shakespeare shows to be tragically self-destructive,”<sup>197</sup> because like Adonis, if men do not prove their masculinity, they die. This explain why Romeo’s friends try to reassert bound between men and to lead him away from love, as to make him manlier. They often appeal to his virility: “If love be rough with you, be rough with love/Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down.”<sup>198</sup> “Prick” has a bawdy meaning (“that is, quell your erection”<sup>199</sup>), and the words “rough” and “beat down” also show that love is associated with violence and with male absence of emotion. Once Romeo stops speaking about Rosaline and joins Mercutio in a playful dialogue in Act II, scene 4, Mercutio declares: “Why, is not this better now than groaning for love? Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo, now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature (...).”<sup>200</sup> Those last words may hint at Romeo’s usual temper as well as to his masculinity. His sex (“by nature”) is corroborated by his masculine behaviour (“by art”). Moreover, Romeo’s relationship to his friends also prove the ambiguity of male bounds, which exist without being too tight so that men dissociate themselves from women and from womanish characteristics: “One very

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<sup>195</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Prol.3.

<sup>196</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 61.

<sup>197</sup> Kahn, “Coming of Age in Verona,” 5.

<sup>198</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.4.37-8.

<sup>199</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 154.

<sup>200</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.85-7.

important way in which males prove their masculinity is by bonding with other males – but at the same time keeping other males at an emotionally safe distance.”<sup>201</sup> Because being emotionally attached to men is associated to woman behaviour. The feud indeed displays a binary system; if something is not masculine, it is necessarily feminine and vice versa. Hence, in Act III, scene 1, when Romeo refuses to fight Tybalt, he is associated to a woman: “Romeo’s denial of the conventional codes of aggressive, feuding, masculine honour makes him what a woman should supposedly be: submissive.”<sup>202</sup> That is the reason why Mercutio exclaims: “O calm, dishonourable, vile submission!”<sup>203</sup> It is important that he should mention honour, since although it refers to the defence of the father’s house, this is a virtue that was debated in early modern England as Dusiinberre notes: “The Humanists attacked honour as part of an aristocratic culture glorifying war.”<sup>204</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* might thus be imprinted with some Humanist influence since it criticizes honour and the feud as “tragically self-destructive.”<sup>205</sup> Romeo then stands out in this dominating scheme:

To participate in the masculine ethic of the play is to participate in the feud, which defines relations among men as intensely competitive, and relations with women as controlling and violent (...) That Romeo initially rejects this ethic would seem to redefine the nature and structure of male/female relationships.<sup>206</sup>

In fact, neither Romeo nor Juliet seem to recognize themselves either in a violent heterosexual love or in the feud; they propose a new model, that would actually be adequate with Humanist and Protestant ideas by asserting themselves as individuals and not only as the descendants of their fathers’ house. The play then fosters a conflict between generations, which is quite usual; it is also the plot of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. To emphasise this conflict, Shakespeare particularly exaggerates the differences between the old and the young

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<sup>201</sup> Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*, 2.

<sup>202</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 54.

<sup>203</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.72.

<sup>204</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 33.

<sup>205</sup> Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, 84.

<sup>206</sup> Madelon Gohlke, “‘I wooed thee with my sword’: Shakespeare’s Tragic Paradigms” in *The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983), 152.

as Wells notices: “Shakespeare is making a dramatic contrast between the generations – both Lord Montague and Old Capulet are portrayed as far older men than we might expect in view of the age of their children (...).”<sup>207</sup> This is quite a typical pattern in plays, as Catherine Belsey notes:

The plays (...), since fiction depends on obstacles to the implementation of good sense, dwell in detail on the dangers and difficulties which ensue when parental choice fails to coincide with the wishes of the children. Renaissance comedy inherits this motif from Plautus and Terence, and here the sympathy of the audience is invariably invoked in favour of the children.<sup>208</sup>

A happy ending rewards this sympathy. In a comedy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for instance, “Authority joins with youth to reject the irrational will of the old man”<sup>209</sup> when Theseus declares: “Egeus, I will overbear your will.”<sup>210</sup> Somehow, this scheme is not only fit for comedies: “In tragic treatments of the theme too (...), the audience is usually invited to endorse young love as opposed to aged greed, obstinacy or hypocrisy,”<sup>211</sup> except tragedy, and in this case *Romeo and Juliet*, presents it as a social reflection about the place of children, daughters more particularly, and their right to make their own decision. It is also a way to depict a conflict between Old Age and New Age, which is not only the one between parents and children but also the one between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and the different visions of women and family they encompass:

The emergence of new attitudes exacerbates conflict between the generations. The young identify with the new, the old with the attitudes which determined their own moral development. In Elizabethan drama children assert the freedom claimed for them by the reformers against the authoritarianism of their parents’ (...)<sup>212</sup>

But above all, the clash between generations is presented as a refusal on the youths’ part to perpetuate the feud. From the very beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*, the Prologue mentions this

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<sup>207</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 152.

<sup>208</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 201.

<sup>209</sup> Elliot Krieger, “*A Midsummer Night's Dream*,” in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Richard Dutton (New Casebooks. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 47.

<sup>210</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV.1.178.

<sup>211</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 201.

<sup>212</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 41.

conflict: “From ancient grudge break to new mutiny.”<sup>213</sup> The adjectives “ancient” and “new” suggests that the feud is supposed to be perpetrated. Romeo and Juliet do not perpetuate it since they fall in love with their enemy, and the comedy scheme turns out to be a tragic subject. It is not that surprising since according to J.M.R. Margeson in *The Origins of English Tragedy* there are several paradigms of tragedy in the sixteenth-century: “Each of these paradigms positions the hero differently *vis-à-vis* the world around him.”<sup>214</sup> Smith completes this analysis by adding: “In a romance tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet* the protagonists/lovers are overthrown by the forces of Fortune.”<sup>215</sup> That is to say that *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy because of the inadequacy of the lovers to the world around them whereas in Brooke’s version, it was a tragedy because of the lovers’ failures:

Reader, is this tragical matter written, to describe unto thee a couple of unfortunate lovers, thrilling themselves to dishonest desire; neglecting the authority and advice of parents and friends; conferring their principal counsels with drunken gossips and superstitious friars (the naturally fit instruments of unchastity); attempting all adventures of peril for th’attaining of their wished lust; using auricular confession, the key of whoredom and treason, for furtherance of their purpose; abusing the honourable name of lawful marriage to cloak the shame of stolen contracts; finally by all means of dishonest life hastening to most unhappy death.<sup>216</sup>

The lengthy accumulation of reproaches proves that Brooke considers the two protagonists as responsible for their death, whereas Shakespeare sees it more as the tragic fight of individuals against fate and society: “in Shakespeare’s version the fate of that desire is presented as profound injustice as much as proper punishment.”<sup>217</sup> Coppélia Kahn confirms this theory by saying that the play cannot be seen as “a tragedy of character in the Aristotelian sense, in which the tragedy results because the hero and heroine fail to ‘love moderately.’”<sup>218</sup> Instead, *Romeo and Juliet* is considered as a “domestic tragedy”<sup>219</sup> or “tragedy of youth,”<sup>220</sup> which is

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<sup>213</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Prol.3.

<sup>214</sup> J.M.R. Margeson, *The Origins of English Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), quoted in Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 138.

<sup>215</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 138.

<sup>216</sup> Brooke, “To the Reader” in *Romeus and Juliet*, lxvi.

<sup>217</sup> Callaghan, *The Weyward Sisters*, 59.

<sup>218</sup> Kahn, “Coming of Age in Verona,” 5-6.

<sup>219</sup> Kahn, “Coming of Age in Verona,” 6.

somewhat unusual. Tragedy is supposed to become an example, so usually, it is drawn from history and presents grand heroes such as Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, or at least adults like King Lear or Macbeth. Yet *Romeo and Juliet* represents an exception. First, Shakespeare's inspiration for that play is quite unusual: "its sources are typically *novelle* rather than well-known histories."<sup>221</sup> That is to say that common people become protagonists of a genre generally made for kings and queens. It is noteworthy that Shakespeare should have used a plot and characters usually present in comedy and turned it into a tragedy. Roberts explains this choice as the following: "Shakespeare effectively invites the audience to consider adolescent passion and parent-child relations as the stuff of serious drama."<sup>222</sup> In fact, this play is not merely confined to the domestic area, although it mainly focuses on families and houses. Belsey considers that: "The family, separated from the public realm of politics, none the less becomes a microcosm of it and, by practice and by precept, a training ground for the ready acceptance for the power relations established in the social body."<sup>223</sup> Thus, Shakespeare's depiction of the pressure the Montague and Capulet children undergo might also show the suffering of young people in society when it comes to define their own identity and individuality, and this particular example may lead to a more general reflection. Romeo and Juliet try not to define themselves according to the feud and to become adults according to their own identities. The play turns into a tragedy and the death of the protagonists reveals their failure to exist apart from what their families and what society expect of them:

In the course of the action, Romeo and Juliet create and try to preserve new identities as adults apart from the feud, but it blocks their every attempt. Metaphorically, it devours them in the 'detestable maw' of the Capulet's monument, a symbol of the patriarchy's destructive power over its children.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 79.

<sup>221</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 56.

<sup>222</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 12.

<sup>223</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 146.

<sup>224</sup> Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 85.

Part of this destructive power was also Capulet's will to master his daughter, to reproduce the feud through her, by choosing a son-in-law instead of letting her choose a husband, which would have allowed Juliet both to define herself through her own choice, and to ensure regeneration where Capulet only wants replication. The tragic outcome is all the more tragic so as neither regeneration nor replication are possible, only death which destroys any new order but also the old one whose children are dead – Snyder underlines that situation in the end of the play:

(...) the stage is strikingly full of elders – the Friar, the Prince, Capulet, Lady Capulet, Montague. Their power is not passed on. (...) Romeo, Juliet, Tybalt, Mercutio, and Paris are all dead. In effect, the entire younger generation has been wiped out.<sup>225</sup>

But Romeo and Juliet's death is actually provoked by and against the society in which they live. Their death is not accidental, but a course that they willingly embrace. Suicide proves to be their last chance to define themselves as individuals. This is particularly relevant because of their use of the modal "will" ("Here, here will I remain/(...) O, here/Will I set up my everlasting rest,"<sup>226</sup> "I will not away,"<sup>227</sup> "I will kiss thy lips"<sup>228</sup>). Suicide is of a consequence of the feud, but also a resistance to it:

Within liberal humanism death is for this reason the ultimate threat to the autonomy of the subject: it signifies that the subject is finite, that its plenitude is illusory. (...) But death which is self-inflicted, chosen, puts an end to finitude itself, an end to the endless desire of the liberal-humanist subject to be precisely autonomous, to be not just free, but also the origin and guarantee of its own identity, the source of being, meaning and action.<sup>229</sup>

Then, Romeo and Juliet's attempt to define their own identity has not exactly failed, but rather found a tragic way to affirm it. Then, their suicide can be seen as a sacrifice, the last death the play needs to stop all the other ones: "(...) the love of Romeo and Juliet will ultimately benefit their community by procuring the ending of feud."<sup>230</sup> Not only do they

<sup>225</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 64.

<sup>226</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.108-110.

<sup>227</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.160.

<sup>228</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.166.

<sup>229</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 124.

<sup>230</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 136.



sacrifice themselves for the sake of their community, but also to preserve their own identity. Contrary to Adonis, they do not die because they did not succeed in accomplishing their rite of passage, but their death is a rite of passage: “They have come of age by a different means than the rites of passage, phallic violence and adolescent motherhood, typical for youth in Verona.”<sup>231</sup> The parallel between *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* becomes particularly relevant here, because *Pyramus and Thisbe* is the exact reproduction of Romeo and Juliet’s death scene. Hawkes considers it as “the repetition as farce of the near-tragedy of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”<sup>232</sup> The basic plot is very much alike, and Capulet and Egeus show lots of similarities, Hermia and Lysander also “find themselves confronted by, and they wilfully oppose, three distinct kinds of obstacles: the law, the state, and the family”<sup>233</sup> – the proximity between the two plots is even highlighted by the omnipresence of death being particularly ominous at the beginning of the play. Yet, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a comedy despite its tragic potential the way *Romeo and Juliet* could have been a comedy, but ends tragically. The comedy ends in harmony, the characters finally succeed to marry their lover, and the girls succeed their “transition from daughterhood to wifehood.”<sup>234</sup> Yet, no mention is made of womanhood, as if a woman could only be so through her husband, which leads to further reflection about the place of women in marriage.

To conclude, the rite of passage is deeply linked to gender, since children are supposed to be acknowledged as men and women. According to Judith Butler: “(...) we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right.”<sup>235</sup> This is clearly the case of the characters who refuse their rite of passage and strive to find another one, be it by rejecting women, or on the contrary by refusing the feud the way Romeo and Juliet did. The characters

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<sup>231</sup> Kahn, “Coming of Age in Verona,” 20.

<sup>232</sup> Hawkes, “Or,” 253.

<sup>233</sup> Krieger, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” 38.

<sup>234</sup> Richard Dutton, ed. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. (New Casebooks. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1.

<sup>235</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190.

must either achieve their rites or die: "If Shakespeare's comedies can be viewed as rites of passage from youth to manhood, his tragedies shape up as rites of passage from youth to death or from manhood to death."<sup>236</sup> To some extent, only the young lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* succeed to reach adulthood, but at the price of the repetition of the patriarchal order instituted through marriage.

### 3. Marriage as comic ending and tragic beginning.

Marriage is a rite of passage, which both achieves heterosexual love and reproduces the feud, by letting sons be fathers in their turn and daughters be mothers. Arnold Van Gennep cites it as the logical process following puberty: "Nous avons vu l'enfant admis à l'adolescence et à la puberté sociale. Le stade suivant, c'est l'âge mûr qui se marque le mieux par la fondation d'une famille."<sup>237</sup> To a certain extent, its reproduction leads to the reproduction of society and order as well, which is particularly obvious in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Montrose notes:

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends, not only with the creation of new children but with the creation of new mothers and new fathers; it ends upon the threshold of another generational cycle, which contains *in potential* a renewal of the strife with which the play began.<sup>238</sup>

This "creation" of new families and thus generations is made obvious by Theseus's repetition of bed in the last act: "Lovers, to bed,"<sup>239</sup> "Sweet friends, to bed."<sup>240</sup> Yet, Montrose's idea of *potential* is important, because children unwilling to reproduce the feud could disrupt it. Although it is difficult to know which of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written first, it is tempting to speculate that *Midsummer Night's Dream* reproduces the

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<sup>236</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 92.

<sup>237</sup> "We have discussed the child admitted to adolescence and social puberty. The following stage is mature age which is best marked by the foundation of a family" (My translation). Arnold Van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage*. (Paris : Éditions A. et J. Picard, 1981), 123.

<sup>238</sup> Montrose, "'Shaping Fantasies,'" 117-8.

<sup>239</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.354.

<sup>240</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.358.

feud, to then show a tragedy in which children refuse it.<sup>241</sup> Not only would the latter be a counterpart of the former, but also its continuation of its reflection about marriage and patriarchy, explored with a different focus and a different genre. Snyder concurs with this idea when she affirms that chaos is never far in comedies, but never triumphs: “Comedy’s world might thus be seen not as completely elsewhere but as a possible starting point, or a running accompaniment, or even a constituent element, of Shakespeare’s tragic vision.”<sup>242</sup> It then seems interesting to test the validity of this quotation by focusing on the institution of marriage and the different relationships it creates between characters. The necessity to end a comedy in marriage may explain why Linda Bamber considers that there are comic women but tragic men. According to Berggren: “In Shakespearean comedy, it is true, the heroine dominates; in Shakespearean tragedy she most emphatically does not.”<sup>243</sup> But that domination can be explained by the necessity of women to bring the play towards a happy conclusion:

The comic world requires childbearers to perpetuate the race, to ensure community and continuity; the tragic world, which abhors such reassurance, consequently shrinks from a female protagonist.<sup>244</sup>

In short, women dominate not because they challenge patriarchy or fight for their own independence, but precisely because of its exact contrary. Their wombs open a perspective for the future, whereas their death in tragedy erases any possibility of creation. Moreover, the fact the heroine “dominates” does not mean that her fate is enviable, far from it. Especially in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, whose festive conclusion “depends upon the success of a process by which the feminine pride and power manifested in Amazon warriors, possessive mothers, unruly wives and wilful daughters are brought under control of lords and husbands”<sup>245</sup> If a

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<sup>241</sup> Thomas P Harrison sees the style of *Romeo and Juliet* “more like the mature Shakespeare” in “*Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Companion Plays.*” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 13, no. 2 (1971): 211.

<sup>242</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, 55.

<sup>243</sup> Paula S. Berggren, “The Woman’s Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare’s Plays” in *The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983), 18.

<sup>244</sup> Berggren, “The Woman’s Part,” 18.

<sup>245</sup> Montrose, ““Shaping Fantasies,”” 128.

comedy is supposed to end happily, happiness does not mean right or fair,<sup>246</sup> especially for women:

For both men and women, marriage is assumed to be the natural social state, involving a sacrifice of personal independence, but, for women, this loss of freedom is nearly total. They are reared as children towards marriage and have few other options. Their formal duty is initially towards their fathers, who select their future partners, and then to their husbands. Shakespeare gives many examples of those who, like Juliet, rebel; but he also warns against wilfulness and disobedience.<sup>247</sup>

It is actually difficult to say whether Shakespeare “warns against wilfulness and disobedience,” or rather proves how fragile the patriarchal power can be when confronted to daughters’ resistance in their marriage choice. Loomba sees marriage as a violent form of domination: “Marriage is thus an explicit continuation of military domination, a violation of a different kind,”<sup>248</sup> hence Theseus’s mention of his war with Hippolyta. It is particularly obvious in Dominic Dromgoole’s adaptation of the play for the Shakespeare’s Globe: the play opens on a fight between Theseus’s army and the Amazons, which results with a war between sexes to be seen on stage, eventually won by Theseus. Yet, Loomba notices that this evocation of marriage and war is immediately followed by two acts of rebellion, Hermia’s and Titania’s. Then, it is possible to see the play as the expression of patriarchy and its anxiousness to rule queens and unruly women but also of the possible rebellion existing inside of it. The play undermines patriarchal power more than it celebrates it, although it ends in marriage. Moreover, this end is required by the literary genre but does not necessarily forecast happiness. Once the young couples are gone to bed, Puck mentions what Montrose calls “an uncomic world of labour, fear, pain, and death.”<sup>249</sup> Labour and death are present through the reference to the “heavy ploughman” and his “weary task”<sup>250</sup> and words like “shroud,” or “graves.”<sup>251</sup> This is particularly relevant to study the position of women, since

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<sup>246</sup> Raphael Lyne, “Shakespearean Comedy.” Lecture, Cambridge University, May 09, 2018.

<sup>247</sup> John Elsom ed. *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* 65.

<sup>248</sup> Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick,” 164.

<sup>249</sup> Montrose, ““Shaping Fantasies,”” 117.

<sup>250</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.363-4.

<sup>251</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.368-70.

marriage leads to reproduction, reproduction to delivery and delivery to literal “labour.” Regarding “death,” marriage can actually be associated to social death for women, and to individual death since they are therefore perceived as their husband’s propriety. Then, the theme of marriage is not only to be found in comedies, but will be treated differently according to the genre chosen:

His comedies end in marriage; his history cycles are articulated by marriages; his tragedies begin with marriages, his tragi-comedies are involved in complex negotiations with marriages, and both tragi-comedies and problem plays are habitually judged and generically classified in terms of their portrayal of marriages. The importance of marriage in the plays cannot, in short, be overstated; but its role as a generator of ‘happiness’, I think, can.<sup>252</sup>

Hopkins’s remarks above also explain that the differences between genres convey different visions of marriage, and that a wedding is suitable to close comedies because: “it focuses primarily on the experience of the group, as opposed to the individualist, isolationist emphasis of tragedy.”<sup>253</sup> It is interesting then that marriage should be the key point for tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*, except this time, the genre used helps to explore the consequences of marriage on the individual rather than on the group, which makes of it a far less happy subject. Lisa Hopkins presents one main difference between tragedy and comedy by saying that all comedies end with a marriage but all tragedies begin with one.<sup>254</sup> Contrary to common thought, marriage would then mean woe rather than happiness. Hopkins’s perspective is particularly relevant to study *Romeo and Juliet*. The wedding ceremony occurs in the middle of the play and at that very moment the comedy draws to an end. It closes a scene, an act, and maybe an actual genre inside of the play to open up on a new scene in which Mercutio is killed, starting the tragedy. Similar scenes occurs before and after those two events (the wedding and the murder) in a chiastic structure, for instance when Romeo speaks with the Friar (II.3 and III.3), or Juliet with her Nurse (II.5 and III.2), except instead of rejoicing at the prospect of a wedding to come, they mourn their dead and they moan over their destiny.

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<sup>252</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 6-7.

<sup>253</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 17.

<sup>254</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 133.

Characters also change when the genre changes. Capulet who was a good father (“My will to her consent is but a part”)<sup>255</sup> but then he becomes “one of the most peremptory of all Shakespeare’s fathers (...).”<sup>256</sup> Actually, if marriage begins tragedy but ends comedies, it might mean that marriage is what provokes tragedy, and we may theorize that comic marriage is along the same line a prelude to another tragedy, except the spectator has no chance to see it since the play ends at the wedding ceremony without showing the tragedy of married life. Some insights including in comedy may prove it. Marriage is quite ominously associated to death. For Kathryn Schwarz: “Hermia’s interlocked counterfactuals – ‘death or you’ – poise ruinous loss against conjugal gain. The logic of social utility suggests that this may be a choice between death and death.”<sup>257</sup> The heroines of the play indeed mention death at various times and associate it to their lovers: “I’ll follow thee, and make a heaven of hell,/To die upon the hand I love so well,”<sup>258</sup> “Either death or you, I’ll find immediately.”<sup>259</sup> In *Romeo and Juliet* as well, death is intertwined with marriage:

(...) the double death of Tybalt and Mercutio which follows almost immediately on the wedding ceremony, inextricably intertwines marriage and death within the structure of the play, just as Sampson verbally confounds the loss of virginity with the cutting off of heads.<sup>260</sup>

This process was tragically announced by Romeo’s line: “Do thou but close our hands with holy words,/Then love devouring death do what he dare.”<sup>261</sup> It is yet surprising, not to say paradoxical, that a process which aims at reproduction should be associated to the end of life. Actually, the very fact that reproduction is the purpose of marriage ends in a symbolic death of women as individuals. They become their husband’s properties and must approve him or remain silent.

