Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro

Centro de Educação e Humanidades

Instituto de Letras

Cecília Athias Maués Viana
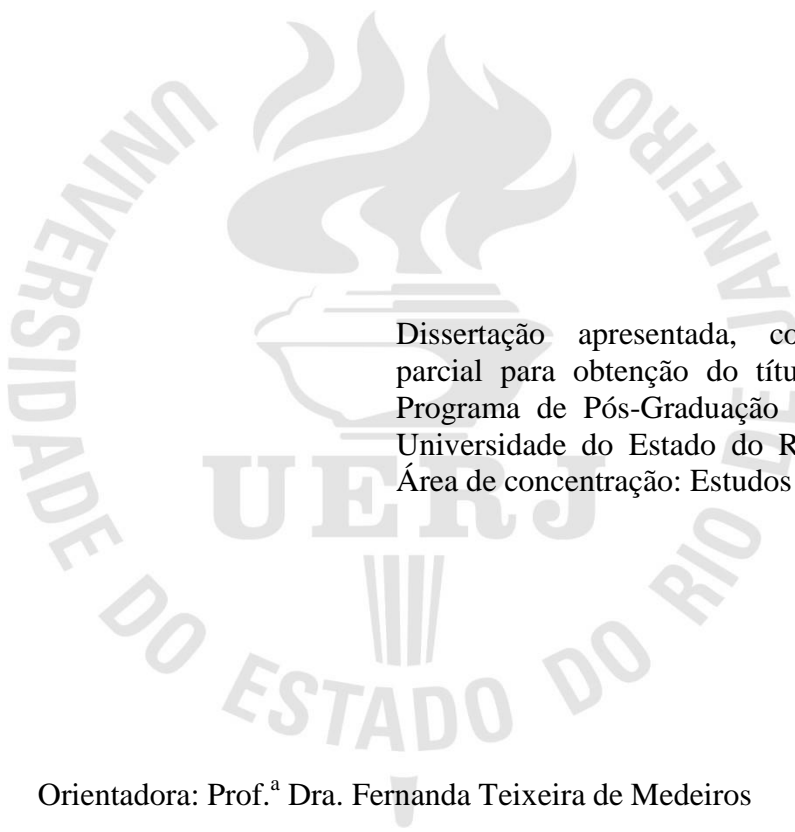
"Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie": agency and transgression in two of WilliamShakespeare's female characters

Rio de Janeiro

2022

Cecília Athias Maués Viana

"Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie": agency and transgression in two of William Shakespeare's female characters

Orientadora: Prof.ª Dra. Fernanda Teixeira de Medeiros

Rio de Janeiro

2022

Autorizo, apenas para fins acadêmicos e científicos, a reprodução total ou parcial desta dissertação, desde que citada a fonte.

_____   _____
                    Assinatura   Data

Cecília Athias Maués Viana

"Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie": agency and transgression in two of William Shakespeare's female characters

<div style="margin-left:50%">
Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Estudos de Literatura.
</div>

Aprovada em 08 de julho de 2022.

Banca examinadora:

_____

Prof.ª Dra. Fernanda Teixeira de Medeiros (Orientadora)

Instituto de Letras - UERJ

_____

Prof. Dr. Davi Ferreira de Pinho

Instituto de Letras - UERJ

_____

Prof.ª Dra. Marlene Soares dos Santos

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro

2022

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Miguel Athias Z'L.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

RESUMO

Este estudo parte do interesse em investigar a representação de figuras femininas no drama escrito por William Shakespeare, prestando atenção especial a seus modos de subjetivação, expressão e ação. Esta dissertação focaliza duas personagens que se destacam por seus altos níveis de agência e transgressão: Helena, a protagonista de *All's Well That Ends Well* (*Bom é o Que Acaba Bem*) (1604-5) e Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*, 1606). Para analisar cada uma, a pesquisa leva em conta tanto o contexto histórico-cultural da modernidade nascente – a cultura retórica humanista do século dezesseis e a exclusão das mulheres da revolução pedagógica em curso no período – como as noções acerca da mulher e da condição feminina na época. A análise aqui proposta também atenta para os aspectos textuais propriamente ditos: o gênero das peças em questão (a peça problema e a tragédia), os solilóquios das personagens em foco e cenas específicas das quais elas participam.

Palavras-chave: William Shakespeare. Representação da subjetividade. Personagens femininas. Agência.

ABSTRACT

VIANA, Cecília Athias Maués. *"Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie":* agency and transgression in two of William Shakespeare's female characters. 2022. 115 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2022.

This study departs from the interest to investigate the representation of female characters in William Shakespeare's drama, in particular their modes of construction of self, expression and action. This dissertation focuses on two characters who stand out due to their high levels of agency and transgression: Helena, the protagonist of *All's Well That Ends Well* (1604-5) and Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*, 1606). To analyse each of them, this research considers the historical and cultural context of early modernity – the humanist rhetorical culture of the sixteenth century and women's exclusion from the ongoing pedagogical revolution then –, the notions concerning 'woman' and the female condition at the time. The analysis employed here also pays attention to the textual aspects, as the genre of the plays in question, the soliloquies of both characters and specific scenes in which they take part in.

Keywords: William Shakespeare. Representation of subjectivity. Female characters. Agency.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

My undergraduate course was in the area of Psychology, and although I have always been interested in Literature, it was not until the Master's programme that I came into formal contact with literary studies. I was first introduced to Shakespeare's work through the reading of his last plays and became gradually closer to his work thanks to the interest in the female characters he wrote, two in special: Helena, from *All's Well That Ends Well* (1604-5) and Lady Macbeth, from *Macbeth* (1606). These two characters called my attention because of their speeches alone on stage – their soliloquies. Besides, they also seemed to yield interesting, contemporary discussions on topics concerning gender, agency and construction of selfhood.

It is generally agreed that Shakespearean female characters have few moments in soliloquy, a dramatic resource that allows us to read modes of self-expression as well as the character's representation and construction of subjectivity. Considering the soliloquy itself, it has had different usages in other varieties of theatre before the early modern drama. It has been employed since the Classical drama and also has a prominent use in the medieval theatre, particularly in the morality plays and their *psychomachia*[11], or the representation of the conflicts of the soul, which was an influential device to Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

One of the reasons for the constant use of soliloquies in morality plays is that they dealt with issues of Christian salvation, theological instruction, and had the specific purpose of moral correction. Thus the use of soliloquies granted a way of involving the audience, as it was directly addressed. According to Neil Corcoran, in *Reading Shakespeare's Soliloquies* (2018), the audience was treated as if it were another character in the drama and was conceived of as "humankind in general, as it might be by a priest in a sermon" (CORCORAN, 2018, p.68).

In the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, the soliloquy acquires new levels of development and complexity. Throughout Shakespeare's dramatic canon, the soliloquy gradually became more complex, distancing itself from a purely expository speech, that is, when it conveys plot information to the audience, to acquire more elaboration, providing characters with the capacity of displaying psychological depth. Corcoran's argument supports the fact that Shakespeare's use of the soliloquy, however indebted to the

---

[1] The Latin poem "Psychomachia", written by Christian author Prudentius in the 4th century, gave rise to the tradition of *psychomachia*.

medieval drama, is astoundingly original and inventive, for at once it inherits and radically transforms a traditional mode of theatre. James Shapiro suggests, in *1599 – A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005), that there is a notable connection between the development in the writing of soliloquies and in the writing of essays, both of which account for important modes of expression of the first person, particularly prominent in early modernity.

The disparity in number between male and female characters in Shakespearean drama is quite significant. Out of the estimated 980 'persons' of his drama, only 155 of those characters account for the female representatives. Yet, they most certainly do *not* fall behind in terms of impact, relevance and memorability in comparison to their male counterparts. Thus I intend to investigate Helena's and Lady Macbeth's subjectivities taking into account how much power and how many resources the characters have to shape themselves. The themes of agency and transgression ground my discussion on gender norms and ideals, which is guided by questions as: how did Shakespeare mediateideas concerning early modern gender prescriptions in his plays? Are Helena and Lady Macbeth given a different treatment than "real women" at the time, who were certainly attendees in public playhouses in London? Do we read a certain amount of freedom as far as history is concerned in Shakespeare's drawing of the two characters here analysed? In order to discuss these characters and the issues they evoke, I have divided this dissertation into three chapters.

Chapter one presents an overview of the rhetorical culture of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and explores the ideas of self in early modernity to prepare the ground for the discussion of agency of the two female characters chosen for this study. Then, mostly based on the studies of Ian Maclean (1980), I deal with the notions of woman in different fields of knowledge available in early modernity, particularly concerning religion, medicine and economy. The chapter ends with a section related to women's lives in sixteenth-century England, in which I focus on the gender disparities and the limitations imposed on the female sex in the period, always keeping in mindthat the access to work and education was highly dependent on social class.

Chapter two is dedicated to the discussion of Helena in relation to agency and transgression in *All's Well* and I explore how her agency is what drives the core of the action in this play. I also deal with the genre of problem play and the theme of virginity, which concerns the construction of the protagonist and is widely debated in *All's Well*.

Throughout the chapter, I close read Helena's three soliloquies, as well as two decisive moments in the play, the virginity dialogue (1.1) and the bed-trick (4.2-4.4), in whichthe

protagonist's agency and transgressive mode can be further analysed. From its title onwards, *All's Well That Ends Well* questions the idea of happy endings and disbelieves the institution of matrimony.

In chapter three I deal with the character of Lady Macbeth and her participation in the action of the play, which is especially significant from acts 1 to 3. I briefly discuss the genre of tragedy and its relation to gender, exploring the treatment female characters are given in *Macbeth*. Throughout the chapter, I analyse Lady Macbeth's partnership with Macbeth and close read her two soliloquies (1.5). I also discuss the issues concerning maternity and how they are involved in the construction of Lady Macbeth's character, keeping in mind that agency and transgression pervade the referred topics. The outlining of historical and conceptual points concerning the rhetorical culture and the early modernity will help to carry out a deeper reading of bothcharacters. It is through the exploration of the selected passages in both plays and by foregrounding the theme of agency that I will delve in the topic of construction of selfhood to think about the two female subjectivities at issue here.

1. APPROACHING EARLY MODERNITY AND ITS NOTIONS OF SELF

1.1 Early modern humanism and rhetorical culture

This research is interested in reading William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) plays and female characters in a dialogue with the historical and factual context in which his work emerged, paying special attention to early modern women's access to knowledge and education and the places they occupied in society. Women in general tended to be excluded from the humanist pedagogical revolution, since they were not admitted at grammar schools or universities; however, belonging to a rhetorical culture certainly affected them, or so does Shakespeare's work lead us to surmise.

It is clear that the early modern European intellectual infrastructure was still deeply influenced by misogynistic views. Nevertheless, in the Middle Ages (c. 1400), Christine de Pisan (1364-1430) had already expressed prowoman ideas, proposing a counterargument to the attacks on women that pervaded the religious, social, cultural, academic and economic fields. Christine de Pisan was responsible for initiating the 400-year-old public debate, later entitled *Querelle des Femmes,* through the writing of letters to French scholar Jean de Montreuil (1354-1418). This epistolary exchange is known as *Querelle de la Rose*. De Pisan discussed sexual politics, advocated a defence of the female sex and is referred to as an early feminist thinker by Joan Kelly in her essay "Early feminist theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*" (1982). De Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) is a result of the *querelle* and was translated into English by Brian Ansley (?-1536) in 1521. Interestingly, Christine de Pisan is mentioned by Russel Fraser, editor of the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *All's Well That Ends Well* (2003, p.3), as a possible source for Shakespeare's construction of the protagonistHelena. Besides, a part of Baldassare Castiglione's (1478-1529) *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) – the most renowned conduct manual of the sixteenth century, translated into English in 1561 by Thomas Hoby (1530-1566) – is concerned about "the woman question", as the third of its four books focuses entirely on that issue, surely influenced by the *querelle*.

Shakespeare was trained in the traditions of rhetoric and the humanist movement propelled the early modern society to a pedagogical revolution. The origins of humanism can be traced back to the end of the Middle Ages and it stands as an intellectual

concern with the rediscovery, interpretation and assimilation of ancient Greek and Roman texts. According to Nicholas Mann, the term "humanist" − translated from the Italian word *umanista*, which designates the ones who study rhetoric and classical literature − occurs in the English language in the late sixteenth century (1996, p.1). Simultaneously, it is worth noting, to the growing expansion of grammar schools and the Elizabethan playhouses in the period. The humanist thought was widely endorsed and developed throughout Europe by many prominent scholars and Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) stands as the main humanist thinker until the present day. It is due to the pedagogical curriculum proposed by humanists that in the Tudor and Jacobean periods rhetoric was given a vital place in grammar schools, as it guided principles and methodology of their educational programmes. Bearing in mind that the terms humanism, rhetoric and the culture derived from it are closely connected when it comes to early modernity, my purpose is to explore the notions concerning the early modern self, the culture of debate and the rhetorical training that took place in grammar schools as well as the existing connections among them. The works of contemporary researchers as Joel Altman (1978), Stephen Greenblatt (1980), Peter Platt (1999), Russ McDonald (2001), Peter Mack (2004), and Fernanda Medeiros (2019) are in consonance with and of great support to the present study of the early modern culture of debate fostered by grammar school training and Shakespearean drama.

The beginning of modernity was marked by several ruptures, as society was gradually and deeply becoming more complex. Two major historical facts are to be commented on, when dealing with the period in which Shakespeare lived and worked. The navigations to the so-called "New World" gave Europeans the sense of a universe in growing expansion, but also fostered the inevitable, tense and violent contact with alterity. Important Renaissance author and inventor of the textual form known as the essay, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) in "On Cannibals" (c. 1580) registers his impressions concerning the contrasts between the European and the Brazilian indigenous population's culture. The cannibals to whom Montaigne's title refers are the native Brazilians. Oddly enough, the writer asserts that if the native people of Antarctic France − Brazil − were indeed barbarians, so were the Europeans inasmuch as their habits proved to be corrupt and cruel. The natives, on the other hand, lacked formal training and led lives much closer to nature and distant from the ways of a society undergoing a process of modernisation, a fact which did not make them any less civilised.

According to Montaigne's argument, had the native Brazilians been met by the Greek

philosophers, such as Plato for example, they would have been well appreciated, for the ancient thinkers understood that the greatest and most beautiful creations in life come either from Nature or Fortune. Besides, the natives showed a state of such simplicity, in the eyes of Montaigne, that they captured the essence of the golden age, or the personification of the dream of a lost, primitive paradise. In relation to the indigenous nation, the essayist asserts, as though idealising his own Utopia, that

> They are in such state of purity that it sometimes saddens me to think we did not learn from them earlier, at a time when there were men who were better able to appreciate them than we. I am sorry that Lycurgus and Plato did not know them, for I think that what we have seen of these people with our own eyes surpasses not only the pictures with which poets have illustrated the golden age, and all their attempts to draw mankind in the state of happiness, but the ideas and the very aspirations of philosophers as well. They could not imagine an innocence as pure and simple as we have actually seen; nor could they believe that our society might be maintained with so little artificiality and human organization (MONTAINGE, 1993, p.110).

Montaigne also voices the early modern debate that enquires the problem of artifice as opposed to nature, seeking to identify a level of hierarchy between both. To Montaigne, "it is not reasonable that art should win the honours from our great and mighty mother nature", as "with all our efforts we cannot imitate the nest of the very smallest bird, its structure, its beauty, or the suitability of its form" (1993, p. 109). Thus, he asserts his view of the superiority of nature over human art. Montaigne also suggests that European terms referring to treason, greed and slander are unknown to indigenous nations. It is noteworthy that Shakespeare echoes a passage from "On Cannibals" in *The Tempest* (1611), act 2 scene 1, when Gonzalo describes his ideal commonwealth, which would not admit any kind of commerce or "no name of magistrate; / Letters should not be known; riches, poverty / And use of service, none" (2.1.150-151). Montaigne's thinking is relevant to this work, as well as Shakespeare's, as he is a product of the sixteenth-century rhetorical culture, practising a relativistic and dialogical mode of thinking.

The occurrence of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century plunged the European world into a wave of religious, political and cultural distress. The Reformation was headed by Martin Luther (1483-1546), a German monk and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, who, in 1517, nailed a document containing ninety-five theses to a church door. Luther's statements, originally written in Latin, stirred up a debate concerning the Catholic practice of indulgences and later evolved into actual attacks against the Roman church's beliefs. However, it was thanks to

Luther's further writings in the vernacular German tongue, and the technology of the

printing press, that Lutheran ideas spread widely and the magnitude of the results was felt all around Europe. As far as England is concerned, it was not until William Tyndale (1494-1536) completed a translation of the New Testament into English, in 1525, that Henry VIII's Catholic government (1509-1534) was challenged. The great revelation of Tyndale's work was that thousands of printed copies reached the hands of English people, granting anyone who could read the possibility of accessing the Bible not through priests' sermons at church, but through their very own interpretation. Thus, it is safe to say that values such as freedom, autonomy and individualism were fostered by the Protestant doctrine and pervaded the early modern period.

Modernity, then, brings along a new set of human values, such as responsibility and autonomy, considering the Protestant reading of the Bible in vernacular languages and its direct interpretation by individuals, as well as the imminent possibility of upward mobility and the ideal of individual development through education. In other words, self-fashioning through formal training, which was available to the rising middle classes. Both values are reflected on the Shakespearean tragedy and the issues about culpability and free will raised by the plays. This is a point which sets the early modern tragedy apart from the classical one. Whereas the latter relied on the idea of an over- determining Fate and the inevitability of events, the Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy brings to the fore questions concerning human agency and interrogates the potential of supernatural forces to act upon an individual, as is the case of the Witches and their supposed power to predict or control the events in *Macbeth* (1606). In case we consider, as I assume we can, a reading of the Weïrd Sisters as a symbolic representation of Macbeth's deep desires, we thus enter the realm of choice, agency, responsibility and autonomy.

It is noteworthy that early modernity shows a growing interest in literary experiences that foster the presentation of the self. We can find a variety of modes of expression that prominently deal with the representation of early modern selves, such as the theatrical speeches and soliloquies, as well as sonnets and essays. According to Fernanda Medeiros in "What does a Shakespearean character say when he or she says I?":

> This large interest in the first person and its movements of thought and expression is one of early modern humanism's trademarks and an essential trait for the development of Western civilization as we know it today, a civilization where individuals play the central role, for the good and for the bad (MEDEIROS, 2019, p. 70).

Although the humanist pedagogical revolution in progress in early modernity overall tended to cast women aside, as they were excluded from places of formal training, it is

important for the appreciation and discussion of Shakespeare's work to explore the cultural context in which it came into existence. This research thus aims at the investigation of two Shakespearean female characters – Helena (*All's Well that Ends Well,* 1604-05) and Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth,* 1606) – and understands the soliloquy as a dramatic device and a privileged site for the expression and representation of a character's self. My aim is to explore the constructions of Helena's and Lady Macbeth's subjectivities and also to discuss them within the subject of self-fashioning, as conceptualised by Stephen Greenblatt (1980). Therefore I shall explore in detail the notions and representations of the process of self-fashioning as well as the sixteenth- century rhetorical culture and the practice of debate, which pervaded the intellectual life of the period.

1.1.1 The marks of rhetoric in Renaissance: selfhood and culture

Shakespeare lived, learned, wrote and staged his plays in a world pervaded by the marks of a rhetorical culture. His work provides us with textual evidence of his classical training, which took place in Tudor grammar schools. Early modernity offers an understanding of rhetoric as a method of communication as well as of argumentation, which also shaped modes of writing, learning and teaching at schools, thanks to the humanist pedagogy. Therefore to communicate and debate within a rhetorical culture engendered ways of thinking and conceiving the world. In the context of sixteenth- century culture and education, rhetoric reached considerably beyond its cliché and pejorative views of ornamentation of speech and persuasion.

Concerning the rhetorical approach to selfhood, Erasmus's (1466-1536) extremely famous statement that "Human beings are not born, but fashioned" is, according to Peter Platt in "Shakespeare and Rhetorical Culture" (1999), "an epigraph for both humanism and *homo rhetoricus*" (p.287), who is considered an actor, an individual certainly aware of the theatricality of existence, one that fully embodies the idea that living is performing. It is meaningful to the purposes of this research to explore some of the topics examined by Platt, particularly concerning the classical origins of rhetoric. The author delves mainly into the ideas of three thinkers: Plato (428-347 BC), Aristotle (384-322 BC) and Cicero (106-43 BC). In the Platonic view, rhetoric is utterly dangerous, misleading and illusory, thus, Plato fiercely attacks rhetoric, fearing its deceiving, potentially harmful powers to the citizens of

his ideal *polis*. It is through the character of Socrates that Plato states that rhetoric is not committed to the plain truth, but rather it is set to employ a technique of persuasion. In the Platonic thought, through rhetorical skills, the ignorant man might appear to have more knowledge than the expert does. Plato hence places truth under the philosophical domain, in the sense that it is Philosophy's discourse the one that is able to reach and discover the real truth. Rhetoric, on the other hand, is misleading, dubious, and apart from the truth. According to Platt, in *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*

> Plato sets up what would become the key tenets of the anti-rhetorical prejudice: the philosopher is concerned with the true and just, while the rhetorician strives only to *appear* just; persuasion is portrayed as inherently duplicitous and divorced from truth (1999, p. 278).

Aristotle, on the other hand, establishes a systematisation of rhetoric. The Aristotelian treatise *Rhetoric* may be read as a response to his predecessor and master Plato. Aristotle's work admits the doubleness of rhetoric and acknowledges its essential strategy – the *disputatio in utramque partem* –, which is the examination of contradicting or conflicting aspects of a topic.

According to Aristotle, rhetoric may be employed in cases that do not possess a predetermined truth. Reconsidering Plato's negative views and attacks, rhetoric is given a new reading, as Aristotle responds to the Platonic critique and provides rhetoric with more of a positive note. Aristotle defends that through the learning and usage of rhetoric, one may acquire the capability of seeing the facts clearly, in addition to learning the ability of argumentation, thus being able to refute someone conclusively.

Besides, Aristotle establishes a tripartition of rhetoric: judicial, demonstrative and deliberative. The forensic or judicial is used when dealing with past actions, for example, in the case of convincing someone, either a judge or an assembly, about something that has happened. It was usually employed in criminal cases. The second type is the epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric and it is useful to shape one's present opinions, as censuring or condemning vice and praising virtue. Epideictic speeches may have been delivered at public festivals or funerals. The third and last type is the deliberative or political kind of rhetoric, related to future actions, that is, making or not a specific decision, or settling on the best course of an action. It is clear, then, that Aristotle acknowledges and validates rhetoric through his systematisation of the three uses of it.