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<sup>255</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.2.16.

<sup>256</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 134.

<sup>257</sup> Kathryn Schwarz, “Comedies End in Marriage” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment*, ed. Valerie Traub, (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 271.

<sup>258</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.243-4

<sup>259</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.2.160.

<sup>260</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 133.

<sup>261</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.6.6-7.

As Simone de Beauvoir states: “Le besoin biologique – désir sexuel et désir d’une postérité – qui met le mâle sous la dépendance de la femelle n’a pas affranchi socialement la femme.”<sup>262</sup> Her mentioning “children” and “sexuality” proves that they are important points in marriage. *Romeo and Juliet* presents them as related to social gain, for example when Juliet’s mother tells her to be “a cover”<sup>263</sup> to Paris, who is associated to a “precious book of love.”<sup>264</sup> The word “precious” means that Paris is beautiful, but foremost rich, so does “gold clasps locks in the golden story.”<sup>265</sup> It is to be validated with her following sentences: “So shall you share all that he doth possess,/By having him, making yourself no less”<sup>266</sup> except it also conveys a sexual meaning:

**share :** (...) *RJ*, I.iii.93. Lady Capulet tells Juliet to provide a ‘cover’ (mount coitally – *OED*; P) for Paris’s book of love: ‘so shall you share all that he doth possess,/By having him, making yourself no less’. She may mean Paris’s wealth and social status, but the Nurse hears the coital implications in *share*, *possess*, *having*: “No less! Nay, bigger; women grow by men.”<sup>267</sup>

To be short, this passage shows that in marriage men were supposed to provide riches and women a womb; hence the importance of monogamy and of control on women’s sexuality that the Middle Ages had contributed to impose.<sup>268</sup> Once again, Shakespeare reflects the situation of his time in his plays. According to Amanda Bailey:

Registering that the assertive Hippolyta, Titania, and Hermia are ultimately brought ‘under the control of lords and husbands’, feminist scholars have linked the play’s misogynistic resolution to the inequities of the early modern sex/gender system.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> “The biological need – sexual desire and desire of a posterity – which makes the male dependent of the female did not socially free the woman” (My translation). Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 20.

<sup>263</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.3.89.

<sup>264</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.3.88.

<sup>265</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.3.93.

<sup>266</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.3.94-5.

<sup>267</sup> Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare’s Sexual Puns and Their Significance* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989), 236.

<sup>268</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 138.

<sup>269</sup> Amanda Bailey in “Personification and the Political Imagination of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 400.

Yet, if in the end of the comedy those three women depend on their husbands, there is one female character that unintentionally brings her husband under her “control” in spite of his initial opinion, this is Helena. The main contrast of the play is that Titania, and Hermia choose to get married whereas Demetrius’s choice can be qualified since he is still charmed. Dusiinberre indicates that many reforms that the Protestant proposed caused “to bring the freedom of women in line with the freedom of the men, either by making women more free to choose, or by making men less so,”<sup>270</sup> which is exactly what happens to the young characters in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Because they are the ones on whose eyelids Puck puts some magic, only the men are charmed and deprived of choice. On the other hand, the girls who were either forced to marry someone they did not love or rejected by their loved one are finally given what they wanted. The Puritans were critical of “traditional male freedoms,”<sup>271</sup> and so is the plot of the comedy since there is an upside down situation in the end - Demetrius has no freedom at all since he is still victim of a charm, whereas Hermia obtains what she wanted although she was the only character who initially had to sacrifice her love, but also her freedom. One may argue that Titania too is charmed and fooled in this play, which would contradict the argument above. However she is not part of the young lovers; she is already married. This may show that women would not have a choice, but that it could change with the new generation. As a result, I would not say that there is a “misogynistic” resolution to the play; rather, there is a criticism against marriage, which applies to both men and women. This negative vision of marriage actually permeates Shakespeare’s plays, for example by presenting dissimilar couples, and particularly by insisting on age difference:

Whereas Juliet’s father, Old Capulet, gives every sign of being past sexual activity, his wife is, if we are to take literally her statement that she was Juliet’s mother ‘much upon these years/That you are now a maid’ (1.3.74-5), only about twenty-eight years old.”<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 41.

<sup>271</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 41.

<sup>272</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 158.



Some directors and actors also represented on stage the burden marriage could represent, especially for women, by representing a discrepancy not only in age but also between the happiness of Theseus regarding his marriage and the potential regret of Hippolyta:

(...) Penny Downie played the role at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1982. Her Hippolyta was a deeply reluctant, indeed sullen, bride: her statements that the time would pass quickly were motivated not by joy but by a disempowered acceptance of the inevitable, and her flat future tenses, without any use of the optative, reflected this sense of despairing entrapment.<sup>273</sup>

Shakespeare's plays actually warn the audience against the repellent aspects of marriage.

Among those, Hopkins enumerates:

(...) a wife risks quarrels and the curbing of her will, such as occurs in the relationship of Titania and Oberon, and death in childbirth, as happens to the mother of the changeling boy; or her children may be deformed – although the fairies promise that this will not happen to any of the couples in the play, their mere mention of deformity nevertheless serves to confirm it as a real possibility.<sup>274</sup>

She forgets to mention adultery. Titania and Oberon both accuse each other of having slept with someone else:

TITANIA  
Your buskined mistress and your warrior love,  
To Theseus must be wedded (...)

OBERON  
How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,  
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,  
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?<sup>275</sup>

This then leads to one more distressing aspect of married life – jealousy: “These are the forgeries of jealousy.”<sup>276</sup> This negative vision is yet not a total rejection of marriage in itself, but rather of the old conceptions attached to it. In this regard, Shakespeare seems once more to reflect Humanist and Protestant visions.

The Puritans embraced Calvin's doctrine of chaste marriage as an emancipation for men and women from the celibate ideal. (...) For women the effect of the celibate ideal was to

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<sup>273</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 25.

<sup>274</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 27.

<sup>275</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.1.71-6.

<sup>276</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.2.81.

undermine the status of wives, and to cast women in general in the role of temptress. Adam succumbed to Eve and was banished from Paradise.<sup>277</sup>

It is interesting then that *Venus and Adonis* should have been written before the other plays. Venus is presented as a temptress: “Red cheeks and fiery eyes blaze forth her wrong.”<sup>278</sup> “Red cheeks” evoke shame, “fiery eyes” madness and “her wrong” sheds light on the narrative voice’s judgement of her action. She is the one who desperately seeks Adonis’ bed, and she herself speaks of “how want of love tormenteth”<sup>279</sup> clearly referring to sexuality; she can indeed be associated to the figure of the temptress. This behaviour was usually advocated to warrant woman’s submission: “the justification of the absolutist definition of marriage is the frailty of women. Like Eve, they are patently more subject to the wiles of the devil. They are spiritually weaker, more evidently in need of guidance.”<sup>280</sup> On the other hand, Puritans suggested a vision of marriage in which the woman would not be associated to a temptress, thereby overcoming the need to dominate her. She would not be a help, a subordinate or a burden, but a companion and an equal: “Marriage could only be a partnership in Puritan terms if the woman was free to choose a husband, and was herself adult enough to be his partner.”<sup>281</sup>

Yet, as mentioned above, choice is not really the main characteristic of Shakespeare’s plays, especially when it comes to marriage. Butler explains, using Lévi-Strauss’s *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* to develop her argument, that “(...) the bride functions as a relational term between groups of men, she does not *have* an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She *reflects* masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence.”<sup>282</sup> It seems difficult then to perceive her as an equal in an institution that negates her as individual, especially in Shakespeare’s time. As Dusinger reminds us: “In

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<sup>277</sup> Dusinger, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 24.

<sup>278</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.219.

<sup>279</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.202.

<sup>280</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 168.

<sup>281</sup> Dusinger, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 96.

<sup>282</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 52.

common law the union of man and wife meant loss of separate identity for the woman.”<sup>283</sup>

This is to be observed in *Romeo and Juliet* for instance in which Lady Capulet is only designated as her husband’s wife. He addresses her as such: “Wife, we scarce thought us blessed”<sup>284</sup> but that is also how the ladies are presented in the whole play: “Capulet’s wife” and “Montague’s wife.” In the list of roles, they are also named as such whereas the Nurse’s boy has a name – Peter – and Cousin Capulet is seen as a relative more than a possession insofar as there is no genitive to designate him. The mothers of Romeo and Juliet have no name; they are only shown as their husbands’ wives. It is important to say that this “loss of separate identity” mentioned by Dusiinberre is necessarily linked with the loss of the name for married women. In this regard, Juliet displays again an opposition to the previous generation. During the balcony scene, in Act II, scene 2, Juliet’s complaint about Romeo’s name could be interpreted as a reflection about the fact that their families are enemies, as well as a reflection about naming and identity. When Sasha Roberts discusses the patriarchal aspects of the feud, she names “first, the politics of naming in the play, and secondly the assertion of civic, patriarchal authority.”<sup>285</sup> How interesting, given the importance of the name in the feud and the fact that patriarchy works with patrilineal right – that is that the name and the goods are to be inherited from father to son – that Juliet should ask Romeo to “deny [his] father and refuse [his] name.”<sup>286</sup> She even orders him: “O be some other name!”<sup>287</sup> with an imperative verb and an exclamative sentence, showing her assertiveness. Moreover, the use of the verb “be” instead of “take” or “have” proves that despite Juliet’s reflection on what is in a name, identity is nevertheless linked to a name. This assertion is reinforced by the repetition of that order: “Romeo, doff thy name.”<sup>288</sup> It is all the more interesting so as Romeo should actually

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<sup>283</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 100.

<sup>284</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.164.

<sup>285</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 32.

<sup>286</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.34.

<sup>287</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.42.

<sup>288</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.47.

be the one to tell such words, because asking Juliet to lose her name and deny her father would have been similar to a proposal. As underlined by Judith Butler, “As wives, women not only secure the reproduction of the *name* (the functional purpose), but effect a symbolic intercourse between clans of men.”<sup>289</sup> This is exactly what Juliet rejects here. She rejects the name of her husband-to-be instead of reproducing it, and does not want to be an “intercourse between clans of men” but to exist beyond and despite those clans, which would not allow her love. Marriage thus becomes the foundation of new order of things in which the wife gives up neither her name nor identity to take up her husband’s: marriage is a new birth, or as Romeo calls and thus accepts it, a new baptism: “Call me but love and I’ll be new baptized.”<sup>290</sup> The Nurse then calls Romeo “my lady’s lord,”<sup>291</sup> even before calling him Romeo. Further, he says to Tybalt: “And so, good Capulet, which name I tender/As dearly as mine own, be satisfied.”<sup>292</sup> The comparative of equality proves that his name has not supplanted Juliet’s after the wedding. Frey notes that “Dreams [fathers] might have of patrilineal extension are shattered by their daughters’ choice of marriage partners”<sup>293</sup> but it goes even beyond. Not only does Juliet shatters her father’s “dream of patrilineal extension,” but she also does not exchange it for Romeo’s. Her entire monologue discredits the power of a name, as patriarchy would establish it by showing that the name and the family associated to it should not prevail on the individual. Thus, this is an affirmation of the individual over the group, and more particularly over the family. But this is also another vision of marriage. It is noteworthy that Juliet actually proposes to Romeo:

Three words, dear Romeo, and goodnight indeed.  
If that thy bent of love be honourable,  
Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow

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<sup>289</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 53.

<sup>290</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.50.

<sup>291</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.3.82.

<sup>292</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.70-1.

<sup>293</sup> Frey, “‘O sacred, shadowy, cold, and constant queen,’” 299.

By one that I'll procure to come to thee,  
Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite<sup>294</sup>

Romeo did express his love, but not his will to marry, so Juliet's words "If (...) Thy purpose be marriage" is actually her proposal. This inversion of roles is somehow crystallized in the end of the play: "Romeo's death in the Capulets' (not his own fathers') tomb reverses the traditional passage of the female over to the male house in marriage and betokens his refusal to follow the code of his fathers (...)." <sup>295</sup> By trying to change the usual way of naming subjects, Coppélia Kahn estimates that Romeo and Juliet "seek to mold social reality to their changed perceptions and desires by manipulating the verbal signifiers of that reality" <sup>296</sup> which could actually be the author's aim more than his characters'.

Thus, Shakespeare criticizes marriage as a social, and even individual death for women, who strive to impose their own vision of marriage on reality: "Women in the drama want to be married but not mastered, and this levels them with men who have always lamented loss of liberty in marrying." <sup>297</sup> Shakespeare's plays adopt a Puritan vision of marriage, depicting not the submission of woman but a partnership with her. The different characters choose different options, which could imply that *Romeo and Juliet* is actually the logical continuation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Demetrius and Helena as well as Lysander and Hermia perform the rite of marriage to perpetuate tradition and patriarchy, but challenge it by according to women what they want instead of attributing more freedom to men. Romeo and Juliet accomplish their marriage as a new order of things, in which Romeo accepts not to impose his name to Juliet, whereas: "In patriarchal Verona, men bear names and stand to fight for them (...)" <sup>298</sup> but which also benefits women instead of submitting them.

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<sup>294</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.142-146.

<sup>295</sup> Kahn, "Coming of Age in Verona," 20.

<sup>296</sup> Kahn, "Coming of Age in Verona," 11.

<sup>297</sup> Dusinger, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 96.

<sup>298</sup> Kahn, "Coming of Age in Verona," 12.

Our analysis thus clearly shows that Shakespeare's plays have been influenced by the debates around women during the Renaissance, reflecting both the Middle Ages ideals they were supposed to correspond to, and the Puritan debate posing them as equals but whose ideals were confronted to reality:

The Puritans inherited from the sixteenth century reformers a world which had changed in principle but not in practice. (...) The double standard still operated, wives were still beaten, daughters forced to marry, and chaste marriage was still a dogma invented by theologians to accommodate a married clergy.<sup>299</sup>

In this first part, I have tried to demonstrate how men and women are both educated and pressured to correspond to gender norms, which set them apart despite their common humanity and can actually result in denial of women's humanity. Shakespeare presented in his work the roots of gender rules and the reason for the traditional oppositions between men and women, which can be summed up as following:

When men revile women, they cry out against their own failures, hating themselves for what women 'tempt' them to; women, by contrast, curse men for external, verifiable wrongs against them. Women resent men for oppressing them, while men despise women for reminding them that they are creatures of flesh<sup>300</sup>

Yet, Shakespeare's work also display the progressive empowerment of women, and how, as Butler puts it, "(...) gender is something that one becomes – but can never be (...)." <sup>301</sup> The tragic end of *Romeo and Juliet* or the perpetuation of patriarchy at the outcome of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may first lead to think that any form of resistance to gender rules was supposed to be nipped in the bud. Yet, it would be interesting to see that Shakespeare actually also turns traditional situations upside down so that he progressively challenges the dividing lines between "masculine" and "feminine." Such reversals do not only imply a criticism of gender norm and rules, but also questions about gender identity on stage.

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<sup>299</sup> Dusingberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 41.

<sup>300</sup> Berggren, "The Woman's Part," 26.

<sup>301</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 152.

## II. “Gender trouble”: effeminate men and unruly women.

Shakespeare depicts gender inequality from the point of view of both men and women. Displaying it immediately induces some form of resistance towards an order that prevents individuals from expressing their own individuality, thus leading them to play a role: “The feminism of the drama consists [...] in constant pressure against the boundaries which, in defining the feminine, determine also the masculine, making the sword as restrictive as the skirt.”<sup>302</sup> Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s style does not suppress gender norms and rules, but rather makes them more inclusive and less divisive. This finds expression in the multiple strategies that he deploys, whether by showing how unbalanced these notions are, or inverting them to expose their arbitrariness. Indeed, not following gender rules is often perceived as indecent on both men’s and women’s parts. That is for men to behave in an effeminate manner and for women to act manly. By displaying such situation, Shakespeare echoes Butler’s affirmation: “The injunction *to be* a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated.”<sup>303</sup>

### 1. The Petrarchan tradition: when woman returns the gaze.

According to Judith Butler, language is a weapon that both maintains and destroys oppression: “The power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression.”<sup>304</sup> Language conveys structures of thoughts and fashions our perception of the world. It thus seems important to study Shakespeare’s style and use of literary tradition to better understand his approach to gender, and more particularly his

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<sup>302</sup> Dusienerre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 225.

<sup>303</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 199.

<sup>304</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 158.

use of traditional forms of poetry, namely Petrarchan sonnets. Shakespeare makes direct reference to the Italian poet through Mercutio: “Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in.”<sup>305</sup> Earl sees it as “an interspersed in an English literary dialogue that had accepted Petrarch as a canonical member of the great classics.”<sup>306</sup> Yet, Mercutio’s line is ambiguous. By mentioning him, he both mocks Petrarch and celebrates him. There are multiple uses of Petrarchan devices that can pay homage to the poet, since Romeo is justly compared to him. A.J. Earl in “Romeo and Juliet and the Elizabethan Sonnets” enumerates the “hallmarks of Petrarchism,”<sup>307</sup> which are all to be found in Romeo’s speech, like “the lover-poet seeks solitude (...),”<sup>308</sup> which is the first known characteristic of Romeo: “Towards him I made, but he was ware of me/And stole into the covert of the wood.”<sup>309</sup> He also expresses “hyperbolic adoration of the beloved (...)”<sup>310</sup> when he says “She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair.”<sup>311</sup> His adoration is reinforced by an anaphora in “too” and a polyptoton (wise/ fair/ wisely too fair). He also uses hyperbolic metaphors: “He that is stricken blind cannot forget/The precious treasure of his eyesight lost,”<sup>312</sup> which partakes in another aspect of Petrarchan discourse: “a restricted choice of metaphors: the Sun, the Moon, (...)”<sup>313</sup> as illustrated in Act II, scene 2: “It is the east, and Juliet is the sun./Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon.”<sup>314</sup> There are “annotation of the love theme in terms of antitheses, oxymoron (...)”<sup>315</sup> as well: “O, she is rich in beauty, only poor/That when she dies, with beauty dies her store,”<sup>316</sup> “Do I live dead that live to tell it now.”<sup>317</sup> Finally, Romeo makes use of “the

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<sup>305</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.4.38-9.

<sup>306</sup> A.J. Earl, ‘Romeo and Juliet and the Elizabethan Sonnets.’ *The Journal of the English Association*, no 27 (1978), 101.

<sup>307</sup> Earl, “Romeo and Juliet,” 102.

<sup>308</sup> Earl, “Romeo and Juliet,” 102.

<sup>309</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.122-3.

<sup>310</sup> Earl, “Romeo and Juliet,” 102.

<sup>311</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.219.

<sup>312</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.230-1.

<sup>313</sup> Earl, “Romeo and Juliet,” 102.

<sup>314</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.3-4.

<sup>315</sup> Earl, “Romeo and Juliet,” 102.

<sup>316</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.213-4.

<sup>317</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.2.222.



sonnet”<sup>318</sup> to seduce Juliet in Act I, scene 5, when he compares his lips to “two blushing pilgrims.”<sup>319</sup>

The dialogue in which the pair admit their mutual love, and kiss, takes in its first fourteen lines the rhyme scheme of a sonnet. Romeo speaks the first quatrain, and Juliet the second; a more rapid exchange of dialogue then occupies the sestet. By choosing to write in this form at the vital encounter of the play, Shakespeare is paying a covert tribute to his contemporaries.<sup>320</sup>

Thus, not only does Shakespeare pay homage to Petrarch, but also to other writers. Earl mentions Henry Constable in this specific case. But all those features also enable a specific feeling, namely love, to have its specific way to be expressed and thus better conveyed to the audience. According to Smith, the sonnet creates “an enclosed, private world in which time moves gently forward towards a coupling of lovers as well as of rhymes.”<sup>321</sup> Poetry enables the audience to understand that a new space has been formed on stage. However, Smith adds: “Recalling the conventions of Petrarchan love associated with the sonnet form, it also denies them in its movement from avoidance to acceptance of physicality.”<sup>322</sup> Shakespeare has changed a number of features characteristic of the Petrarchan style, as a way to play with the audience’s expectation. Yet, when Mercutio also plays with Petrarchan discourse, adding an element that is usually absent from description like this, it rather seems to aim at mockery:

I conjure thee by Rosaline’s bright eyes,  
By her high forehead, and her scarlet lip,  
By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh  
And the demesnes that there adjacent lie.<sup>323</sup>

This reference to Rosaline’s genitals could have been expected of bawdy Mercutio. More surprising is that the chorus should also sarcastically mock Petrarchan discourse by echoing Romeo’s lines. “That fair for which love groaned for and would die,/With tender Juliet

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<sup>318</sup> Earl, “Romeo and Juliet,” 102.

<sup>319</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.5.94.

<sup>320</sup> Earl, “Romeo and Juliet,” 114-5.

<sup>321</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 156.

<sup>322</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 156.

<sup>323</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.1.17-20.

matched is now not fair”<sup>324</sup> is reminiscent of “One fairer than my love! The all-seeing sun/Ne’er saw her match since first the world begun”<sup>325</sup> and refers to how much Romeo indulged in its despair, and yet soon chose another mistress. This suggests that Petrarchan discourse is used to celebrate love but is not reliable, and far too hyperbolic to be real. This is confirmed by Demetrius’s line when he falls in love with Helena: “Demetrius awakens into a set of Petrarchan and pseudo-classical conventions.”<sup>326</sup> The first two lines of his reaction are filled with hyperbolic comparisons: “O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine,/To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?”<sup>327</sup> He first calls her “Helen” instead of “Helena,” which may be a reference to Helen of Troy. He then enumerates several mythological creatures and hyperbolic adjectives, without using any verb, suggesting that those words could just as well be her name. She *is* a “goddess,” she *is* “perfect,” etc. His occulting the verb turns the sentence not into a comparison, but into a series of different epideictic apostrophes. The second line recalls the beginning of Shakespeare’s famous sonnet 18: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”<sup>328</sup> Somehow, Helena does not believe Demetrius to be true, probably because of all his exaggerations, and this is a correct appraisal since he is under a charm. Some directors have chosen to show the mockery that can be aimed at Petrarchan lovers. For example in Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), Romeo’s use of Petrarchan speech is desacralized because when praising Juliet, he realizes that he is actually watching the Nurse.

Thus, Shakespeare has an ambiguous position regarding Petrarchan discourse, oscillating between celebration and mockery. Somehow, he seems not to criticize the style as much as the content since he still uses it, be it in a distorted way or not. For instance, his Sonnet 130 ends with: “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare/As any she belied with

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<sup>324</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.0.3-4.

<sup>325</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.2.92-3.

<sup>326</sup> Krieger, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” 45.

<sup>327</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.137-8.

<sup>328</sup> William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Richard Proudfoot. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010), Sonnet 18, l.1.

false compare.”<sup>329</sup> The adjective “false” may precisely indicates what is bothering in Petrarchan style. DusiBerre explains this sonnet as following:

When Shakespeare claimed that his lady’s fairness needed no fictions to enhance it, he pinpointed an attitude to women which was symptomatic of its time. Poets should portray women as they are, recognisable in nature, not as gods and devils of literary mythology.<sup>330</sup>

Two visions of woman are linked: the poetic one, which makes a god out of a contemptuous woman, and the religious one that presents her either as a temptress or an angel (Romeo calls Juliet “bright angel”<sup>331</sup>). DusiBerre terms it “the Christian polarity between Eve and the Virgin Mary.”<sup>332</sup> That is to say that woman is only to be perceived through general categories, and extremes. She is the embodiment of all qualities or the representation of all flaws, making of her a literary creature indeed, but certainly not representative of real women. Mentioning satires that were written against women and accused them of all failures, DusiBerre explains that courtly love, inherited from the Middle Ages, wronged women as much as satires did.<sup>333</sup> First, because of its inherent hypocrisy: “(...) it is the code of a society which pays homage to woman, while despising women.”<sup>334</sup> This precisely applies to Romeo’s behaviour. Even though he celebrates Juliet’s beauty during several scenes, he accuses her of making him effeminate after Mercutio’s death.<sup>335</sup> Mercutio uses Petrarchan speech not to celebrate women but always to mock them and despise love. Petrarchan discourse is all the more misogynistic since it supposes that a male lover describes extensively his beloved; by doing so, he deprives her of any self-description and determination. He projects his fantasies onto her, and the reader or audience is only given a male vision of the female body – there are seldom descriptions of the beloved’s personality or interiority. This is particularly obvious in the passages about Rosaline. First and foremost, Rosaline is not present at any moment on

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<sup>329</sup> Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Sonnet 130, l.13-4.

<sup>330</sup> DusiBerre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 139.

<sup>331</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.26.

<sup>332</sup> DusiBerre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 138.

<sup>333</sup> DusiBerre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 138.

<sup>334</sup> DusiBerre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 141.

<sup>335</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.115-7.

stage; she is not even mentioned among the *dramatis personae*. She only exists through Romeo's speech, and has no occasion to contradict or qualify the description he makes of her, or to defend herself against Mercutio's low-body jokes. Romeo first confesses his love and love-sickness to Benvolio during a few lines in Act I, scene 1, which means that he designates the feeling she causes instead of designating her. Of course it is then told that "she is rich in beauty"<sup>336</sup> but there is no specific description of her that would help the audience to imagine her more precisely. Above all, her name – knowing the importance of the names in *Romeo and Juliet* – is only revealed in another scene by Benvolio: "Supps the fair Rosaline whom thou so loves."<sup>337</sup> Not only is Rosaline denied a presence on stage, but also an identity. She thus corroborates Dusiinberre's following quotation: "To put a woman on a pedestal gives a man a Muse without allowing her any right of reply."<sup>338</sup> It seems ironical then that a style that aims at celebrating a woman should actually depreciate her by doing so. Moreover, Petrarchan discourse as well as courtly love contributed to carrying the metaphor of love as war, which is still used through expressions such as "love conquest." This is made particularly obvious when Romeo mentions "the siege of loving terms"<sup>339</sup> or "assailing eyes,"<sup>340</sup> or when Venus says of the god of war: "Making my arms his field, his tent my bed."<sup>341</sup> This could be perceived as flattering for a woman, and Venus presents it as such when she is described as: "Being proud, as females are, to see him woo her."<sup>342</sup> But it also turns the woman into an object to be won, and deprives her of agency in the process of love. Novy notices that in the Petrarchan tradition "love is frequently described as a war, and the beloved is addressed as an

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<sup>336</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.213.

<sup>337</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.2.84.

<sup>338</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 141

<sup>339</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.210.

<sup>340</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.211.

<sup>341</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.108.

<sup>342</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.309.

enemy,”<sup>343</sup> it thus fosters estrangement between men and women, and even war between the sexes.

Furthermore, not only does it deprive the celebrated woman of speech and agency, but it also conveys a false vision of women, an ideal to which real women obviously do not correspond. Dusiñberre indicates that it was an aspect of poetry that was criticized in Shakespeare’s time: “(...) the Humanists demanded from poetry not fictions, but discernible truth about women.” A paradox may thus be underlined. A fictional genre – theatre – is required to better represent non-fictional persons on stage and thus destroys the fictional fantasies fostered by another fictional genre – poetry. On stage, women are not merely described by men the way they are in poetry, they are characters and the audience’s adherence to the play depends on their being realistic. They speak; they can react and thus define their identity.

Thus the dramatists were in an ideal situation for championing the images of life – the individual woman, the rational being insisted on by the Humanists against the fictions of medieval poetry – against the falsehood of poetry.<sup>344</sup>

It does not mean that poetic language or more precisely Petrarchan language is erased from the stage, but rather it is distorted, or provokes a reaction. Women on stage react differently when faced with Petrarchan discourse - they either reject it or voice it themselves. Juliet illustrates the first case. She is aware of what courtly love encompasses. When she addresses Romeo in the balcony scene, she proves gullible neither of Romeo’s promises nor of the facticity of the situation: “Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say ‘Ay’,/And I will take thy word; yet if thou swear’st,/Thou may prove false.”<sup>345</sup> She describes the situation to come as to expose that she knows it is a stereotype of courtly love. She also seems to prefer deeds to words. When Romeo suggests her to “blazon”<sup>346</sup> their love, she answers: “Conceit more rich

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<sup>343</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 38.

<sup>344</sup> Dusiñberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 12.

<sup>345</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.90-2.

<sup>346</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.6.26.

in matter than in words/Braggs of his substance, not of ornament.”<sup>347</sup> When Romeo wants to swear he loves her, she cuts him off, seemingly disappointed with the start of his sentence, which might be too lyrical for her.

JULIET  
(...) swear by thy gracious self,  
Which is the god of my idolatry,  
And I'll believe thee.

ROMEO  
If my heart's dear love-

JULIET  
Well, do not swear.

It is also noteworthy that she calls him “god of my idolatry,” thereby reversing the usual Petrarchan scheme. This seems to be the strategy adopted by Shakespeare’s female characters not to be mere objects of praise, but also to enact their will and their own personality in seduction. They particularly do so thanks to a poetic form that consists in describing physically the beloved one: the blazon. In *Venus and Adonis*, the blazon is ingenuously appropriated by Venus, who first describes Adonis:

‘Thrice fairer than myself,’ thus she began,  
‘The field’s chief flower, sweet above compare,  
Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,  
More white and red than doves or roses are.’<sup>348</sup>

The multiple comparative forms (“thrice fairer,” “more lovely,” “more white and red”) and superlative forms (“chief flower,” “above compare”) links her discourse with the superlative tendencies of Petrarchan tradition. The metaphors employed are usually addressed to women (“flower,” “nymphs,” “roses”) and confirms that Venus has taken the position of the man, which is the position of the subject and not of the object. This is already quite subversive, but this is not merely an inversion since further, she also describes herself:

Thou canst not see one wrinkle in my brow,  
Mine eyes are grey and bright and quick in turning,  
My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow,

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<sup>347</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.6.30-1.

<sup>348</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 7-10.

My flesh is soft and plump, my marrow burning;  
My smooth moist hand, were it with thy hand felt,  
Would in thy palm dissolve, or seem to melt.<sup>349</sup>

Venus both denies power to Adonis over himself but also over herself. He seldom speaks, his first direct speech only occurring in line 185, which proves her domination over the situation and contradicts the usual pattern of woman as deprived of speech. As a result, Venus is a character to confirm Novy's quotation: "Shakespeare's female characters step out of the objectifying frames of Petrarchan discourse and show their agency."<sup>350</sup>

Thus, while blazons, sonnets and other forms of poetry are believed to celebrate women, they actually deprive them of speech and power. Since women are praised for their beauty, it seems obvious that they are expected to meet those praises, but nothing is said about their character. They are mere physical beings, described by men, but we have no access to their thinking and their identity is to be men's interpretation of it. Yet, Shakespeare reinvent this tradition; though Petrarchan love is not supposed to be a comic matter, in Shakespeare's work, it makes the audience laugh because it becomes caricatured. The more the plays progress, the more the use of Petrarchan discourse and of blazon is appropriated by women themselves to gain power, rather than serving as a disguise way for men to assert their power over women. Since women usurp Petrarchan poetry, which Novy designates as "the most prestigious analyses of desire,"<sup>351</sup> one may conclude that they did so to formulate "analyses of desire," by which I mean sexual desire, at a moment when women were praised for their virginity and their modesty. Novy indicates: "The idea of women as being purer than men, less sexual, passionless, might be attached at this point to Queen Elizabeth or to a beloved in Petrarchan poetry (...)." Knowing that Shakespeare mocked and somewhat distorted Petrarchan language in some of his work, he might well have done so to represent women's passion as well.

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<sup>349</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.139-144.

<sup>350</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 33.

<sup>351</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 32.

## 2. Female sexual empowerment.

According to Novy, “Shakespeare’s interest in female initiative in love began early in his career.”<sup>352</sup> This is an interesting statement knowing that in Shakespeare’s time, love was little related to “female initiative.” As Helena says “We cannot fight for love as man may do; We should be wooed, and were not made to woo.”<sup>353</sup> It is difficult to know whether the modal “can” refers to the capacity or to the right to fight for love. Likewise, women are associated to the passive form of the verb “to woo,” whereas the active form is a negation. The aim is clearly to maintain women in a passive and consequently submissive position. This is particularly obvious in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, because of Oberon’s behaviour towards Titania. As Loomba puts it: “(...) Oberon uses the juice of ‘a little western flower’ to trick Titania, but he disciplines her by a manipulated arousal of her sexual appetite, so that even her desire is not her own.”<sup>354</sup> Titania is ridiculed because of her sexual attraction to an ass, that will disgust her once she is back to normal: “How came these things to pass?/O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!”<sup>355</sup> Oberon does not answer her, and it is not sure that she would still have given him the changeling boy, had she known that Oberon had tricked her. It is all the more disturbing since Oberon seems to rejoice at seeing his own wife in someone else’s arms: “Seest thou this sweet sight?”<sup>356</sup> The alliteration highlights this sentence, which is surprising on a husband’s part. On the one hand, he does like this situation because it gives him power on a wife who spurned him. He either mocks or pities her (“Her dotage now I do begin to pity”<sup>357</sup>), which of course places him in a dominant position. On the

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<sup>352</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 32.

<sup>353</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.241-2.

<sup>354</sup> Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick,” 177.

<sup>355</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV.1.77-8.

<sup>356</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV.1.45.

<sup>357</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV.1.46.



other hand, it is as if by having provoked himself the ultimate situation in which his wife would have diminished his power, namely cuckoldry, he had kept power on it and on her. By being the instigator of the situation, Oberon is also the master, and because of her love for an ass, Titania's only expression of desire is ridiculed. Moreover, when considering desire, it is important to keep in mind that Shakespeare time was dominated by the dichotomy between "woman the goddess or woman the devil."<sup>358</sup> Venus is a goddess, who can be seen as the devil. Belsey echoes this idea when she quotes the play *The White Devil* by Webster, and more particularly the line "Woman to man/Is either a god or a wolf" and declares:

The image of a wolf evokes a ravening predator trafficking by night to steal the sheep from the fold. Women of this kind, repositories of the dark mystery of female sexuality, steal men out of the family and destroy the fundamental institutions of society.<sup>359</sup>

Venus' being both a goddess and "a wolf" is therefore no contradiction, but a logical link. Venus is the goddess of love and carnal pleasure; she embodies women's sexuality in its entire powerful and unknown dimension. She is presented as voracious, even dangerous and often compared to a bird of prey:

Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast,  
Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh and bone,  
Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste,  
Till either gorge be stuffed or prey be gone<sup>360</sup>

Further she is a "[falcon],"<sup>361</sup> whereas Adonis is compared to a "wild bird being tamed with too much handling,"<sup>362</sup> reinforcing her dangerous and threatening aspect. Demanding passivity of women in seduction places the man in a position of domination - they choose who to woo and when to woo, and then remain complete master of the situation. Venus usurps that place; she makes Adonis fall: "Backward she pushed him,"<sup>363</sup> which is reminiscent of the words the Nurse's husband had addressed to Juliet when she was a toddler: "Thou wilt fall

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<sup>358</sup> DusiBerre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 7.

<sup>359</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 183.

<sup>360</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.55-8.

<sup>361</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.1027.

<sup>362</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.560.

<sup>363</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.41.

backward when thou hast more wit,”<sup>364</sup> except in Adonis’ case he is not even the subject of the sentence, insisting on his passivity. The contrast between the two characters is to be seen with the hypallage “Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,”<sup>365</sup> Venus is a conqueror and Adonis obeys. Her will to dominate is particularly explicit when she says: “be ruled by me.”<sup>366</sup> This could be interpreted as the male expression of anxiety when confronted to a ruling Queen in England, though Elizabeth based her authority on her virginity. In any case, there is a clear parallel to be made between the fear of woman’s sexuality, of her freedom, and of her possible will to rule and dominate men. Thus through Titania and Venus, love, sexuality and seduction on women’s part are presented either as ridiculous or threatening. Venus seems to embody male fears, and Titania to deflate them. They are criticized for their sexual desire, knowing that displaying them was unsuitable for women: “The identification of love with marriage, and of marriage with what is private, implies a sexuality which is whispered rather than proclaimed.”<sup>367</sup>

Yet, Shakespeare does not “[whisper]” sexuality; this is an important theme of his work and part of an important reflection about gender. First, although female desire seems to be mocked in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it is nonetheless discussed, and the play exposes female pleasure whereas sexuality usually was male-centred. Of course, Titania finally comes back to Oberon without knowing he is the cause of her humiliation, but it seems that once again, the new generation might be synonymous with change. Demetrius first threatens to rape Helena, but finally marries and loves her. This might demonstrate an evolution of sexuality from violence, rejection, and seeing women as mere sexual objects, to something more respectful. This is also noticeable in *Romeo and Juliet*, in which sexuality is widely discussed:

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<sup>364</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.3.43.

<sup>365</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.549.

<sup>366</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.673.

<sup>367</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 208.

[The] Prologue is entirely decorous, but it is interesting that he speaks of the feud that divides the houses of Montague and Capulet in terms of the lovers' sexual engendering: 'From *forth fatal loins* of these two foes/A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.' From the start the lovers are associated with the sexual act.<sup>368</sup>

It shows that it lies at the core of the play, as can be seen with the first scene, characterized by Porter as "the most relentlessly phallic opening in all of Shakespeare's plays,"<sup>369</sup> and the multiple uses of bawdy language. The Nurse and Mercutio are good examples of bawdy characters, and the interest of Shakespeare for sexual matters is made obvious through them "All the body language of Shakespeare's play is spoken either by characters whom he had added to Brooke's story (...),"<sup>370</sup> or that he has developed such as the Nurse. Yet, Mercutio and the Nurse do not refer to their own private experience, but rather sexualize Romeo and Juliet. Mercutio can be particularly salacious:

Now will he sit under a medlar tree,  
And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit  
As maids call medlars when they laugh alone.  
O Romeo, that she were, O that she were  
An open-arse, thou a poperin pear!<sup>371</sup>

Knowing that the Arden edition indicates that a "poperin pear" refers to "the resemblance of a pear to male genitals," Mercutio's innuendo is quite explicit and overtly sexual. The alliteration in "O" seems to incarnate Rosaline's private parts in the text. The aim is clearly to provoke laughter: "Like many of his contemporaries, Shakespeare derives much light-hearted comedy from the use of sexual wordplay (...)." <sup>372</sup> Then, sexual innuendos would necessarily be seen as a universal subject of laughter. Somehow, Mercutio's lines are particularly interesting for the reference he makes to women being alone. He says that women speak overtly of sex when men are not near to judge or condemn them, and hints that they like sexual innuendos as much as he does. It recalls Act I, scene 3, when the Nurse, Capulet's wife and Juliet are all alone and discuss marriage. Although it is difficult to say what the reaction

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<sup>368</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 150.

<sup>369</sup> Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio*, 155.

<sup>370</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 150.

<sup>371</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.1.34-8.

<sup>372</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 89.

of Juliet and her mother is, it is quite clear that the Nurse enjoys this moment given how she laughs and repeats several times the anecdote of Juliet's fall. This passage confirms Mercutio's remark on women and proves that the Nurse is not afraid to talk about sex, suggesting that despite constraint, women enjoy some liberty in private spaces. But she also links sex with maternity. Because of that point she still embodies the old generation, though she is less restrained in her speech than Lady Capulet for instance.

Judith Butler outlines the "compulsory obligation on women's bodies to reproduce."<sup>373</sup> According to her, the "maternal body" is culturally produced; it is "an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire."<sup>374</sup> This is what most characters expect of Juliet when they think about marrying her - sexuality corresponds to the consummation of marriage, and the wedding night is part of a logical process in the wedding ceremony. It explains why most of the references to marriage in the play are also references to sexuality, but always as part of reproduction:

CAPULET  
Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.

PARIS  
Younger than she are happy mothers made.<sup>375</sup>

Paris immediately mentions "mothers" before "bride" or "wife." Grammatically speaking, Juliet is but the object in the first sentence, and the passive structure of Paris's line proves that women have no agency in the procedure: men literally decide for them when they shall become mothers. Juliet's lack of choice is also emphasised through her mother's speech:

Well, think of marriage now. Younger than you,  
Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,  
Are made already mothers.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 123.

<sup>374</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 125.

<sup>375</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I. 2. 11-12.

The imperative form “think of marriage now” and the use of the exact same sentence as Paris’s indicate once again that she cannot take decisions about her marriage, and hence about her sexual life. The repetition of this sentence, with the use of the plural and of the present tense show that this is a feature or a rule, socially accepted and even imposed. Yet, Lady Capulet replaces the adjective “happy” that Paris used by “of esteem,” proving that happiness might be less relevant than convention when it comes to marriage and maternity. Somehow, even though the play links Juliet’s marriage and sexuality, her own aim is not pregnancy – which she never mentions – but pleasure. Although she says to her mother that she does not think about marriage, she is not devoid of sexual desire; she expresses it clearly. She evolves from passivity (“Saints do not move, though grant for prayers’ sake.”<sup>377</sup>) to a position of control over the accomplishment of her sexual desire. She is the one who decides to get married and who chooses the moment when she wants to let Romeo into her room. She denies him any access to it in the orchard scene, but she is the one who finally impatiently waits for her wedding night: “Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night.”<sup>378</sup> She associates her loss of virginity with pleasure since she indirectly mentions orgasm:

Come, gentle night, come, loving black-browed night,  
Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night  
And pay no worship to the garish sun.<sup>379</sup>

First, “‘die’ was early modern slang for sexual orgasm.”<sup>380</sup> Moreover, her repetition of the word “come” proclaims her longing and impatience, as well as her multiple references to the night, which are also references to what happens during the night. As Coppélia Kahn puts it:

Against this conception of femininity, in which women are married too young to understand their sexuality as anything but passive participation in a vast biological cycle through

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<sup>376</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I. 3. 70-72.

<sup>377</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.5.104.

<sup>378</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.2.5.

<sup>379</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.2.21-5.

<sup>380</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 36.

childbearing, Shakespeare places Juliet's unconventional, fully conscious and willed giving herself to Romeo.<sup>381</sup>

Somehow, Shakespeare did not describe her behaviour as unrestrained or unbridled either. Dusiinberre specifies that in humanist view "Virginity wastes Nature's resources,"<sup>382</sup> but was still an important matter: "The virtue of virginity depends on keeping it till marriage."<sup>383</sup> Shakespeare's female characters could have been perceived as wanton had they not waited for marriage before consummating their love: ("But gentle friend, for love and courtesy,/Lie further off, in human modesty,"<sup>384</sup> "O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?/What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?"<sup>385</sup>) Their sexuality does not cause them to be reproachable young girls, but they are instead modern, humanist ones, who are still virtuous because they wait for marriage before giving way to their desires. Thus, Juliet's sexuality is neither inexistent nor raging. She is on top of that, in charge of it rather than letting men choose for her, which means that she does not correspond to the categories applying to women in a patriarchal system – Madonna or whore. To a certain extent, by relating her to no preconceived figure, Shakespeare makes her more realistic. Moreover, Juliet's mastering of her own sexuality is destroying the power men would take upon her by violence. Indeed, masculine sexuality is first presented as violence against women as expressed by Samson in the very first scene. By displaying their sexual desires and deciding by themselves when and with whom to engage in sexual intercourses, women are not mere victims. It reduces the violence of the play. Sexuality is associated to the love between Romeo and Juliet, and not violence anymore. Juliet then contradicts Bamber's quotation: "The tragedies, says Fiedler, are obsessed with the dark side of women's sexuality."<sup>386</sup> The speech about her wedding night happens after Mercutio's death, that is in what can be considered as the tragic part of play. Rather, this

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<sup>381</sup> Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 97.

<sup>382</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 45.

<sup>383</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 47.

<sup>384</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.2.60-1.

<sup>385</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.2.125-6.

<sup>386</sup> Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, 3.

tragedy seems to focus on the light side of women's sexuality, one that they make their own, and which does not necessarily link sexuality to the need for procreation, but rather emphasises the links between sex and love.

Wells draws attention to the mix of religious and bawdy in *Romeo and Juliet*,<sup>387</sup> which can be regarded as a way to show that lust and love are not incompatible. Among the references to religion, there is of course the meeting scene and the invocation of saints and pilgrim, later the Friar says of Juliet that there is "immortal blessing from her lips,"<sup>388</sup> so that the mix between the bawdy jokes of Mercutio or the Nurse are counterbalanced, or rather complemented with those high metaphors. Romeo and Juliet's wedding concretizes this fusion between love and sex and religious and bawdy. In *Venus and Adonis*, Adonis fails to understand this fusion: "Love comforteth, like sunshine after rain/But lust's effect is tempest after sun,"<sup>389</sup> which may explain his final death. He sees sex and love as opposite notions, and it seems that Shakespeare mocks him because of it. Even though Venus is portrayed as rash, even scary because of her voracious sexuality and given though her seducing Adonis sounds more like a rape than courtship, this narrative poem is not to be construed as tragic. Stanley Wells develops the conditions in which the poem was written:

At the age of seventeen Shakespeare's patron the Earl of Southampton (...) faced an enormous fine (...) for refusing to marry Burleigh's granddaughter, Lady Elizabeth Vere, simply it would seem, because she did not attract him and in any case he (...) did not want to marry. This was three years before Shakespeare's dedication to him of *Venus and Adonis*.<sup>390</sup>

This may explain why Shakespeare changed the original story, which accounts for its comical dimension. Furthermore, Shakespeare was not merely inspired by Roman poems, but also by English tradition which depicted love relationship in a radically different way: "the English tradition of romance narrative, told both in poetry and in prose, provided many plots in which

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<sup>387</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 163.