The third scholar mentioned by Platt in his classical overview of rhetoric is Cicero (106-43 BC), a Roman thinker of tremendous importance in early modernity. Grammar

schools' pedagogical projects centred around the model of the Ciceronian rhetor as the main path to the training of public orators. Within the humanist notion, the orator may be compared to the figure of the professor, that is, a person who possesses profound knowledge of his classical predecessors, which they transmit through fine, clever and crafted speech. Therefore, the Ciceronian orator is a model of the civilised man. According to Platt,

> Rhetoric is defended because it gives shape and culture to an unformed, inherently brutish humanity, because it has tremendous metamorphic power; rhetoric is defended not because it is natural - 'a systematization of natural eloquence' (Vickers1988: 296) - but because it is *not* natural (PLATT, 1999, p. 294).

Thanks to the humanist pedagogical project, rhetoric is not only placed at the heart of schools' and universities' curricula, but it also represents an emblem of civilisation in the figure of the orator. In this sense, rhetoric and its rhetorical culture exceed in great degree the impoverished but widespread notion of ornamentation of speeches and texts. Thus, one can understand rhetoric as being considerably closer to the idea of communications and linguistic studies. Within the humanist perspective, underscoring the rhetorician's ability to engage his audience in virtuous action was a central defense of rhetoric, as it had practical effects on society. Cicero is also responsible for outlining the stages of rhetoric, namely *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *actio.*

Trained in the traditions of rhetoric, Shakespeare's attitudes concerning it were, nonetheless, ambivalent. The playwright showed both admiration and distrust towards it as well as towards the idea of *homo rhetoricus*. Considering the notion of rhetorical selfhood and rhetoric as both inevitable and problematic, Peter Platt asserts that:

> For Shakespeare, rhetoric is violent, artificial, and potentially distorting. Yet human experience would be brutal, bare, and amorphous without it. This Renaissance quest to define rhetoric with an eye toward condemning or celebrating its ornamental relation to truth has continued to modern times (PLATT, 1999, p.294).

The playwright not only masterly employed what he had learned from the classical tradition, but closely examined the issue of rhetoric, seeking to understand its complexities and dangers, but virtually staging the fundamental gap between essence and appearance, being and seeming. Throughout his body of work, Shakespeare labours

over a concern with what is outward show and inward truth, acknowledging language as a tremendously powerful tool that may be, in one account, deceiving, degrading, destructive or harmful; or, conversely, constructive, healing or exuberant. It is safe to say that language itself was in the centre of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century drama and the

fascination towards it virtually permeated all areas of the world Shakespeare lived in.

Russ McDonald in *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* (2001) asserts that language was a central topic of interest in the sixteenth century and that rhetoric was at the heart of the humanist studies. According to McDonald, language to Shakespeare apparently "acted as a powerful stimulus: first, to his recognizing and using the resources of the English language; and second, to his reflections about language as an artistic andhumanistic medium" (2001, p. 31). The idea that Shakespeare used language as amedium thus implies that he devoted boundless energy to the exploration of words and their numerous possibilities concerning drama and poetry. Besides, he also manipulated rhetorical devices as ambivalently as described above – both amazed and wary – testing its uses and exhibiting its values.

Shakespeare's exceptional poetic abilities found a rather favourable audience both on the Elizabethan page and stage. Thanks to "the growth and vigour and instability of the English language around 1600" (MCDONALD, 2001, p. 31), Shakespeare was able to deeply develop his gift and sensitivity to words. In this sense, the Bard is responsible for expanding the English vocabulary up to the point that someof the words we use on a daily basis have a Shakespearean root. McDonald affirms that the English poet coined the following terms: "countless" (*Titus*, 5.3.159), "assassination" (*Macbeth*, 1.7.2), "unreal" (*Macbeth*, 3.4.106) and "frugal" (*Much Ado*, 4.1.128)" (2001, p. 36), to mention just a few.

Russ McDonald also notes a transition in Shakespeare's writing career, especially as far as the use of rhetorical tropes is concerned. Although Shakespeare provides us with countless examples of his attraction to "the incantatory power ofhighly wrought language" (2001, p.40), McDonald detects that, from earlier to later practice, Shakespeare moves from a rather ostensible use of rhetorical devices to a more mature and subtle manipulation of language without, nevertheless, giving up on the exploration of rhetoric.

McDonald also highlights the aspect of "perspectivism" in Shakespeare's work, leading us to understand that audience and readers are encouraged to be receptive to

multiple viewpoints when it comes to his plays. Shakespearean drama is thus polyphonic and will not offer us a definite resolution at the end. The plays, moreover, suggest a refusal of absolutes and dogmatic stances, inviting us to – and having the characters – go through internal struggles that may not have one single conclusion in thelast act.

Due to the centrality of language in early modern culture, the Renaissance self is considered thus Protean-like, flexible, rhetorical, mutable and prone to be shaped. We find

that the early modern self, so fond and given to theatricality as it is, encompasses subjectivity not only in terms of inwardness, but also as something to be performed. Delving further in the rhetorical strategy of arguing both sides of a question, I will discuss how this practice pervades intellectual areas as pedagogy, politics, religion and drama in the sixteenth century.

1.1.2   The pervasiveness of the culture of debate in the intellectual life of the sixteenth century

Being of central importance to the English Renaissance thought and culture, the practice of *disputatio in utramque partem* is rhetoric's essential strategy and represents the ability – or the power – to discuss persuasively a specific topic on opposite argumentative positions. Joel Altman, in *The Tudor Play of Mind*: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama (1978), explores the workings of the minds of scholars, especially Erasmus's, and detects a mode of thinking that permanently affected personal conduct and ways of studying, writing, teaching and learning in sixteenth-century Europe. In the chapter entitled "The Moral Cultivation of Ambivalence", Joel Altman demonstrates that the early modern intellectual life is characterised by combining both an encouragement of morality and a sophistic argumentation. Altman suggests that the widespread stance of cultivating ambivalence nurtured a culture of debate in the period, which pervaded the theatrical, the political, the religious and the pedagogical spheres. The practice of *disputatio* was employed in several distinct spheres as a method of enquiry and debate, as Altman affirms:

> This habit was expressed in many forms. Arguing both sides of the question was frequently employed as a mode of political inquiry and (not infrequently) of political hedging; it appears as a mode of theological speculation and even of scientific investigation. But it is also turned to use simply as a creative pastime, in which one need not to proceed beyond disputation to secure conviction; here, its value lay rather in exercising the inventive faculty to produce effective proofs (ALTMAN, 1978, p.32).

Joel Altman comments on William Cecil, Elizabeth I's chief advisor, offering the Queen pieces of advice on the question of marriage. Cecil issues a report that discussed the advantages and disadvantages ("perils and remedies") to the English monarch, should she decide on marrying Monsieur d'Anjou. The "perils and remedies" of a scenario in which the

Queen remains unmarried included, for instance, a possible revenge by Spain and France under the category of "peril" and the possibility "To norrish their Troubles" under the category of "remedies". In case Queen Elizabeth were to wed the French suitor, a "peril" listed in the document was the "Danger in Childbearing", to which the precaution was to be "In God's hands". Joel Altman wittily concludes, by examining the record of Elizabeth's reaction that "the Queen wanted an answer, but all she got was a disputation" (1978, p. 40).

In the same chapter, Altman examines Erasmus of Rotterdam's method to show the possibility of creating "ambivalent yet deeply moral poetic fiction" (1978, p. 53) in *The Praise of Folly*, published in 1511. According to Altman, Erasmus enquires and speculates about an original question, "What is folly?", but not in abstract terms, which allows an examination of the issue of madness "mimetically, concretely, in the way of fiction" (1978, p. 54). Hence, Erasmus discourses on folly by creating a specific form of speech that grants him a way of searching for its meaning, and of exploring his initial question by "juxtaposing a variety of viewpoints within the single discontinuous mind of his speaker" (1978, p. 54), instead of arguing dialectically on it, by opposing and contrasting ideas. Thus, Erasmus casts Folly, the lady character who plays a rhetorician, to write his work of fiction (a monologue), and his instrument of enquiry is the lady's consciousness itself, plural as it may be, which allows the writer to "range, in moods of satire, admiration, uncertainty, and exhortation, over the entire spectrum of human insipience" (1978, p.54). According to Altman, Folly's praise is a self-praise, so Erasmus, the author, through Folly, the speaker, shows its determination through speech in attesting "the extent of her influence among men" (1978, p.54). Folly is a rhetorician and

> assumes a role, and imitates, for *its* advantages, the habits of another known type. This makes the declaration yet more complex and amusing, since Erasmus has superimposed upon Folly's native vagaries the *techné* of the sophist, which, though there be method in it, also possesses its own brand of madness (ALTMAN, 1978, p.55).

According to Altman, the real value of Erasmus's highly complex rhetoric in *The Praise of Folly*, considering its structure and shape, lays precisely in the "playing that allows men to be other than what they are" (1978, p.62). Dealing with Erasmus's method in *The Praise of Folly* allowed Altman to explore and take a close look at what he termed a moral cultivation of ambivalence. Erasmus is a humanist master; hence, in Altman's text, he stands as the example of the trained rhetorician who managed with "extraordinary dexterity…to simultaneously entertain two opposing points of view" (1980, p.32). Thinking on *The Praise of Folly,* Altman states that "From a strictly Platonic viewpoint, it is

hypocrisy; to a more tolerant and dynamic humanism, it is a potentially fruitful flirtation with possibility" (1978, p.62).

Concerning the rhetorical training provided in grammar schools, Joel Altman affirms that students would engage in a number of different composition exercises. Erasmus writes the curriculum to St. Paul's grammar school outlining two possible subjects that would allow schoolboys to train their writing both in style and in content. Students were able to develop their abilities in arguing both sides of a question in relation to themes such as rashness versus caution – as far as political decisions are concerned –, or profligacy versus cupidity, particularly in relation to the management of wealth.

Once the themes were laid out, the schoolboy would proceed to the writing of letters, which were subdivided as the three types of classical oration as proposed by Aristotle: judicial, deliberative, and demonstrative. The letter-writing exercise performed at schools would, then, permit and encourage students to imagine what a particular historical or fictional character would say in specific situations. For instance, what Penelope's urging of Ulysses to return home in Homer's (c. 750 BC) *Odyssey* would have been like. To Altman, the relevance of the practice of letter-writing at schools had a wide pedagogical range, in matters of decorum and at a psychological level, as

> The student was taught to imagine himself in circumstances utterly unlike his own and to see with eyes other than his own; in formal terms this meant composing according to the decorum of person, audience, and matter, but psychologically it involved a systematic expansion of the imagination beyond its usual subjective limitations, and fostered awareness of other human realities (ALTMAN, 1978, p.32).

The practice of writing letters, thus, provided a fruitful site for the expression and performance of selves, since the student was encouraged to imagine himself in other persons' positions, momentarily sharing their particular experience and making the effort to imagine how they would act and speak, had they been in such a place, thereby creating other speeches than his own. It is worth noting that the rhetorical training offered at grammar schools provided space and opportunity for the theatrical manipulation of one's identity, in other words, the practice of self-fashioning.

"The Moral Cultivation of Ambivalence" highlights the pervasiveness of a particular modality of thinking – which took the form of debate – and the fact that it is found in all intellectual fields of the sixteenth century, such as religion and drama, besides education and politics. The practice of *disputatio* through written exercises consisted in one of the four pillars of Tudor grammar schools' curricula. The pluralistic consciousness of Erasmus's character in *The Praise of Folly* and its author's consequent use of a discursive

form to juxtapose diverse viewpoints stand as a strategy to pursue answers to the original question "What is folly?". Thus, in this chapter, Joel Altman attests the great importance of rhetoric, debate, argument and enquiry in the sixteenth- century intellectual life, in the sense that it corresponded, in fact, to ways of conceiving the world as well as to the modes of thought of early modern scholars.

Although women were overall excluded from pedagogical institutions, it is relevant to discuss the historical and factual context to prepare the ground for the investigation of William Shakespeare's drama as well as of his female characters. I will be addressing other issues related to grammar schools, as far as the educational programmes and the composition exercises are concerned, narrowing down the focus on letter-writing as it promoted theatricality.

Peter Mack's detailed study in *Elizabethan Rhetoric* (2004) allows us to examine the discursive practices and norms that permeated the Elizabethan discourse, particularly that of the elite, as well as the literary culture that formed the curricula in grammar schools in the sixteenth century. Mack's aim is to demonstrate how the institutional practices that formed the educational system worked together to shape the training acquired by schoolboys. The author adds that the grammar schools' aims were oriented to the promotion of religion, moral virtue, wisdom and eloquence. For that purpose, humanist educational theorists, such as Erasmus, believed that the study of classical languages and literature fostered these four qualities.

Concerning the training in reading and writing, Mack analyses "the shape of the grammar school programme, the methods of reading classical Latin texts which pupils were taught, and the forms and methods of composition they practised" (2004, p. 11) so as to trace which skills schoolboys might have been expected to acquire in the educational process. As to the authors that appear in four of the grammar schools' syllabi – Ipswich (1523), Harrow (1591), Sandwich (1580) and Rivington (1576) –, suggesting that a consistent study in Latin literature took place in these educational institutions, we find: Cicero (106-43 BC), Terence (c.190-158 BC), Virgil (70-19 BC) and Ovid (43 BC-c.18 AD). Naturally, there are several other authors contemplated in the schools' programmes, but I choose to highlight the Latin writers and thinkers that appear to be most prominently relevant to the work of William Shakespeare.

For the purposes of this research, I will be concentrating on Peter Mack's comments on the exercise of letter-writing, as he states that "the principal forms of written Latin composition practised in the grammar school were letters and themes" (2004, p. 24), the

latter, in contemporary terms, is associated to a type of essay. Two of Erasmus's works were most frequently recommended to pupils to give them support in composition exercises: *De Copia* (1512), "one of the most often printed of all humanist texts, specified by name in twelve of the English syllabi" (2004, p. 31) and *De conscribendis epistolis* (1534), which was used specifically for letter-writing.

Erasmus's *De Copia* provided a method for enriching written texts by adding a variety of rhetorical tropes, a generous supply of words and increasing the material or subject of speech, relying on the rhetorical notion of *inventio*. Such an idea finds its correspondent in the modern word 'inventory', as it represents the inventoried contents of what the speaker will say and not the event of creating something new and original. Peter Platt reminds us that "while the notion that language is abundant, multiple, and various may cause us anxiety in the late twentieth century" (1999, p.285), in the sense that in contemporary writing of essays and articles, for example, we tend to underestimate – frown upon, as a matter of fact – the usage of multiple synonyms to convey an idea, to early modern writers, nevertheless, "the inheritors of the rhetorical tradition, this *copia* was usually a cause for celebration" (1999, p. 285). Hence the notion of *copia* bears in it the variety of expressions, the copious supply of words and matters of speech, and it was of immense importance in early modernity. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) offers several fine examples of the resource of multiplication of language. To name but one, we may think of Macbeth's words in the banquet scene, after meeting Banquo's murderers, haunted by the fact that Fleance still lives: "But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears" (3.4.24-5).

As to *De conscribendis epistolis*, Peter Mack affirms that it stresses the importance of the letter's content, its purpose and the writer's own perception of his addressee. In Mack's words, Erasmus's work "urges a careful consideration of the relation between writer, subject-matter and recipient" (2004, p. 41), thus clarifying the parallels that can be drawn between the composition of letters and the writing of theatre plays. Then, from a rich array of elements, the pupil would select which ones might be appropriate to each type of epistle, including letters of encouragement or persuasion. It is clear that the modes of composition of letters in grammar schools encouraged that learners acted according to specific orientations of conduct and that they nurtured thoughtful consideration of their audience – or recipients. Hence, letter-writing may be understood as fostering theatrical ways of being in and perceiving the world, as the schoolboys wrote letters not from their own authorial voice, but rather impersonating other voices.

1.1.3 Self-fashioning

Early modern middle-class individuals were given the possibility of social mobility, as in Renaissance the strictly hierarchical world of the Middle Ages was being replaced with one in which moving along the social scale and rising socially were possible, albeit with different windows of opportunity to each individual. William Shakespeare himself was a middle-class man, who managed to make money thanks to his own efforts, and enjoyed considerable prestige during the major part of his playwright's life. He was also able to purchase land and property, as he acquired the second largest house in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Thus, Shakespeare illustrates the notion of self-fashioning, as conceptualised by literary critic and scholar Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-fashioning:* From More to Shakespeare (1980).

Greenblatt's subject in this book is the practice of self-fashioning and how the sixteenth-century individuals experienced considerable power to shape themselves as well as others' subjectivity and identity. The critic asserts that the Elizabethan-Jacobean era is a period that understands "the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (1980, p.2) and interprets the self as "a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires" (1980, p.1). Greenblatt observes that the process of self-fashioning involves autonomy, although that is not the central issue, as in Renaissance there was a stronger imposition of discipline upon the middle-class and aristocratic subjects than there was before. Such imposition

was inflicted by the family as a social and economic instance of regulation, the state and the religious institutions.

The tension mentioned by Greenblatt, between the amount of autonomy available to early modern individuals and the social constraints imposed on them, points to the fact that the process of self-fashioning must have happened quite differently to each individual, inasmuch as they had distinct quantities of power and resources at their disposal. As far as early modern women are concerned, it is fundamental to consider them in terms of social class. Whether they were, for instance, aristocrats or members of the middle or lower classes influenced a great deal the chances they had to receive formal training. It is worth noting

that access to education was generally very limited to early modern women and the issues concerning gender disparities in the period are dealt with in the section "The early modern notions of woman" in this chapter. It is, however, from this idea of friction among power and impossibility, autonomy and constraint that the notion of self-fashioning is built and put into practice, particularly considering the diverse conditions that individuals had to explore the possibilities of shaping themselves. However unconventional it may be to think about the process of self- fashioning concerning women, as Greenblatt himself concentrates his analysis exclusively on men throughout his book, this research intends to investigate female subjectivities taking into account how much power and how many resources the characters have to shape themselves.

Similarly to the other writers on whom Greenblatt focuses – Thomas More (1478-1535), William Tyndale (1494-1536), Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542), Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-1599) and Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) –, Shakespeare "moved out of a narrowly circumscribed social sphere and into a realm that brought them in close contact with the powerful and the great" (1980, p. 7). Greenblatt affirms that all the writers contemplated in his book embody a profound experience of mobility throughout their lives and stand as powerful examples of the practice of Renaissance self-fashioning.

Delving further into real examples of the processes involved in the shaping of early modern selves, particularly concerning the representations and limitations on self-fashioning, we shall look into the religious and political spheres as well as reference books on conduct. Greenblatt illustrates an attempt within the theological discourse to impose restrictions on the shaping of human identity by drawing on St. Augustine's declaration, which reflects Christianity's growing anxiety and suspicion of the

individual's power to embrace a process of self-fashioning: "Hands off yourself. Try to build up yourself, and you build a ruin" (1980, p. 2). Greenblatt also notes that the fashioning of a self, either of one's own or of others, is always, though not exclusively, through language. It may indicate the achievement of "a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving" (1980, p.2).

Thanks to the imminent possibility of moving upwards in the social scale, a number of conduct books became extremely popular in early modernity. Such books constitute a rather normative material, which not only suggests ways, but, in fact, imposes behavior rules which individuals might follow to successfully present themselves to the world.

Brought forth by such books, thus, was an articulated set of attires, gestures, behaviours, and speeches.

The Book of the Courtier by Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529) – published in 1528 and translated to English in 1561 – is a notorious example listed among the conduct books in circulation at the time. Castiglione's manual had numerous editions and translations throughout the Renaissance and stands as one of the most representative conduct books of the period. *The Book of the Courtier* is divided into four books: the first one addresses the ideal model for the courtier's essential virtues, intellectual and moral qualities. The second book deals with the general rules applied to the courtier's demeanour, attire and conversational skills. Book Three is undoubtedly the most relevant to this research, as it concerns the description of the ideal court lady and explores subjects particularly concerning women and how they should act and behave properly. Book Four offers recommendations on the ways the courtier might be trusted to pass on political instructions to princes.

In the third book, Castiglione proposes a debate among guests and the themes they discuss mainly draw comparisons between women and men, seeking to establish the existing differences between these two genders. In conversation with Gaspare Pallavicino, Magnifico Giuliano de' Medici is the one responsible for describing the ideal model of the lady and adopting a more favourable attitude towards women, whereas Gaspare voices traditional misogynistic assertions, of Aristotelic inspiration. The themes approached by the two guests concern, for instance, demeanour – that a lady should be "affable, modest and decorous" (1901, p. x) –, dress code, moral virtues, and the ideal physical appearance of a court lady. It is interesting that Castiglione's extremely popular manual openly proposed that individuals should *perform* in the

presence of others, in the sense of the book's concerns with outward displays of polite behaviour, up to the point that distinctions among artifice and reality, appearance and essence, seeming and being are blurred. It is also worth stressing the central role of rhetorical skills when it comes to Castiglione's instructions on conduct, as, for instance, when one of his characters says that the court lady should be able to entertain others with a pleasant, appealing and honest conversation, always keeping in mind who her interlocutor is, so that she may address him or her accordingly, particularly paying attention to rank and status. Castiglione's highly important concept termed *sprezzatura* also emerges in *The Book of the Courtier* and it corresponds to the idea of an extremely studied performance, that

seems to be done effortlessly, or, a studied carelessness.

Besides Castiglione's conduct manual, another notorious example of guidelines as how to put the process of self-fashioning into practice is to be found in the work of early modern political thinker Niccólo Machiavelli (1469-1527). He was born in Florence and his earlier career was entirely dedicated to public office. Machiavelli held the position of Chancellor of the Florentine Republic from 1498 until its collapse and consequent return of the Medici princes to power in 1512. In the same year, Machiavelli was not only abruptly removed from his public position, but became an object of suspicion, charged of taking part in a plot against the return of the Medici princes. He was then imprisoned and tortured.

During Machiavelli's exclusion from Florence, after he had been released from prison and sent to compulsory exile, he devoted himself to the study of letters and politics and wrote the majorly popular and widespread work *The Prince*, in 1513. However subject to high doses of prejudice and misinterpretations, the book is often studied and cited until the present day. *The Prince* is composed of twenty six chapters and its last part contains Machiavelli's political project, exhorting the Medici to restore Italian unity. The book's first and major part consists of an analysis on how to gain, but above all, to hold and maintain power. *The Prince* can be considered a handbook of practical advice to political leaders, in which Machiavelli states that getting power can occur either hereditarily, by election or even by good fortune. The issue of maintaining power, however, is only possible thanks to a set of indispensable qualities that any ruler must possess, if they are to succeed in their leadership. Machiavelli termed this crucial notion *virtú*.

In chapter XVIII – "How Princes Should Keep Their Word" –, the author considers the outward aspects of a good governability and the way of maintaining the state – both the territories and jurisdictions, but also the princely state –, which is a concern that pervades his entire book. Machiavelli addresses new leaders, not those who have inherited their principalities, but in fact new princes. One of Machiavelli's aspirations is to make new rulers *seem* like well-established ones. It is clear that the author stresses the importance of practicality and efficiency as well as of performance, or theatricality, when it comes to political rule. Regarding mercy, faith, religion and virtue, Machiavelli affirms that

> A prince, therefore, need not actually have all the qualities I have enumerated, but it is absolutely necessary that he seem to have them. Indeed, I shall even venture to assert that there is danger in having those qualities and always respecting them, whereas there is utility in seeming to have them. It is useful to seem, and actually to be, compassionate, faithful, humane, frank and pious. Yet a prince's mind should be so enlightened that when you do not need to have these qualities, you have the knowledge and the ability to become the opposite (MACHIAVELLI, 1976, p.283).

The quote clarifies that Machiavelli comprehends that a prince's expression should not be thought after in terms of truthful inward aspects, but rather as something to be performed. When it comes to political rule, Machiavelli suggests that the appearance and essence of the leader will not necessarily be aligned. It is a clear understanding that human identity is better off being manipulated and put to use favouring, in the case of princes, the state. Machiavelli not only notes the flexibility of the self and acknowledges its rhetorical characteristic, but adds, and exceedingly so, a moral flexibility to what is already mutable, versatile and variable in the disposition of the self. In the Machiavellian conception of good governability, a prince ought to *seem* virtuous, religious, and merciful, as well as to bear a good reputation, all of which may be oftentimes better and more useful than virtue itself. It is clear that *The Prince* offers atheatrical approach to politics and that the ruler – in fact, a good ruler – should efficiently perform the characteristics that will aid him to govern cities, conquer new principalities and keep his kingdom under his power.

Further exploring Greenblatt's notion of self-fashioning in the work of William Shakespeare, the critic deems Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603-04) "as the supreme symbolic expression of the cultural mode" (1980, p. 232) described as not only the possession of power to fashion one's identity as well as others', but also in relation to the ideas of *improvisation*, violence, religious doctrine and sexual concerns. Iago manages to fashion Othello's subjectivity as much as his own and, with the unsettling assertion "I am not what I am" (1.1.66), shifts as Proteus to manipulate others around him. To Greenblatt, Iago is the ultimate representative and the mouthpiece of "the motto

of the improviser, the manipulator of signs that bear no resemblance to what they profess to signify" (1980, p. 238). Besides, Iago compares himself and his body to a garden (1.3.320-26) as though formulating a theory of self-fashioning and Greenblatt adds that the villain "includes himself in this ceaseless narrative invention; indeed, as we have seen from the start, a successful improvisational career depends upon role- playing" (1980, p. 235). Machiavelli's blunt statement "the deceiver will always find someone who will let himself be deceived" (1976, p. 281), might be a reasonable epigraph for Iago, whereas Othello, an everlasting outsider in the Venetian community, is subject to racism and exclusion. Iago not only knows this, but uses it to destroy Othello, thus underscoring the indispensable awareness of the Other, the addressee, when it comes to self-fashioning.

Thus Greenblatt demonstrates the existence of a bleaker side of the self- fashioning

at play in *Othello.* If early modern middle-class individuals were gradually being given the opportunity to move among distinct social groups and to experience the power to shape themselves; they were, at the same time, confronted with the threatening idea of the unknown and its multiple chances of deceit, failure and downfall. Iago thus represents a pessimistic – however realistic – approach to the alluring new possibilities presented by the use of language and performance that qualifies the early modern rhetorical culture. As far as the idea of self-fashioning is concerned, getting around a world that was in a gradual process of modernisation and allowing chances of social mobility, it depended always, though not exclusively, on the powers of one's own speech, as claimed by Greenblatt. The ability to perform through the use of words, or even to construct an identity by cultivating appearances thanks to language, also stresses the fact that speech is both a mode of address to the world and of self-fashioning. Such rhetorical skills are appreciated and encouraged in conduct manuals, as Castiglione's shows, but also in schools and in the political and intellectual spheres.

Throughout this first section I traced the existing connections among the early modern rhetorical culture, the humanist pedagogy and the idea that language and performance are closely connected, especially when dealing with the possibilities of self-fashioning. Understanding the Renaissance self as Protean-like, flexible and prone to theatricality proves to be helpful when we consider the Shakespearean characters, as two of them will be the topic of the following chapters of this dissertation. I intend to interrogate how much malleability Shakespeare affords Helena and Lady Macbeth in the construction of their selfhood, and to examine their agency – considering that it

represents an individual action in relation to a particular context – alongside the question of autonomy in both plays. The next section explores the early modern notions of woman, both in the academic and in the social fields. The first will contemplate Renaissance medicine and its interrogations concerning the female body, the religious doctrine and its understanding of women's place. The second investigates women's social condition – whether they belonged to the aristocracy, middle or lower classes, and their respective access to education and work.

1.2   **The early modern notions of woman**

1.2.1   <u>The early modern discourses about women in different fields ofknowledge</u>

The notion of "female" has in many senses been opposed to that of "male" and the force of this duality is constantly felt in distinct fields of knowledge in early modernity. To discuss the views on women, I will be focusing on Ian Maclean's *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (1980), particularly concerning the religious, medical, and economic notions of women in the period. Renaissance medicine provided physiological foundations to justify women's general and innate inferiority in relation to men. In religious thinking, we find the establishment of marriage as a divine institution and, also, the fact that women's roles concerning matrimony – whether married or unmarried – strongly influenced the places they occupied in society as a whole. Besides, the Bible – a major source in the period – brings forth the idea of women as heiresses of Eve, which deeply framed the early modern perspective of the female sex. As to economic matters, women were generally expected – and commanded – to be in charge of domestic affairs. In the following section, "Women's lives in sixteenth-century England", I argue how relevant women were to the business life of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, precisely because of the nature of the work they carried out. All these areas and their respective understandings of the female sex share one particular ideal, which was imposed on women: that they should be compliant, chaste, silent and submissive to men.

The initial study of Renaissance accounts on woman presented here aims to introduce and reflect upon what was invoked by scholars to justify a "natural" relegation of women to their homes, as well as their general exclusion from political public life, formal education at schools, and rhetorical training in early modernity. However, Ian Maclean asserts that "at the end of the Renaissance, there is a greater discrepancy between social realities and the current notion of woman than at the beginning" (1980, p.1). This clarifies the gap that there is between theoretical thinking on female beings and the actual reality of sixteenth and early seventeenth-century women, as I discuss in the following section.

The European intellectual infrastructure concerning the female sex in Renaissance is built from ancient texts, medieval thinking and scholarly commentaries throughout the period. Renaissance thinking, however mobilised by the ideas of change and innovation brought forth by the humanist movement, was still highly influenced by the medieval

philosophical tradition of Scholasticism, a movement that attempted to harmonise Christian thought with that of the Classical Antiquity.

The idea of a dialectical, oppositional mode of thought – which firmly contrasted male to female – is to be found, for instance, in Plato and Aristotle, but it is securely widespread, according to Maclean, from the earliest times to the most far-flung cultures (1980, p. 4). The idea of sex difference stands, thus, as the prime intellectual technology to comprehend the notion of woman. It is important to take into account, however, that such pairs of opposites are, in fact, used to understand not only human beings, but the world as a whole. In Aristotelian thinking, oppositions such as right/left, above/below, front/back, odd/even, one/plurality, good/evil, straight/curved occur simultaneously to the male/female opposition. Maclean demonstrates and concludes that the woman's side of the equation was frequently aligned with the part of deprivation, weakness, passivity, irrationality, incompleteness, imperfection and inferiority.

Ian Maclean draws on the long-standing literary genre of the commentary, a widespread mode of composition and interpretation of classical texts and previous materials in Renaissance. Both Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.) and Galen (129 – c.199) stand as the two main sources for Renaissance thought, as they were widely cited and commented by scholars. The Renaissance medical accounts on woman, shared by physiologists, anatomists and physicians, gave rise to a number of questions concerning the biological condition of the female body. These questions particularly discuss the reasons for the imperfection of women and their overall inferiority in relation to men. To Aristotle, the woman is a passive being, constituted by cold and moist humours. Galen's ideas show similarities to Aristotle's, except for the fact that the first stated the existence and efficacy of the female semen. Galen compares male and female genitalia, supposing that the uterus is equivalent to an inverted penis, and that the ovaries (*testes mulierum*) corresponded to the testicles. Both thinkers agree that the hottest created thing is the perfect one and compare male and female sexual organs, both in function – man's strength and perfection as opposed to woman's imperfection and necessity of male completion – and in form – woman's organs are internal and inverted, whereas man's are external, complete. A number of misogynistic questions arise from the two theories mentioned here. For example, it was asked of women, "Is she a monstrous creation? Is she an imperfect version of the male?" (MACLEAN, 1980, p. 30)

Within the widespread theory of humours, dominant in both Renaissance and Scholastic thought, as well as in its resulting theory of psychological difference, which attributed reason to men and irrationality to women, woman's colder temperature is

seen as functional, since the colder metabolism causes her to slowly consume food, in order to leave nourishment for the foetus and also for an eventual production of breastmilk. Menstruation, too, is seen as a result of woman's cold metabolism. In the Middle Ages, women's menstruation was firmly associated with malediction, uncleanness, and related to the transmission of diseases, such as smallpox.

Further accounts on woman show her deprived condition, her unfitness and discrepancy in relation to the perfect male being. As Maclean's research attests, the woman:

> Like boys and eunuchs, has a higher voice, denser, paler, fattier, softer flesh than the male, which burns better than does his on funeral pyres, and is rarely ambidextrous. She takes longer to form in the womb, causes more pain at childbirth to her mother, being less able to help herself than the more active male; but she reaches puberty earlier, and ages more quickly because of the corrupting effect of her dominant humidity. Her physical shape (fatter hips and narrower shoulders than the male) is also the result of colder humours, which do not possess sufficient energy to drive matter up towards the head (MACLEAN, 1980, p. 35).

As issues regarding the female body were virtually oriented to bearing children and the act of procreation – "what is the origin of semen? Do both sexes produce it? which part of the body develops first in the foetus? Which determines sex and resemblance of children to parents?" (1980, p.28) –, we should notice that none of these

questions indicates a curiosity, let alone a concern, about the woman's health and wellness. Within this medical context, women were seen as potential mothers, as in Renaissance the ultimate female attribution was maternity itself. A wife's major role was to produce healthy children, most preferably of the male sex, as defended in Aristotelian theory.

As to the religious attitudes towards women, the Biblical passage found in the Book of Genesis (2:21), which qualifies the woman as the "weaker vessel", is the statement from which the scholastics derive their assumptions of her "diminished mental powers (especially reason)" (MACLEAN, 1980, p. 9). It is also from the Book of Genesis that medieval and Renaissance thinkers drew the idea that Eve was the main responsible for the Fall and, thus, single-handedly received the condemnation, punishment and blame for her transgression that brought shame upon humankind, leaving Adam out of such conception.

Concerning the widespread idea of the inheritance of Eve imposed upon the female sex, contemporary scholar Helen Wilcox, in "Feminist criticism in the Renaissance and seventeenth century" (2007), affirms that such assumptions played a fundamental part in shaping the early modern perception of womanhood. Wilcox asserts that this is a reason for women to have been constant targets of punishment and physical, social and psychological attacks (2007, p. 28). Hence, there is an established relationship between the female sex and

sin, and also the association between temptation and the feminine speech.

The religious discourse is also responsible for establishing the paradigmatic idea of marriage as a divine institution, which is fundamental to understand what frames the perceptions around women in Renaissance. First, belonging to the realm of the divine, marriage stands as unchangeable, that is, an institution "with which man may not tamper" (MACLEAN, 1980, p. 27). Second, the roles women play in or in relation to matrimony – as maidens, wives, widows or unmarried – actually shape the roles they play in society as a whole, and limit the views regarding them. In other words, a woman was not considered outside such parameters in early modernity and the lack of legal status outside the institution of marriage was definitely a violent restriction and limitation to sixteenth and seventeenth-century women.

According to Ian Maclean, the paradigm of marriage is also closely connected to the malediction of Eve. This is responsible for "the most burdensome and wide-ranging effect" (1980, p. 18) upon women, which is their subjection to their husbands. Yet, the author identifies a shift in Renaissance in comparison to the Middle Ages regarding the parts women and men play in marriage. In early modernity, the woman is deemed more of a companion than a servant to her husband.

As to the economic sphere explored by Aristotle and his ideas on women in relation to domestic duties, we find once again that the wife should be firmly submissive to her husband's will. She would be commanded not only to look after his property and keep strangers away from the house, but also to keep a modest look and "be tolerant of her husband's moods and behaviour, and pray for him in his absence" (1980, p. 58). The Aristotelian assumption that women are better off handling household affairs, remaining virtually excluded from public spaces, and being their husbands' servants as well as hosts for – preferably male – babies, thus, lays the foundations of the patriarchy at its most extreme, and we find it at the heart of Western philosophy.

Taking stock of how inferior women are deemed to be by scholars in early modernity, not only physically but mentally – lacking, for instance, robustness to play prominent roles in society –, Maclean affirms that this flawed conception contributes to "the natural justification for her exclusion from public life, responsibility and moral fulfilment" (1980, p. 44).

Concerning sixteenth and early seventeenth-century women, we do know, in fact, that they led an active working life at the time, being – regardless of class – responsible for

overseeing household chores and, in case of richer women, supervising servants and seeing to the family's business and accounts, just to name a few items of what constituted an extensive list of activities. In case of England's capital, we should be aware of the fact that women were to be seen all over Elizabethan London and that rural housewives got around the public markets, selling the surplus of their production. Women would have been seen around such lively and loud locations, and they would have been found occupying a central and public space, despite the commonplace ideas that they were confined to their houses and excluded from the public sphere. Besides, early modern Englishwomen must have been considerably distant from the compliant, silent model, if they were to keep up with the above-mentioned tasks.

Spanish humanist and scholar Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540) is the author of three major works concerning the instruction of women: *The Education of a Christian Woman* (1523), *Plan of Studies for Girls* (1524), and *The Office and Dutie of an Husband* (1529). The first book was an extremely popular sixteenth-century manual that

advocated the education of women, as well as intellectual equality between genders. Vives, however, while defending a pedagogical project that included "the whole human race" (2000, p. 64), also imposed strict limitations upon how women were to access such education, proved by, for example, the reading material he allows them to study in the chapter "Which writers are to be read and which not to be read" (2000, p. 73-80).

Although Vives supports that ignorance is what truly breeds wickedness, evilness and vicious behavior, and openly recommends the education of women and girls, he firmly distrusts the female nature and believes in women's tendency to sin. He is a vigorous supporter of the woman's relegation to the home and subjugation, for "if she is a good woman, it is best that she stay at home and be unknown to others. In company, it is befitting that she be retiring and silent, with her eyes cast down so that some perhaps may see her, but none will hear her" (VIVES, 2000, p. 72).

By praising celibacy and the ultimate preservation of chastity, as a woman's virginity is her "most beautiful and priceless possession" (2000, p.65), Vives shows clear signs of the strong patriarchal legacy that structured the Renaissance society. However inspired by the humanist spirit of societal change through education and certainly in favour of instruction for women, Vives's detailed educational project was overall aimed at enhancing women's housekeeping skills and ultimately becomingbetter wives.

To Vives, reading is not only advisable to women and girls, it is probably the best

occupation to the female sex. As mentioned, the specific type of literature allowed is quite limited. The chapter of *The Education of a Christian Woman* dedicated to the detailed description of which authors are or are not to be read by the ideal girl emerging from his book recommends the reading of the Bible, but also Plato, Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, Erasmus and Thomas More's *Utopia*. Stories that focus on the deeds of self- sacrificing, longsuffering women are also encouraged. Regarding the condemned materials, Vives's prohibitions encompass books written in vernacular languages, such as English, Spanish and French, but also romances thematising love and war. The fine and decent Christian woman shaped in Vives's manual should avoid such books as she would keep away from a poisonous snake or a scorpion. Should she insist, such books

> should not only be wrested from her hands, but if she shows unwillingness to peruse better books, her parents or friends should see to it that she read no books at all and become unaccustomed to the reading of literature – and, if possible, unlearn it altogether (VIVES, 2000 [1523], p.78).

The desirable qualities that a woman should have, according to Vives's, echo the early modern ideals imposed on the female sex. She ought to have chastity, modesty, silence, submission, diligence, and sobriety in both conduct and personal attire. The insistence that is present throughout the manual is that the woman must be hard- working, an idea commanded since the very early stages, for instance, as of the period of literacy. From this phase on, Vives strongly advises that girls are to learn letters as well as useful housekeeping knowledge. He recommends that the skills of working with the hands should be cultivated by all women and girls, regardless of their social class – princesses and queens included. In a moment of enquiry and defence that, among the advisable occupations designated to the female sex (reading, cooking, and needlework), idleness is undoubtedly what should be feared the most, Vives voices the early modernity commonplace extended to women:

> What could she do better than this when free of all the household tasks? She will converse with men, I suppose, or other women. About what? Is she to talk forever? Will she never keep quiet? Perhaps she will think. About what? A woman's thoughts are swift and generally unsettled, roving without direction, and I know not where her instability will lead her (VIVES, 2000 [1523], p.59).

As of this point on, I will be addressing the issues concerning the active participation of women of different ranks in the social and economic world of early modern England. I will, too, be discussing the place families occupied in this society, the work placed under women's responsibility and their attendance in public playhouses in London.

1.2.2   Women's lives in sixteenth-century England

In early modernity, gender disparities, legal disabilities and limitations imposed on women permeated the social, cultural, academic and economic fields. Women's general exclusion from schools and universities, alongside the idea of Eve – being considered fully responsible for the Fall from heaven – proving that women were more irrational than men and morally wrong, sets the factual and historical context of the general experience of womanhood in early modern England. On the other hand, Thomas Platter (1574-1628), a Swiss visitor to London whose diary accounts are particularly telling, is responsible for writing one entry especially interesting to the present discussion about early modern English women. Platter registers, in 1599, the

contemporary proverb that ran in England defining it as "a woman's paradise, a servant's purgatory, and a horse's hell". If early modern England seemed to offer women more freedom, we may relate it to their sizable attendance in public playhouses in London, but it is also noteworthy that the country was ruled by two queens over the course of fifty years, with Mary I (1553-1558) and Elizabeth I (1558-1603) wearing the crown. Both Mary and Elizabeth were the daughters of Henry VIII (1491-1547), the first from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536) and the second from his union with Anne Boleyn (?1507-1536). Both queens died childless and this fact stands out when we think about Elizabeth, since the statement of being a virgin empowered her. That is, not only did Elizabeth assert that she was England's bride, but she also declared herself *Prince* of England.

Celebrated literary critic and Shakespearean scholar Phyllis Rackin strongly supports the idea that history writing is a type of storytelling. The scholar employs a critical methodology to historical research in Shakespearean scholarship, considering that "if the story of misogyny and oppression is the only story we tell about the past, we risk a dangerous complacency in the present" (2005, p. 8). Taking this into consideration, this section explores the social and economic status of women of different social classes in early modern England and intends to discuss issues as: what places did they occupy in Shakespeare's time? What distinct roles did women play in society and what kinds of knowledge did they have access to in early modern England? What role did women play in the material history and in the economic structure of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries? I will be providing historical facts about the places and occupations aristocratic,

middle and lower-class women had in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England, initially supported by the works of Alison Sim (1996), Susan Dwyer Amussen (1999), Sarah H. Mendelson (2002), Jean Howard (2005), Phyllis Rackin (2005) and Catherine Richardson (2012).

In "Women and work" (2002), Sara H. Mendelson clarifies some of the social categorisations that formed the early modern English society, paying special attention to why and how women were placed in such groups. Poor individuals counted for the great majority of the population and, at the middling level, there would have been women who pursued what we would now call a profession – businesswomen and caregivers, for example – "despite the fact that professional salaried work identities were comparatively rare for early modern women as a group" (2002, p. 71). At the higher level of the social spectrum – gentry and aristocracy –, women performed labour- intensive jobs, supervising large households, administrating medical institutions and taking places as officeholders at courts.

Considering that the bulk of early modern England's population lived at the bottom of the social and economic scale, Mendelson subdivides poor women into two groups, namely the ones who earned a living, but barely managed to keep themselves at subsistence level, and others who were considered destitute and depended on institutional authorities to survive. According to the author, "these two groups of poor women, those living in relative or in absolute poverty, formed the majority of the female populace, making up somewhere between a half and two thirds of the population" (MENDELSON, 2002, p.60). Mendelson names such women as cottagers, labourers, servants and vagrants. Not only were the women at the lower end of the social pyramid considered more vulnerable to poverty than men, since, as today, there was a considerable wage gap between genders, females were given a smaller share of food and had fewer available occupations. It is relevant that the size of the early modern London's population grew exponentially throughout the years. According to Helen Wilcox (2010), in 1500 its population averaged out at 50.000, by 1600 it had grown to 250.000, and by the late seventeenth century, London was already considered thesecond largest European city.

Susan D. Amussen, in "The Family and The Household" (1999), asserts that the families were responsible for a great share of the economic production in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, standing as the actual cornerstone of the economic and the political order in Shakespeare's England. Considering such importance, Amussen examines the structure and the organisation of families in Shakespeare's time to understand the place

and significance of his ubiquitous use of the theme of family in his plays.

The term "family" could indicate not only the nuclear family – a married couple and their children –, but it could also include those who worked with the family, such asservants or apprentices. As to the size of the families in Shakespeare's time, they were generally small, with an average of five people or less; however, their size may have varied depending on wealth, so it was rather common that richer families, such as nobles, yeomen, gentlemen, and merchants had larger households, whereas poor families might have been fairly smaller.

Concerning the economic participation of families in early modern England, there is a difference between the countryside family production and the one carried out by town families. The first generally engaged in agricultural work and farmed the land, working together to weave cloth or knit, and wives were responsible for supervising the production of food, drink and clothing.

To better illustrate the point of the kind of knowledge women possessed in Shakespeare's world, Phyllis Rackin draws examples from Sir Anthony Fitzherbert's *Book of Husbandry* (1555). It describes the awfully extensive list of a housewife'sduties in the rural context, which, according to Fitzherbert, included a wide array of farming skills, as:

> milking cows, taking corn and malt to the mill and making sure that the miller returned fair measure to her, baking and brewing, feeding pigs and tending fowl, growing a kitchen garden, making hay, shearing and winnowing grain, growing and processing flax and hemp, spinning and weaving, going to market 'to sell butter, cheese, milk, eggs, chickens, capons, hens, pigs, geese, and all manner of corn' (FITZHERBERT *apud* RACKIN, 2005, p. 36).

In the case of town families, they "worked together in the shops of bakers, butchers, tailors, and grocers; they worked as printers and turners, merchants and innkeepers" (AMUSSEN, 1999, p. 85). Whether urban or rural, the nature of family experience reveals that Shakespeare's society was one whose foundation was built from the familial organisation. The issue of family and the household in early modern England, therefore, brings together the domestic, the economic, the social and the political spheres – since it was at the center of the political order as well.