<sup>388</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.3.37.

<sup>389</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.799-800.

<sup>390</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 141.

a woman actively pursues a man she loves.”<sup>391</sup> By mixing two traditions inside a single poem, the author enables profound reflection on love and sexuality. Once again, it seems important to turn to the Humanists, and thus to Dusiſberre, to better understand the perspective adopted in *Venus and Adonis*. She discusses some Humanists’ vision of sexuality: “Luther had preached that the sexual impulses of men and women were essential to Nature’s good ordering of society.”<sup>392</sup> Then Venus is not under attack for desiring Adonis, but he would be for rejecting her. Venus often invokes Nature as an argument for her cause: “By law of nature thou art bound to breed.”<sup>393</sup> Dusiſberre also mentions “The image of Nature as a thrifty goddess who wants a return on what she gives (...).”<sup>394</sup> It is interesting to observe that *Venus and Adonis* may echo reflection of the time on sexuality. Somehow, merely mentioning nature and breeding links it to reproduction again, whereas Shakespeare also deals with pleasure, and women taking control over their own sexuality in this poem. Venus is never coy to express her desires: “O, thou didst kill me: kill me once again!”<sup>395</sup> - the meaning of dying in early modern English has already been explained above – so that the poem is clearly erotic, if not pornographic, given the visual aspect of Venus’ speech. She is indeed quite explicit about her desires:

I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;  
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;  
Graze in my lips, and if those hills be dry,  
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

(...)  
Then be my deer, since I am such a park;  
No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand  
bark.<sup>396</sup>

First she uses a blazon to describe her body and express her desire; Will Fisher notices that “Venus’s speech is part of the tradition of ‘landscape pornography’, a tradition of sexually

<sup>391</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 33.

<sup>392</sup> Dusiſberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 43.

<sup>393</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.171.

<sup>394</sup> Dusiſberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 43.

<sup>395</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.499.

<sup>396</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.231-240.



charged depictions of the landscape extending back to classical elegy.”<sup>397</sup> She describes her body with lots of sexual metaphors, except she delivers it instead of letting a man do so. Her calling Adonis “my deer” (which is a pun with “dear”) may indicate her inverting roles, but Fisher refutes this theory since she refuses to take “the role of the hunter.”<sup>398</sup> She then presents the sexual activity as a moment of pleasure for both Adonis and her. She is quite daring in what she asks as developed by Dymphna Callaghan:

‘Feed where thou wilt’, an invitation to the breast (the ‘mountain’) and to cunnilingus (‘lower where the pleasant fountains lie’), further positions Venus in a simultaneously maternal and sexual relation to Adonis. It is the liminal condition of femininity that signals Venus’s alliance with nature. Within a single animal identity, she is possessed of an almost instinctive sexual voracity and maternal nurture<sup>399</sup>

However, Callaghan interprets Venus’ behaviour as both presenting her as an animal and a divinity, thus depicting a monster. It could be said that rather than making her monstrous, her humanity is highlighted in that it encompasses both sexual desire and maternal desire as the two can coexist in a woman whereas they usually refer to very different characters in literature. This is one of the only moments when she does not force Adonis to anything but rather invites him. Venus does not consider sexuality as necessarily being part of marriage (hence the fact she is closer to Nature than culture), and she does not associate it with violence or reproduction but with delight: “If thou wilt deign this favour, for thy meed/A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know.”<sup>400</sup> Thus, Shakespeare defends female sexuality by not presenting it as shameful.

Sexuality, though often meant to be hidden or taboo, is here overtly discussed on stage or in a poem. And yet it is never crude or completely explicit, because although Shakespeare

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<sup>397</sup> Will Fisher in “‘Stray(ing) lower where the pleasant fountains lie’: Cunnilingus in *Venus and Adonis* and in English Culture, c.1600-1700” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 335.

<sup>398</sup> Fisher, “Cunnilingus in *Venus and Adonis*,” 336.

<sup>399</sup> Fisher, “Cunnilingus in *Venus and Adonis*,” 336

<sup>399</sup> Dymphna Callaghan, “(Un)natural Loving: Swine, Pets, and Flowers in *Venus and Adonis*” *Textures of Renaissance Knowledge* (ed. Phillipa Berry and Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 65.

<sup>400</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.16.

understood it to be a universal source of laughter, it is also considered in his work as a subject for serious reflection, focusing on power relations which demand of women to be passive, in their social role as well as in their sexual one. Knowing that “Shakespeare’s sources were in no way responsible for the bawdy of *Romeo and Juliet*,”<sup>401</sup> and of any other work, Shakespeare proves to display particular interest in sexual matter, but not merely for comic purposes, or at least, with serious reflection on sexuality behind a witty, low-body joke. Though men would expect women to be a mere receptacle for their pleasure and offspring, Shakespeare’s female characters rather assert themselves as active, speaking about sexual intercourse instead of hiding it, embracing it and not fearing it and considering it as deriving of desire rather than duty, leading to pleasure and not mere maternity. Foucault underlines that sexuality is “suffused by power relations”<sup>402</sup> and it appears that Shakespearean women seek to abolish it. Thus, Shakespeare seems to have been influenced by the historical context in which he lived, since the Renaissance brought and “encouraged attention to women’s pleasures.”<sup>403</sup> Carol Thomas Neely indicates, upon discussing some medical treatise that “attending to women’s urgent desires, undoes conventional gender roles,”<sup>404</sup> and it seems that Shakespeare does exactly the same with his work. One may then wonder to what extent he “undoes conventional gender roles” and whether this breeds gender inversion or not, a shift of position or something else.

### 3. Gender inversion or gender fusion?

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<sup>401</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 149.

<sup>402</sup> Quoted in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 125.

<sup>403</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, “Lovesickness, Gender, and Subjectivity: *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*,” in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 5, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 281.

<sup>404</sup> Thomas Neely, “Lovesickness, Gender, and Subjectivity,” 283.

As seen above, female characters resist an order that oppresses them and seek freedom, “acting as agents not victims in their personal relations.”<sup>405</sup> Although they often fail to resist – Hermia and Helena become silent spouses, Juliet dies, Venus loses her lover – patriarchy does not totally submit them either. Juliet finally dies but does not marry Paris, Hermia marries Lysander despite her father’s will, Helena marries Demetrius despite Demetrius’s will, and Venus keeps Adonis to herself in the shape of a flower. Merely depicting resistance on stage already suggests a certain defiance towards order, particularly in Shakespeare’s time, knowing that: “In the sixteenth century the idea that women had consciences which might operate independently from men’s, might even judge and oppose the male conscience, was revolutionary.”<sup>406</sup> In this regard, Helena, Hermia, Titania, Juliet and Venus are “revolutionary” by the standards of their time because they all oppose men’s will. The evolution about women’s representation permeates Shakespeare’s work, and it is all the more interesting since the less conventional characters often are those who are supposed to be the most oppressed ones. Dympna Callaghan, when dealing with class differences, mentions Gail Kern Paster, who “has argued that ‘the institution of wet-nursing’ worked to enforce class differences.”<sup>407</sup> Knowing that patriarchy is about hierarchy, based mostly on sexist content, but also on class or race differences, it is particularly relevant that the Nurse, whose mere status indicates class-difference, who is a woman, should be the only one who voices her opinions and enjoys freedom of movement. One may argue that her lower class status leads her to have more liberty, but I would rather say that she takes that freedom herself, which led Dympna Callaghan to designate the Nurse as an “unruly woman.”<sup>408</sup> She proves to be a woman of character, including with dominant figures such as her master. Even if she finally becomes silent, she answers Capulet back when he abuses Juliet in Act III, scene 5,

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<sup>405</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 29-30.

<sup>406</sup> Dusinger, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 86.

<sup>407</sup> Callaghan, *The Impact of Feminism*, 7.

<sup>408</sup> Callaghan, *The Weyward Sisters*, 83.

and rebukes him: “You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so.”<sup>409</sup> When she comes to see Romeo in Act II, scene 4, Mercutio immediately addresses her bawdy quibbles: “’Tis no less, I tell ye, for the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon.”<sup>410</sup> Yet, she does not seem impressed or deterred: “An ‘a speak anything against me, I’ll take him down, an ‘a were lustier than he is, and twenty such jacks, and if I cannot, I’ll find those that shall.”<sup>411</sup> She proves violent if needed, and unafraid to join Mercutio in the area of sexual puns. She also penetrates a male space, which is the street, since she is always the one going out-door when Juliet cannot. On the other hand, Romeo does the exact contrary, as underlined by Roberts:

While men were typically identified as ‘public’ beings in early modern culture, *Romeo and Juliet* complicates those stereotypes by showing a man who (by contrast to his male peers) cultivates privacy as part of his persona and inhabits private spaces.<sup>412</sup>

This is indicated even before the audience sees him on stage: “Away from light steals home my heavy son,”<sup>413</sup> so that he is first associated with feminine features. Critics have often noticed that Shakespeare’s female and male characters often embody the other sex’s virtues: “(...) often Shakespeare’s women prove more ‘manly’ than their lovers.”<sup>414</sup> This is particularly obvious in *Venus and Adonis*. Venus even expresses her wish to be a man and to benefit from the same privileges: “Would thou wert as I am, and I a man.”<sup>415</sup> The metaphors of the poem effect this reversal. In the beginning, Adonis is presented with qualities usually associated with young girls: “Rose-cheeked Adonis”<sup>416</sup> and the metaphors referring to him are also rather feminine: “More white and red than doves or roses are.”<sup>417</sup> As for Venus, she is associated with masculine virtues, like strength: “Being so enraged, desire doth lend her

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<sup>409</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.169.

<sup>410</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.4.108-9.

<sup>411</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.4.144-146.

<sup>412</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 37-8.

<sup>413</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.135.

<sup>414</sup> Berggren, “The Woman’s Part,” 22.

<sup>415</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.369.

<sup>416</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.3.

<sup>417</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.10.

force/Courageously to pluck him from his horse.”<sup>418</sup> The inversion of roles is made obvious by Venus’ anecdote about the god of war: “Yet was he servile to my *coy* disdain,”<sup>419</sup> which echoes: “’Tis but a kiss I beg; why art thou *coy*?”<sup>420</sup> This parallelism shows that Venus does not abandon her femininity because she also impersonates masculine virtues; rather, both coincide in her. Then, one can wonder what the purpose of those inversions is, and what they can provoke. The example of Venus chasing down Adonis is particularly difficult to analyse, because it can both refer to men’s fear of unruly, sexually driven women and be deflated by a comical effect. Since inversion turns social order upside down –like carnival<sup>421</sup> - it could indeed create a comical situation, but it can also lead to a reflection on the validity of those social rules and how obsolete or arbitrary they are.

Inversions challenge social order by displaying other possible schemes. For example, Roberts notes: “Effeminacy threatens to undermine rigidly held distinctions between masculinity and femininity; distinctions upon which patriarchy is constructed.”<sup>422</sup> She mentions Romeo’s attitude, his being prone to lovesickness, his refusal to fight, and all those elements associate Romeo with femininity and prove that he cannot control his feelings, which was usually a reproach made to women. Likewise, Capulet is unable to control his anger (“You are too hot.”)<sup>423</sup> According to Roberts: “*Romeo and Juliet* thus complicates the received wisdom of patriarchal ideology – that while women are subject to their feelings men are able to master their emotions, whether of anger or despair, and are therefore the ‘natural’ masters in society.”<sup>424</sup> This undertaking of women’s qualities could then be interpreted as a criticism of patriarchy and prove the absurdity of its bases. Juliet is presented as a daring young woman, planning most of the action of the play, including the wedding (as shown

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<sup>418</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1.29-30.

<sup>419</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1.112.

<sup>420</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, 1.96.

<sup>421</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>422</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 59.

<sup>423</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.175.

<sup>424</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 60.

above), the farewell scene: “O, find him, give this ring to my true knight/And bid him come to take his last farewell,”<sup>425</sup> seeking a solution to escape forced marriage: “Tell me not, Friar, that thou hearest of this,/Unless thou tell me how I may prevent it.”<sup>426</sup> She proves particularly brave when told to take the potion, despite the Friar’s undisguised attack to her sex:

FRIAR LAURENCE

And this shall free thee from this present shame,  
If no inconstant toy nor womanish fear  
Abate thy valour in the acting.

JULIET

Give me, give me, O, tell not me of fear.<sup>427</sup>

So does she when stabbing herself. Juliet then proves to be a deep character:

Far from being a simple, conventional heroine, Juliet is a complex, conflicted, and multidimensional character, whose femininity can be read in opposing ways. In my view, rather than representing a feminine ideal Juliet evokes the problematic figure of the unruly woman; the woman who challenges patriarchal dictates and social convention<sup>428</sup>

Indeed, she does not merely disobey a father that wants to force her to get married to a man she has not chosen, she also defies the feud and patriarchal society. Juliet evolves throughout the play, from a fourteen-year-old girl obedient to her parents (“But no more deep will I endart mine eye/Than your consent gives strength to make it fly”)<sup>429</sup> to a daring young woman. Thus, the more the play progresses, the more the feminine qualities that Romeo possessed at the beginning of the play are developed, and so are Juliet’s masculine virtues. The inversion reaches a climax in the last Act of the play, when Romeo and Juliet commit suicide. They somewhat exchange weapons, since Romeo kills himself with poison, which is a feminine weapon: “Here’s to my love. (*Drinks.*) O true apothecary,/Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die,”<sup>430</sup> and Juliet kills herself with a masculine weapon: “O happy dagger! (*Takes Romeo’s dagger.*) This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die. *She stabs herself, falls*

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<sup>425</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.3.142-3.

<sup>426</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.1.50-1.

<sup>427</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV. 1118-121.

<sup>428</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 53.

<sup>429</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.3.99-100.

<sup>430</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.119-120.

(and dies).”<sup>431</sup> In this regard, the mentions made to the two lovers are telling. The title of the play is *Romeo and Juliet* – and Phyllis Rackin notes that “only three female characters whose names are featured in the titles of Shakespeare’s plays,”<sup>432</sup> underlining Juliet’s importance. But when the play draws to a conclusion, the very last words of the chorus are: “For never was a story of more woe/Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.”<sup>433</sup> Juliet’s name is now the first to be mentioned and Romeo is referred to as hers, proving the she might have become the main character of the play. Actually, personal pronouns are quite revealing about the relationship between men and women. They may either show domination schemes between men and women or affection. For example, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, they reinforce Titania’s resistance to her husband and prove her being eager to be on an equal footing with him: “Am not I thy lord?/Then I must be thy lady.”<sup>434</sup> The rhetorical question used by Oberon as well as the negation undermine his position whereas instead of answering the question, Titania uses an affirmative, deductive sentence that claims their position to be equal. Here, the possessive pronoun refers to whom each one should obey. The word “lord” implies authority and power when by calling herself “thy lady,” Titania presents herself as not being influenced. Then Oberon designates himself as Titania’s; the possessive pronoun is a term of endearment:

OBERON  
 Why should Titania cross her Oberon?  
 I do but beg a little changeling boy  
 To be my henchman.

TITANIA  
 Set your heart at rest.<sup>435</sup>

In this case, “her” can be seen as an attempt on Oberon’s part to tenderize Titania by eliciting affection. Indeed, once their conflict is ended, Titania calls her husband “My Oberon;”<sup>436</sup> but

<sup>431</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.169-170.

<sup>432</sup> Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 82.

<sup>433</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.3.309-310.

<sup>434</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.63-64.

<sup>435</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.119-121.

in this scene, it also proves Titania's power over Oberon. Once again, he asks a question and uses a restrictive clause: "I do but beg." The word "beg" places him in a position of inferiority. The adjective "little" may refer to the youth of the boy but it also undermines the request, as to make it more acceptable. Yet it fails, Oberon stops his line on a feminine caesura ("h**en**chman"), whereas Titania starts her answer with a stressed syllable and uses an imperative form "Set your heart at rest", finishing the sentence and establishing her superiority in this exchange. Titania embodies Puritan virtues: "for Puritans, wives can disobey their husbands if their consciences take different courses."<sup>437</sup> However, Titania and Oberon still represent the old generation, and a sort of war between the sexes. In *Romeo and Juliet*, love leads the lovers to be often presented or to present themselves as equals. First in their seduction "one hath wounded me/That's by me wounded."<sup>438</sup> The parallelism sets the two characters in both an active and passive position. Romeo then says about their love: "As mine on hers, so hers is set on mine."<sup>439</sup> The chiasmus reinforces both the idea of reciprocity and of equality. Then, after Tybalt's death, the Nurse's description of Juliet mirrors Romeo's behaviour: "O, he is even in my mistress' case,/Just in her case,"<sup>440</sup> the repetition reinforces their being similar. She adds: "Even so lies she,/Blubbering and weeping, weeping and blubbering."<sup>441</sup> The chiasmus here insists on the unending weeps of the two lovers while the repetition of the word "even" insists on their similarity. Thus, none of them dominates the other in the process of love, nor of grief. Both characters express desire and sadness, love and grief. This strict equality also means that they are subject to the same feelings and possess the same qualities. Those parallelisms do not mock the characters, but rather emphasise the similarities between men and women. Shakespeare's male characters cry, his female

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<sup>436</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV.1.75.

<sup>437</sup> Dusiinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 90.

<sup>438</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.3.46-7.

<sup>439</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.3.56.

<sup>440</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.3.84-5.

<sup>441</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.3.86-7.



characters are daring. Novy indicates: “(...) similarity between the sexes as an argument for women’s rights was not impossible to contemplate at the time.”<sup>442</sup> Shakespeare then shows that emotions are neither masculine nor feminine but contained in each person. Roberts confirms this theory:

Not only does Juliet depart from orthodox models of gentlewomanly conduct, but the play exposes the fragility of gender stereotypes by showing a woman to be as strong – even less effeminate – than a man and fully capable of taking the leading role in marriage, and a man capable of ‘womanish’ behaviour.<sup>443</sup>

More than exposing “the fragility of gender stereotypes,” Shakespeare also questions their validity by exposing characters who do not conform themselves to it, and yet attract the audience’s empathy. Since Romeo and Juliet often express their love, their feelings, their doubts and fears, the audience knows them and identifies with them, both because this expression of emotions make the characters understood and may echo the spectator’s own feeling:

In more general terms, a reader or spectator may be said to identify herself with a particular character, and thereby to ‘enrich’ and pleasurably reencounter her own personality. To identify with a character or a writer is to read with confidence in our ability to understand, and with a feeling of companionship that comes from a sense of being understood.<sup>444</sup>

For instance, “the female reader identifies with the character of Juliet.”<sup>445</sup> Furthermore, although they die, Romeo and Juliet still have what they wanted: being married and united, and their status is acknowledged and accepted by their parents at the end of the play:

Romeo and Juliet are acknowledged in their identities as husband and wife, and with the promise of a funerary monument the private becomes reincorporated into the public body. This is reiterated in the Prince’s final instruction ‘to have more talk of these sad things’ (5.3.307): what had previously been ‘untalked of and unseen’ now becomes spoken in the public domain.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 26.

<sup>443</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 57.

<sup>444</sup> Juliet Fleming, “The Ladies’ Shakespeare,” in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymrna Callaghan (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 5. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 7.

<sup>445</sup> Fleming, “The Ladies’ Shakespeare,” 7.

<sup>446</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 99-100.

What Romeo and Juliet could not have in life and had to keep secret is now revealed. It can be more than interesting to link it to the question of gender identity, because this is something private that finally becomes public. The Prince's remark could also be a message to the audience, an invitation to reflect on Romeo and Juliet's example. The play thus reveals what is supposed to be hidden, and gender - supposed to be a private matter - becomes something to be pondered by including behaviours that do not conform to social expectations, but also bodies that do not correspond to pre-conceived images.

Roberts discusses Romeo's behaviour and his possible physical appearance as related to it: "Hence Romeo was a part frequently played by women in the nineteenth century: his 'womanish' behaviour allowed actresses to play the part with immunity."<sup>447</sup> She also quotes "Rigaud's painting of the 'balcony scene' for *Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery*" and says that Romeo appears as a soft, feminized figure, whose features are barely distinguishable from those of Juliet"<sup>448</sup> and indeed, he has a marked waist and hips. Their embracing arms almost make them merge into each other.



The "balcony scene" (II.2) by L.F. Rigaud from *Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery*, 1789 (Robert 1998, 56)

<sup>447</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 55.

<sup>448</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 56.

This exchange of role is to become an exchange in appearance as well, blurring boundaries between genders, and making it difficult for the audience to recognize what they expect. According to Bruce Smith: “Shakespeare’s comedies often invite the conclusion that masculinity is more like a suit of clothes that can be put on and taken off at will than a matter of biological destiny.”<sup>449</sup> Of course, this quotation can be taken literally in plays like *As You Like It*, or *Twelfth Night* because of cross-dressing, but the same observation is not absent from the plays under scrutiny. Actors play characters who themselves try to play the role assigned to them at birth. Then, Capulet’s line: “I’ll play the housewife for this once”<sup>450</sup> might be metatheatrical and mean that a man playing an authoritative father – he is preparing his daughter’s wedding with a man whom she does not love – could also have played a woman on Elizabethan Stage and that his attitudes – ruling the house, being authoritative – are part of a role and not of biological attributes. His line echoes Butler’s reflection about the word “woman” and how it could apply to both a male and a female body: “(...) ‘woman’ need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and ‘man’ need not interpret male bodies”<sup>451</sup> This is exactly what is displayed on stage. Capulet playing a woman shows that men can impersonate women because their male bodies do not necessarily mean they are men. One then needs to consider whether Capulet’s line offers a moment of comic relief to counterbalance Juliet’s despair, or still belongs to tragedy and serves as a way to indicate that Capulet’s power is arbitrary. In any case, this shows that the stage is a privileged space to question gender or to give up gender norms. Sasha Roberts also argues so by commenting Charlotte Cushman’s performance as Romeo in 1845:

Charlotte played the part of Romeo to great acclaim opposite her sister Susan’s Juliet (...) She sought to emphasise Romeo’s vigour and masculinity: ‘Miss Cushman is a very

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<sup>449</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 3.