Amussen refers to families as actual enterprises and clarifies that our contemporary separation between family life and work was barely inexistent in early modernity. The author affirms that they:

> required several workers, and many had separate roles for women and men. While some businesses were much larger and used additional laborers and workers, most of those working in a business lived on the premises. The

> economic role of the family meant that many families not only lived together, but worked together all day long (AMUSSEN, 1999, p. 83).

Recovering Puritan writer William Gouge's (1578-1653) comments on the principle that a well-ordered family was an essential condition for a well-ordered state, he qualifies the families as "a little commonwealth… a school wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned" (AMUSSEN, 1999, p. 86). As to the start of adulthood in Shakespeare's time, it was marked not by age but by marriage, which, between 1600 and 1650, happened at the age of twenty-six for women and twenty-eight for men. The establishment of an independent household was also a milestone of the adult life in the early modern society. The families were mainly patriarchal, as the power resided *primarily* in the male figure, from whom it was expected to represent the family to the outside world, as well as "to govern all those in the house so that it was orderly and peaceful" (AMUSSEN, 1999, p.86). As their husbands' counterparts, wives shared some of the household's power with them. In theory, the wife was to be subordinate to the husband, silent and obedient; however,

there is consistent research to let us know that actual facts must have happened quite differently, and the bibliography at issue here enables us to explore these questions.

Considering the tasks allotted to the wives in managing their households, the premise of silence and obedience would be virtually impossible to meet, as dealing with servants made it impossible for a wife to be silent, as she had to talk, command, and address orders. It is worth noting, however, that the power women enjoyed within their households did not mitigate the major social and political system of silencing and subjection to which they were submitted. Thus, when looking back on the lives of early modern English women, we must take into account both their vital participation when it came to business, and also the institutional misogyny which permeated virtually all areas of society then.

A significant part of a sixteenth-century English wife's tasks, especially the ones living in rural areas, emerged from selling the products of her work, such as eggs, butter, or cheese, and this act took place in the very busy, lively and loud markets. Both a public and a civic space, heavily used by the people, the market was a set for crowds and negotiations, not only financial, but social and political, as it welcomed a wide variety of individuals. Amussen describes the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century English market and women's active part in it the following way:

> The market, where women sold their own goods and bought provisions for the family, was not a silent place; nor did one succeed in the market if one were too meek or obedient. Bargaining was central, and as those who have tried it know, it

is not for the faint of heart. Women might be silent and obedient in their husband's presence, but they certainly could not do their jobs if they took that into the outside world. Many contemporary observers noted the *de facto* independence of women in England (AMUSSEN, 1999, p. 87).

Echoing Thomas Plater's observation, the quote above points to the fact that English women might have had more freedom than other female Europeans at the time. Yet, "if anything, however, such relative independence increased anxiety about women's behaviour" (AMUSSEN, 1999, p. 87). As to such anxieties related to female conduct, Amussen states that they were directed not only to those who were married, but "perhaps even more to those who were not" (1999, p.88), as was the case of single women and widows, who might have enjoyed more freedom than their counterparts who lived in matrimony. Unmarried adult women rarely – and certainly disapprovingly – lived and worked independently, as it was more common for them to engage in their parents' household affairs or work as servants. In fact, "after 1563 it was illegal for unmarried women or men between the ages of fifteen and forty-five, to live out of service: they were expected to be part of someone's household" (AMUSSEN, 1999, p.87). Widows, on the other hand, may have had more economic freedom to either keep running their husbands' businesses or practice trades, either by themselves, or with the assistance of apprentices or journeymen.

Concerning women at higher levels of society, Phyllis Rackin (2005) provides the example of English diarist Lady Margaret Hoby, exploring her entries from the years 1599 to 1605. Hoby's diary lets us know that she was responsible for collecting

rents, reviewing accounts, and paying bills as well as preparing food and medicine, providing for guests, and attending to the sick (2005, p. 36). Besides, Hoby's records also show that she and her servants managed a production of honey by keeping an apiary, mixed wax lights and oil, and weighed wool. Historian Alison Sim, in *The Tudor Housewife* (1996), comments on Hoby's notable capacity for business, as she had "discussions about buying a farm with a Thomas Adeson, spending evenings reading papers and having numerous discussions about business with Lord Hoby, who seems to have accepted the active part she played" (SIM, 1996, n.p.).

Regarding wealthier women, who would be considered businesswomen in contemporary terms, Sim mentions that the most famous and largest trade was the one involving silk and its representatives, the silk women. In England, they dealt with raw silk thread and produced a variety of goods, such as, for instance, ribbons, girdles, and laces – "twisted silk cords which had a whole variety of uses from attaching seals to documents

to decorating and holding together rich people's clothing" (SIM, 1996, n.p.).

According to the historian, the silk women were quite respected and their business business had a bustling, established market, especially in London. Other trade organisations – the guilds –, in which women were in charge and had prestigious positions do not have such clear records. It is interesting to notice, however, that women had a sizable participation in two of the most powerful London guilds, the Fishmongers and the Goldsmiths. Alison Sim affirms that "only five out of the five hundred guilds in England excluded women and references to apprentices suggest that girls as well as boys served their time in various trades" (SIM, 1996, n.p). Yet, in such cases, the great majority of the female workforce took part in much less prestigious places than, for instance, the silk women, and, unsurprisingly, "women who became guild members usually did so through marriage" (SIM, 1996, n.p). The guilds functioned as actual associations, by regulating work conditions, terms of apprenticeship, and, also, guaranteeing their workers' interests, by, for instance, providing financial support for members and their families as well.

It was oftentimes by means of guild membership that rich Tudor widows were allowed to keep running their husbands' businesses, having and training apprentices and, in certain circumstances, even carrying on large-scale trades throughout the years. This was the case of Jane Rawe, "who ran a private exchange business, travelling between Hazerbrouck, London, Antwerp and Calais" (SIM, 1996, n.p). Interestingly enough, widows also played a substantial part in the publishing market, representing a tenth of all publishers in the period.

Reflecting upon the issues concerning the private sphere, in "Domestic Life" (2012), Catherine Richardson provides historical information on domestic life during early modernity adding to what has been exposed so far, particularly in relation to the important political and economic terms that revolve around wealthier households. Richardson offers meaningful examples of contemporary commonplaces that had home life as their main subject, particularly "that a man's house was his castle, and that the household was akin to a commonwealth in which the role of the head of the house (if not his particular person) resembled the rule of the king within his kingdom and Christ over his church" (2012, p. 202). Richardson affirms that across the Jacobean period (1603-1625) the ideas of patriarchal ruling, which problematically associate the male head of the house to a king in his castle, were crystallised into a political ideology of rule.

Richardson also notes a shift in the early modern modes of production, as it was the case of the fast-growing urban mercantile elite which, recalling Stephen Greenblatt's ideas on the possibility of social mobility explored in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), began purchasing house ornaments and domestic objects, such as linen table cloths, silver spoons, cushions, and window curtains. To Richardson, "the household moved from being the location within which the things that households needed were produced, to being a site for the display of goods manufactured and purchased outside" (2012, p. 203). The higher the social level, the more specialised and complex were the tasks encompassed in housewifery, precisely because of the consumer goods disposed in wealthier households, as fine linens and lace, all of which required specific maintenance.

As to an ordinary Tudor house management, Alison Sim mentions that earth floors were very common at the time and it should have been a difficult job to keep them clean, considering the dust and the fact that they cannot be scrubbed. Also, the majority of the Tudor houses used wooden objects, such as cups and bowls, which are also harder to clean than the ones made out of pewter, which people at a higher social condition had at their disposal. Such richer households might have had flagged stone floors, which certainly made the cleaning job less time-consuming. Nevertheless, when discussing the means available to keep a Tudor house clean, Sim states that the technology at the time was rather limited, as "piped water supply, although known in

the sixteenth century, was very rare" (SIM, 1996, n.p). A Tudor housewife, then, after having organised her water supply, would take on the task of scouring everyday objects by using river sand or a plant known as horsetails. It is interesting the recommendation given by Gervase Markham (1568-1637) to the keeping of dairy and the vessels used for its storage, which must be so clean "that a prince's bedchamber must not exceed it" (SIM, 1996, n.p). I will not address Alison Sim's further information on the wearisome process of bucking and the production of ale, but it is important to bear in mind all of these activities and the fact that countless early modern women performed them on a daily basis and with great intensity, since, for instance, as every Tudor, whether rich or poor, wore a linen underwear and women were strongly encouraged to keep their washings "whiter than white" (SIM, 1996, n.p).

In a period in which conduct books were in great demand, Gervase Markham's highly popular handbook to women displays in its long title the duties a housewife should see to. It is called *The English Housewife, Containing, The inward and outward virtues*

which ought to be in a complete woman, As her skill in Physic, Cookery, Banqueting-stuff, Distillation, Perfumes, Wool, Hemp, Flax, Dairies, Brewing, Baking, and all other things belonging to an Household. A Work very profitable and necessary, gathered for the general good of this kingdom (1615).

It is worth noting that the skills a woman could have been apprenticed to correspond mainly to useful domestic and devotional skills, as there were still wide- ranging restrictions to female education. There are, however, some notable examples of early modern women who received formal training, yet, it was a privilege for the wealthy. Thomas More's daughter Margaret Roper (1505-1544) and Elizabeth I (1533- 1603), for instance, are deemed as very well-educated; yet, they were surely the exception rather than the rule. Early modern women writers, both from the nobility and the middle class, are also fundamental examples to consider female literacy. It is the case of, for instance, Anne Locke (1533-1592), Margaret Tyler (1540-1590), Isabella Whitney (c. 1546- c.1624), Mary Sidney (1561-1621), Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645), Margaret Hoby (1571-1633) and Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639), to name but a few writers that have recently begun to be recovered after centuries of exclusion from literary studies, academic papers and classrooms (cf. PACHECO, 2002; MARTIN, 2010).

It is of great importance that women were also theatergoers in Shakespeare's England. As Phyllis Rackin (2005) reminds us, a number of prologues and epilogues to many early modern plays attest not only the existence of female playgoers, but also mark an awareness that they needed to be pleased. If a considerable portion of an actor's income came from the box office, from the selling of tickets, to please and entertain the audience was an imperative. Besides, as "women constituted a sizeable proportion of the paying customers in the public playhouses, perhaps more than half" (2005, p. 46), they surely possessed collective economic power, as Rackin demonstrates.

Jean Howard, in the chapter "The Materiality of Ideology" (2005), discusses the social impacts of women as spectators and as paying customers in Elizabethan public playhouses. Howard is interested in analysing not the content of the playscripts themselves, but rather the political and social consequences involved in the act of attending public amphitheatres. Howard mentions not only the financial part – the imperative of paying a sum of money to enter the theatre –, but the fact that "it involved mingling with, observing, and being observed by playgoers of at least two sexes and several social classes" (2005, p. 74). Interestingly enough, the scholar adds that, although public theatres were designed to respect hierarchical categories – commoners in the pit, gentlemen in the galleries and lords

placed at the top –, in reality, one could take the place they were able to or were willing to afford. Hence, the audience's arrangement was less defined by rank than by the amount of money one spent at the box office.

Jean Howard, then, examines a document, *The Elizabethan Stage*, which was a 1574 Act of the Common Council of London that listed a number of reasons defending the restraint and regulation of public playing inside the city. The antitheatrical arguments stress the concerns and anxieties directed towards the idea that the crowds of people at the playhouses would promote illicit sexual encounters and the dissemination of both the plague and of "unchaste, uncomelye, and unshamefaste speeches and doynges" (CHAMBERS *apud* HOWARD, 2005, p. 75). In fact, what attracts Jean Howard's attention in the document is the preoccupation mentioned at the its conclusion, which clearly indicates that, at such public locations, the danger is that those who were initially considered "guests" – nobles and aristocrats who would attend private performances, in private hours, restricted locations and presumably not pay to watch a play – are transformed into paying customers. To Howard, "in this document public playing is presented as altering social relations by the emergent material practices attendant upon play production and attendance" (2005, p. 76).

Regarding the women as playgoers, it is in Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), an antitheatrical tract as well, that they are significantly mentioned and, according to Howard, explicitly addressed. "The Gentlewomen Citizens of London", says Gosson, paternalistically worrying about their safety and reputation, are far better off at home, keeping busy with the housework, in the company of their husbands, children and books. The theatre, on the other hand, was a highly dangerous place for a woman to be. Before tackling the reasons as to why women should remain away from playhouses in the view of Puritans, it is noteworthy that not only a significant number of women were in public theatres, but that they also belonged to different social classes, as courtesans and aristocratic ladies, but also members of the emergent middle-class group. Jean Howard mentions that it is such women, citizens of "the middling sort", to whom Gosson most directly voices his concerns.

At first, Gosson's objections are directed to the threats posed to women's sexual purity, as the theatres were considered highly immoral places, where any woman might become a prey of ogling, lewd men. Jean Howard notes that the very idea of a woman being gazed by several different eyes and thus becoming "symbolically whored" (2005, p.78) inflames Gosson's argument. However, Howard dwells deeper on the issue and asks:

> Yet who is endangered, really, by women's theatergoing? The intensity of Gosson's scrutiny of the woman playgoer indicates to me that her presence in the theater may have been felt to threaten more than her own purity, that in some way it put her "into circulation" in the public world of Elizabethan England in ways threatening to the larger patriarchal economy within which her circulation was in theory a highly structured process involving her passage from the house and surveillance of the father to the house and surveillance of the husband (HOWARD, 2005, p. 78).

The author states that the process described above is indeed a complex one and possibly affected more the women who were higher up the social scale than, for instance, working class women. Regarding the "Gentlewomen Citizens of London", though, Jean Howard asserts that Gosson feared the thought of a woman becoming momentarily freer from the "normal" structures of patriarchal control and "her value as the exclusive possession of one man cheapened, put at risk, by the gazing of many eyes" (2005, p. 79). Still, Howard's argument takes a fundamental turn when she discusses the process of empowerment that women might have experienced when attending a public performance by their own participation in the "theatrical economy of gazes", as they, too, became gazing subjects. It is a fact that female playgoers were among a plural audience at theatres, places attended by people of "at least two sexes" (HOWARD, 2005, p. 74), the rich and the poor, the educated and uneducated, and all of it was awfully feared by antitheatricalists. Nevertheless, at least momentarily, early modern

Englishwomen did get to observe and be observed, to mingle among different social groups, and to enjoy the communal experience of a public space such as the theatre, thus challenging and disrupting, for a moment, the profound and violent patriarchal system of oppression that they lived under.

Taking into consideration Rackin's skeptical, if not metacritical, approach to history writing and to historical research, we should bear in mind that when studying Shakespeare and the gender issues prompted by his plays, in early modern England "inequalities between men and women were taken for granted" (RACKIN, 2005, p. 26). Gender disparities were not dealt with with the questioning lenses through which, atlast, they have been in the past few years. In Shakespeare's world, such inequalities were sanctioned by law, religion, and reinforced by the duties and habits of the day-to- day experience, particularly related to familial life and household affairs, as the discussion here shows that work in early modern England was highly gendered.

Considering that the set of tasks commonly assigned to women of all classes was the one related to housekeeping, Alison Sim shrewdly comments that such skills tend to be generally unconsidered by historians and deemed worthless, taking into account early

modern women's overall "inferior" education as opposed to the formal one provided to men. To the historian, "a sixteenth-century woman was often very well educated indeed, but educated in the practical skills she would need to run house and home" (SIM, 1996, n.p). The general lack of attention concerning early modern women's work thus reflects, in fact, the low status that housekeeping has always had and not the actual assessment of the abilities, production and tasks they carried out. I hope this research contributes to this discussion, as it looks back on early modernity acknowledging the great share of work placed under women's responsibility, as well as the specific knowledge they had to acquire in order to carry out all the tasks assigned to them.

Besides, the nature of such work is indispensable to the functioning and the organisation of early modern England's society. The central role of families in Shakespeare's world also attests to the indisputable importance of women, as not only the households were deemed "a little commonwealth" at the time, but the families stood in a place of economic and political cornerstone, granting wives the position of companions to their husbands – as opposed to the medieval concept of the wife as servant. There are also important instances in which early modern women may have exerted power, as is the case of their condition as paying customers at public playhouses

and consequent possession of collective economic power. Whereas, in Renaissance, women still lived in an environment of oppression and were subject to real attacks because of their sex, in Shakespearean drama, female characters are given a different treatment. Having discussed the important milestones of early modern humanism, the conceptions of women in different fields of knowledge and the accounts of women's lives in sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England, I will move on to the discussion of the two female characters chosen for this study, examining how their construction challenges at least some of their contemporary gender roles.

2. FEMALE AGENCY AND TRANSGRESSION IN *ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL*

2.1 Approaching the play: the text and its reception

> All's Well That Ends Well, *Ms. Fitch? I mean, is it even a Shakespeare play?*
> Mona Awad (2021)

All's Well That Ends Well (1604-5) is still one of Shakespeare's least popular plays. As author Mona Awad, in her novel *All's Well*, published in August 2021, has a college student say to her main character, a Theatre Studies teacher: was it even written by Shakespeare? The question echoes throughout the novel and the book humorously deals with the lack of attention this play is still subject to, all the while contributing to its popularisation. Shakespeare's brilliant and unconventional *All's Well That Ends Well* features a strong and complex female protagonist, who not only holds the majority of the lines in the play, but also speaks the most relevant soliloquies, taking up the stage three times to speak her mind. The young Helena lives in Roussillon and is the sole child of a famous, but deceased court doctor, Gerard de Narbonne. From her father, Helena inherited a "receipt" (1.3.244), a medical prescription that allows her to heal the King of France and, as Fernanda Medeiros (2021) highlights, it is precisely the combination of the specific knowledge Helena has and the ability to turn such knowledge into a paid fee that grants her the autonomy to get her closer to where she most wants to be: married to her social superior Bertram.

As the daughter of a physician, Helena is not an aristocrat and, as an orphan, is bequeathed to the Countess of Roussillon's overlooking, whose husband, the Count, had also died before the opening of the play. The Countess's son and heir to the county, Bertram, now fatherless, must attend the King of France, to whom he is "in ward" (1.1.5). The news of Bertram's parting for Paris triggers a profound sadness in Helena, who is deeply in love with him and cherishes their having been playfellows. She thus begins her restless quest in pursue of Bertram until the end of the play.

Throughout the plot, we witness Helena's impressive agency and determination, as she is a character who sees no obstacles ahead of herself and will go as far as it takes to get to where she wants to be. If Helena may seem to be strongly driven by ambition, particularly to those who do not listen to her in private moments, it is through her

soliloquies, especially in those that take place in act 1 scene 1, that the protagonist shares her mind with audience/readers and we may, then, get to know Helena's true motivations in the play, that is, to act on her love of Bertram. Clearly she is love-struck to such an extent that she remains absolutely ignorant and uncritical of Bertram's numerous flaws, and the issue of Helena's overpowering desire as the motor of her agency and her subsequent transgressive acts are to be explored here. In what follows, I will engage in the close reading of her soliloquies, taking into account their relevance in making it clear to us who Helena is or what she really wants.

As Susan Snyder points out in her introductory study to the play (1993, p. 25- 33), there is consistent criticism that has openly expressed their disinclination to *All's Well That Ends Well*. This is the case of Arthur Quiller-Couch (1863-1944), E. M. W. Tillyard (1899-1962) and Josephine W. Bennett (1899-1974), all of whom labelled it as a failure. Clifford Leech (1909-1977) discredits Helena for her ambition, while H. G. Cole (1866-1946) charged her of religious hypocrisy. On the other hand, Harold Bloom asserts that *All's Well* is "Shakespeare's most undervalued comedy" (BLOOM, 1998, p. 345). When it comes to gender, agency and transgression, Charlotte Lennox (1730- 1804) attacked Helena's character in 1753 because she was arrogant, cruel and violated feminine propriety. Two centuries later, Bertrand Evans (1912-1999) also expressed his deep-seated dislike towards Helena asserting that "her pilgrimage was never meant for [Saint] Jaques, but for Priapus[2]" (EVANS *apud* SNYDER, 1993, p. 33).

The website IMDb (*The Internet Movie Database*) informs us that directors John Barton and Claude Whatham (1968) and Wilford Leach (1978) adapted the play from past stage productions to television films. Apart from that, in 1980, Elijah Moshinsky directed *All's Well That Ends Well* as part of the project *BBC Television Shakespeare*, which broadcasted adaptations of all Shakespearean plays from 1978 to 1985. Moshinsky's was the only version initially designed for television and, until the present day, *All's Well* has not yet had a film adaptation, a fact which echoes the negative reviews and criticism it has received so far.

With the aim of discussing the relevance of topics such as female agency and its centrality to the unfolding of events in the play, as well as examining the works of other critics while presenting my reading of Helena, this chapter thus explores *All's Well That Ends Well* privileging a different, more positive approach to Shakespeare's unorthodox

---

[2] In Greek mythology, Priapus is the god of human, animal and vegetable fertility, often represented bearing an enormous phallus and permanent erection.

play. After all, it features a main female character who undertakes a series of actions that are traditionally reserved to men, as travelling to different locations by herself, being granted the power of choosing a spouse she desires, and plotting the transgressive act of a bed trick, thus revealing the significant inversion of gender roles established in the play. Moreover, there is valuable and solid research that attests to the play's and the protagonist's actual dramatic and literary merits, as is the case of the work of contemporary scholars Lisa Jardine (1987), Marjorie Garber (2004), Jean Howard (2006), Emily Gerstell (2015), Rory Loughnane (2016) and Fernanda Medeiros (2021), whose ideas are of great support to the present study, especially as far as the reading of Helena's agency and transgression is concerned.

In chapter one, I explored the early modern discourses about women in distinct areas, namely in medical, economic and religious thinking, and these fields share a common ideal in relation to the female sex, that of chastity, silence, obedience and overall submission to men. Helena confronts and disobeys this gender ideal in important ways, as her conduct and interaction with other characters show. I refer here principally to the bawdy dialogue with Paroles, in act 1 scene 1, which I explore in section 4 below, besides her behaviour at court (2.1, 2.3), which not only transgresses the social code of female silence, but also the parameters of female compliance, as she cruises a room filled with lords and addresses each of them as if deciding which one she would choose to marry. I return to this fundamental point in the plot in section 5 below.

Helena, young and single, also challenges the strong restrictions and limitations imposed on the female sex in the period. This character has power to act as she wishes, which is granted to her by her learning in medicine and is reflected in her untypical mobility. Helena decides to go on a journey disregarding her guardian's permission, which is in fact given to her, but only after she had already "fixed" (1.1.200) her mind on it. Moreover, I believe that the bed trick at play in *All's Well That's Ends Well* is the most decisive and transgressive confrontation of gender norms in the construction of Helena's character, as she, at this moment still a virgin, plots and arranges, in highly unmaidenly terms, her first sexual intercourse with her newly-wed and reluctant spouse. During the bed trick, female virginity is not dealt with as a woman's most priceless possession – as it was widely believed to be at the time, for it guaranteed her chances to marry – but as a commodity, with a price set on it, which Helena pays to the Widow in Florence (3.7).