<sup>450</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.2.43.

<sup>451</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 152.

dangerous young man,’ noted one observer (Joseph Leach, *Bright Particular Star*, 1970, p. 175.)<sup>452</sup>

It is interesting to see that, contrary to what occurred on the Elizabethan stage, a woman plays a male character, leading to further reflections on gender on stage.



Charlotte Cushman as Romeo, 1845  
(Roberts 1998, 6)

Charlotte Cushman illustrates how the performance of gender depends on clothes, behaviours and attitudes, as opposed to the biological body underneath. Theatre thus becomes the place where men can impersonate women – which was more than common during the Elizabethan era – and women can be men, creating a place somewhat set apart. According to Kaye McLelland, “the logical place to look for readings that escape cultural constraints and expectations is the stage,”<sup>453</sup> it is the place where women can impersonate “vigour and masculinity” and where cross-dressing for actors and actresses is not a mere disguise because theatrical action has become more important than the actor or actress’s sex.

Some Shakespearean characters do not simply shift from one gender to the other, but embody both feminine and masculine values. Garner for instance underlines Hippolyta’s

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<sup>452</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 6.

<sup>453</sup> Kaye McLelland, “Toward a Bisexual Shakespeare: The Social Importance of Specifically Bisexual Readings of Shakespeare.” *Journal of Bisexuality* 11, no. 2–3 (April 2011), 356.

“androgynous character.”<sup>454</sup> Her mere status of Queen of Amazons links her to war as well as to womanhood. Other characters’ sex is not even given. Hawkes evokes the hypothesis that Helena’s parent “Nedar” could actually be her mother instead of her father: “The nearest version of the name in Ancient Greece exists as “Neda,” (...) “Neda” is of course female.”<sup>455</sup> It does not seem probable but it is still interesting to imagine that Shakespeare could have discreetly evoked a world in which children would belong to their mother. Furthermore, not only are the characters’ gender blurred, but so is their speech. Wells compares the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* and Romeo’s description of Rosaline to sonnet 4.<sup>456</sup> There is a strikingly common theme indeed; the poet compares beauty to richness and implies that it should be a beautiful person’s duty to share beauty. Romeo says: “O, she is rich in beauty, only poor/That when she dies, with beauty dies her store.”<sup>457</sup> The sonnet also creates a metaphor connecting beauty and richness: “Profitless usurer, why dost thou use/So great a sum of sums yet canst not live?”<sup>458</sup> and accuses the beloved person of being selfish: “For having traffic with thyself alone,/Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive.”<sup>459</sup> This could also be compared to Venus’ address to Adonis: “Things growing to themselves are growth’s abuse./Seeds spring from seeds and beauty breedeth beauty.”<sup>460</sup> Consequently, there is a common theme in love expression between three different genres, but interestingly enough the main difference is in the addressed and the addresser. In the play, a young man addresses a young woman, in the poem a young woman addresses a young man, in the sonnet, Wells indicates that a young man may be addressing another young man.<sup>461</sup> This disorder of gender around a similar discourse might prove that love speech is not gendered in Shakespeare’s work, proclaiming the universality of emotions and of their expression instead of thinking that some are specifically

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<sup>454</sup> Garner, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” 90.

<sup>455</sup> Hawkes, “Or,” 225.

<sup>456</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 152-3.

<sup>457</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.1.213-4.

<sup>458</sup> Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Sonnet 4, l. 7-8.

<sup>459</sup> Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Sonnet 4, l. 9-10.

<sup>460</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.166-7.

<sup>461</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 152-3.

feminine or masculine. This “gender trouble” is obvious in the movie *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Beyond the fact that a woman plays a man who embodies a woman, Gwyneth Paltrow, who plays young Viola, often delivers both Juliet’s and Romeo’s lines, including when she is not disguised as Romeo.

Thus, Shakespeare’s characters display different characteristics, whether they are masculine or feminine. This helps to construct complex characters, who undergo evolution throughout the play and with whom one may identify more easily. Shakespeare presents gender as a prop among others, or a disguise, which is not necessarily peculiar to a specific sex or body, but rather a fluctuant notion and illustrates Butler’s following quotation:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.<sup>462</sup>

Gender is thus not specific to any body, behaviour or speech, but rather “free-floating” and not absolute.

#### 4. Homoeroticism as contradicting “compulsory heterosexuality.”

Shakespeare displays “gender trouble” on stage by inventing characters who do not correspond to the stereotypes of masculinity or femininity, which were yet part of a model of “compulsory heterosexuality,” as Butler puts it:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire.<sup>463</sup>

Shakespeare could then have depicted gender as a spectrum by refusing this “compulsory heterosexuality” and shown homoeroticism between the characters. In this part, I will use the word “homoeroticism” instead of “homosexuality” because the word was not used in the

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<sup>462</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

<sup>463</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 31.

Elizabethan era,<sup>464</sup> during which there were no categories such as homosexuality, bisexuality or heterosexuality but rather homosexual behaviours. Several critics<sup>465</sup> have defended the idea that *Romeo and Juliet* celebrates heterosexual and bourgeois love. According to Dymphna Callaghan for instance, “*Romeo and Juliet* consolidates the ideology of romantic love and the correlative crystallization of the modern nuclear family.”<sup>466</sup> It is true that Romeo and Juliet as well as Hermia and Lysander or Helena and Demetrius show that heterosexual couples are the norm on Shakespeare’s stage – which does not preclude the representation of homosexual passion like Orsino and Cesario’s in *Twelfth Night* for instance – and homosexual love is never overtly represented but rather consigned to the margins of the plot. Yet, the reason why there is no clear homosexual couple on stage is that “Technically buggery was a crime punishable by death, and the accusation of being a sodomite was frequently levelled at political opponents as well as being derogatively used of Catholics.”<sup>467</sup> However, homoeroticism was still present in literary texts. Smith explains that books explicitly discussing homosexual desire were not “on the cultural margin or cast (...) onto the public bonfire.” They were actually “popular books.”<sup>468</sup> It would not be surprising then that Shakespeare’s plays could display homoeroticism on stage through some specific characters, like Titania for instance. Her explanation for not wanting to give the Indian boy to Oberon gives an insight into her potential homosexual behaviour:

His mother was a votaress of my order;  
And in the spiced Indian air by night,  
Full often hath she gossiped by my side,  
And sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands  
Marking th’embarked traders on the flood,  
When we have laughed to see the sails conceive  
And grow big-bellied with the wind,  
Which she with pretty and with swimming gait

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<sup>464</sup> Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*, 11.

<sup>465</sup> Will Stockton, “The Fierce Urgency of Now: Queer Theory, Presentism, and *Romeo and Juliet*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 288-289.

<sup>466</sup> Callaghan, *The Weyward Sisters*, 62.

<sup>467</sup> McLelland, “Toward a Bisexual Shakespeare,” 349–50.

<sup>468</sup> Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*, 28.

Following (her womb then rich with my young squire)  
 Would imitate, and sail upon the land  
 To fetch me trifles and return again  
 As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.  
 But she, being mortal, of that boy did die,  
 And for her sake do I rear up the boy;  
 And for her sake, I will not part with him.<sup>469</sup>

First, Titania refuses to obey her husband on behalf of her female friend, as underlined by the repetition of “And for her sake” in two consecutive lines (136, 137). It is as if the two women had conceived that baby together, as to be seen with the scansion of line 131: “**F**ollowing (her **w**omb then **r**ich with **m**y young **s**quire)”. That “womb”, “rich” and “my” can be stressed creates a link between those three words and the impression that Titania had influence on her votaress’s pregnancy. Several critics have advanced this idea such as Arthur Little Jr. who “describes the Votaress in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* as Titania’s ‘spouse,’ and compares their mode of producing the changeling boy to the use of a ‘sperm bank.’”<sup>470</sup> More generally, the conception of this child resembles parthenogenesis and Titania is more loyal to her votaress than to her husband, thereby suggesting some emotional implication that can be interpreted as homoeroticism. Novy notes: “In some comedies and romances, women long for a friendship that is or seems past,”<sup>471</sup> such longing such as Titania’s could also be perceived as longing for matrilineal society. Loomba links Titania’s words to “other images of female bonding and love,” among which the “female communities of the Amazons,” embodied by Hippolyta and also reminiscent of matrilineal societies, and finally “Helena’s passionate reminder to Hermia (...).”<sup>472</sup> Helena is indeed a character who shows desire for a male character, but who can express herself in a way that blurs the lines between heteroeroticism

<sup>469</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.122-137.

<sup>470</sup> Arthur Little Jr., qtd by Julie Crawford <sup>470</sup> in “Shakespeare. Same Sex. Marriage” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment*, ed. Valerie Traub, 265. > use a short

<sup>471</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 126.

<sup>472</sup> Loomba, “The Great Indian Vanishing Trick,” 4.



and homoeroticism. As Amanda Bailey argues, many critics<sup>473</sup> have noted that Helena “invokes the language of marital bonds”<sup>474</sup> when she mentions Hermia in Act III, scene 2.

We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,  
Have with our needles created both one flower,  
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,  
Both warbling of one song, both in one key,  
As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds  
Had been incorporate.<sup>475</sup>

According to Bailey, in this passage Hermia and Helena turn into a “two-face goddess” and that by becoming so, they distance themselves from “procreation” – which is what was expected of women - to get closer to “alteration.” Yet, the mere verb “created” could link this description to procreation, and the repetition of “both” insists on the notion of union, all the more so as it is always followed by “one,” which conveys the idea of their merging into one single being. Elements like the “needles” or the “flower” show that they create their own vision of femininity – flower being a feminine attribute. We can also consider “needles” to be a phallic object and thus a masculine one though sewing was a feminine activity, so that this association between “needles” and “flower” may induce that both masculinity and femininity potentially coincide in them, but that they chose to make their world exclusively feminine. The scansion also creates a feminine atmosphere. There are feminine endings<sup>476</sup> in lines 204 and 205: “**Have** with our **needles** **created** **both** one **flo**(wer),/**Both** on one **sampler**, **sitting on** one **cushion**,” which attenuates the end of the line and buttresses through the formal features the idea of calm and bliss described by Helena, while including the feminine as dominating both the style and the content. Lines 205 and 206 begin with trochaic inversions which underline “both” and thus their union, that appears three lines later: “But yet an union in

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<sup>473</sup> See Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Frances E. Dolan, *Marriage and Violence: The Early modern Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>474</sup> Bailey, “Personification and the Political Imagination,” 408.

<sup>475</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.203-8.

<sup>476</sup> “The feminine endings of verses (which I distinguish here from the rather different device of “feminine rhyme”) are metrical supplements to an iambic pentameter in the form of an eleventh syllable, usually unstressed, that assists the transference of poetic sense from one line to the next.” Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare’s Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 4.

partition.”<sup>477</sup> Helena even reproaches Hermia for abandoning her to support men: “And will you rent our ancient love asunder/To join with men in scorning your poor friend?”<sup>478</sup> The word “asunder” is reminiscent of the wedding ceremony - “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder”<sup>479</sup> - insisting once again on the idea of union, and of marital bonds. Helena’s words recall Friar Lawrence’s definition of marriage in *Romeo and Juliet*: “Till holy church incorporate two in one.”<sup>480</sup> Likewise, Helena insistence on two becoming one is unmistakable:

Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;  
So with two seeming bodies but one heart,  
Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,  
Due to one, and crowned with one crest.<sup>481</sup>

According to Amanda Bailey, this union mentioned by Helena is not to be “limited to same-sex attraction” but shows the “play’s queer potential.”<sup>482</sup> It might thus be significant to link this exploration of queerness<sup>483</sup> and the title – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – with “The Queer Manifesto”, which was a text given to people during the New York Gay Pride Day parade in 1990, which defined “queerness” as following: “Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It’s not about the mainstream (...). It’s about being on the margins, defining ourselves; (...) it’s about the night.”<sup>484</sup> The night in this specific play, being also linked to a dream, can thus be associated to “margins” that are to be explored: “Night-time in the forest repeatedly conveys the sense of estrangement and misunderstanding with which the

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<sup>477</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.210.

<sup>478</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.215-6.

<sup>479</sup> King James Bible, Matthew 19:9.

<sup>480</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.6.37.

<sup>481</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.211-4.

<sup>482</sup> Bailey, “Personification and the Political Imagination,” 408.

<sup>483</sup> See for instance Goran V. Stanivukovic, *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality* (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017); Madhavi Menon, *Shakespeareer : a Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Kate Chedgoy, *Shakespeare’s Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture* (Manchester, New York; Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>484</sup> “THE QUEER NATION MANIFESTO”. Accessed 22 January 2018.  
<http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/queernation.html>.

lovers are afflicted.”<sup>485</sup> It is a moment during which things become mysterious and when our landmarks are disrupted. The place in which the plot is set is as relevant as the time is. Most of the play occurs in the wood, which represents a place outside of the city, where it is easy to get lost, and an in-between or some liminal space: it is situated between Athens and the house of Lysander’s aunt (“From Athens is her house remote seven leagues.”<sup>486</sup>) It is then possible to take Judith Butler’s affirmation literally: “This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects’, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject.”<sup>487</sup> The play occurs indeed “outside” of the city and outside of the “matrix” which conveys patriarchal model and its inherent vision of gender. The genre of the play is particularly adequate to present such places, times, and opportunities: “Comedy offers us vicarious escape into alternative realities, new roles, second chances.”<sup>488</sup> Kaye McLelland also notices “there are specific periods of time where societal norms can be subverted or reversed and where different roles can be temporarily taken on”<sup>489</sup> in Shakespeare’s work and cites *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. She links it with Bakhtin’s notion of carnival: “These are spaces and times where normal rules are suspended or where different rules apply.”<sup>490</sup> The stage also creates such periods of time. Yet, when McLelland argues that “different roles can be temporarily taken on,” it is not a mere question of entertainment, it is also linked to a real quest for identity, as Bevington underlines: “Darkness and the forest, then, offer the lovers a glimpse of their inner selves.”<sup>491</sup> He adds: “In the forest, moreover, the experience of love invites all lovers to consider, even briefly, the opportunity for sexual revelling freed from the restraints

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<sup>485</sup> Bevington, “‘But We Are Spirits of Another Sort,’” 30.

<sup>486</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.1.159.

<sup>487</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of “Sex,”* 3.

<sup>488</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, 52.

<sup>489</sup> McLelland, “Toward a Bisexual Shakespeare,” 357.

<sup>490</sup> McLelland, “Toward a Bisexual Shakespeare,” 357.

<sup>491</sup> Bevington, “‘But We Are Spirits of Another Sort,’” 30.

of social custom.”<sup>492</sup> The play occurs where and when strange things happen so that the characters are literally lost – when Robin scatters them in the forest so that the characters find themselves lost, his speech sounds like a nursery rhyme or a magical incantation, as underlined by the trochaic rhythm:

Up and down, up and down,  
I will lead them up and down.  
I am feared in field and town.  
Goblin, lead them up and down.<sup>493</sup>

The characters are also symbolically lost as proved by Lysander’s confusion when he wakes up:

My lord, I shall reply amazedly,  
Half sleep, half waking; but as yet, I swear,  
I cannot truly say how I came here.<sup>494</sup>

The characters question their love, and even their identity: “Am I not Hermia? Are not you Lysander?”<sup>495</sup> All those elements indicate a questioning about gender, as reflected in 2016, when Emma Rice directed *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for the Globe Theatre and chose to rename Helena as Helenus - the part was played by Ankur Bahl – and portrayed him as a gay man whereas Hermia remained his female friend.

Somehow, if comedy seems to be particularly adequate to explore margins and suspend rules to better question identity, J. Adelman considers homoeroticism (more particularly between men) as a theme “articulated in Shakespeare’s earliest comedies and then apparently abandoned, returning with new force not in comedy but in tragedy and romance.”<sup>496</sup> Interestingly enough, this subject thus evolves from one genre to another; does it mean that it becomes a more serious subject? As seen above, the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*

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<sup>492</sup> Bevington, ““But We Are Spirits of Another Sort,”” 25.

<sup>493</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.396-9.

<sup>494</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV.1.145-7.

<sup>495</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.2.273.

<sup>496</sup> Janet Adelman, “Male Bonding in Shakespeare’s Comedies,” in *Shakespeare’s “Rough Magic”: Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber* (edited by Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn. Newark, London: Associated University Presses, 1985), 73.

discusses merely heterosexual love; however, Shakespeare added a character whose behaviour may induce that the play deals with homoeroticism as well. Mercutio is particularly interesting, knowing that in Brooke's version of the play, he is a very minor character, present only by name. Roberts analyses the development of this character as such: "Shakespeare developed Mercutio's role extensively, placing him in the company of men – a move which testifies to Shakespeare's interest in relations between men."<sup>497</sup> Several elements indicate indeed Mercutio's possible attraction to men. First, he strongly criticizes and rejects love for woman: "And to sink in it should you burden love,/Too great oppression for a tender thing."<sup>498</sup> According to Judith Butler: "(...) disavowed male homosexuality culminates in a heightened or consolidated masculinity, one which maintains the feminine as unthinkable and unnameable."<sup>499</sup> Mercutio mentions women, but only to set them apart and prefers male bounds to their company. He displays this "consolidated masculinity" by insinuating that Romeo is made less able because of his love to Rosaline ("Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead, stabbed with a white wench's black eye (...) and is he a man to encounter Tybalt?"<sup>500</sup>) or by being prone to fight – "Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk?"<sup>501</sup> This moment is caused by Tybalt's provocation, which can be interpreted as homophobic insults: "Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo."<sup>502</sup> Knowing the definition of consort ("Consort : Coit; a bedfellow")<sup>503</sup> Mercutio's reaction to Tybalt's line is revealing. He repeats several times the word "consort," leading prominence to its offensive meaning. He also says: "What, dost thou make us minstrels? An thou make minstrels of us."<sup>504</sup> The chiasmus insists on the link between this insult and Romeo and Mercutio. He goes on with "Here's my fiddlestick,"<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 67.

<sup>498</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.4.23-4.

<sup>499</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 94.

<sup>500</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.4.13-7.

<sup>501</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.74.

<sup>502</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.44.

<sup>503</sup> Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance*, 55.

<sup>504</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.45-6.

<sup>505</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.1.47.

which induces that he draws his sword, but the sexual metaphor might also be carried on with this line, as made obvious in Zeffirelli's adaptation of the play (1968): Mercutio is in the water and points his sword out of it in a defiantly phallic gesture. Mercutio is indeed a character prone to bawdy quibbles; Porter designates him as "Shakespeare's most phallic character"<sup>506</sup> because of how extensively he makes references to the phallus. More specifically, Porter notes: "Mercutio's three references to his friend's phallus serve as an index of the sexual dynamics of the friendship."<sup>507</sup> Those three references are: "Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down,"<sup>508</sup> "I conjure only but to raise up him"<sup>509</sup> and "thou a poperin pear."<sup>510</sup> Those references bear "an opposition to love, an amiable erotic permissiveness, and a phallocentrism that admits traces of homoeroticism."<sup>511</sup> The second one seems particularly relevant, because Mercutio is imagining Romeo in some private moment:

'Twould anger him  
To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle  
Of some strange nature, letting it there stand  
Till she had laid it and conjured it down -  
That were some spite. My invocation  
Is fair and honest. In his mistress' name.  
I conjure only but to raise up him.<sup>512</sup>

The words "stand" or "raise up" clearly refer to an erection while the "mistress' circle" can be associated with Rosaline's genitals. Porter notes about the last line: "It is as if Mercutio has a personal investment, as we say, in his friend's erection." And that involves "the idea of Mercutio's taking Rosaline's place not only as conjurer but also as container of Romeo's phallus."<sup>513</sup> Mercutio has often been represented as a gay man in several modern adaptations, like Luhrmann's. Mercutio is portrayed as "a black drag queen whose erotic interest in

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<sup>506</sup> Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio*, 155.

<sup>507</sup> Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio*, 156-7.

<sup>508</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.4.28.

<sup>509</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.4.29.

<sup>510</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.1.38.

<sup>511</sup> Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio*, 157.

<sup>512</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.1.23-9.

<sup>513</sup> Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio*, 157.

Romeo is palpable.”<sup>514</sup> According to Susan Benett, this enables to “raise questions of both race and sexuality that counter the pervasive white hetero-normativity described in scholarship and production histories alike.”<sup>515</sup> One could argue that those questions about gender and the visible homoeroticism on stage is a recent concern and that it would be anachronistic to apply those ideas to older plays and adaptations, but the presence of homoeroticism not only on stage but also in the text is undeniable. Thus, contrary to what some critics<sup>516</sup> may argue, *Romeo and Juliet* does not display love and desire only with heterosexuality as sole focus, but does challenge heterosexuality as compulsory thanks to characters who do not comply with that obligation.

To conclude this second part, Shakespeare’s characters tend to turn traditional situations upside-down, principally when in case of seduction. The heroines reinvent Petrarchan discourse, speak out for themselves and are not coy concerning their sexuality while men may look effeminate for instance. However, this change in tradition does not mean that there is a mere inversion of gender in Shakespeare’s characters, but rather a fusion, which leads them to be far more complex than stereotypes, and thus certainly more realistic. Somehow, the plays written by Shakespeare are often perceived as misogynistic and representing only heterosexual love; I have sought to show that this vision is debatable, if not utterly mistaken. Why then is *Romeo and Juliet* celebrated as the epitome of heterosexual love, and why could the same idea be argued about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*? It is important to remember that although there were and are women in Shakespeare’s plays and in the audience, they are often ignored. In addition, there are still too few of them among critics, editors and directors, which may explain the masculine vision cast on Shakespeare’s work.

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<sup>514</sup> Susan Benett in “Precarious Bodies: *Romeo and Juliet* in Baghdad at the World Shakespeare Festival” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment*, ed. Valerie Traub, (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 699.

<sup>515</sup> Benett, “Precarious Bodies,” 699.

<sup>516</sup> Melissa E. Sanchez in “Impure Resistance: Homoeroticism, Feminism, and Shakespearean Tragedy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 304.

### III. “Gender Trouble” beyond the characters.

The vision people have of Shakespeare’s plays may be more influenced by the context in which they live than by Shakespeare himself, especially concerning gender since its norms are perpetually refashioned. The case of *Romeo and Juliet* has particularly been discussed above, and Callaghan underlines that the interpretations change in time, though the play remains the same. “As Joseph Porter points out, *Romeo and Juliet* ‘has become far more canonical a story of heterosexual love than it was when it came to Shakespeare’s hand’ (141).”<sup>517</sup> Although New Criticism advocates some “separation of author from text, text from audience,”<sup>518</sup> it cannot be denied that the audience and the author exert a considerable influence on the text. A text cannot be considered as raw material, it has necessarily been shaped by a context and transformed by others, so that even though its existence results of the author’s creativity, it is reinvented through the influence of readers, whatever their status may be. The foregoing study attempts to uncover a certain “gender trouble” in Shakespeare’s text, and to show that his characters question the notion of masculinity and femininity as well as the norms and rules related to them. However, is it possible that this trouble may extent to those who manipulate the text? How do editors and critics treat gender? Do their own gender have an impact on the text? What are the links between the readers or spectators and the play? To what extent do they influence each other? And to what extent did this mutual influence also reshaped the vision we have Shakespeare himself?

#### 1. Gendered editions.

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<sup>517</sup> Callaghan, *The Weyward Sisters*, 61.

<sup>518</sup> Swift Lenz, Greene and Thomas Neely, ed. *The Woman’s Part*, 10.



According to Laurie E. Maguire: “In the past we bought Shakespeare’s text (or thought we did); now we know we are buying the editor’s.”<sup>519</sup> We talk about Shakespeare’s plays, without even wondering if all our interpretations of his plays are what he aimed at or, as suggested by the name, interpretations. According to Fleming, being conscious that Shakespeare’s texts have undergone slight changes because of all those who have manipulated them, editors must not be afraid to do so as well.

Since Shakespeare’s plays were adapted by actors, changed by other writers, and altered by theatrical scribes, censors, compositors, and proof-readers – since, beyond this, the texts varied from themselves at the moment of their first publication – the editor is free to modernize them in her turn.<sup>520</sup>

Yet, what does “to modernize” mean? Does it mean making it accessible for modern readership or applying modern interpretations on it? Of course, since Shakespeare lived four hundred years ago, his vision of society and even his language can prove difficult for modern people to understand. The editor may help the reader to understand words and jokes that would otherwise be completely obscure to modern readership. Those changes may seem minimal; yet explaining a text also implies that some judgement is conveyed. For example, in the Arden edition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the note draws an enlightening parallel between the different mentions to “sweet musk-roses,”<sup>521</sup> and “musk-rose buds”<sup>522</sup> mentioned in Act II and Titania crowning Bottom with “musk-roses.”<sup>523</sup> The note indicates: “a sad decline for the flowers adorning Titania’s bower.” The mere adjective “sad” passes a judgement about Titania’s relationship with Bottom, whereas it is open to interpretations. It can be seen as degradation for Titania, or as an affirmation of her sexuality. Titania’s love for Bottom is presented from her point of view and directed towards her own pleasure.

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<sup>519</sup> Laurie E. Maguire, “Feminist Editing and the Body of the Text,” in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 5. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 60.

<sup>520</sup> Fleming, “The Ladies’ Shakespeare,” 12.

<sup>521</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.1.252

<sup>522</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.2.3.

<sup>523</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV.1.3.

[Titania] and Bottom experience not animal lust, but a blissful, sensual, symbiotic union, characterized, like that of mother and child, by mutual affection and a sense of effortless omnipotence. Their eroticism, the opposite of Oberon's bestial fantasies or Theseus' phallic wooing, is tenderly gynocentric (...).<sup>524</sup>

Why then should we consider the mention to the flowers as “a sad decline”? Here, the vision of Titania's sexuality is influenced by the editor's interpretations. As Valerie Wayne remarks, “(...) since editing is not value-free, the concerns of gender, sexuality, rank, and race are integral to it, just as they are to critical practice.”<sup>525</sup> It seems that Shakespeare has less influence on the vision of gender his plays elaborate than what Stallybrass calls “the labor of production,” by which he means “editorial work, theatrical stagings, critical commentary, the global production and distribution of books, the incorporation of texts into the educational apparatus.”<sup>526</sup> However, why do they have an influence specifically on gender rather than on any other theme of Shakespeare's plays? A common vision presents Shakespeare as being part of an all-male production: he was a male author writing for male readers, has been studied by male critics and edited by male editors. And yet, although it is undeniable that men have dominated Shakespearian criticism during the past centuries, it is nevertheless noticable that a woman may be considered as the very first critic of Shakespeare. Her name is Margaret Cavendish, as stated by Romack who sees her as “first Shakespeare critic” because of her “defense of Shakespeare against a detractor (...) in her *Sociable Letters*, published in 1664.”<sup>527</sup> Thus, there has been a female point of view on Shakespeare since the very beginning of Shakespearian criticism.

Yet, what is a female vision of Shakespeare? Is there a unique one? Is it necessarily a feminist one? According to Maguire, “feminist editing” can be associated with “gender

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<sup>524</sup> Thomas Neely, “Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Comedies,” 65.

<sup>525</sup> Valerie Wayne in “The Gendered Text and Its Labour” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment*, ed. Valerie Traub, (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 551.

<sup>526</sup> Stallybrass, “Editing as Cultural Formation,” 92.

<sup>527</sup> Katherine M. Romack, “Margaret Cavendish, Shakespeare Critic,” in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymna Callaghan (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 5. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 25.

awareness and linguistic sensitivity to combat misogyny.”<sup>528</sup> However, does she mention the misogyny present in Shakespeare’s texts or in the editing of Shakespeare’s texts? First, it seems obvious that the vision of women in early modern England was different from what it is today, as mentioned in the first part. Editors have to explain some lines related to gender roles. For instance, in the Arden edition of *Venus and Adonis*, when Adonis “[blushes] and [pouts] in a dull disdain,”<sup>529</sup> the note indicates that there is an “usual association of disdain with proud and cold women,” which a modern reader not acquainted with Petrarchan discourse would not necessarily know. However, Maguire indicates: “Today’s editors have a duty to combat gender biases in their glosses.”<sup>530</sup> It is possible to qualify sexist lines by explaining them, for example by specifying “women were believed to,” or “it was thought that,”<sup>531</sup> as to indicate that the judgement about women is part of a historically situated stereotype and not a universal truth. Glosses actually have done quite the contrary until now, as to be seen with the embarrassment bawdy jokes can convey:

Editors even of scholarly editions, some of them still current, evaded frankness in their glosses by using Latinisms such as ‘pudendum’ – which, heaven help us, means something of which one should be ashamed – for the female sexual organs, and phrases such as ‘with a bawdy quibble’ or ‘with an obscene pun’ to avoid explaining a sexual quip.<sup>532</sup>

It means that the reader is compelled to accept an interpretation of the text as s/he reads it by the mere explanation of the gloss. Where Shakespeare wanted to convey bawdy jokes, editors introduce a judgement by telling that female sexual organs are something to be literally ashamed of, which distorts Shakespeare’s work in which sexual freedom, at least in speech, is quite obvious. Then, contrary to what Edmund White says, feminist edition or criticism is not “far-fetched reinterpretations of the classics”<sup>533</sup> but rather the legitimate attempt to

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<sup>528</sup> Maguire, “Feminist Editing,” 76.

<sup>529</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.33.

<sup>530</sup> Maguire, “Feminist Editing,” 68.

<sup>531</sup> Maguire, “Feminist Editing,” 68.

<sup>532</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 1.

<sup>533</sup> Quoted in *The Weyward Sisters: Shakespeare and Feminist Politics*, ed. Dymrna Callaghan (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1994), 5.

counterpoise hundreds of years of male-centred, not to say sexist, editing. For instance, Maguire mentions the *dramatis personae* as influencing the reader's perception of the characters, and as often being gender biased: "In most editions *dramatis personae* lists are arranged hierarchically: men on top."<sup>534</sup> She mentions the Riverside Shakespeare revised second edition of 1997, indicating that it "still separates male from female roles by a line of white space – a system possibly of use to twenty-first-century acting companies anxious to calculate the number of male and female actors required, but confusing and misleading to the first-time reader."<sup>535</sup> This visual separation of the characters proves that gender is an issue in editing, which is too often male-centred: "(...) a classification based on gender and/or rank (and the two are linked) is nothing less than editorial apartheid."<sup>536</sup> Other editions, not even necessarily feminist, like Brian Gibbons's "have abolished segregation"<sup>537</sup> and divide the characters according to their household, which is less confusing. Those gender-biased presentations of the characters have effects on those who receive the text:

This is particularly damaging because it is through the preconceptions of editors that early modern texts are presented to schoolchildren and students, who use their editions for public examinations. They are also of course used by directors and performers.<sup>538</sup>

The remarks of the editor are also essential for readers, because there are some blanks in Shakespeare's work that must be filled in. Shakespeare did not include many stage directions; most of the time, it is necessary to derive these from the characters' lines. This feature is not only to be found in plays, but also in *Venus and Adonis*, although the narrative voice could have explained the situation. Venus says: "Lie quietly, and hear a little more;/Nay, do not struggle, for thou shalt not rise."<sup>539</sup> The reader understands the fight at stake at this moment. By giving orders, Venus indicates that Adonis is fighting to escape her.

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<sup>534</sup> Maguire, "Feminist Editing," 72-73.

<sup>535</sup> Maguire, "Feminist Editing," 73.

<sup>536</sup> Maguire, "Feminist Editing," 73.

<sup>537</sup> Maguire, "Feminist Editing," 73.

<sup>538</sup> Dusi, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Preface to the Third Edition xviii.

<sup>539</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.709-710.

But in absence of indication in the text or in the dialogues, the editors or the actors actually add their own interpretation, which was not necessarily in Shakespeare's text. This can result in totally opposed positions about the text. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hippolyta is a noticeably silent character, and whenever she speaks, her lines are subject to interpretation. She actually proves that silence can either mean that she is not allowed to speak – in which case the subject cannot convey meaning - or that she refuses to speak, and thus communicates her disapproval. Does Hippolyta's silence prove her submissive or rebel? In the first scene of the play for instance, she is on stage when Theseus gives his judgement, yet she does not say anything and she is quiet from the moment Egeus enters till the end of the scene. She does not confront Theseus but she does not approve of him either. As noticed by Philip McGuire, "Hippolyta's silence" has "openness" which allows it to be differently interpreted from a performance, a production and an era to the other."<sup>540</sup> In Michael Hoffman's *A William Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream* (1998), Sophie Marceau turns her back at Theseus to show her disapproval. As Garner reminds us, "(...) he undoubtedly notices her frowning, for he asks, 'What cheer, my love?' (I.i.122)."<sup>541</sup> If this doubt about Hippolyta's silence can be discussed in a dissertation or a lesson, Maguire underlines that "Productions are (...) obliged to commit themselves to one interpretation of moments and characters: Hippolyta is a reluctant, conquered bride or she is not (...)."<sup>542</sup> Thus the director is forced to take a decision that has clear consequences on the place of female characters in the play. The staging is also an important factor because it is made of choices about actors, tones, props and costumes, which all convey meaning as well and add information about the characters. For example, K. McLelland comments the choice of costumes in Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. "It is only necessary to look at Leonardo DiCaprio

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<sup>540</sup> Philip C. McGuire, "Hippolyta's Silence and the Poet's Pen," in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Richard Dutton (New Casebooks. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 156.

<sup>541</sup> Garner, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*," 89.

<sup>542</sup> Maguire, "Feminist Editing," 76.

in his manly suit of armor or Claire Danes in a very gender prescriptive pair of fairy wings to see that, Mercutio aside, this is a very straight take on a fairly straight play.”<sup>543</sup> Shakespeare gave no indication about what the two young lovers were supposed to wear; once again this is a director’s choice that makes the play so heteronormative. “Productions are editions inasmuch as they mediate an author’s text for an audience.”<sup>544</sup>

However, those interpretations may not depend solely on the director or the editor’s gender, but also be a question of age and dominant point of view. Stallybrass stresses the importance of the historical context in edition, and on gender views: “(...) the construction of the individual, and the making of genders and sexualities are materially embedded in the historical production and reproduction of texts.”<sup>545</sup> For example, the way editors present or explain bawdy jokes reveals some judgement about them. Mercutio’s joke: “O Romeo, that she were, O that she were/An open-arse, and thou a popp’rin’-pear”<sup>546</sup> has led to different reactions, ranging from censorship to explanation of the joke: “When *Romeo and Juliet* first appeared in print, in the corrupt text of 1597, the passage substituted a euphemism, ‘open Et caetera’, in an early example of censorship.”<sup>547</sup> On the other hand, the Arden edition clarifies the metaphor and even explains the line further: “the triple *p* alliteration of *poperin pear* entails a thrusting onomatopoeia obvious from sexual play on ‘pop’er in.”<sup>548</sup> Those differences between the two editions highlight differences between two ages. Shakespeare’s plays are an adequate medium to understand how a certain era viewed women and their education.

Henrietta Bowdler cut passages and entire plays in order to produce *The Family Shakespeare* (1807), a work fit to be ‘placed in the hands of young persons of both sexes.’ Bowdler’s work is notorious; her name is now used as a verb to describe the expurgation of indelicate

<sup>543</sup> McLelland, “Toward a Bisexual Shakespeare,” 353.

<sup>544</sup> Maguire, “Feminist Editing,” 75.

<sup>545</sup> Stallybrass, “Editing as Cultural Formation,” 92.

<sup>546</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.1.37-8.

<sup>547</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 157.

<sup>548</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 184.

passages in texts; and her edition of Shakespeare is regarded as the mistaken product of an overly nice pre-Victorian sensibility.<sup>549</sup>

This example shows that although Henrietta Bowdler was a woman, she cast sexist prejudices on a play, namely that women should not read about sexual quibbles. It also proves that such reshaping and censorship actually lead to a complete misunderstanding of Shakespeare's plays. Similar cuts and mistakes can be found in films. For instance, in Lurhmann's version of *Romeo and Juliet*, the Nurse makes no reference to sexuality, turning her into a severe, old woman more than a funny character. According to Sasha Roberts, "[Removing] the extensive bawdy in *Romeo and Juliet*" leads it to be "a sanitized, sentimental, romanticized version of the play, far removed from what an Elizabethan audience would have seen and enjoyed."<sup>550</sup> Those cuts are the reason why readers and spectators may have a mistaken vision of Shakespeare's work and of his presentation of both heterosexuality and homoeroticism. Thus editors, instead of helping the reader by clarifying the text to him/her actually convey misinterpretations of the plays.

The notion of whom the edition is addressed to is quite relevant. There is a concern about the readers or spectators, seeing some of them as not able or allowed to have access to such quibbles, especially women in the past centuries, and young people nowadays:

Most commercial editions are aimed at the high school and undergraduate markets – an impressionable audience by any standards (...) the editor has the opportunity therefore to function as teacher and social worker, both proselytizer and poser of provocative questions.<sup>551</sup>

Indeed, the reflection on sexuality and on gender that can be detected in Shakespeare's plays can have an influence on the readers or spectators, and by editing or staging Shakespeare's plays, the editors and directors have an influence on the vision young people will have on gender. Stallybrass captures the influence of Shakespeare's plays as following: "Culture as

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<sup>549</sup> Fleming, "The Ladies' Shakespeare," 12-3.

<sup>550</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 87.

<sup>551</sup> Maguire, "Feminist Editing," 64.

contamination. The gentle Shakespeare as contaminator and corrupter of youth.”<sup>552</sup> Young people will study Shakespeare’s plays and draw conclusion about themselves and their own role.

## 2. “Gender trouble” in the audience.

When thinking about the making of a poem or a play, the writer, the editor and the director obviously come first to mind, but the audience is often occulted. The spectator and the reader are perceived as receiving the play without having an influence on it. Yet, they may be concerned by the same issues as the other actors of a production, particularly concerning gender – indeed, they are also too often thought to be exclusively male: “(...) the masculine pronoun ‘he’ was still the preferred form for designating ‘the reader’, implying either that most readers were likely to be men or that the gender of the reader was irrelevant.”<sup>553</sup> Yet, the example of Cavendish shows that women are also attracted by Shakespeare’s plays, and the interpretation of a text may differ according to the reader’s gender. For instance, numerous critics have perceived in *Venus and Adonis* the expression of male fears towards female sexuality and deem Venus’ attitude as shameful. Will Fisher adopts a totally diverging stance, particularly when Venus asks Adonis “Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.”<sup>554</sup> Because of Venus’ references to her pleasure and to the modes that could be used to achieve it, Will Fisher draws a comparison between Shakespeare’s poem and pornographic texts of the time:

These pornographic texts all emphasise how pleasurable cunnilingus can be for both women and men. When Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* is viewed in relation to them, it encourages us to focus on the playful eroticism of Venus’s speech, rather than on the fact that her invitation goes unfulfilled. (...) Given the evidence of the appropriations of Shakespeare’s

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<sup>552</sup> Stallybrass, “Editing as Cultural Formation,” 96.

<sup>553</sup> Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 2.

<sup>554</sup> Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l.234.



poem in later texts, it seems possible that women might have been titillated by the poem, or used it for their own purposes.<sup>555</sup>

Shakespeare's defense of female sexuality would then extend from his characters to his readers, and the interpretation of the text would radically differ because of this shift of focus. However, male editors and critics may lead women to be unable to recognize themselves in Shakespeare's work. This is what Phyllis Rackin observes: "Among the consequences for women students of Shakespeare's plays is the fact that we are being taught to read from the subject position of a man, and a misogynist man at that."<sup>556</sup> As established above, this misogynist position may result in gender-biased presentations, comments, censorship or misinterpretations. Shakespeare's plays might on the contrary have an important influence by arousing a sense of rebellion in women. This may lead to call Shakespeare's texts "feminist," which Juliet Dusinberre defines as such: "a set of texts whose life in the theatre, as also on the written page, is generated in part by energies which might be described as feminist, and which have the power to arouse feminism in an audience or a reader."<sup>557</sup> Indeed, Shakespeare's female characters rebel against their fathers (Hermia, Juliet), their husbands (Titania, maybe Hippolyta) or against patriarchal order. Merely displaying those women on stage and granting them with speech to express their resistance was a pre-feminist act. Those characters had and still have an undeniable power on the audience:

Might not all those middling sort of women who stepped out to the Globe with their female servants to have a good time in a public arena have found Rosalind a revelation? Or Juliet? Or Desdemona? What are these Shakespearean women doing with patriarchal marriage? (...) No wonder a lot of men cried: get my wife and daughter back home and send them to church not to the playhouse.<sup>558</sup>

Whilst the plays may induce the audience to reflect upon certain themes, the converse may be true as well.

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<sup>555</sup> Fisher, "Cunnilingus in *Venus and Adonis*," 345.

<sup>556</sup> Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 16.

<sup>557</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Preface to the Third Edition xix.

<sup>558</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Preface to the Third Edition xxii.

A mutual influence operates between Shakespeare and his audience - his representation of unruly women may have had an influence on female spectators, but their expectations might also explain why he depicted those unruly women. Juliet Dusinberre investigated the different categories that compounded Shakespeare's audience. Among them were men, women and children from different social classes,<sup>559</sup> and the playwrights had to please all these people, including by dealing with contemporary debates, such as the relationships between men and women: "[The playwrights'] ability to reflect controversy, to comment on it, to provoke it, to pioneer, was their guarantee of a livelihood."<sup>560</sup> The particular interest authors had on women and on gender actually reflects concerns of an age. For instance, according to Ania Loomba, "The spectre of overpowering mothers and wives" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* echoes "the historical transformation of gender roles during the period."<sup>561</sup> The Renaissance was indeed a moment when women, influenced by Humanism and Protestantism, started to claim certain rights and better consideration for their sex, like Jane Anger who was part of "the female protesters against male satirists in the decade following 1610."<sup>562</sup> Women protested against men's treatments by demonstrating dressed as men, which recalls some of Shakespeare's plays like *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*. However, according to Dusinberre: "Elizabethan and Jacobean feminism was a movement of minds but not of facts. Puritanism failed to give its ideas on women any permanent form, unless that form might be said to be the plays of Shakespeare."<sup>563</sup> These questions still require critical and intellectual interest, and those plays find an echo nowadays, approaching gender as a universal subject of questions and revisions, and also sadly showing that debates about women's rights remain crucially accurate:

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<sup>559</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 9-10.

<sup>560</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 10.

<sup>561</sup> Loomba, "The Great Indian Vanishing Trick," 171.

<sup>562</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 7.

<sup>563</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 136.

In the East the problems of unmarried daughters and of married women within patriarchy are ascendant, as they are also in the multi-cultural society of contemporary Britain, where young women from ethnic minorities may face a disjunction between home values and the roles expected of them in contemporary Western culture.<sup>564</sup>

Shakespeare's plays still are means to display and question women's place and rights, but nowadays another part of the audience is claiming rights - the LGBTQ community. Shakespeare's plays may prove to be a suitable vehicle to test new ideas, explore domains and demand rights, both because of the homoeroticism and questions about gender present in his plays, and their being part of the canon. Articles study Shakespeare's plays to advocate the institution of gay marriage for instance.<sup>565</sup> Adaptations like *Private Romeo* (2011) by Alan Brown explore forbidden love as a homosexual one, in the very masculine environment of the army. Thus, the audience both have an effect on the play because they represent a monetary income of money for the playwright who subsequently must meet their demands, but also because the interest the audience will have in a play depends on its capacity to test new ideas, to question reality and to deal with controversial issues.

The play also invites the audience to identify themselves with the characters, and by doing so, to take part into the action, at least through their compassion. The audience is supposed to develop feelings towards the characters, be it admiration, love, hatred or despise, which leads them to be involved in the plot, even if they are enable to change its course. Coppélia Kahn mentions how Romeo's duty to kill or not to kill Tybalt becomes as difficult a choice for him as for the audience.

As much as we want the love of Romeo and Juliet to prosper, we also want the volatile enmity of Tybalt punished and the death of Mercutio, that spirit of vital gaiety, revenged, even at the cost of continuing the feud. Romeo's hard choice is also ours.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>564</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Preface to the Third Edition xxix.

<sup>565</sup> See for instance Julie Crawford, "Shakespeare. Same Sex. Marriage" or Will Stockton, "The Fierce Urgency of Now: Queer Theory, Presentism, and *Romeo and Juliet*" in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>566</sup> Kahn, "Coming of Age in Verona," 8.