We also observe that Helena is quite a singular case among the collection of Shakespearean heroines, as she possesses autonomy and the possibility to travel without

relying on any sort of male disguise to carry out her plans. I believe that this is one of the points that stands out in Helena's construction. Readers and spectators of Shakespeare's plays know of the great heroines who relied on male disguise as a necessity to their journeys. This is the case of Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590-1), Rosalind in *As You Like It* (1599-1600), Viola in *Twelfth Night* (1600-1) and Imogen in *Cymbeline* (1610).

As I see it, Helena's agency derives mainly from the specific knowledge she has. Although her capacity in healing the King is referred to in a language of wonder by others as well as by herself (2.1; 2.3), Helena does possess learning, which she had acquired from her father. Helena's owning of "some prescriptions / Of rare and proved effects" (1.3.221-22), that derived from her father's "reading / And manifest experience" (1.3.222-23), provides her a valid excuse to travel to the Parisian court, but not only. It shows Helena's cultivation of a particular know-how that is transformed into a paid fee and works in her benefit thanks to her own efforts. If herself and others make use of a rhetoric of wonder, as "Heaven hath through me restored the King to health" (2.3.65) and the "Very hand of heaven" (2.3.32) which has performed the healing, we can read it as a consequence of the early modern background, as medicine was still closely associated with magic at the time, and Helena could easily be accused of witchcraft if she called too much attention to her wit and her possession of unknown potions.

This chapter thus pays close attention to Helena's verbal expression and one of the reasons why she was elected as an object of study is the fact that *All's Well* is a play in which a lowborn woman occupies the main role and is also granted three moments in soliloquy, a place we rarely see women in, let alone a woman not belonging to the nobility. In the sections below, I investigate Helena's character bearing a few questions in mind: has *All's Well* not received much attention because of the main character's exceptional agency and transgression? Or is it, perhaps, the issue of consent that troubles readers and audience, since Helena chases her love object so relentlessly, disregarding that her counterpart is crucially mortified by the idea of marrying her? Or is it the fact that both Helena and Bertram are explicitly morally unattractive? Or even all of the alternatives above?

In what follows, I foreground a discussion concerning the genre and categorisation of *All's Well* as a problem play and I am especially interested in discussing the discomforts that literary criticism has felt in relation to the play, its

recognised unpopularity and lack of a movie adaptation. After all, what is it that causes the trouble in this play? What is so problematic about it?

2.2 Gender and genre: what is a problem play and how does it relate to the theme of virginity?

> My chastity is the jewel of our house.
> (*All's Well*. 4.2.46)

In the *First Folio* of 1623, the first published collection of Shakespeare's plays put together by his fellow actors in the *King's Men*, John Heminges (1556-1630) and Henry Condell (1576-1627), *All's Well That Ends Well* appears in print for the first time and is classified as a comedy. The catalogue page of the *First Folio*, in fact, clusters Shakespeare's plays into three capacious headings: comedies, histories and tragedies. The very breadth of these categories has troubled later editors and critics and pushed them to create new generic groups. The plays grouped under the genre of comedy, in particular, have undergone a series of subdivisions, largely on grounds of tone, theme and treatment of social institutions. One important new generic category was the one of 'problem play', suggested by the academic and editor Frederick Samuel Boas (1862- 1957), in the 19th century.

In his book *Shakspere and his predecessors*, published in 1896, F. S. Boas asserts that *Troilus and Cressida* (1601-2), *Measure for Measure* (1603-4), *All's Well That Ends Well* (1604-5) as well as *Hamlet* (1600-1), share a number of features, especially when it comes to "temper and atmosphere" (BOAS, 1910, p.345). We can thus infer that these plays are being thought after in terms of tone, as they are not just comic or solely tragic, but rather a combination of both. Moreover, this categorisation also concerns the treatment of social institutions – as, for instance, the government, the military body, marriage and female virginity – a point which sets these plays apart from the others that also combine tragic and comic elements, as is the case of the late plays Shakespeare wrote. Boas's argument concludes pointing to the fact that "dramas so singular in theme and temper cannot be strictly called comedies or tragedies" (BOAS, 1910, p. 345), thus classing them as problem plays.

This categorisation emerges thanks to a comparison among the referred Shakespearean plays and the Ibsenist drama (1828-1906). Boas proposes that the term 'problem play', convenient enough to qualify the drama of his time, would also be useful to class Shakespeare's (BOAS, 1910, p. 345). Such plays deal with, among a vast array of topics, dilemmas concerning sexual conduct and this is particularly relevant to the present reading of Helena, as it directly concerns female virginity. In the case of *All's Well*, virginity is a widely debated topic and Shakespeare is rather cynical in his approach of it, exploring a nastier side of the realities of sex. The device of the bed trick, which I will further explore in the sixth section of this chapter, brings to the fore issues concerning, for instance, how much the sexual encounters bear in themselves an anti-romantic nature. We witness an inexperienced lad, Bertram, who is incapable of telling a girl from the other, considering that the first is an object of his constant wooing and the latter, with whom he mistakenly sleeps with, is the object of his loathing and hate. I wonder if it is Bertram's total sexual inexperience at play, or if Shakespeare is signalling at the raw unromantic drive that sex may have, as an expression of pure lust in action. I would venture that it is not a matter of and/or in this case, but rather a deep complication of the explicitly vulgar, grubbier side of sex.

Thinking on the "atmosphere" (BOAS, 1910, p. 345) of the four above- mentioned plays, Boas observes that in Shakespeare's construction of each respective social world, he introduces us to societies that are "ripe unto rottenness" (BOAS, 1910, p.345). If we think of *All's Well*, in fact, the opening displays a decaying social order, as the men are either dead – the Count of Roussillon and Gerard de Narbonne – or dying, as the King of France, or much too immature and unfit to perpetuate the political world of the play. This is the case of Bertram, heir to the county but, as mentioned, commanded to leave his hometown to attend the King. It is within such social context that Jean Howard assesses the agency of the young heroine Helena, a fundamental point to which I return in detail in sections five and six below.

In addition, the King's speech (1.2), while in conversation with Bertram during the young lord's arrival at the French court, conveys an overall feeling of nostalgia and idealisation of the past, while criticising the present times and communicating the idea of a rotting society in the world of *All's Well*. The King, musing on Bertram's late father's many favourable qualities, observes that the lords of the present (most likely his vassals and wards, but Bertram can be surely included) share a similar wit with the courtiers of the past; nevertheless, the present ones lack the virtues that were often found in those of the

past. The monarch says that the young men he knows now "may jest / Till their own scorn return to them unnoted / Ere they can hide their levity in honour" (1.2.33-4). He proceeds in praising Bertram's father, who had the manners of a

well-trained courtier and showed aspects of his cultivated *sprezzatura*, and, much unlikehis own son, used to show genuine honour and humility even to those who were below him in terms of class, bowing "his eminent top to their low ranks, / Making them proud of his humility / In their poor praise he humbled" (1.2.43-5). Thus the King's words suggest an attitude that cherishes the past and its preservation of moral values, as honour and humility, and laments the following loss of such values in the contemporary world of *All's Well*, thus conveying the feeling of rottenness in the air.

Stubborn and immature, Bertram is responsible for the big realistic blow related to rank barriers in act 2 scene 3. After Helena has healed the sick King, one could have hoped that the events in the play were building up to unfold a fairy tale, and that the "poor unlearnèd virgin" (1.3.240) would, at last, get to be with her beloved prince. But the magic ends then and there, with Bertram's blunt – and yet plausible in the early modern context – rejection of Helena. According to historian Joel Hurstfield, the forced marriage of a nobleman to a physician's daughter, which is imposed by the King in *All's Well*, violates an important limitation stipulated by the wardship system, namely that the imposition of matrimony should not downgrade the ward's rank (HURTSFIELD *apud* SNYDER, 1993, p. 12). The King replies to Bertram's refusal with a long speech on the genuine nature of virtue and nobility, stating that "From lowest place when virtuous things proceed, / The place is dignified by th' doer's deed" (2.3.126-7). The King scolds the "proud, scornful boy" (2.3.152), urging him to understand that "Good alone / Is good, without a name!" (2.3.129-30). But instead of taking Helena as his wife under the King's command, Bertram thrusts us down to earth with what remains his main articulated objection to their marriage: "A poor physician's daughter my wife? Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever!" (2.3.116-17).

As to the source material Shakespeare drew from to compose *All's Well*, one of the dramatist's significant alterations is his heroine's status and this complicates the questions of rank that pervade the play. Before addressing such issues, I will briefly highlight what constitutes the main events of the source story. Scholars generally agree that *All's Well That Ends Well*'s main plot is an adaptation of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375)'s *Decameron* (1353), specifically the ninth story of the Third Day. Boccaccio's novella was translated into English by William Painter (?1540-1595) in *The Palace of Pleasure* (Novel 38),

which was published three times, in 1566, 1569 and 1575, and Suzanne Gossett suggests that Shakespeare is likely to have used the one published in 1575, as it was "nearest in time" (GOSSETT, 2019, p. 7). The source narrative focuses on the story of Giletta de Narbonne, a young, rich and fatherless girl, who falls for Beltramo, with whom she was raised. Giletta is the daughter of a physician who, like Helena, successfully cures the King of France of a fistula. As a reward for her healing, Giletta is granted the right to choose the husband she wants, and she naturally chooses Count Beltramo, who marries her against his will and flees to the wars without consummating the marriage. By means of several bed tricks, an event which happens only once in Shakespeare's play, Giletta gets pregnant and manages to get hold of Beltramo's family ring thus fulfilling two of his seemingly impossible requests.

As it was constitutive of Shakespeare's working method, he created and added characters to Boccaccio's novella including Paroles, the braggart and unvirtuous soldier, Lafeu, a good old counsellor, and the majestic figure of the Countess, Bertram's mother and a widow who truly cherishes Helena and supports her union with Bertram. For the purposes of this research, especially as far as the reading of the female protagonist is concerned, it is relevant to focus on the impact and significance of the alterations concerning her. Whereas Giletta is rich and manages to oversee estate matters while her unwilling spouse is off fighting the wars, a fact which highlights her higher rank, Helena never gets to actually live the role of Countess of Roussillon, exerting political and social authority in the play. Although Helena ends the play as the future Countess, married to Bertram and pregnant with his child, we do not witness any of the subsequent events that follow such union. *All's Well*'s protagonist is regarded as "a poor physician's daughter" (2.3.116) by her future husband and it is Bertram's apparently permanent rejection of Helena in terms of class that twists the play's fairy-tale source. Even though Shakespeare found the theme of class difference in the source he used, he most certainly has made it sharper and more problematic in *All's Well*.

As to the play's ending, we also find that Shakespeare has made crucial changes to the source material. Boccaccio's/Painter's narrative ends with Giletta's arrival at a feast, while holding twin sons in her arms, who look very much like their father. Kneeling at the Count's feet, showing him their children and his family ring, she pleads that he should accept her as his rightful wife. They embrace and kiss (which never happens in *All's Well*'s playtext) and the story ends with the promise of a happily-ever- after to the main couple.

In Shakespeare, moreover, the long final scene (5.3) resembles more of a trial, in

which Bertram and Diana are being confronted by the King. This scene raises more questions than assurances regarding the future happiness of the Helena-Bertram couple. If *All's Well* ends satisfactorily, at least for the King, the Countess, Helena and Diana, Bertram's last words convey a considerable amount of doubt and uncertainty. The first part of the scene, in which Bertram tells a series of lies and shows a shifting of tone towards Diana, openly calling her a prostitute, for example, after having addressed her as a "Titled goddess, / And worth it with addition" (4.2.2-3), sets the tone for his lack of romance, not to mention his unworthiness. For these reasons, I believe that Shakespeare's title is all the more bitter and ironic, for what we witness in the final scene precisely operates to make us question romance, love, happy endings and the institution of matrimony as a promise of everlasting affection.

Around three decades after Boas's study was published, W. W. Lawrence's *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (1931) also dedicated considerable attention to the problem plays and, thinking similarly about dramatic tone, theme and the discussion of social institutions, Lawrence stated that they "clearly do not fall into the category of tragedy, and yet are too serious and analytic to fit the commonly accepted conception of comedy" (LAWRENCE *apud* Dobson and Wells, 2001, p. 357). In *All's Well* there are no actual deaths throughout the plot, although the play opens with a general atmosphere of mourning, as the stage direction indicates that Bertram, his mother, Helena, and even Lafeu enter the stage "*all in black*" (1.1 s.d). The play's ending, despite all the unsettling and substantial lack of consent in the final marriage, and the consequent discomfort and discontent towards it, does feature a traditional celebration of union and reassurance of continuity of a noble household.

Among the array of topics discussed in *All's Well*, we thus find a particular concern among scholars with matters of marriage as an institution and of female virginity. According to Rory Loughnane (2016), "over the space of fifty-two lines, the words 'virgin', 'virgins', and 'virginity' occur twenty-two times" (2016, p. 415) in the play. Loughnane is referring to the infamous and openly vulgar virginity dialogue between Paroles and Helena in act 1 scene 1. Both dealt with as a commodity and, yet, as priceless, virginity is debated throughout *All's Well*. The play attests to its condition of a social and political regulator, while contemplating it from different viewpoints, according to Shakespeare's skilful usage of the rhetorical strategy of *disputatio in utramque partem*. In the play, a woman's virginity is associated with an ancestral family ring (4.2.45-50) and as a "vendible" (1.1.157) item, best disposed of and consumed before it has lost its freshness. Besides, Helena's purchase

of the bed trick both sets a price on her losing her virginity "to her own liking" (1.1.153), while problematically

stating that something which should not be for sale is sold, thus placing her virginity as a commodity matter-of-factly. Therefore we can, for sure, assert that virginity is intensely contemplated within the universe of interest of *All's Well*, while acknowledging its political and social implications, as female chastity was considered an imperative to perpetuate the patriarchal system, assuring legitimate heirs and family bloodlines in early modernity.

The term problem play stands and is used to qualify *All's Well* until the present day, despite being the target of disputes and debates among critics and editors, as Susan Snyder (1993, p.16-19) and Suzanne Gossett (2019, p.3-6) indicate in their respective Introductions to the editions to the play. According to both editors, *All's Well* is a comedy, even though we must take its particularities into account. Snyder mentions that the "elaborately comic shaping" (SNYDER, 1993, p. 18) of *All's Well*, as is the case of *Measure for Measure* (1603-4), has yet a "generic anomaly" (SNYDER, 1993, p. 18) that impedes both of these plays to be grouped into the comic gender alone, since their "direct address to pain and desire and the perceived deep-seated pessimism about human worth and power" (SNYDER, 1993, p. 18) has contributed to the several critical searches for a definition of problem play. Suzanne Gossett is even more straightforward in her account of *All's Well*'s genre, "which, despite all complications along the way, is certainly comedy" (GOSSETT, 2019, p. 4, my emphasis).

Shakespeare's comedies are many and very different from one another. His readers and audience are familiar with the fact that Shakespearean plays present us with a constant stretching of generic boundaries, or even a refusal to conform to traditions of genre altogether. From this perspective, the representatives of the comic genre in Shakespeare's dramatic works could bear clear affinities in tone and atmosphere, but remain with their singularities and, perhaps, constantly resisting to comply to generic classifications. As *All's Well* suggests, there is certainly a comic plot in action, but we definitely do not find a subplot of romantic comedy there, as the event of the substitution in bed reminds us. Besides, Helena and Bertram's is the only wedding in the play, unlike other comedies Shakespeare wrote that feature multiple final marriages, and I presume that this all the more highlights the uneasiness of the union in *All's Well*. As to the term problem play itself, I believe it can be useful to call our attention to pivotal issues in *All's Well*, as the discussion

on virginity and matrimony shows and thanks to the treatment Shakespeare gave to the social institutions in the problem plays, they stood out to the nineteenth-century critic. As I see it, the "problem" here works as a way to force readers and audience to think differently about well-established social organisations and social regulators.

In what follows, I will delve in the close reading of the protagonist's first soliloquies in the play, exploring the distinct moments in which Helena is nourished by the restless force of her agency, taking into account the role that language plays in the construction of her subjectivity and paying attention to the relevance of her speeches in private to the reading of her motivations and desires.

2.3 **Free or fated? Female agency and transgression in Helena as seen through her first soliloquies**

> The fated sky
> Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull Our
> slow designs when we ourselves are dull.
> (*All's Well.* 1.1.219-21)

Turning our attention to the soliloquy and its condition of dramatic resource, we know that Shakespeare's female characters have rather few moments to speak alone on stage. Particularly thinking on Helena, as mentioned, she is not only the character who says the majority of the lines in *All's Well*, but soliloquises three times. Helena's first words on her own (1.1) already state the gap that there is between the other characters' understanding of her and her own private thoughts. If the Countess and the old lord Lafeu, characters who are fond of Helena, mistakenly suppose that she is mourning her late father (who had been dead for only six months) and that is why she copiously weeps (1.1.52), her love object Bertram would be the last one of the cast to understand the true cause of the heroine's sorrow.

It is during her first soliloquy, fully cited below, that Helena reveals the cause of her profound sadness, communicating her passion and the desire to marry Bertram. It is also in this speech that we witness the protagonist's first indication of her decision to pursue an interclass marriage and thus to transgress the rigid, structuring system of rank to which all individuals were submitted to, in other words, a categorisation system thatfirmly regulated and prescribed family lineages and legal rights, which was very rarely overcome. Nevertheless, it is in early modernity that the possibility of social mobility was first given to

middle-class individuals and Helena is a character that gets to experience it. Her trajectory from a lowborn physician's daughter to a nobleman's wife attests to such an idea and it is thanks to the amount of power she has in her hands to shape herself. If Helena is able to experience a process of self-fashioning, it has to do with her learning in medicine and the subsequent unfolding of events in the play, more specifically: making up her mind to go to court (1.1), persuading and healing the King to get her reward (2.1) and marrying Bertram (2.3). Her soliloquy allows us to glance at a significant part of her inner life, which proves to be highly complex and, for sure, pervaded by issues of social class. After everyone has left the stage, Helena shifts the core of the action to her own self and pours out her heart:

> **HELENA**
> O, were that all! I think not on my father,
> And these great tears grace his remembrance more Than
> those I shed for him. What was he like?
> I have forgot him. My imagination
> Carries no favour in't but Bertram's.
> I am undone! There is no living, none, If
> Bertram be away. 'Twere all one
> That I should love a bright particular star And
> think to wed it, he is so above me. In his
> bright radiance and collateral light Must I be
> comforted, not in his sphere.
> Th'ambition in my love thus plagues itself. The
> hind that would be mated by the lion
> Must die for love. 'Twas pretty, though a plague, To
> see him every hour; to sit and draw
> His archèd brows, his hawking eye, his curls, In
> our heart's table – heart too capable
> Of every line and trick of his sweet favour. But
> now he's gone, and my idolatrous fancy
> Must sanctify his relics. (*All's Well.;* 1.1.81-100)

In this first moment, we witness a lamenting, resigned character, "my idolatrous fancy, / Must sanctify his relics", and Helena's frame of mind will only change when we meet her alone for the second time (1.1.218-231). While in soliloquy, Helena expresses the great depth of her feelings for Bertram up to the point that she has completely forgotten her dead father's face, saying that her "imagination / Carries no favour in't but Bertram's". She thinks solely on her object of affection. She acknowledges that she loves someone who occupies a far higher position than she does in the social sphere and compares her love of Bertram to loving a "bright particular star".

Helena's love language constructs the image of a predator-prey relationship, "The hind that would be mated by the lion, / Must die for love". As I see it, this line anticipates Helena's willingness to die for her affection, if that is what it takes to get what she wants.

When Helena says "love" and imagines a hind, surely a weaker animal than a lion, accepting that it must end its life in order to copulate, she says that death and love are intertwined. When Helena says "love", she also, very closely, thinks of death and that she is willing to die for it. If such an idea comes in the form of an image in her soliloquy, she declaratively says it when meeting the King and telling him what she is prepared to risk in case she fails to cure him: "no worse of worst, extended / <u>With</u> <u>vilest torture, let my life be ended</u>" (2.1.171-172, my emphasis).

It is quite interesting to notice the shift in gender roles concerning subject-object or writer-muse that Shakespeare establishes in Helena's final lines above. Admitting the maddening, bittersweet pleasure it was to constantly be by Bertram's side, "'Twas pretty, though a plague", Helena also communicates her adoration for Bertram's body – *not* his virtues or intellect, we should observe. His image is imprinted so deeply in her mind that she is able to reconstruct "every line and trick of his sweet favour". Interestingly, Helena, a woman, is gazing upon her love object, thinking and speaking poetry thanks to her affection for it. Her unrequited love fills out her "heart's table", or a white sheet of paper, whereas the male counterpart of this situation is placed in the position of object, muse or inspiration.

The next time we hear her speaking alone, still in act 1 scene 1, Helena shows a radically different behaviour, as though re-made before our eyes. We notice a significant change in her from the first to the second soliloquy concerning the breaching of class barrier, which perhaps her words "There is no living, none, / If Bertram be away" anticipate. If we first witness Helena as a self-pitying, "undone" young maid, lamenting her apparently unreachable love, when we meet her alone on stage once again, she is full of self-resolve and determination, erasing any possible impediment in her way towards loving her social superior. Helena says:

> **HELENA**
> Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, Which we
> ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
> Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull Our
> slow designs when we ourselves are dull. What
> power is it which mounts my love so high? That
> makes me see, and cannot feed mine eye? The
> mightiest space in fortune nature brings
> To join like likes, and kiss like native things.
> Impossible be strange attempts to those
> That weigh their pains in sense, and do suppose
> What hath been cannot be. Who ever strove
> To show her merit that did miss her love?
> The king's disease – my project may deceive me,
> But my intents are fixed and will not leave me. (*All's Well;* 1.1.187-200)

Helena exhorts herself to move forward and takes matters into her own hands, uttering what I assume to be her most powerful line in the whole play, "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie". It conveys the character's willingness to confront, disobey and transgress what the "fated sky" has determined for her. Helena says that the power to act and obtain what one desires lies within themselves, as if creating her own motto to Greenblatt's conceptualisation of self-fashioning.

The speech above is fully constructed in rhyming couplets and the shift from earlier instants, when Helena dialogues with Paroles (1.1.101-217) mostly in prose, suggests her attempts in intervening in her own fate, freeing her scope of action with the power she assumes she has at her disposal. Helena's rhyming couplets evoke the feeling of a fairy tale about to unfold, while transmitting her own desire to solidify her personal "project", so rigid a structure it is, and deal with her "fixed" intentions which "will not leave" her.