Catherine Belsey has also investigated how the emotional involvement of the spectators into the play also becomes a reflection about what a character should do: “The spectators participate in his choices; they are enlisted in the debate between good and evil; they are asked, in other words, to take sides.”<sup>567</sup> Thus, the audience is not passively receiving a play, but is actually active in a process of interaction, which is particularly developed in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Although comedies end in marriage, this one presents an exception, even if the characters do marry: “(...) the marriages do not provide closure by occurring at the end of the play.”<sup>568</sup> If we consider that the most important theme of the play is supposed to be solved only in the end and in the last act, it means that there was more than love-story and marriage at stake in the play. Hopkins underlines that the play could have ended at the beginning of Act V:

Almost all the plot material has been used up by the opening of Act V: Titania and Oberon are reconciled, the lovers have come together in mutually agreeable couples, returned to the city and been reconciled with Theseus and Egeus, Bottom has been transformed back to his normal shape, and all that remains is for the mechanicals to perform their play.<sup>569</sup>

The play within the play is part of a metatheatrical reflection, which shows the links between the actors, the characters and the audience, as well as the didactic dimension of theatre. McGuire underlines the parallels some productions have drawn between different characters of the play. For instance, Peter Brook “doubled the roles of Oberon and Theseus, of Hippolyta and Titania, and of the courtiers and fairies.”<sup>570</sup> He links it to Hermia’s line: “Methinks I see these things with parted eye,/When everything seems double.”<sup>571</sup> It shows that fiction (the dream and the fairies) acts as a double of reality (the Athenian palace and the courtiers); it is a mirror in which real people must look at themselves. Thus, if dream and real world are related, so are theatre and reality. The most important parallel can thus be identified between

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<sup>567</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 22.

<sup>568</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 27.

<sup>569</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 27-8.

<sup>570</sup> McGuire, “Hippolyta’s Silence,” 151.

<sup>571</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV.1.188-9.

Philostrate and Puck. Both are serving a king and entertaining him; their doubling adds other layers of embedded plots, so that it becomes difficult for the audience to understand who is watching whom, who steers the course of the action, who is the observer and who is the observed. In Adrian Noble's production of the play, Oberon and Puck are faced with a toy theatre when they plot against Titania, making of them directors as well as characters and reinforcing the metatheatrical dimension. According to Hawkes: "[Oberon] acts as audience to as well as participant in Titania's duping."<sup>572</sup> But Oberon might only be a participant, and not that much a director. Although he gives orders to Robin, the latter is the one who questions theatre the most and blurs the lines between reality and fiction. First, he puts magic on the lovers' eyelids, he drives them to separate ways in the wood and manipulates them like puppets, Bevington designates Puck as "a stage manager of his own little play,"<sup>573</sup> but he also abides by Oberon's will, so he can be seen as an actor, and he takes pleasure in watching the misadventures of Titania and the lovers, implying that he is a spectator as well. He buttresses his multiple action upon watching the men practicing their play in the wood: "What, a play toward? I'll be an auditor;/An actor too, perhaps, if I see the cause."<sup>574</sup> By saying so, he seems to sway the audience into taking part into the play. Moreover, considering him as a potential director sheds a significantly different light on one of his final monologues. In Act V, scene 1, just after the lovers are gone to bed, he delivers a speech in which he evokes a world of darkness. Because of the rhyming couplets, this may be seen as a song or an incantation:

Now it is the time of night  
That the graves, all gaping wide,  
Every one lets forth his sprite  
In the churchway paths to glide.<sup>575</sup>

Several interpretations can be drawn from these verses. First, it may confirm the theory that marriage is associated with death. It may as well announce that something more sinister is to

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<sup>572</sup> Hawkes, "Or," 233.

<sup>573</sup> Bevington, "'But We Are Spirits of Another Sort,'" 30.

<sup>574</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III.1.74-5.

<sup>575</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.369-372.

come after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a tragedy for instance, like *Romeo and Juliet*, once again implying that they are following and complementing each other – after all, Robin promises another play to come when he further says: “We will make amends ere long.”<sup>576</sup> It could also hint that after the merry moment they had, the spectators should reflect about the darker aspects of the play (paternal violence and forced marriage) and question their own identity as well. This might thus show that there is a link between fiction and reality, and that what is subject to comedy and entertainment in the theatre actually provokes darker consequences in real life. The spectator is indeed asked to draw parallels between fiction and reality. Robin is in fact both one of the most fictional characters – he is a puck, a spirit – and the most real one, since he is the only one interacting with the audience in the end of the play. At that moment, there is a transition between the fictional world that Oberon closes (“Every fairy take his gate,”<sup>577</sup> “Trip away, make no stay”<sup>578</sup>) and the real world that Robin brings back:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended:  
That you have but slumbered here  
While these visions did appear.<sup>579</sup>

He sounds like Quince for being afraid to have offended the audience: “If we offend, it is with our good will./That you should think, we come not to offend,/But with good will.”<sup>580</sup> In addition, by mentioning “shadows” and “visions” but also sleep, he draws a clear parallel with the lovers awakening at the beginning of Act 4: “These things seem small and undistinguishable,/Like far-off mountains turned into clouds,”<sup>581</sup> “Are you sure/That we are

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<sup>576</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.424.

<sup>577</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.406.

<sup>578</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.411.

<sup>579</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.413-6.

<sup>580</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.108-110.

<sup>581</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV.1.186-7.

awake? It seems to me/That yet we sleep, we dream.”<sup>582</sup> The spectator is thus expected to identify with the characters, and to understand their quest for identity as his/her own.

And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream,  
Gentles, do not reprehend:  
If you pardon, we will mend.<sup>583</sup>

This moment blurs even more the lines between all the layers of fiction, since Robin uses the word “dream” which is the title of the play. Whose dream does the title refer to, and who are the dreamers? He also alludes to the possible agency of the audience on the play. In line 420, his hypothetical sentence links the pronouns “you” and “we,” and thus underlines the effect the audience can have on the play. The fourth wall is definitely broken when he concludes: “Give me your hands, if we be friends;/And Robin shall restore amends.”<sup>584</sup> Telling that a fictional character could hold the hands of real spectators definitely shatters the borders between fiction and reality, and so does the pronoun “we,” which reunites all those different beings into one entity. By displaying fictional worlds embedded within one another, Shakespeare actually made of the audience one more character in his play. It forces the spectators to see themselves as such, and to ask themselves questions about their experience in the theatre: “The popular device of the play within the play can make the audience similarly self-conscious.”<sup>585</sup> It obviously also leads to a reflection about theatre and the value of a play.

According to Lisa Hopkins, when Hippolyta watches the play in Act V, she is given “her first lesson in theatre criticism and public behaviour (...).”<sup>586</sup> Theseus asks her to observe “what they mistake,”<sup>587</sup> thus appealing the intention of the audience on that point too. By merely reading the text, we understand that the actors play badly. They overplay by

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<sup>582</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV.1.191-3.

<sup>583</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.417-420.

<sup>584</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.427-8.

<sup>585</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 35.

<sup>586</sup> Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 27.

<sup>587</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.90.

repeating so many times the same word that it finally loses power and by taking an incredibly long time to die: “Thus die I, thus, thus, thus./Now I am dead,/Now I am fled,”<sup>588</sup> “Now die, die, die, die, die.”<sup>589</sup> The text is more reminiscent of songs because of the repetitions and of the spondaic rhythm: “Speak, speak. Quite dumb?/Dead, dead? A tomb,”<sup>590</sup> making it sound rather cheerful whereas this is supposed to be a tragic moment. The comparisons used are somewhat unusual: “His eyes were green as leeks.”<sup>591</sup> But interestingly enough, the actors lead an important reflection about how to play a girl, how to portray gender on stage and how to make it seem real. They present it as a matter of appearance: “Nay, faith, let not me play a woman. I have a beard coming,”<sup>592</sup> “And I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too. I’ll speak in a monstrous little voice (...).”<sup>593</sup> The actor must look like a woman and sound like a woman to be able to play a woman. Yet, in Michael Hoffman’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe only becomes credible when Flute takes off his wig and stops mimicking a female voice. This is no longer comical because he is not trying to imitate a girl, he would definitely not succeed to do so. Instead of focusing on the props, he focuses on the text, proving speech and expression of the feelings more suitable to embody a girl than costumes and imitations. Thus, he really becomes plausible, and the play becomes so too – people stop laughing. Theatre thus questions gender, be it the characters, the audience or of the actors. Bottom’s words about playing a woman are all the more comic to modern audience, since we are not used to see male actors playing women’s roles. In early modern England, women were seldom seen on stage as most of the female roles were played by men.<sup>594</sup> Phyllis Rackin specifies: “In our own theatres, by contrast, male cross-dressing invariably threatens to provoke the nervous laughter that arises from contemporary anxieties

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<sup>588</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.293-5.

<sup>589</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.299.

<sup>590</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.320-1.

<sup>591</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.328.

<sup>592</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.2.43-4.

<sup>593</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I.2.47-8.

<sup>594</sup> Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 43.



about masculine sexual identity.”<sup>595</sup> If the concepts of masculine and feminine are relatively similar from an age to another, they still undergo evolution; the way gender is displayed on stage then depends on the audience watching the play and on its gender norms:

For Anglo-Saxon audiences (...) a man in travesty, as the term suggests, remains an instrument of farce. In a society where men are ashamed to weep, to appear womanly can only be a humiliation, but in avoiding any semblance of the opposite sex, Shakespeare’s men cut themselves off from an understanding of the fullest range of human experience.<sup>596</sup>

The theatre is a place where feelings are to be displayed, interiority discussed, the most intimate thought are expressed to the audience through soliloquies so that what is usually hidden is exposed on stage. Emotions are heightened:

It is a commonplace of Elizabethan times as well as our own that women are allowed by convention to cry when men are not; actors are also expected to express emotions – in their performances – more often than other people do in life<sup>597</sup>

Theatre is a powerful lens to look at the world, because it enables us to see what is usually hidden or concealed. Stage thus examines gender norms and frees the actors from them, for otherwise their performance would be less convincing. The actors, be it in Shakespeare’s time or nowadays, do not embody a character because of their physical resemblance with him/her, but merely because this character needs a body to be incarnated. They then show masculinity and femininity as potentially existing in every body, as Novy mentions:

My point here is not simply that actors are androgynous, but that traditional masculine and feminine qualities exist in everyone to some degree, and that the condition of actors mirrors the potentiality we all have to go beyond these categories – beyond all dichotomies – a potentially threatening to believers in a neatly ordered world.<sup>598</sup>

Shattering this dichotomy, theatre becomes the place where a man can play a woman defying gender rules, like Juliet for instance, or for other plays, the place where a man can play a woman disguised as a man, so that the actors draw the audience’s attention towards different

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<sup>595</sup> Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 74.

<sup>596</sup> Berggren, “The Woman’s Part,” 21.

<sup>597</sup> Marianne Novy, “Shakespeare’s Female Characters as Actors and Audience” in *The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983), 267.

<sup>598</sup> Novy, “Shakespeare’s Female Characters,” 266.

aspects of gender that are usually confounded: “(...) three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.”<sup>599</sup>

As a conclusion, there is a mutual influence between the audience and the play, since the expectations of the audience influence the main themes of the play, while the audience is asked to take part into the action, to reflect on the choices of the protagonists and their validity. But the spectators also experience the different struggles the character goes through, making them his/her own, so that the play also leads to a potential process of reflection. Shakespeare reinforces this process by blurring the lines between fiction and reality, between director, actor, character and spectator. His play particularly invites the audience to ask themselves questions about gender and about its representation, and thus about how gender is actually to be played, to be represented, and to be a mere role. The different layers of fiction thus proclaim that fiction is reality, questioning gender, showing that it is acquired and performative, portraying characters whose extreme feelings shatter gender norms according to which a man should not cry for instance, and that reality is fiction because we play roles which we believe to be our true nature but which are acquired and performed.

### 3. Androgynous Shakespeare.

To gain a better understanding of the depiction of gender in Shakespeare’s work, focusing on his characters is not sufficient; it is necessary to look at the editors and at the audience. Yet there is still one actor whose influence is clearly essential but whose relation to gender has not yet been discussed. Shakespeare the man arouses fascination, especially concerning his gender; some critics even defend the idea that Shakespeare was a woman.<sup>600</sup> To what extent can an author’s gender have an influence on his work? Why is it crucial for

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<sup>599</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187.

<sup>600</sup> Sidney L. Gulick, “Was ‘Shakespeare’ a Woman?” in *College English* 15, no. 8 (1954): 448.

some readers and spectators to know whether Shakespeare was a man, or a woman, or heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual? We might have a misleading vision of Shakespeare because we project fantasies onto him but also because we refuse to reconsider our vision of him, be it quite stereotypical and debatable. Kaye McLelland says so when she investigates the different elements that could lead us to think Shakespeare was bisexual:

I would say that we have moved on from a time when Smith (1991) detected an unspoken argument that 'if Shakespeare is going to remain the lynchpin in the canon, he certainly can't be gay. Or even bisexual.' I believe we have also moved on from a time, if there ever was one, when canonical works cannot be subverted or reinterpreted.<sup>601</sup>

The question lies not in knowing whether he was bisexual, but rather in seeking whether we can envisage him as such. It seems important to ponder the intention behind the text, and to wonder whether literary creation truly was male-centred or not. Smith underlines: "the literature of Renaissance England is a series of books written by men to men about men."<sup>602</sup> Some elements may indeed lead us to think that Shakespeare reflects the misogyny of his time. For instance, Smith indicates: "For the first consumers of *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and the sonnets, the act of reading was itself an act of masculine self-affirmation."<sup>603</sup> He says so because he considers those works both a celebration of male friendship and misogynistic:

Shakespeare's two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, were, in their original printings, likewise exercises in the performance of masculinity. As published by Richard Field, *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 and *The Rape* in 1594, both poems carry dedicatory epistles to the Earl of Southampton that play on Plato's praise in the *Symposium* of soul-authored 'offspring' begotten without the help of women.<sup>604</sup>

Furthermore, the way Shakespeare depicts the female characters might help to understand his vision of women and his capacity to understand them. Women characters are often stereotyped when described by men, especially in the Renaissance. For instance, Montrose

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<sup>601</sup> McLelland, "Toward a Bisexual Shakespeare," 359.

<sup>602</sup> Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, 28.

<sup>603</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 135.

<sup>604</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 134.

mentions “The virginal, erotic and maternal aspects of the Elizabethan feminine”<sup>605</sup> which can be found in Shakespeare’s plays through what Janet Adelman calls “triply maternal figure” with “mother, Love and Nature;”<sup>606</sup> Venus embodies this vision of femininity for instance. Being born a man or a woman may give an author a biased way of looking at and depicting life. Once again the opposite sex will always be seen as an “Other” whose interiority will remain unknown. For instance, according to Linda Bamber in *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, a man necessarily writes as a man and a woman as a woman.<sup>607</sup> Would it mean that Shakespeare could not describe the mind of a female character with accuracy? Bamber’s assertion postulates a binary opposition between male and female authors and their writing, yet it might be far more complex and porous, the same way it is for Shakespeare’s characters. In this regard, what Jonathan Gil Harris says of “*écriture féminine*” actually works the other way around and applies to masculine writing as well.

Likewise, *écriture féminine* insists that the other embodied in corporeal matter implies not the adversarial alterity of the Hegelian dialectic – a conception of the ‘other’ still dominant in early modern studies, even if now stripped of its teleological thrust – but a companionable difference within the same, and hence a deferral of unitary identity.<sup>608</sup>

Male and female writing may present differences but must not be considered exact opposites.

However, Shakespeare’s depiction of women seldom presents them as inferior: “Many audience members, readers, and critics have said that Shakespeare’s women are often more intelligent than his men (...).”<sup>609</sup> Women in Shakespeare’s plays are portrayed as more clever, witty, virtuous and trustworthy than men are.<sup>610</sup> But above all, Shakespeare seems to be endowed with a particular ability to depict their feelings and states of mind: “Many believed that Shakespeare had an uncanny ability to enter into women’s minds and hearts and to

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<sup>605</sup> Montrose, “Shaping Fantasies,” 105.

<sup>606</sup> Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (London: Routledge, 1992), 2.

<sup>607</sup> Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, 5.

<sup>608</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris in “Cixous, Cavendish and the Writing of Dialogic Matter” in *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, ed. Callaghan (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 35.

<sup>609</sup> Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, 28.

<sup>610</sup> Gulick, “Was ‘Shakespeare’ a Woman?” 446.

express their deepest feelings.”<sup>611</sup> It is the case in the plays under scrutiny; Juliet for instance clearly challenges Linda Bamber’s assertion that female characters are less complex than male ones.

They do not have the same ability to be as fully human as the men. They aren’t allowed to get angry or to be as much in error as the men. They do not learn by their experiences. The men do.<sup>612</sup>

Yet, in act III scene 2 Juliet first blames Romeo for having slaughtered her cousin (“O serpent heart hid with a flowering face!”<sup>613</sup>) before regretting it and violently blaming the Nurse for doing so: “Blistered be thy tongue/For such a wish! He was not born for shame,”<sup>614</sup> “Ah, poor my lord, what tongue shall smooth thy name/When I, thy three-hours’ wife, have mangled it?”<sup>615</sup> She hesitates, becomes angry first at the Nurse, then at herself for having been mistaken, and she ponders about what she should do, proving Bamber’s quotation debatable. Moreover, Bamber affirms that the identity of female characters remains unknown whereas that of tragic heroes is widely discussed: “No (...) umbrella speeches shelter the consciousness of the women characters in the tragedies. Nor do they soliloquize; and only rarely do we have glimpses of something behind-the-scenes in their personalities.”<sup>616</sup> By “umbrella speeches,” Bamber means a character speaking to define the interiority of the hero. Yet Juliet could actually prove this quotation wrong again. The Nurse’s speech about her in Act I, scene 3, helps the audience to understand her age: “Even or odd of all days in the year,/Come Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen,”<sup>617</sup> to have an insight into her childhood and to know more about their loving relationship: “Thou wast the prettiest babe that e’er I nursed.”<sup>618</sup> The spectators know much more about Juliet’s family and childhood

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<sup>611</sup> Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 72.

<sup>612</sup> Sue Parrish in *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* Ed. John Elsom (London ; New York: Routledge in association with the International Association of Theatre Critics, 1989), 71.

<sup>613</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.2.73.

<sup>614</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.2.90-1.

<sup>615</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.2.98-9.

<sup>616</sup> Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, 7-8.

<sup>617</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.3.17-8.

<sup>618</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.3.61.

than about Romeo's, whose parents seldom speak – Capulet appears and speaks in ten scenes, Lady Capulet in eleven scenes, whereas Montague speaks in three scenes and his wife in only one. Romeo's friends discuss how he should be more than how he is in reality, it is more difficult to understand him as a character. Bamber also mentions the importance of soliloquy, which is an important feature to understand a character's interiority, as underlined by Belsey: "How is the impression of interiority produced? Above all by means of the formal development of the soliloquy."<sup>619</sup> Juliet does soliloquize, for instance in Act IV, scene 3, when she hesitates before drinking the potion the Friar gave her. She describes her thoughts and feelings: "I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins," "I fear it is, an yet methinks it should not", "O, look, methinks I see my cousin's ghost."<sup>620</sup> There is then an important use of the pronoun "I" which reinforces her exposing her identity.<sup>621</sup> Furthermore, Juliet alternates this description of her feelings with hypotheses that betray her fear. "What if this mixture do not work at all?" "What if it be a poison (...)", "How if", "shall I not then be stifled in the vault", "Or if I live", "O, if I wake."<sup>622</sup> All of these questions and hesitations in a soliloquy pronounced before committing an act that can be associated with suicide is reminiscent of Hamlet's "To be or not to be,"<sup>623</sup> and he is no character to lack insight into interiority. But if tragedy seems to be a genre particularly adequate to those questions, comedy also enables the audience to better understand female characters by entering their minds. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is no soliloquy on Lysander's or Demetrius's part, but when Hermia wakes up alone in the wood after Lysander abandons her, she tells the dream she had. "Methought a serpent ate my heart away,/And you sat smiling at his cruel prey,"<sup>624</sup> which allows the audience to enter her psyche. Norman N. Holland considers Hermia's dream

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<sup>619</sup> Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 42.

<sup>620</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.3.15, 28-9, 55.

<sup>621</sup> On the importance of the pronoun "I" in soliloquies see Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 49.

<sup>622</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.3. 21, 24, 33, 36, 49.

<sup>623</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. (Ed. Ann Thompson, Neil Taylor, Richard Proudfoot. London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2014), III.1.54-87.

<sup>624</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.2.153-4.

“an illustration of someone’s unconscious made conscious.”<sup>625</sup> Women are thus deep characters, whose dreams, unconscious and interiority can be known. Roberts explains that Shakespeare inherited dramatic functions that led him to present characters, including women, as types: “In fact the dramatic conventions that Shakespeare inherited in the late-sixteenth century were concerned less with psychological realism than with the *function* of characters and character ‘types’ as vehicles for exploring ideas; as a mean to the end.”<sup>626</sup> However, in Shakespeare’s plays it seems that both are compatible, which reinforces the idea of Shakespeare developing his female characters’ psychology. Of course he presents “types,” all the young lovers are typical types of comedies for instance, except his characters go beyond their types – by being particularly prone to bawdy jokes for the Nurse, by crying for Romeo, by being rejected for Venus, etc. Indeed, his characters contradict or challenge their own types, until they attain a complexity more akin to real people than fictional constructs. Shakespeare portrays female characters not as types or secondary roles, but rather focuses on their own individuality, their failures and their qualities, their fears and their joys: “Shakespeare presents each female character as an entire human being, without any particular classification, because they are all so different. They are what they are, with their own qualities, skills, defects, and failures.”<sup>627</sup>

This particular ability to enter the female brain led several critics to imagine Shakespeare as a woman: “[Cavendish] even imagines Shakespeare himself as a woman (...). Cavendish values Shakespeare for his protean ability to know the secrets of gender, to write as if he were a natural woman.”<sup>628</sup> However, it seems quite discouraging to think that only a woman could have understood women and defended them, and there are too few arguments

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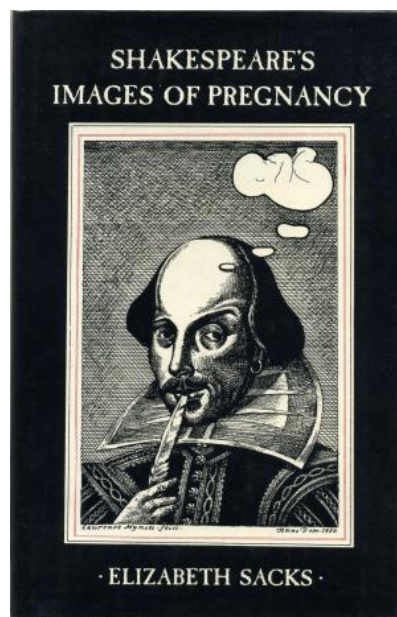
<sup>625</sup> Norman N. Holland, “Hermia’s Dream,” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Richard Dutton (New Casebooks. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 61.

<sup>626</sup> Roberts, *William Shakespeare*, 34.

<sup>627</sup> Caroline Alexander in *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* Ed. John Elsom (London; New York: Routledge in association with the International Association of Theatre Critics, 1989), 68.

<sup>628</sup> Romack, “Margaret Cavendish, Shakespeare Critic,” 26-7.

and proofs to validate this theory. Yet, it is interesting to observe that the parallel between the author and a woman – without affirming that he was one – is quite recurrent, within Shakespeare’s plays too. The act of creation links the writer to a mother, which was already a common metaphor in Shakespeare’s time: “Renaissance medical terminology likened the brain to a womb.”<sup>629</sup> When Philostrate presents *Pyramus and Thisbe* to Theseus, he designates it as the work of “Hard-handed men that work in Athens here,/Which never laboured in their minds till now,”<sup>630</sup> the word “labour” being associated with delivery.



*Shakespeare's Images of Pregnancy,*  
front cover (Sacks, 1980)

Shakespeare’s work depicts fascination as well as awe towards creation, as evidenced in Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech. Elizabeth Sacks indicates: “Mab herself is mythologically related to the Celtic fertility deities (...),”<sup>631</sup> which links her to reproduction. She is designated as bringing dreams and as “the fairies’ midwife,”<sup>632</sup> and Mercutio makes a comparison between idea and child: “True, I talk of dreams,/Which are the children of an idle

<sup>629</sup> Elizabeth Sacks, *Shakespeare's Images of Pregnancy* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 4.

<sup>630</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.72-3.

<sup>631</sup> Sacks, *Shakespeare's Images of Pregnancy*, 18.

<sup>632</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.4.54.



brain.”<sup>633</sup> It all carries the metaphor of pregnancy. The reference to the dream directly recalls *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, all the more so as Mercutio is talking about fairies.<sup>634</sup> He is describing the cause of imagination - Queen Mab can be seen a metaphor of inspiration - while also depicting its consequences, which is a world of imagination and wonder that he vividly describes. It is noteworthy that Mercutio should always associate mental and physical acts of creation, recalling Elizabeth Sacks’s words. “The most creative mental act that we can perform is to have an original idea; our most creative physical act is to have a child.”<sup>635</sup> Although Mercutio mostly talks of dreams, he also deals with eroticism: “This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,/That presses them and learns them first to bear,/Making them women of good carriage.”<sup>636</sup> Romeo answers: “Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace,/Thou talk’st of nothing.”<sup>637</sup> As Stanley Wells remarks: “We may recall that ‘nothing’ could be used of both the male and the female sexual organs.”<sup>638</sup> Romeo’s answer acquires a double meaning, either rejecting Mercutio’s speech by accusing it of having no sense, or on the contrary indirectly approving Mercutio by linking his imagination to sexuality. Actually the word “nothing” - despite his first meaning - may lead to various interpretations about its possible implications. Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* also metaphorically associates it with physical union.

And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.<sup>639</sup>

This passage is interspersed with references to both body and mind. In line 14, “imagination” is the subject of the sentence and refers to the mind, whereas the verb “bodies forth”

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<sup>633</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.4.96-7.

<sup>634</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 154.

<sup>635</sup> Sacks, *Shakespeare’s Images of Pregnancy*, 1.

<sup>636</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.4.92-4.

<sup>637</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.4.95-6.

<sup>638</sup> Wells, *W. Shakespeare, Sex, & Love*, 155.

<sup>639</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.14-7.

obviously refers to the body. In lines 15 and 16, the two final words “pen” and “nothing” are metaphors of sexual parts. The “pen” connotes a penis, the line incidentally ends on a masculine ending, whereas “nothing” would represent the vagina; the line ends on a feminine ending. In mental as well as physical creation, masculine and feminine must then be reunited to bring forth an idea. The masculine part seems to be embodied by the poet – he is associated with the pen thanks to the genitive form – and the audience or the spectator might be the feminine presence. A literary work only gains meaning if there is an addressee to receive the ideas of the addresser and then create something out of nothing. The play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* proves the importance of the material provided by the poet so that the audience may give life to it and create an imaginative world by believing it could be true. Philostrate says of it: “(...) it is nothing, nothing in the world,/Unless you can find sport in their intents.”<sup>640</sup> He obviously says that the play has no value, but he also implies that it will not have any “unless” Theseus, that is the spectator, brings some to it. “Itself a ‘creation’, *Pyramus and Thisbe* has substance only if the inner eye of the imagination will do its supplementary work and ‘amend’ the limitations of theatre.”<sup>641</sup> This idea of common creation, ignited by the poet and perpetuated by the audience is also discussed in the prologue to *King Henry V* with “imaginary puissance”<sup>642</sup>: “Think, when we talk of horses that you see them.”<sup>643</sup> Imagination and the success of a play is a process to be achieved by several persons. Shakespeare’s plays are not merely Shakespeare’s achievements; the reader or the spectator must still bring them to life. It explains why Shakespeare’s vision is not overwhelming, but still defines his work:

In fictional discourse, ‘authority’ is not so absolute: in creating a hypothetical imaginary reality author and reader are, in a sense, *collaborators*. Between them power is constantly being renegotiated, as the writer keeps offering new details of the hypothetical world he is constructing, as the reader draws on his own experience to amplify those details and gives or

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<sup>640</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.78-9.

<sup>641</sup> Sacks, *Shakespeare’s Images of Pregnancy*, 23.

<sup>642</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Henry V* (Ed. T. W. Craik. London ; New York: Arden Shakespeare, 1995), Prologue 25.

<sup>643</sup> Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, Prologue 26.

withholds his imaginative assent. In a word, fiction making is a *performative* act in which the reader or the listener is as much a participant as the author.<sup>644</sup>

This work of collaboration explains the mutual dependence of the audience and author, which has already been discussed. Somehow, it is relevant that Smith should see literary creation as “performative.” It must be enacted by a subject and validated by those to whom it is presented, exactly the way gender is. Thus, Shakespeare’s reflection on gender might also be a metatextual reflection on how fiction has to be approved by the spectator instead of depending on the individual’s own will. Shakespeare’s characters are subject to a double gaze; not only must they meet the expectations of their family concerning gender rules, but also those of the audience as characters of fiction. The validation of their identity as adults is still defined by intersubjectivity<sup>645</sup>, knowing that the spectators are part of this process. Shakespeare’s characters are then brought to life by the connection between author and reader, the way a baby is brought to life by the connection between father and mother. But more than that, their identity is then to be validated by the spectator, who in his/her turn interrogates his/her own identity. This is reminiscent of Socrates’ vision of the mind as being “pregnant” with an idea and needing someone else’s help to deliver that idea.<sup>646</sup> Through his characters and his plays, Shakespeare could deliver the idea contained in the spectator’s brain.

However, it is confusing that Shakespeare should become a midwife whereas he was previously seen as a pregnant mother. Boundaries are even more blurred if we take into account Smith’s account of Shakespeare’s dedication of *Venus and Adonis* to his patron, the Earl of Southampton.

If Southampton is pleased, Shakespeare will honour him ‘with some graver labour’. If, on the other hand, ‘the first heir of my invention’ prove ‘deformed’, ‘I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather, and never after ear so barren a land’ (224). With respect to the poem, the sexual

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<sup>644</sup> Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*, 17.

<sup>645</sup> “A situation in which the self is defined as much by those around the person as much as the person or self.” Christopher Tilmouth, “Intersubjective Shakespeare.” Lecture, Cambridge University, April 26, 2018.

<sup>646</sup> Platon. *Théétète* (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1995), 148e-151d.

images of 'burden', 'labour', 'heir', and ploughing cast Shakespeare as the mother to Southampton's father as well as a bestower of seed himself.<sup>647</sup>

Contrary to dominant discourse, literary creation is not a solitary activity but rather an act accomplished by several actors. Yet, Smith's quotation also indicates that Shakespeare is a "father as well as a bestower of seed himself," which means that Shakespeare could be both father and mother to his text. This metaphor is not merely a question of who brings forth the idea and who nurtures it; there are also notions of masculine and feminine, which must not be forgotten while pursuing this line of thought. This conjunction between masculine and feminine could explain Shakespeare's capacity to speak both to men and women and to question gender on stage. Virginia Woolf investigates Shakespeare's capacity to associate masculine and feminine qualities, and presents it as a necessary process for creation.

Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought.<sup>648</sup>

Physical creation requires a combination of the sexes, and so does literary creation. Shakespeare's mind is thus described by Virginia Woolf as "the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind (...)." <sup>649</sup> Because of this combination, Shakespeare is able to understand and to address both men and women; he unites the sexes and transcends them: "Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of mind."<sup>650</sup> According to Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare was able to use his mind in its full capacity because he did not divide it into masculine and feminine, did not confine it to the sole focus of masculinity and thus gave his work and his characters the same qualities. This association of masculine and feminine seems to be the condition which both enables a writer to reach universality and allows characters to reach

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<sup>647</sup> Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, 134.

<sup>648</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 119.

<sup>649</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 119.

<sup>650</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 117.

individuality and adulthood, hence Shakespeare's depiction of young characters at a moment of transition: "(...) Shakespeare believed that for a man to be more than a boy, as for a woman to be more than a child, the masculine and the feminine must marry in his spirit." Once the masculine and the feminine are united in a mind, once the author does not abide by the conventions of his own gender but tries to be freed from arbitrary borders, s/he is able to understand different minds instead of merely reflecting his/her own experience, and can thus address very different people. For example, Smith mentions how Shakespeare echoes people's experience about gender and above all desire: "Shakespeare's sonnets convince a homosexual reader that they were written by someone who knew homosexual desire from the inside (...)." <sup>651</sup> I am not trying to ascertain whether or not Shakespeare was homosexual or bisexual, but I will use these diverse theories about him to prove his ability to write gender and to capture various experiences. Subsequently, not only is Shakespeare's discourse universal because he is able to depict the mutual emotions we feel despite our disparities, but also because he is able to understand and express everyone's specificity. That is why he is such a fascinating figure, and one that withstands the passage of time. People recognize themselves in his work, despite their differences; Shakespeare puts words on their feelings and their struggles and provides them a mirror on stage, which reflect their own identity and forces them to consider it.

Finally, it is crucial to examine the means Shakespeare used to better explore identity, and more particularly gender. His specificity first comes from his ability to use "(...) both sides of his mind equally." <sup>652</sup> Somehow, the foregoing reflection was meant to show that Shakespeare's work reinvented gender rules as well as genre rules and that between 1593 and 1595, he incorporated different genres into a single piece of work. Snyder mentions particularly the narrative poems:

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<sup>651</sup> Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, 26.

<sup>652</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 125.

The narrative poems from these same years can also be seen as exercises in comedy and tragedy – for although *Venus and Adonis* ends in Adonis's death, it is hard to quarrel with F.T. Prince's conclusion that the poem treats sexual desire 'in the spirit of romantic comedy,' as *Lucrece* treats it tragically.<sup>653</sup>

And yet, it is still difficult to clearly establish whether *Venus and Adonis* is comical despite Adonis' attempted rape and final death or whether it is tragic despite the ridiculous way in which Adonis dies. Indeed, his death is undermined by the fact that it is repeated. Venus first believes Adonis has been killed, which renders his real death far less moving when it really occurs - Venus' tears have already been wasted on a fake death. Likewise, the preceding parts exposed the tragedy contained in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the fact *Romeo and Juliet* begins as a comedy finally to turn into a tragedy. Snyder's analysis of Juliet's fake death scene makes it comparable to Adonis':

But Shakespeare keeps the comic strain alive through the rest of the scene. The highpitched, repetitive mourning of the Nurse, Paris, and the Capulets sounds more like Pyramus over the body of Thisbe than a serious tragic scene. Finally Peter has his comic turn with the musicians.<sup>654</sup>

Comic and tragic genres are maybe not merely to be separated into two parts in *Romeo and Juliet*, the comic genre being interrupted with Mercutio's death to open onto a tragic plot. According to Snyder, "What Shakespeare is attempting here is not counterpoint but the *fusion* of tragic and comic. It doesn't quite work."<sup>655</sup> But I am not sure this "fusion" can be considered a failure. She tells herself that it enables the author to change focus on different themes: "Finally, comedy can become part of the tragedy itself, providing in its long-range, levelling, anti-individual perspective the most radical challenge to heroic distinction."<sup>656</sup> Incorporating two different genres into a single one enables Shakespeare to use the better of each of those genres. Snyder holds a negative vision of this attempt: "Shakespeare may have been dissatisfied with his experiment. At any rate, he wrote no more tragedy for several years,

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<sup>653</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 4.

<sup>654</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 68.

<sup>655</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 68.

<sup>656</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 5.

and he never again returned to the comedy-into-tragedy structure.”<sup>657</sup> Yet, one may argue that Shakespeare has, at least through those three works, tried to create a fusion between tragedy and comedy to use the best features and devices of both genres, which allows him greater accuracy in his description of life and of the human mind, in the way that he found, according to Virginia Woolf, a fusion between masculine and feminine in his mind as an author.

Thus, it is interesting to see that Shakespeare is often described as being able to enter people’s minds and to reflect their feelings, emotions and fears, be they men, women, heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. It helps to explain why he became canonical, or “a cultural deity.”<sup>658</sup> His work resonates with everyone, which explains why he provokes fantasies – he has become “our god in our own image.”<sup>659</sup> His work might not have known such success had he spoken only to one half of the population. Furthermore, instead of restricting himself to one gender or one genre, Shakespeare did not deny all the possibilities each of them might offer, and by effecting a fusion between those in his work, he somewhat transcended them, allowing a far better exploration of human nature – because his writing is not purely masculine – and giving it in a form that can deal with the complexity of the subject – because his work is not merely tragic or comic. Genre is at the service of gender; the final work ultimately achieves greater complexity, but also greater depth, because Shakespeare undermined the lines that define conventional categories.

In conclusion, critics have sometimes accused feminist criticism of being far-fetched and of applying modern frameworks to older texts. Yet, men have written about Shakespeare for years and have imposed their own point of view on his work, forgetting about the women who were part of the audience and the readership and who had a clear influence both on the plot and on the interpretations given to it. Misogynist criticisms or staging, visions of Shakespeare the man as necessarily heterosexual for instance have been the norm for the past

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<sup>657</sup> Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, 70.

<sup>658</sup> McLelland, “Toward a Bisexual Shakespeare,” 360.

<sup>659</sup> McLelland, “Toward a Bisexual Shakespeare,” 360.

centuries. Yet, some accuse feminist critics of arbitrarily applying their vision to a text;<sup>660</sup> this is ironic. All the more so since beyond the importance of the editor, critic or audience's gender upon the interpretation of a work, Shakespeare's plays also invite the audience to draw parallels between fiction and reality and to interrogate their gender identity the way the characters do:

That the dramatic medium itself is thematised in Shakespeare's play does not imply a claim for the self-referentiality of the aesthetic object or the aesthetic act. On the contrary it implies a claim for a dialectic between Shakespeare's profession and his society, a dialectic between the theatre and the world.<sup>661</sup>

Moreover, this collaboration between the author and the spectator, which gives life to a literary work can be seen as the process of giving birth to a child. The association of pregnancy and literary creation is common and the author may also be associated with a mother and a father. This metaphor helps us to understand what Virginia Woolf meant when she said of Shakespeare that he had an androgynous mind. Shakespeare brings both masculine and feminine features into his work, and develops it thanks to a combination between different genres, thus creating characters whose gender identity may be complex and generate questions and interpretations. Elizabeth Sacks thus shows the power Shakespeare has to question gender not only in his characters, born of his androgynous mind, but also in all the real people related to the text. "Shakespeare allowed his literary creations their own power of creativity; like duplicating cells, the creativity multiples and spreads, inevitably touching audience, reader and actor."<sup>662</sup>

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<sup>660</sup> See for instance Fred Inglis "Recovering Shakespeare: innocence and materialism," in *Shakespeare in the Changing Curriculum*, edited by Lesley Aers and Nigel Wheale (New York, Routledge, 1991), 58-73 or Edmund White, "When the genders got confused: the Odd Woman, the New Woman, and the homosocial," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 12, 1991, quoted in Callaghan, *Weyward Sisters*, 4-5.

<sup>661</sup> Montrose, "'Shaping Fantasies,'" 132.

<sup>662</sup> Sacks, *Shakespeare's Images of Pregnancy*, 14.



## Conclusion

To conclude, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* question both genre and gender, each serving the other. Exploring genre rules helps to better understand gender ones. According to Sidney, comedy "is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which [the poet] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be (...)"<sup>663</sup> whereas tragedy "openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue;"<sup>664</sup> it "teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded."<sup>665</sup> Shakespeare proved gender to be both part of "common errors of our life" and "ulcers" that are covered and yet may be painful and "[uncertain]." It is crucial to observe that as far as gender is concerned, Shakespeare made what was comic tragic, to emphasise how important a concern it was, and what was tragic, or at least serious, Shakespeare made comic, to mock the arbitrariness of gender rules. His style mixes different genres and reinvent them in order to abolish the distinction between masculine and feminine. For instance his work is interspersed with references to bawdy language or to Petrarchan discourse that he rewrites so that they do not maintain women in a subordinate role. His female characters speak for themselves; they are lovers but not objects of idolatry or wicked temptresses. They fight against patriarchy, which Shakespeare criticizes by exposing its internal violence on stage. This defence of women helps not to perceive them as a category but as individuals, whose interiority is known by the audience, and whose struggles may potentially echo the spectator's experience. Judith Butler explains how a literary text may, by depicting women's emotions and individuality, shatter the binary opposition that we are culturally predisposed to accept:

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<sup>663</sup> Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 98, l. 4-6.

<sup>664</sup> Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 98, l. 25-6.

<sup>665</sup> Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 98, l. 29-30.

The literary text as war machine is, in each instance, directed against the hierarchical division of gender, the splitting of universal and particular in the name of a recovery of a prior and essential unity of those terms. To universalize the point of view of women is simultaneously to destroy the category of women and to establish the possibility of a new humanism. Destruction is always restoration – that is, the destruction of a set of categories that introduce artificial divisions of a set of categories that introduce artificial divisions into an otherwise unified ontology.<sup>666</sup>

By destroying this binary opposition, Shakespeare describes characters impersonating both masculine and feminine qualities, proving that they coexist within everyone instead of being assigned to one sex. This combination of masculinity and femininity in his characters is also to be found in Shakespeare's genius, through an androgynous mind that attained universality by showing that we are all subject to the same emotions and feelings, regardless of our sex, but that we may also have different points of view and undergo different struggles depending on our gender. Shakespeare is then able to address everyone individually and to lead any individual towards critical insight. Theatre and narrative poems are particularly adequate for that purpose, because they invite the spectator or the reader to identify with the characters, to take part and to be involved in the characters' choices and evolution but also to question acting. Juliet Dusinberre underlines how the theatrical performativity and gender one are related:

Men and women perform on stage the gender roles which they are required to perform in society, thus highlighting the theatricality inherent in social behaviour. In doing so they unsettle those social roles by demonstrating that they play parts which have been learnt, rather than determined by innate characteristics.<sup>667</sup>

By blurring lines between reality and fiction, Shakespeare creates a fictional world in which gender roles are less artificial than in society, because their facticity is questioned.

Common belief holds that Shakespeare was ahead of his time. Concerning gender, this is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, he can doubtless be regarded as a product of his time, reflecting the Puritan and Humanist questionings about women, with their call to treat them

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<sup>666</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 162.

<sup>667</sup> Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Preface to the Second Edition xlv-xlvi.

with respect, and the emerging notions that they were neither gods nor devils, but human beings. His depiction of young characters willing to make their own choice despite their parents' will actually reflects the conflict that existed between the ideals from the Middle Ages and those of the Renaissance, and shows how deadly and arbitrary the prevalent rites of passage could be. On the other hand, he might be considered as definitely ahead of his time for having depicted characters that did not conform to categories and certainly not to gender types. Instead, his characters struggle to define their own identity, to understand who they are and whom they love, and the result can seldom be reduced to a single interpretation. Shakespeare clearly depicted gender as a spectrum, and not as a binary opposition between masculine and feminine, and saw in each of his characters an infinite possibility of characteristics instead of preconceived ones that would abide by traditional models. His male characters impersonate feminine virtues and his female characters embody masculine ones as well.

However, the interpretations about gender that can be drawn from Shakespeare's work may have been misinterpreted or even ignored, because criticism has too long been dominated by a unified misogynistic discourse which imposed both on Shakespeare's texts but also on our vision of Shakespeare the man, his era and audience, a male-centred vision which is now to be challenged by diverse points of view. They may enrich interpretations of those canonical plays by focusing on themes which had until now been treated as secondary aspects; gender is one among others. I will thus conclude this dissertation with Valerie Wayne's insistence on the necessity to shed new light on Shakespeare's plays:

(...) we do not need new editions that recycle old texts and received ideas. We do, however, need critically current, distinguished editions that seriously rethinks texts in relation to race, sexuality, gender, and other forms of marginalization such as class and disability.<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>668</sup> Wayne, "The Gendered Text and Its Labour," 557.

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*I am grateful to Dr Sophie Lemerrier-Goddard for having helped me and guided me through the elaboration of this dissertation.*

*Thanks to my former English teachers, Johann Laubacher for having turned my attention to Shakespeare, to English literature and to the representation of women, and Pierre-Yves Coudert for having aroused passion for those subjects.*

*I would also like to thank my friends from France and England, whose help and advice have been a great support. Thanks to Danny Vagnozzi, Félix Duperrier, Olga Boubounelle, Axelle de Reviers, Ellen Birch, Sabrina Hogan and Alexis Biron. Thanks to Thomas Formenty, Elise Angioi, Camille Le Gall and Alice Rabilloud for being good ears. Finally, thanks to Thibaut Siegfried for his fruitful help and encouragements, thanks to my father for being all the contrary of the fathers studied in this work, and above all, thanks to my mother, for the time she spent listening to me discussing this work and supporting me whatever I may try.*