Unlike her first time alone in the play, in which her words call up images of bright stars above her and of extreme love between disparate beings ending in death, it seems that Helena is grounding herself this second time. Her soliloquy conveys not only her imaginative explorations, but also a process of decision-making. She will not "sanctify" Bertram's "relics", but strive to "show her merit" and gain her love at all costs. We now read that Helena's language is communicating her physical, tangible desire through the words "feed", "join" and "kiss", providing a concrete evidence of her motivations to pursue Bertram. In addition, she uses a defying tone as though challenging her own fate in the form of a self-enquiry, "What power is it that mounts my love so high?"

As of this point, I will explore other plot moments that feature Helena, in which she conducts herself in public, and examine how her character is shaped by agency and transgression, contrasting, but also corroborating at times, her language construction in private and in the presence of others.

2.4 "How might one do, sir, to lose *it* to her own liking?" - The virginity dialogue

Not my virginity yet –
(*All's Well.* 167)

After Helena's first soliloquy, the braggart soldier and Bertram's friend Paroles enters the stage for the first time, abruptly addressing her, "'Save you, fair queen!" (1.1.108). The New Cambridge Shakespeare's edition of *All's Well That Ends Well* (2013) notes that "queen" was also another term for prostitute in the period, but Paroles may also be referring to the mythological figure Helen of Troy with his "fair queen". From this moment on, Helena shows us and Paroles that he has met his match, as she sarcastically retorts him, "And you, monarch!" (1.1.109). Paroles, then, kicks off a totally inappropriate and indecorous conversation with Helena and this is how the infamous virginity dialogue unfolds. Within it there is the longest and most concentrated debate on the topic of virginity in all of Shakespeare's dramatic works, as acknowledged by Rory Loughnane (2016).

Thinking on the several associations in this play to refer to a woman's virginity, this specific dialogue between Helena and Paroles is quite straightforward, having the soldier voice the annoying and misogynistic rant of how women had better "Keep it not" (1.1.148) and dispose of their virginity while it is "vendible" (1.1.157), for "'tis a commodity will lose the gloss with lying; the longer kept, the less worth" (1.1.155-56). It seems that the King of France is also a believer of the same sexist approach, as he, referring to Diana's marriage by the end of the play, remarks that she is yet fit to be wedded, since she is an "uncroppèd flower", but overall, "a <u>fresh</u> uncroppèd flower" (5.3.327, my emphasis). The King thus voices the early modern widespread belief in the importance of female virginity and Bertram's empty companion delivers a similar idea in far more vulgar and baser terms, stating that a woman's virginity, if kept for too long, "breeds mites, much like cheese" (1.1.144-45).

Helena, although unmarried and supposedly inexperienced, is quick to banter Paroles, and we know, thanks to the end of her speech just before he enters the scene, that she firmly distrusts him, as he is "a notorious liar" and "a great way fool, solely a coward" (1.1.103). Thus we may infer that to a certain extent Helena's remarks are intended for mockery and her tone is largely sardonic, after all, why would she even care for the advice of this "notorious liar" on how she might eventually lose her virginity "to her own liking"?

True to his name, Paroles speaks much more than Helena and approaches her with the entirely rude, indiscreet question, right after calling her a queen: "Are you meditating on virginity?"(1.1.98). Helena is by herself when Paroles meets her and she is also an orphan, which, as I see it, counts for her being alone in the universe of the play,

considering of the fact that living in the fringes of a noble household would not have granted her any further sense of belonging. This only adds to the inappropriateness of such a dialogue and Paroles is not unaware of it, as he, before finally leaving the stage, dismisses Helena with the insulting suggestion, "When thou hast leisure, / say thy prayers; when thou hast none, <u>remember thy friends</u> …farewell" (1.1.214-16, my emphasis).

The conversation that unfolds between the two characters features a handful of obscene puns, from both sides. Thus we find one of the evidences related to the construction of Helena's transgressive character. By witnessing that she is no prude, and does not fear losing her virginity, quite the contrary, we notice that Paroles's entrance virtually remakes the protagonist before our eyes. Instants earlier, she is "undone" (1.1.86) by her seemingly impossible and unrequited love, musing on the maddening pleasure that it was to be in Bertram's company, "'Twas pretty, though a plague" (1.1.96). But Paroles comes along and Helena not only consents to his intruding question, but leads him on, boldly taking part in the exchange. Making use of military metaphors as though to speak a language that the soldier can understand, she enquires if there is "some warlike resistance" (1.1.119) against insistent men that the unvirtuous fighter before her might reveal. Paroles, then, initiates his shallow argumentation on how keeping one's virginity is unnatural and selfish, warning Helena that, when encountering a man, he

> **PAROLES**: […] will undermine you and blow you up.
> **HELENA**: <u>Bless our poor virginity from underminers and blowers-up</u>! Is there no military policy <u>how virgins might blow up men</u>?
> **PAROLES**: Virginity, <u>being blown down</u>, man will quicklier be blown up. Marry, in blowing him down again, <u>with the breach yourselves made, you</u> <u>lose your city</u>. It is not politic in the commonwealth of nature to preserve virginity. Loss of virginity is rational increase, and there was never virgin got till virginity was first lost (*All's Well.* 1.1.121-131, my emphases).

There is quite a lot to unpack in the passage above, as far as female transgression and agency are concerned. It is clear that Helena reveals herself as sexually aware and playful, all the while showing off her resourcefulness. In other words, I do believe that her mood swing, from the weeping and undone young woman to being Paroles's sparring partner can be read as her ability to move through a world that treats her with hostility and disrespect. Helena's theatricality and competence to dissimulate her real intentions, particularly through language, is what grants her the power to confront Paroles. Sarcastic and straightforward, Helena begins to make naughty jokes about male erection and orgasms ("how virgins might blow up men"). Chastity, for sure, was an imperative for early modern women and their virginity a priceless possession, thus Helena's words in the referred

dialogue attest to the fact that she would not only be Aristotle's nightmare, whose texts were considered authoritative materials in the period, as shown in chapter one, but she would certainly make contemporary humanists, as J. L. Vives, for example, shudder at the sight of such a transgressive interaction. Aristotle elected a woman's silence as her best garment, relegating her to the home and far from public spaces, all of which firmly contrasts to Helena's conduct both in the virginity dialogue and in the play as a whole. Vives himself openly suggests that women are far better off remaining inside their houses, in company of their husbands, children and books. But, if they were to be in the company of others, it would be best that they remained silent and reserved, looking down and striving to remain unnoticed by people around them. In fact, as I discuss below, later critics, especially in the 18th century, have also felt the need to bowdlerise Helena's answers in the dialogue, or even suppress it altogether in their own versions of the play.

The actor and highly famous organiser of Shakespeare's Jubilee in 1769, David Garrick (1717-1779) produced his own adaptation of *All's Well That Ends Well* in 1742 and greatly decreased the heroine's part and quest towards marriage to enlarge Paroles's plot. Also in the eighteenth century, actor and editor John Philip Kemble (1757-1823) was so offended by the virginity dialogue that he removed it completely from his adaptation of the play (cf. SNYDER, 1993, p. 32; LOUGHNANE, 2016, p. 413). Kemble also altered the very impressive scene in which Helena gets to choose the husband she wants, in act 2 scene 3. In Kemble's version, Helena does not address each of the available suitors (the King's vassals) who are disposed in front of her, but offers herself directly to Bertram, showing her willingness to be his compliant wife. Thus Kemble's attested annoyance with the play is directly associated with its shifting of gender roles and he consequently ended up suppressing much of its heroine's participation, not to mention her agency.

Still on the heroine's transgressive mode, the same editor's disturbance regarding Helena also occurs because of her transgression in relation to permission and consent. Kemble transfers her determination to pursue Bertram from scene 1, while she is in soliloquy, to the moment after she gets her guardian's permission to travel, in scene three. As Rory Loughnane puts it, the "problem of decency" (2016, p. 414) that Kemble finds in Helena lies not only in the openly vulgar dialogue with Paroles or in her conduct at court among the men, but also in the way she devises her plans and actions, privately.

A brief reading of a playbill for a performance of *All's Well* highlights the centrality of Paroles's role for eighteenth-century spectators, as Daivd Garrick's version of the play also proves. The playbill dates back to 2nd March 1756 and the performance took place at

the Drury Lane Theatre in London, a place established by Garrick. Paroles features at the very top of the playbill, whereas Helena's name is the last in the casting list:

Picture 1 – Playbill for a performance of *All's Well* (1756).
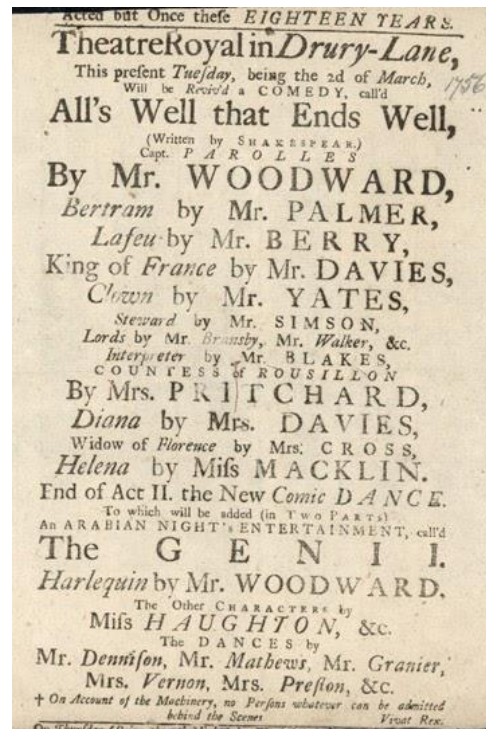
Source: The Royal Shakespeare Company, 2022.

Eric Partridge, in his *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (2005 [1947]), puts together a long glossary listing numerous of Shakespeare's sexual puns. An entry related to the aforementioned fragment of the virginity dialogue, concerning "blow up; blower-up" (PARTRIDGE, 2005, p. 84) refers to the explosion and injection of male semen in a woman's body, which brings us to the next topic on Paroles's speech, "Virginity being blown down, man will quicklier be blown up". Here the so-called soldier directly mentions the moment of sexual intercourse, in which the maidenhead is broken – "blown down" – and thus causes sexual arousal and pleasure in her male counterpart, by means of the "breach" women have, so as to, at last, lose their "city", i.e. their virginity. Paroles's argument tries to ground itself on the premise of social well-being and reproduction, asserting that virginity "by being ever kept, it is ever lost. / 'Tis too cold a companion. Away with't!" (1.1.133-34). Nevertheless, as we can expect form Shakespeare, Paroles himself is not all bad. He in fact suffers a shaming-ritual at 4.3, revealing to Bertram, First and Second Lord his willingness to betray them all and, humorously, once having his blind-fold removed, exclaims "Who cannot be crushed with a plot?" (4.3.328).

A Youtube search for "*All's Well* the virginity dialogue" reaches two very similar,

equally disturbing, yet interesting contemporary performances of this particular scene. The actor Jude Lazaro posted his take on 11th June 2020 and Sacha Dhawan in 2017. Both actors deliver their speeches under a supposed influence of alcohol and, while often looking straight to the camera, seem to give their talk as a pick-up line, that is, something one says to woo someone else, to flirt and show sexual interest. What impressed me the most is that both performances were delivered as monologues, cutting off Helena's presence entirely, hence, highlighting the supposed larger part Paroles has in the scene, since he speaks more, but also missing out on a chance to explore Helena's provocative and disturbing answers. It is worth noting that Sacha Dhawan's video had had over 57.800 views until the last time I accessed it[3] and belonged to the "Culture" section in the widely circulated British newspaper *The Guardian*. Dhawan's clip was also a part of Shakespeare's 400th anniversary celebrations.

Emily Gerstell, in her essay "*All's* [not] *Well*: Female Service and 'Vendible' virginity in Shakespeare's problem play" (2015), comments on the "obsessive and odd relationship that the play has with virginity" (GERSTELL, 2015, p. 205), calling our attention to the multiple perspectives from which this topic is taken into consideration. First, Helena's stance on the virginity dialogue, showing off her determination to pursue her own sexual fulfilment, as opposed to Paroles's explicit and sexist assertion that a woman's virginity is a commodity. Gerstell also highlights Diana's attitude towards sex, a character that stays true to her mythological name. However, apparently no one else in the play other than herself seems to notice what she really wants, that is, to remain chaste and by Helena's side (4.4.28-30). If we take Diana by her word, it is in her soliloquy that we clearly see her desire for celibacy, as she says after arranging the fake sexual *rendez-vous* with Bertram: "Therefore I'll lie with him / When I am buried. Since Frenchmen are so braid, / Marry that will, I live and die a maid" (4.2.72-4).

Up to this point in the play, Helena does not mince words, whether she is alone on stage or in the company of others. It is my contention that the pendulum-like movement of this character, or her mood swings, contributes greatly to her theatricality and ability to act and dissemble, which are valuable resources she owns to get around in the world of the play and, as I mentioned, is an important part of her female agency and transgressive mode. In what follows, I will delineate and explore other points that concern Helena's agency and transgression, keeping track of what happens next in the play, after the referred interaction

---

[3] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z16KV7VxfIg. Last access on: June, 2022.

with Paroles. We should bear in mind that both topics chosen for discussion here – agency and transgression – tend to show us Helena's wavering movements, from aggression to submission, from strength of resolve and purpose to passivity, from straightforwardness and self-assertion to obedience, as her agency and transgressive acts are also affected by a similar swing. Helena acts and complies, transgresses and obeys, breaches social orders as well as restores them.

2.5 "Not helping, death's my fee; / But, if I help, what do you promise me?" – Agency, power and self-interest

> Then shalt thou give me with thy kingly hand
> What husband in thy power I will command.
> (*All's Well*. 2.1.191-2)

When dealing with the Countess in act one scene three, Helena is met with the first character in the play who expresses nearly total incredulity towards her cultivated knowledge, medical skills and capacity in healing the King of France. Although the Countess shows true love for her "gentlewoman" (1.3.99) and finds Helena an honourable maid – after all, she is supposedly good enough for her son Bertram –, clearly the good assumptions she holds for the protagonist concern Helena's character, her being, and not her actions *per se,* as, for instance, her intentions to travel to Paris (1.3) and her going on a pilgrimage (3.4). The Countess, much unlike her son, does not shudder at the thought of Helena's love for a social superior and, by the time the King actually marries them (2.3), the Countess states her wishes very clearly, "It hath happened all as I would have it, / save that he comes not along with her" (3.2.1-2). In addition, when reading the letter Bertram had addressed to her reporting his unfortunate wedding, the Countess says that "This is not well, / rash and unbridled boy, / To fly the favours of so good a king, / To pluck his indignation on thy head / By the misprising of a maid too virtuous (…)" (3.2.23-27, my emphasis).

When it comes to the heroine's healing practice, on the other hand, the Countess sees very limited chances that Helena should be at all successful in her attempt at curing the King. Questioning not only Helena's abilities, but also her very presence at court, the Countess says

> **COUNTESS**
> But think you, Helen,

> If you should tender your supposèd aid,
> He would receive it? He and his physicians Are
> of a mind; he, that they cannot help him,
> They, that they cannot help. <u>How shall they creditA
> poor unlearnèd virgin</u>, when the schools, Embowelled
> of their doctrine, have left off
> The danger to itself? (*All's Well.*, 1.3.235-242, my emphasis).

As far as the medical schools' expertise is concerned, there is nothing more from which they may draw in order to aid the old King, as their knowledge has been drained in addressing the royal illness. Hopelessness is all round. Royal physicians and the royalty himself assume that the case is beyond the scope of medical cure and the sickness has been left to follow its own course until it reaches termination. From this perspective, in the early modern context, the Countess's incredulity towards Helena is entirely justifiable. Young and female, she would be totally deprived of any chance to offer her "supposèd aid" at a court to a king. It seems to me that the Countess's question
– "How shall they credit / A poor unlearnèd virgin" – resonates in different moments in the play, as in Helena's following encounter with the King of France, but also in the virginity dialogue, as Paroles offers his precious advice to an unknowing and inexperienced maid (little did he know that Helena, although a virgin, proves to be quitethe contrary). Besides, the total lack of "credit" in the "poor unlearnèd virgin" echoes in Bertram himself, whose strong refusal and disinclination to marrying "a poor physician's daughter" reveals his failure in acknowledging her until his last and not at all reassuring couplet, after Helena reappears bearing his child and his family ring.

Lisa Jardine, in her essay "Cultural confusion and Shakespeare's learned heroines" (1987), focuses on the explicitly educated heroines in Shakespeare and, alongside Portia from *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-7), Helena is the object of her reflection. Considering the early modern background when it comes to women's access to and possession of knowledge, "women of intellect capable of employing specialist knowledge customarily restricted to men" (JARDINE, 1987, p. 4) were virtually uncommon in Renaissance. The traditional demands of decorum directed towards women then made clear that a woman's learning was intended for no other audience than her husband and father. Moreover, Jardine affirms that "there is something intrinsically *indecorous* about a woman who (whether with the encouragement of her family or not) transgresses the social code which requires her to observe a modest silence and passivity in public" (JARDINE, 1987, p.4).

Jardine's argument is particularly interesting to the present reading of Helena's character as it highlights the transgressive mode embedded in its construction, as shenot

only shares her knowledge with others in public, while on her own and unmarried, but also undertakes an openly indecorous transgression of early modern gender codes in her moments at court (2.1; 2.3). Jardine states that Shakespeare introduces Helena with an "uneasy celebration of her cultivation" (JARDINE, 1987, p. 5) and compares this feeling of uncertainty and anxiety towards learned women to the historical figure of Margaret More, Thomas More's intellectually gifted daughter. Helena is a specifically learned woman in *All's Well*; yet, her "technical skill is viewed with incredulity"(JARDINE, 1987, p. 5), as the Countess's speech testifies.

Arriving at court, then, Helena is introduced to the King by lord Lafeu, who refers to her as "Doctor She!" (2.1.77). The King is truly beyond hope by then and, having been abandoned by his "most learnèd doctors" (2.1.114), refuses to believe in any other possible cure. He tells Helena, "I say we must not / So stain our judgement, orcorrupt our hope, / To prostitute our past-cure malady / To empirics" (2.1.117-120). In the frail King's mind, we observe his questioning, as though saying "who does Helena think she is to come to his court and dare to awake his long lost faith?" The King also fears for his good reputation, should he go along with an "empirics", an outlaw and unlicensed healer. Besides, Helena is a woman, her gender alone would prevent her from being any sort of legal practitioner of medicine.

The College of Physicians of London was established in 1518 by Henry VIII and "The congregated college" that the King mentions (2.1.113) may well have been associated to this medical society by audience members. As stated by Barbara Traister (2003), the College granted or denied licenses for those practicing medicine in Shakespeare's London and whoever was unlicensed could be subject to fines and imprisonment (2003, p. 334). Members of the College were mostly royal physicians and men educated at the Universities of Oxford (founded in 1096) and Cambridge (founded in 1209). According to Traister, "all non-licensed medical personnel – by far the largest group of medical practitioners in London – were labelled 'empirics'" (TRAISTER, 2003, p. 335). Helena, as the king's words testify, is such a case. As women were not admitted at schools or universities, it goes without saying that they were not admitted as members of the College of Physicians of London, under any circumstance. Helena's gender thus complicates even more her encounter with the king, a "poor unlearnèd virgin" who goes to his court claiming to have the cure for his fistula.

But Helena is undeterred. She appeals to the highborn ailing man before her, her rhyming couplets channelling her power, both of persuasion and of healing:

HELENA
Dear sir, to my endeavours give consent,Of
heaven, not me, make an experiment.I am
not an impostor that proclaim Myself against
the level of mine aim,
But know I think, and think I know most sure,
my art is not past power, nor you past cure (*All's Well.*, 2.1.151-56).

Helena's language does seem to acquire an incantatory effect over the characters, as her successful interaction with the king proves. However, before accepting her help, he wants a guarantee. "Upon thy certainty and confidence / What dar'st thou venture?" he asks her. Yes, he will go along with whatever it is this poor virgin is there to offer, but what if she fails? Then, Helena is willing to die. And what if she succeeds? She exclaims, "Not helping, death's my fee. / But if I help, what do you promise me?" (2.1.187-8).

The interaction between Helena and the King, a powerful lowborn and an ailing highborn, shows us yet another level of Helena's prevailing inclination and disposition to undertake all, even death, to obtain what she wants. This moment is explored by Mona Awad, in her novel *All's Well* (2021), and she illuminates the power relations and the characters' desires at play in this scene (act 2 scene 3):

> He puts himself in her hands. He submits to this lowborn woman. And then we, as the audience, realize how truly desperate, how truly ill, how truly vulnerable and afraid, the King really is. We also realize how powerful Helena must be, to risk her life for this. And how much she must want Bertram. It's a scene in which everyone's desire is laid bare and the power dynamics – between king and subject, low and highborn – are reversed. Helen will die at the King's hand if she fails to cure him. But the King will inevitably die if she fails too. His illness put him at her mercy either way (AWAD, 2021, p. 211, my emphasis).

Mona Awad is interested in reading what she calls Helena's witchy powers and how Shakespeare's *All's Well* turns out to be a kind of gothic fairy tale. What interests us here and is highlighted in the contemporary adaptation is observing how Helena acquires the power of choice. Shakespeare's heroine possesses a specific, cultivated kind of knowledge and uses it for her own good and wish fulfillment. After the successful royal cure, the dramatist writes a powerful scene to stage his heroine's selection of a husband. Completely motivated by self-interest, Helena wants the right to choose the spouse she desires from among the King's vassals. It is known to her and to us, but not to the King, that Bertram is her choice. She enters a room filled by "all the lords in court" (2.3.47), who themselves make for a "youthful parcel / Of noble bachelors" (2.3.53-4). Before them, Helena is free to select whomever she wants to be her husband, as the King's words to her confirm: "Thy frank election make; / Thou hast power to choose, and they none to forsake" (2.3.56-57). To Marjorie Garber (2004), Helena's entry at the ceremony

of husband-choosing, accompanied by the healed and rejuvenated King of France, is "triumphal" (GARBER, 2004, n.p). Garber also notes Helena's resourcefulness, who is "equipped with patience, ingenuity and good sense"(2004, n.p.), thus revealing the critic's favourable take on Shakespeare's heroine. Garber also suggests that the pleasing and satisfactory ending of *All's Well* concerns the female desire at play – mostly the Countess's and Helena's – and the validation of their wishes is an important aspect of this play, even though it may count for its unpopularity.

In the play, as Helena is the only one who knows that Bertram is the chosen one from among the King's vassals, she needs to *pretend* and simulate a decision-making scene. The King tells her, "peruse them well" (2.3.63), and Helena carefully moves along, from lord to lord, addressing each of them, deeply invested in power and agency. This is one of the decisive moments in which Helena completely transgresses the early modern social code that commands women to remain quiet, passive and subservient, especially in the presence of others. But, radically unlike the way we perceive Helena in soliloquy – determined, decided, her intents "fixed" – she addresses Bertram in the typical compliant and obedient wifely tone prescribed to females under patriarchal control: "I dare not say I take you, but I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live / Into your guiding power" (2.3. 103-105). Hence, once more we witness the movements of the main character's overpowering desires, her pendulum swings that show us a transgressive, yet submissive side of herself.

Scholar and literary critic Jean Howard, in "Female agency in *All's Well That Ends Well*" (2006), highlights the ambivalence at play when it comes to Helena's agency. At the same time that she is learned and possesses autonomy to go on journeys (the French court and central Italy) without relying on a male disguise, she herself, the King and the other characters who witness the healing process refer to her skills using the language of wonder and magic. Lafeu tells Paroles that the "very hand of heaven" (2.3.32) cured the King. Helena calls herself "the weakest minister" of heaven (2.1.135) when trying to persuade the King into trying out her medicine. The King believes that "some blessèd spirit" (2.1.173) speaks through the young maid. Thus, she occupies both the place of a miracle-worker as well as of a healer. Hence, alerts Jean Howard, Shakespeare provides for and limits his heroine's agency, making her an agent and *not* an agent. The ambivalence of Helena's agency lies also in the fact that healing the King operates in her favour, granting her the power of choice, but at the same time it restores the health of a central male figure, who

decisively contributes to the perpetuation of the very patriarchal system that oppresses her sex. In the present work, I choose to highlight the importance of the protagonist's life-bestowing knowledge, privileging a reading of how it works in favour of her power to act. I also consider that her agency shows us wavering movements – from straightforwardness and self-assertion to obedience, for instance – which the character consciously puts into practice in order to serve her own purposes.

Taking into account the protagonist's transgressive character, as well as Bertram's strong refusal after their forced marriage – "I will not bed her" (2.3.272) –, in the following section I will explore the decisive moment of the substitution in bed, in which Helena takes over Diana's place, to whom Bertram had announced his "sick desires" (4.2.35) and with whom he had high hopes of engaging in adventurous, exogamous sex.

2.6 "In fine, delivers me to fill the time": the bed trick

> Why then tonightLet
> us assay our plot; which, if it speed, Is
> wicked meaning in a lawful deed, And a
> lawful meaning in a wicked act, Where both
> not sin, and yet a sinful fact.
> (*All's Well.* 43-47)

Between scenes two and four of the fourth act, Helena is able to trick Bertram into sleeping with her. In the darkness of Diana's bedroom, in Florence, Bertram mistakenly assumes he is recovering his "sick desires" with the young Florentine, when, in fact, that night Helena and him were consummating their marriage and producing a legitimate heir. As I mentioned above, the bed trick is a device that Shakespeare uses to explore the unromantic nature of sex and it also brings to the fore a number of issues concerning the protagonist's virginity as well as its social and political implications. Moreover, it is my contention that the bed substitution in *All's Well* is the most relevant moment for the expression of Helena's transgression.

Refusing to consummate their marriage, Bertram chooses to flee to Italy to fight a war, as he prefers to face imminent death rather than to wed Helena. Then, under his command, she returns to Roussillon and the image of Bertram at war triggers a great deal of fear in her, followed by self-blaming for any possible harm that may befall her loved one. While in soliloquy for the last time, Helena says:

HELENA

> Poor lord, is't I
> That chase thee from thy country, and expose
> Those tender limbs of thine to the event
> Of the none-sparing war? And is it I
> That drive thee from the sportive court, where thou
> Wast shot at with fair eyes, to be the mark
> Of smoky muskets? (*All's Well;* 3.2.102-108)

Helena decides to imagine herself as the protagonist of Bertram's fleeing and I believe that here we may observe more clearly her attempts to form an identity for herself, as she tries to understand – or to invent – where she stands in relation to her love. Seeking – or creating – a place for herself, as Bertram's wife, before being "the shadow of a wife (…) / The name and not the thing" (5.3), in the soliloquy above she does it through language. When Helena says "I" above, a speech with high doses of self-sacrifice, she is drowning in deep terror for the sake of the one she loves in order to fulfill her personal wish of being someone that matters to him, of being someone who influences his actions. Is he in danger, Helena enquires herself, subject "to be the mark /Of smoky muskets", *thanks to her*?

She addresses the bullets in the Italian battlefield, "O you leaden messengers", urging them to dodge her lord. The repetition of sound here, "violent **s**peed of fire, / Fly with fal**s**e aim, move the **s**till-pier**c**ing air / That **s**tings with pier**c**ing" works to convey the sound of the bullets shot in the battle and it is also as though Helena feels her body being pierced. Her mind is in Italy, but her body is in France and Shakespeare dramatises his heroine's profound division, the fact that she is torn, near and away at once. If she had obediently agreed to return to Roussillon at Bertram's command (2.3),it is during her last speech alone that she resolves once again to leave.

Helena disguises herself as a pilgrim aiming for Santiago de Compostela in Spain, but she actually goes to Florence, precisely where Bertram is. She, then, plots the bed trick and it happens offstage. Shakespeare wrote two plays that feature a bed trick, *All's Well That Ends Well* (1604-05) and *Measure for Measure* (1603-04), but the great difference between the two of them is that, in *Measure for Measure*, the trick is not devised by the actual substitute. In *All's Well's* bed trick, we witness Bertram's incapability of telling one girl – Diana, whom he insistently tried to woo and bed – from the other, Helena, with whom he actually sleeps, but for whom he nurtured only hate and contempt. The trick also features a newly-wed spouse who experiences the strangeness of having her very first sexual intercourse in which, although it happens with the lad she loves, she is embraced as if she were another woman. By considering Helena's language moments after the bed substitution, we acknowledge her bitter account of her male lover's lust in action, that can

make "such sweet use" (4.4.22) of a body he hates, as, in the pitch-dark of a bedroom, "lust doth play / With what it loathes for that which is away" (4.4.24-25). Although Helena promises to dwell further on the bed trick and the sex she had with Bertram, she never does it. Instead, she offers Diana and the Widow that "all's well that ends well; still the fine's the crown. / Whate'er the course, the end is the renown" (4.4.35-36), as the play moves on to its conclusion.

The device of *All's Well*'s bed trick poses a number of problems related to female virginity. In the context of the Elizabethan-Jacobean society, a woman's virginity was understood as a matter of social, political and biological organisation, as female chastity was an imperative to perpetuate family bloodlines and make sure that property and title moved on straight from father to legitimate son. In the play, once more, the heroine's impressive agency and willingness to transgress social codes favour two distinct, conflicting sides. First, Helena's initial question to Paroles, on how she might lose her virginity to her own liking, is materialised when she puts the bed trick into action and, truly, *loses it* as she likes it. Contrastingly, she fulfils her sexual wish while enabling the reestablishment of a decaying social structure in Roussillon (and in the whole world of the play, as a matter of fact). After her trick, Bertram goes from a refusing and fugitive newly-wed husband to being a husband and father of a legitimate heir, hence becoming fit for taking his father's place as Count of Roussillon. We may notice that the change that affects both characters thanks to the bed trick has such important consequences in the social reproduction and perpetuation in *All's Well* that Bertram leaves Roussillon while single and childless before the end of the first act and returns there only in the final scene (5.3), to witness the reappearance of his wife and soon-to-be mother of his child. Jean Howard also suggests that this movement of double favouring, the female desire as well as the continuity of the patriarchy, bears in itself

> Shakespeare's imaginative negotiation of one of his culture's most fundamental paradoxes: the social system that consistently subordinated women also depended upon them both for biological reproduction and often for the social reproduction of that very system (HOWARD, 2006, p. 47).

Thus, in the very moment of reencounters and revelations in the final scene, we notice that Helena's agency and transgression had, on the one hand, operated to restore a specific social system whose structures and cultural values professedly subjugate her sex and have the need to exert control over it. On the other hand, we do witness a breaching in the social and political hierarchy of *All's Well*, as a nobleman actually marries a lower-class girl. As I see it, this is one of the main problems with which this play confronts us.

However, the fact that Helena is the planner, sponsor and agent of the bed trick in *All's Well* strongly contributes to her transgressive character, as she puts in practice nothing less than a sexual harassment, deceiving the one she loves all along trusting that it is justified by her own affection. Susan Snyder affirms that Helena's condition of planner and agent, lover and contriver (1993, p. 17), is responsible for her high unpopularity among readers, audience and critics. Helena does not wait to be wooed, she plots, pays and tricks in the name of love and, *All's Well*, for sure, is a peculiar play in its gender role inversions and transgressive acts.

2.7 Is all well that ends well?

> All is well ended if this suit be won,
> That you express content
> (*All's Well*. Epilogue)

From its title onwards, the play begs the question: is all well that ends well? We should notice, because it is uncommon in Shakespearean comedy, that the title itself, or a similar variation of it, insistently appears in the playtext four times when approaching its conclusion: once, voiced by Helena at 4.4.35-36, in her end-of-scene rhyming couplet, assuring Diana that their journey to Roussillon and final encounter with Bertram and the King will come to a successful end. The second time, also declared by the main character upon hearing yet another setback, "All's well that ends well yet, / Though time seem so adverse and means unfit" (5.1.25-26). The third and fourth occurrences are delivered by the King. His words conclude the play with a promising and positive note, with hopes for a happier future that will leave all bitterness behind (5.3.332-33).

If we take the idea of soundness and physical health, it seems that all has ended well, for the King of France, at least. If we also consider the restoration and continuity of the nobility in Roussillon, it has also ended well, as the Countess's and Helena's wishes for her union to Bertram are fulfilled and they are legally wedded with a true heir on the way. But, taking into consideration the bitterness of the final marriage, we might ask: what can the future have in store for them? They have very few and unromantic encounters in the play: saying their farewells (1.1), the forced marriage (2.3), the brutal denial of a kiss (2.5), the bed trick (4.2-4.4) and a last meeting in the final scene, where Helena is "but the shadow of a wife" (5.3.307) and Bertram utters his cryptically constructed final couplet that assures us (and his wife) nothing: "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll

love her ever, ever dearly" (5.3.315-16).

The ambivalence and the irony of *All's Well That Ends Well*'s title are also in consonance with its protagonist's. Helena is invested in power, has the means to act as she will and her agency, as I attempted to show, is what drives the core of the action in this play. Although her restless disposition to have her way favours the very system that holds her as an object, she does end the play exactly where she wanted to be. There is, however, very little chance that she will live a pleasant marriage, filled with love and mutual respect, but that remains open for discussion and, overall, up to the readers' and the audience's imaginative projection into a future we do not get to witness.

As to Helena's transgression, we can say that it is never really revolutionizing and that it could not have been, actually, as the very idea of "revolution" is not familiar to this moment in history nor is Shakespeare a revolutionary. In England, the term is first used after 1642, the time of the English Civil War. There is not an actual breaching or reinvention of a socio-political order in *All's Well*, after all, the play does exist within a comic frame, so it ends up contributing and allowing for the community's perpetuation. It is worth noting that the interclass marriage in the play is quite untypical in Shakespearean drama and this is, in fact, considered a real transgression of the strict limits imposed by the early modern class system, as Susan Snyder points out (1993, p.13).

After years of being the object of negative criticism, sexist attacks, and possessing a very limited stage history, I trust that it is about time to work in favour of a different approach to *All's Well That Ends Well.* I hope this research contributes to a contemporary discussion of the play, acknowledging that it urges us to deal with a wide variety of topics that speak to the present times, as the argument concerning female agency and transgression employed here testifies.

In what follows, I move on from the discussion of a virtually unpopular play to an extremely well-known tragedy. From a play that is seldom staged, to another one that has such a wide stage history that it even bears its own superstitions. We will move on from a world in which a king is healed to another one where a king is murdered. Let us then enter the uncanny, witchy and tragic world of *Macbeth*.

3. LADY MACBETH, FEMALE AGENCY AND TRANSGRESSIONS OF GENDER PRESCRIPTIONS

3.1 Approaching the play and its female protagonist

What's done, is done.(*Macbeth*, 3.2.13)

Macbeth (1606) is frequently grouped among the four of the great tragedies Shakespeare wrote, alongside *Hamlet* (1600-1)*, Othello* (1603-4) and *King Lear* (1605- 6). *Macbeth* is a play about transgression and murder, but it is also about a world where desire runs untamed. It is a play that conjures us to reflect on issues concerning human agency, because the series of deeds and crimes committed throughout the plot allow us to reflect on the impact of human actions in the world of the play. We can interrogate, for instance, the potential of supernatural forces acting upon Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. That is, do the witches compel Macbeth to murder? Or do they bring to the fore inner thoughts that had already existed within both protagonists? Is Lady Macbeth responsible for pushing Macbeth to murder? Should she be blamed for it?

As my subject in this chapter is the female character at issue, I will discuss her trajectory in the plot, from her ostensive, and – as will eventually be perceived – immature lack of hesitation towards the regicide, to her sickened final moments in the play. It seems to me that she is a character who struggles with her own humanity from beginning to end, wrongly assuming that she could get rid of any feeling in order to fulfill her desire of a glorious future beside Macbeth as Queen of Scotland. Her immaturity, or blinding arrogance, makes her state to her horrified husband, for instance, that "Things without all remedy / Should be without regard – what's done, is done" (3.2.12-13), not realising that these are deeds that *must*, as a matter of fact, be thought after, because they can and will make one mad.

The historical source Shakespeare used to compose *Macbeth* is Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587). Precisely in relation to the character of Lady Macbeth, she is adapted and transformed from Holinshed to Shakespeare. Phyllis Rackin (2005) suggests that the reshaping was necessary to meet contemporary demands and it required notable revisions of Holinshed's descriptions of Scottish women in the 11th

century. If we read Lady Macbeth side by side with the chapter "Of the Manners of the Scots in these days, and their Comparison with the Behaviour of the Old, and Such as Lived Long Since within this Island", as Rackin suggests, we observe radical differences in terms of gender roles. In ancient Scotland, according to Raphael Holinshed,

> the women…were of no less courage than the men; for all stout maidens and wives…marched as well in the field as did the men, and so soon as the army did set forward, they slew the first living creature that they found, in whose blood they not only bathed their swords, but also tasted thereof with their mouths with no less religion and assurance conceived, than if they had already been sure of some notable and fortunate victory. When they saw their own blood run from them in fight, they waxed never a whit astonished with the matter, but rather doubling their courage with more eagerness they assailed their enemies (HOLINSHED *apud* RACKIN, 2005, p. 124).

As the chronicler shows above, Lady Macbeth's ancestors were fierce, fearless and bloodthirsty. They fought alongside the men in the battlefield and slaughtered those that came in their way. Ancient Scotswomen would drink their enemies' spilt blood and, although Shakespeare's character shows some traces of her ancestors' fury, she does not do so with the taste for blood. She is not able to kill Duncan, as he reminded her of her own father as he slept (2.2), and, even though she fantasises of dashing out a baby's brains (1.7), she *imagines* it. She uses such charged metaphorical language in her favour, but never actually does any sort of murderous actions in the play.

We can relate the production of a "Scottish play" to King James I (1603-1625), a Stuart monarch. In 1603, Shakespeare's company, formerly known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was officially announced as the King's Men, almost simultaneously with the Scottish king's accession to the English throne. *Macbeth* does attest to the monarch's personal and political beliefs, at the same time that it underscores his power: James traced his bloodline back to Banquo, Thane of Lochaber in the 11th century, when Macbeth was king. In the play, Banquo is a virtuous Thane who is killed by the treacherous Macbeth, as King Duncan is. I do not mean to imply here that Shakespeare and his company were speaking on behalf of King James or any institution other than the theatre itself, infamous and marginal as it was, even though there is critical consensus that *Macbeth* was written to please the King. Besides its function to honour James I, it is worth noting that *Macbeth* is an extremely topical play, in the sense that it spoke to its present times and contemporary issues. The Scottish setting and the themes of equivocation and witchcraft can be read as topical evidences.

King James studied witchcraft and wrote *Daemonologie* (1597), a book which contemplates the evil forces of witches, or agents of the devil. In the second chapter of his

study, particularly concerning witches, he writes that they "easily spy[es] our affections" (2008, p. 9). The idea that the evil agents have free access to our passions ties in with Shakespeare's creation of witches who are intertwined with the protagonists, creatures who can identify Macbeth's "black and deep desires" (1.4.52) and who also tend on Lady Macbeth's "mortal thoughts" (1.5.40). Shakespeare does deeply complicate the issue of agency in the play, as Emma Smith discusses in the chapter about *Macbeth* in her book *This is Shakespeare* (2019). Also concerning whether our actions are powered by ourselves or supernatural murdering ministers, Stephen Greenblatt points out that "Shakespeare achieves the remarkable effect of a nebulous infection, a bleeding of the demonic into the secular and the secular into the demonic" (1997, p. 2560). Shakespeare thus problematises the power of divine intervention and the indisputable attribution of events to demonic agency in *Macbeth*; that is, although the witches do exist, the principal tragic deeds of the play proceed from human actions. *Macbeth* portrays a world where thought is translated into action, a dangerous and unbearable society in which the hero is a tyrant who says, for example, "The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand" (4.1.162-63).

Due to its frequent posing of issues concerning salvation and damnation, especially present in the language of the protagonists, *Macbeth* offers a reading of strong moral implications concerning disorder and death should right rule be disrupted. Macbeth is split in opposite directions, torn between his own desire to do ill and the awareness of the horrible consequences he will face. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, who although momentarily shows off a seemingly frozen spirit when it comes to killing a king, is not able to actually do it and ends up suffering greatly from her guilty conscience and the horrors of the crimes Macbeth committed with her help.

In 1605, a significant historical event takes place and looms over *Macbeth*. A group of English Roman Catholics was imprisoned for conspiracy against King James – a Protestant. They rebelled against the king's refusal to extend religious tolerance. Officers of the crown found and captured Guy Fawkes in a cellar under the Parliament filled with great amounts of gunpowder, lumber and coal, beneath the place where James, his queen and son were supposed to attend in person. Fawkes was tortured and disclosed the names of other conspirators, and among them was the Jesuit Superior in England, Father Henry Garnet. He was hunted down and tried before the King's Council at the Guildhall in March 1606. The most conclusive evidence against Garner was his book, *A Treatise of Equivocation* (c. 1598), a manual on how to tell partial truths, or no truths at all, under oath without breaking one's word to God.

That is the reason why the term 'equivocation' was a familiar one for Jacobeans. It stands for a condition of language, a rhetorical strategy, which Garnet defined as the Jesuitical doctrine of mental reservation. The language of ambiguity, dissimulation and division runs freely in *Macbeth*, pervading its characters and the issues posed by the play. The theme of inversion is present in all levels of experience and we witness the portrait of a world that is in the middle of extreme crisis. Scotland is often depicted as a sick body, for instance, when Madcuff exclaims "Bleed, bleed, poor country" (4.3.32), comparing it to a reeking, oozing wound. Scotland is contaminated by treacherous Thanes, as Macdonald, Cawdor and Macbeth are, a world in which those who should be protective, kill; the one who is right to rule is murdered, and when there should be rest, there are only sleepless nights.

As Marjorie Garber suggests, equivocation could be used to describe a "mental reservation" (2004, n.p) and "an unwillingness to commit oneself either way" (2004, n.p). In *Macbeth*, the term appears in two different moments (2.3; 5.5). In the "comic relief" in act 2 scene 3, in which the Porter at Inverness wakes up drunk and supposes that he is the keeper of hell's gate. Claiming to hear an insistent knock, he says

> here's an equivocator, that could swear in both
> the scales against either scale, who committed treason
> enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to
> Heaven: O come in, equivocator (*Mac.* 2.3.8-11).

Not only does the Porter at Macbeth's castle declaratively say that equivocation is the road to hell as he welcomes the equivocator to the place he is gatekeeping, the idea of equivocation here is staged instants earlier to one of the most horrific scenes in the play, which is when Macduff discovers King Duncan's corpse, who was murdered in his sleep. The fact that *Macbeth*'s comic relief takes place right before such revelation, the moment when "Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!" (2.3), is all the more unsettling for audience and readers. We thus realise how equivocation is a fundamental concern in this play. Macbeth himself can be read as an equivocator, a martial hero who suppresses a treacherous riot and is the ally of the King, but also someone who chooses to murder this very King to take his place, remaining fully aware of the ill deed he is doing. Consequently, after the crime, Macbeth suffers every minute while he is King. The other occurrence of the term "equivocation" is voiced by the hero himself by the end of the play (5.5), realising that he has misread the prophecies of the witches, doubting "the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth" (5.5.43-44).

Overall, what contributes to my analysis here is to consider that equivocation is

essentially similar to ambivalence and to a refusal to commit oneself either way, thus, to equivocate means that by giving out misleading answers or telling untruths or partial truths, one virtually disguises their own agency, as the act of equivocating shows one's will power to *choose* to lie for their own sake under oath. Lady Macbeth acknowledges her husband's double stance, his unwillingness to commit himself to the "greatness" (1.5) he is promised. She soliloquises "that which rather thou dost fear to do, / Than wishest should be undone" (1.5.23-4). As to her own self, it seems to me that her humanity is what impedes her from wounding Duncan with her keen knife, in spite of how evil her thoughts are while in soliloquy. But she does not disclaims agency as much as Macbeth does – "If chance will have me King, why chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.144-145). I suppose that Lady Macbeth realises the extent to which her affections, as remorse and pity, as well as her sex, may prevent her from killing another person, and yet she yearns to be free from them to keep on with her ambitious plans.

However, if she yearns to strongly move herself to murder while alone on stage, Lady Macbeth is a great equivocator in front of others. When meeting Duncan for the first time (1.6), her words to him underscore her dissimulation and mark that ambiguity is the rhetorical strategy of her choice. She says "All our service, / In every point twice done, and then done double" (1.6.16-17). Since the word "double" is often related to bad events in *Macbeth* – as, for instance, Duncan is at Inverness in "double trust" (1.7.12) and the witches chant "Double, double, toil and trouble" (4.1.10) while stirring their devilish cauldron – we observe that both theatricality and dissimulation are fundamental parts of Lady Macbeth's construction, as her words here attest. The language of the play also draws connections among Macbeth, his Lady and the witches, all the while emphasising their quality of deceit and dissimulation.

The witches' rely constantly on the duplicity and malleability of language to entice their addressees. They are the first characters we meet (1.1), in an opening scene which is strikingly short. The thirteen lines exchanged by the three weird sisters surely establish the fast-paced, lean tragedy about to take place. The effectiveness of *Macbeth*'s opening scene is clear when we read the famous line "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.12), as it communicates the idea of inversions of morality, order, and health in the play. The blurring of what is fair and foul in *Macbeth* reaches its highest point in the assassination of King Duncan (2.2), who is killed by his subject and host. But the statement of inversion uttered by the witches also commands the hero and the heroine of this tragedy. Both as separate individuals and as a couple, the logic of blurred fairness and foulness is clear in Lady

Macbeth herself. Her humanity prevents her from murdering Duncan, as he reminded her of her father, "Had he not resembled /My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.13-14), even though she had strongly claimed for her unsexing and hardening of emotion. She also claims to know what the feeling of affection is like, "How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks" (1.7.55) her, and yet she violently undoes the ideal of maternal care. The inversion is also felt when it comes to gender, as Macbeth and the Lady combine and exchange traditional gender identity traits, as characteristics such as bravery, fierceness, strength, aggressiveness and boldness are expected to be found in men, whereas fear, hesitation and gentleness lie in the female side of the equation. We witness examples of those traits in both sides of the couple, as I discuss throughout this chapter.

Macbeth is also commanded by the logic of inversion chanted by the witches. He seems fair at first, a martial hero and ally of the King, whose gruesome acts on the battlefield are praised by characters such as Duncan and the captain (1.2). We also learn from Ross, in act 1 scene 3, that Macbeth kills by making "Strange images of death" (1.3.101). His foul crimes committed at war are imagined as fair and virtuous acts and the praising of violence is one consequence of the inversion between fair and foul.

We do not need to seek far and wide to find a number of critical references that define Lady Macbeth as a foul, malevolent being, the manipulative and cruel woman who subverts what constitutes femininity. The commentaries I highlight here will be further discussed below. Feminist critic Linda Bamber qualified the Lady as a "nightmare female figure" (BAMBER, 1982, p.2). Janet Adelman states that the "most horrifying expression" of what she calls maternal malevolence in *all* Shakespeare is represented in Lady Macbeth (ADELMAN, 1992, p. 134). More recently, Neil Corcoran stated that the "unsex me here" soliloquy contains "some of the most terrible lines in all Shakespeare" (CORCORAN, 2018, p. 110).

In relation to *Macbeth's* posing of issues that concern agency and responsibility, contemporary Shakespearean scholar Emma Smith points out that

> The attribution of agency in the play's opening scenes is questioned and problematized, pulled between the incompatible but simultaneous realms of the human and the supernatural. All this Shakespeare lays out before he even introduces the character that most critical history has blamed for everything that happens in the play: Lady Macbeth (SMITH, 2019, n.p.).

As exemplified above, a considerable part of the critical history has found in Lady Macbeth the character to blame for the great share, if not all, of the tragic deeds that take place in *Macbeth*. That is one of the motivations which drives the research I undertake here.

That is, to propose a different, more just distribution of responsibility concerning the female protagonist at issue. My reading aims at acknowledging both sides of the partnership of "greatness" (1.5) that binds the main characters.

As the examples I will show here testify, many contemporary references liken powerful, ambitious women to Lady Macbeth and attest to the presence the character still has in contemporary Anglo-American popular culture. The title "Lady Macbeth" is often flung at females who conciliate straightforward ambition to their careers, whether in the public or in the private sphere. Hostile comparisons to the character can be found in the media, as is the case of politicians Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), Hillary Clinton (1947-), Cherie Blair (1954-), Meghan Markle (1981-), but also the North-American socialite Kim Kardashian (1980-)[4]. The chant "Maggie Thatcher, Milk Snatcher" occurred after Thatcher ended free school milk, in 1971, making a clear allusion to Lady Macbeth's fantasy of pulling a baby's boneless gum from her nipples while she was breastfeeding. Actors Saoirse Ronan and James McArdle have said in an interview that Kim Kardashian and Kanye West inspired them in their recent theatre performance (*The Tragedy of Macbeth* at the Almeida Theatre in London, 2021), as they were the example of a modern powerful couple. Saoirse Ronan says that Kardashian and West have professionalism, but also tenderness. At least in this case, the couple is likened to both characters, as oftentimes women are described as Lady Macbeths, but their husbands (as Bill Clinton, for example), who are equally (if not more) ambitious very rarely are referred to as Macbeths, underscoring the social double-standard which applies to men and women when it comes to issues such as power and agency.

Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth is a character who decisively confronts and disrupts not only our contemporary gender expectations, but early modern gender roles as well. As I discussed in chapter 1, the notions concerning women found in Renaissance texts consider maternity as the ultimate and most fundamental function of the female sex. A woman's body was mostly thought after in terms of reproduction, nursing, and breastfeeding, and

---

[4] Sources to these comparisons with Lady Macbeth are found here:
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/21/gender.uk (Thatcher).
https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/15/hillary-clinton-press-sexism-media-interviews (Clinton).
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cherie-blair-is-the-lady-macbeth-of-british-politics-711023.html (Blair).
https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8584533/Lady-Colin-Campbell-compares-Meghan-Markle-Lady-Macbeth.html (Markle).
https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/saoirse-ronan-kim-kardashian-has-inspired-my-portrayal-of-lady-macbeth-1.4682086 (Kardashian). Last access on June 2022.

there were distinct areas of knowledge – religious, scientific, social and economic – which were deeply preoccupied with procreation and women's roles in relation to it. Early modern women, particularly those from the middle classes and aristocracy, were generally expected to look after the house and to see to their children's early education and needs, showing once more that the expectations of nursing and care were attributed to women.

Lady Macbeth's formulations concerning maternity, which I will discuss further in section 6 below, deeply transgress the expectations of tenderness and care-taking, and if taken literally, can lead her to be read as a murderous mother. This is a character that, while alone on stage, begs to have undone characteristics that make her feminine, maternal and, overall, human. Thus Lady Macbeth represents an opposing view of traditional femininity, then and now, and her transgressions of gender ideals are disruptive to such an extent as to raise quite narrow readings of her, as though the horror produced by her verbal imagery dominated her character as a whole. As to the topic of her agency, I believe that it derives mainly from the power she has within the bond she and Macbeth share in their marriage, a bond which can justly be named a *partnership*. Lady Macbeth also makes use of attributes related to the female sex – as maternity and the lactating body – to try and exert influence on the events around her. She is overall driven by self-interest, which does not mean that it is not shared with her husband. In fact their partnership is in such harmony, up to a point, that its dissolution is fatal to Lady Macbeth, as I show throughout this chapter. In what follows, I discuss her path throughout the play, foregrounding and assessing the scope of her agency as well as her rhetorical powers concerning persuasion, dissimulation, passion and ambiguity.

3.2 Gender and genre – femininity and tragedy

> O gentle lady, 'Tis
> not for you to hear what I can speak: The
> repetition in a woman's ear
> Would murder as it fell.
> (*Macbeth*, 2.3.84-87)

When it comes to Shakespeare, the tragic worlds he imagined and constructed are, most frequently, hostile places for female characters, far less hospitable than the comedies are. Lady Macduff, Lady Macbeth and the gentlewoman who attends on her at Inverness are the only three women of *Macbeth*. Under thunder and lightning, we meet the witches and

their ambiguous characterisations of gender. We may thus ask: are they male? Are they female? Perhaps neither of those? Are they human or supernatural? As Banquo puts it, they "should be women" (1.3.45), and yet they have beards. They are"so wild in their attire / That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth / and yet are on't" (1.3.40-42).

A. C. Bradley, in *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet", "Othello", "King Lear", "Macbeth"*, originally published in 1904, discusses what constitutes the substance of Shakespearean tragedy, interrogating what would be the dramatist's conception of tragedy and the tragic nature of the life that is represented in the plays he wrote. The critic states that Shakespearean tragedy will always lead up to the hero's death (and the heroine's, in case there is one). He defines tragedy as essentially an exceptional "tale of suffering and calamity conducting to the death" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 25-26) of a person of high degree and such calamities do not proceed from outward aspects, as supernatural elements (ghosts, witches) or damages caused by severe weather, they come "inevitably from the deeds of men, and the main source of these deeds is character" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 29).

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth ascend in estate throughout the play. She goes from being the Thane of Glamis's wife, to the wife of the Thane of Cawdor, to subsequently and momentarily Queen of Scotland. Lady Macbeth, however, is not referred to by any character as "queen" up to act 5, when Seyton, whose name sounds almost the same as "Satan", announces that "The Queen, my lord, is dead" (5.5.16). Malcolm, in the last speech in the play, names Lady Macbeth the "fiend-like Queen" (5.7.99), an attribution that has pervaded the readings of this character in literary criticism; yet, we should notice that when Lady Macbeth is last seen she was anything but fiend-like, mad and alone during the sleepwalking scene as she was, altogether deprived of the impressive agency she had during the first moments of the play (1.5 to 3.4).

Bradley comments on this very moment involving Lady Macbeth's somnambulism and hallucinations, stating that they represent abnormal conditions of the mind and, thus, are not "deeds in the fullest sense, deeds expressive of character", as they "are never introduced as the origin of deeds of any dramatic moment" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 30). Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking and the subsequent revelations of the foul crimes Macbeth committed – noting that the regicide had partially been done with her help – do not exert any influence on future events in the play. Lady Macbeth's initial assumption that she and Macbeth could seize the crown and live in glory afterwards proves to be impossible, as her final words attest, "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much / blood

in him" (5.1.37-38). It is noteworthy that we do not find any moral judgement concerning these characters, nor any character, in Shakespearean tragedy. As Bradley puts it, "we feel towards dispositions, actions, and persons such emotions as attraction and repulsion, pity, wonder, fear, horror, perhaps hatred, but we do not *judge*" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 46).

To Bradley, however, Macbeth is the single star of the play – a statement that has been updated and to whose discussion I hope to contribute with this text. Macbeth's tragic flaw lies precisely in the fact that he has a clear view of what is ill and what is good, and yet chooses to do ill. He murders a King that he knows has received "golden opinions" (1.7.33) from others, to whom Macbeth should be loyal and protective, not treacherous and homicidal, as he in fact decides to be. This is the tragic step the hero takes and it profoundly sickens and horrifies him to the extent that his trajectory draws a descending curve, from a brave and seemingly virtuous martial hero to one bearing complete numbness of soul, remaining beyond human emotion.

Bradley further explores multiple features of the female character at issue here and affirms that "the first half of *Macbeth* is greater than the second, and in the first half Lady Macbeth not only appears more than in the second but <u>exerts the ultimate deciding influence on the action</u>" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 322, my emphasis). He thus underscores the great scope of the character's agency and the extent to which her actions impact the world of the play. Lady Macbeth's striking inflexibility of will seems to exert total control over her imagination, feeling, and conscience at first; yet, since we witness her final moments of horror, as her guilty mind is haunted by the crimes she and her husband committed, we know that her strength of resolve and purpose *seems* to deprive her of uncertainty or moral conflict. Bradley thus states that the quality present in Lady Macbeth's character that moves our admiration is "courage or force of will" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 329), *not* imagination.

In fact, the lack of imagination in Lady Macbeth is fatal to her, as she supposes, with high doses of arrogance and immaturity, that she could go on with the project of seizing power by killing Scotland's legitimate ruler without facing the consequences. And the glory of such a wish fades fast. She shows us throughout her trajectory that her understanding of her own self is no better than the knowledge she has of her husband. She wrongly assumes that Macbeth's weaknesses and strange fits would not emerge with greater power after the crime, as her own guilt and remorse do. First, she reveals them in a brief soliloquy (3.2.5-8), then, in greater agony in the sleepwalking scene (5.1). As Bradley puts it, "she never suspects that these deeds must be thought after these ways", since she does not "in the least foresee those inward consequences which reveal themselves

immediately in her husband, and less quickly in herself" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 329).

Lady Macbeth's very first words in her second soliloquy show that, at least initially, she conceives of herself as the owner of the castle at Inverness and also accepts her part in the deed quite clearly, exclaiming "The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the *fatal entrance* of Duncan / Under *my* battlements" (1.5, my emphasis). Actually, Lady Macbeth's strict adherence to the literal facts, which Bradley calls 'literalism', does betray her in a crucial moment, which is right after the murder scene. If Macduff supposed that she would be too gentle to hear such a tale and "the repetition in a woman's ear / Would murder as it fell" (2.3.86-87), Banquo is quick in his reproof of the Lady's poor acting after the disclosure of Duncan's dead body. She says, "Woe, alas / What, in our house?" (2.3.88-89), and Banquo sharply retorts, "Too cruel anywhere" (2.3.90).

It seems clear that Bradley is quite an admirer of Lady Macbeth, as he states that "even when passion has quite died away, her will remains supreme" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 324). Even in her last moments in the play, when the guilt she thought she would be able to suppress spills out over the surface, "no word of complaint, scarcely a word of her own suffering, not a single word of her own as apart from his" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 324). Lady Macbeth's tragic and fatal flaw is the same characteristic that exhorts our admiration of her, that is, the impressive force of her will, whose "grasp upon her nature may destroy her, but it is never relaxed" (BRADLEY, 1991, p. 324). In fact I believe it *does* destroy her. It blinds her. Bradley's argument concludes stressing that Lady Macbeth may be an appalling character, but "she is sublime" (1991, p. 324).

In an inaugural book of Shakespearean feminist criticism, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (1982), Linda Bamber proposes a fairly radical idea that "the Self is masculine, then, in Shakespearean tragedy, and women are Other" (p. 9). If the power and privilege of being the Self lies with male characters, it means that they are subject to fluidity and are able to go through a trajectory in the play, one that involves transformation in character. It also means that tragic heroes are given the power to come into contact with their own selves, exercising self-perception and self-fashioning. As to the tragic women, following Linda Bamber's argument, they are left on the opposite side of the scale, the counterpart of the self being the stable Other, incapable of any sort of self-discovery or shaping its own identity, in other words, tragic women would be deprived of agency and power to fashion their own paths.

My attempt here is to read Lady Macbeth otherwise, rather acknowledging her

agency in the play, which moves important parts of the plot, as we cannot account for human agency apart from the condition of an *individual*. Linda Bamber groups Lady Macbeth among the nightmare female figures created by Shakespeare, alongside Goneril and Regan (*King Lear*, 1605-6) and Volumnia (*Coriolanus*, 1608). Bamber interrogates

> How are we to account for these terrible portraits, charged as they are with sexual antagonism? For these characters are not just women who happen to be evil; their evil is inseparable from their failure as women (BAMBER, 1982, p. 2, my emphasis).

Bamber thus implies that Shakespeare heightens women's cruelty precisely because he places their evilness where we would most likely expect to find the traditional attributions to the female sex, that is, kindness and care. Lady Macbeth's imagery of the infanticide constitutes here the evil climax of her failure as a woman, and we cannot disregard the fact that it *is* cruel and grotesque, but the character shows us yetdeeper layers. Bamber's argument outlined above also suggests that Lady Macbeth's willingness to pluck her nipple from her baby's boneless gums and to smash its skull is "gratuitous" (BAMBER, 1982, p. 2). In fact, I think her speech is absolutely necessary, as far as it serves to her own purposes. Lady Macbeth deliberately makes use of highly charged language to imprint on her husband the terrible force of her determination. After all, he had just sent her an openly seductive letter, reporting what he had heard from the witches. I return to this point in the following section.

According to Linda Bamber, "Lady Macbeth's murderous ambition is more horrible than her husband's because a woman (...) should represent nurture and human connectedness" (1982, p.3). I choose to think differently. Both of the main characters are driven on by vaulting ambition and both express quite clearly their own desires for the crown. It is not until after the murder scene that their partnership dissolves and Macbeth then starts to act alone. Above all, Lady Macbeth, until the end, keeps herselfin the realm of horrible imaginings, it is Macbeth himself who has things done, for instance, when he orders the assassination of Macduff's "pretty chickens" (4.3.220), invading his castle and having his "wife and babes / Savagely slaughtered" (4.3.205-6). As mentioned above, the tragic worlds drawn by Shakespeare prove to be more hostile to female characters than the comedies are and *Macbeth* is not different. In this play we do not witness much female protagonism in relation to the essentially male and dominant patriarchal culture. In *Macbeth*, although at first Lady Macbeth does exert deciding influence on the action, particularly from acts 1 to 3, she decisively loses the passionate courage that is able to convince Macbeth, in a moment of great enthusiasm, to murder the king. Lady Macbeth is

a female character that begins the play with a senseof great power and eventually loses it all by the end.

Except for the Nurse, who participates quite briefly in the plot, both Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff end up abandoned and dead. Deserted by their husbands, they are helpless in the warlike, political world of *Macbeth*. To a certain extent, Lady Macbeth is a character framed within a negative side of womanhood: the wife who crumbles due to the separation from her husband, a housewife whose role is, at first, so constitutive of herself that when she gradually loses her place and voice at home and in her marriage, her whole part in the play vanishes. Finally, Lady Macbeth is a mother – whether fictional or factual is irrelevant, as I discuss in section 6 below – who relies on images of infanticide to try and persuade her husband to do as he had promised he would. The interest here is not to assess the degree of female resistance to a dominant male ideology in *Macbeth*, but rather to suggest that we can read and explore Lady Macbeth's agency, particularly in relation to language, marriage and maternity, underscoring her power in the play.

3.3   Dearest partners in greatness?

> How now, my lord, why do you keep alone,Of
> sorriest fancies your companions making.
> (*Macbeth*, 3.2.9-10)

> Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
> Till thou applaud the deed.
> (*Macbeth*, 3.2.48-49)

In early modern England, the idea of partnership in marriage was emerging and gradually replacing the long term conception of the wife as her husband's servant. In chapter 1, I discussed how the Bible established marriage as a divine institution, one that is unchangeable and remains beyond human control or interference. The religious

paradigm of marriage was also closely connected to the malediction of Eve, which only reinforced women's subjection to their husbands' and, mostly, early modern females were virtually seen as heiresses of Eve. We can thus point out one of the reasons for the widespread fear of a woman's influence upon a man (that he may become more cowardly and emotional), and that fear was quite common in Shakespeare's time. Lady Macbeth herself is largely blamed for her husband's murderous intentions and downfall, which

echoes the perceptions of womanhood then. The representation of the Macbeths, as I see it, shows the problematic and sick side of a marriage in which husband and wifeare initially in symbiotic union, sharing projects and mutual desires, complementing each other seamlessly, but end up fatally apart.

Both in and out of the area of literary criticism, this partnership has received a fair amount of commentaries. For instance, we know of Harold Bloom's famous statement that "the happiest marriage in all of Shakespeare is that of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who suit one another so admirably!" (BLOOM, 1998, p.349). Richard G. Moulton credited the happiness of the marriage to Lady Macbeth's unselfish devotion to Macbeth. Actor Ian McKellen[5], who played Macbeth in Trevor Nunn's RSC 1979 production of the play, stated that after the Hotspurs in *1 Henry IV* (1596-7), the Macbeths are the most happily married couple in Shakespeare. Actress Judi Dench[6], who played Lady Macbeth opposite McKellen in the referred production, offered her impressions of the heroine. Dench emphasised Lady Macbeth's passion for her husband and the extent to which the rift between them grows wider and wider and amounts toher unbearable pain and death.

The commentaries I choose to point out here underscore the depth of the couple's partnership and it is through the word "partner" (1.5.10) that Macbeth addresses his wife, calling her "my dearest partner of greatness" in the letter he sends her after meeting the Witches. But what are the limits of such partnership? Up to what point does this couple actually share desires and projects? How can the happiest marriage in *all* Shakespeare disastrously end up apart, and overall, one side gradually abandoned by the other? Macbeth and Lady Macbeth suffer from the impossibility of being one and she is his "dearest partner of greatness" only for a limited time.

The letter Macbeth writes to his wife naming her his partner opens the fifth scene of act 1 and that is how we meet Lady Macbeth for the first time. Alone on stage, she voices his words while reading the great news that he had been given the title of Thane of Cawdor and had been hailed future King. She is alone in most parts of this scene and even when Macbeth enters the stage (1.5.54), Lady Macbeth still dominates the whole action that unfolds throughout it. To carry on my reading of the character, proposing a fair distribution of responsibility and blame and foregrounding the scope of her agency in the play, I believe it is important to highlight how seductive this letter isto Lady Macbeth.

---

[5] As Sandra Clark (2015) points out, McKellen made this comment in a Q&A session after his show *Acting Shakespeare* (Playhouse Theatre, London, 1987).
[6] https://www.wgbh.org/arts-culture/2020/10/28/judi-denchs-best-roles-from-lady-macbeth-to-james-bonds-boss. Last access: July 2022.

Her husband tells her, referring to the crown: "This have I thought good to deliver thee (…) that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing by being / ignorant of <u>what greatness is promised thee</u>" (1.5-9-12, my emphasis). However, we must notice that the "greatness" extended to Lady Macbeth is promised by her husband alone; after all, we know that she is not mentioned directly by the witches in their prophecy. The following words uttered by the characters attest to how intertwined Macbeth, his Lady and the witches are, and we cannot fail to notice how Macbeth's words move his wife to action as much as her words and the witches' do to him. Concerning the close connection of the couple to the witches, we read Macbeth's first words in the play echoing those of the weird sisters, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.38). Lady Macbeth herself greets her husband quite similarly to the way the witches had hailed him on the blasted heath, saying "Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor, / Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter" (1.5.53-54).

As a matter of highlighting points to support the distribution of responsibility between the couple, we should observe that Macbeth expresses his desire to become king quite clearly. Referring to his meeting with the witches, he states that he "stood rapt in the wonder / of it" (1.5.5-6) and in fact "burned in desire / to question them further" (1.5.3-4). Banquo, too, twice notices that Macbeth is rapt. First, it happens right after the witches had hailed Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and King that shall be (1.3.57). The second time takes place after Ross and Angus had actually greeted Macbeth with the title of Thane of Cawdor – ironically fulfilling the first of the prophecies – and thus dressing him in the robes of a traitor. Banquo exclaims "Look how our partner's rapt" (1.3.144), as Macbeth speaks an aside (1.3.131-143). This speech conveys his mental anguish while he contemplates for the first time the idea of "murder" (1.3.140). As much as Lady Macbeth did try to rhetorically push Macbeth to

action and in fact is able to convince him in a moment of great enthusiasm, surely the catastrophe that Duncan's murder represents in the play proceeded from Macbeth's own desire.

After reading the referred letter, Lady Macbeth promptly, with single-minded energy and attempting to be filled with direst cruelty, thinks of the steps she will have to take to become Queen and rejoice in lifelong glory beside her husband wearing the crown. I believe that the Macbeths' partnership allows us to collect evidences of the Lady's particularities, as, for instance, her naïve and blinding arrogance. The fact that she is too credulous that there would be such a thing as a clean regicide, a simple murder that

would allow them to live happily after the deed shows signs of immaturity in her. It also shows that she really was "transported" by Macbeth's words beyond "the ignorant present" to feel "The future in the instant" (1.5.55-57). She is a character that also believes, for instance, in the power and the possibility of faking appearances. When she urges her husband to "look like th'innocent flower / But be the serpent under't" (1.5.64-65), she assumes that there might be a world where one can keep a false face and not pay a price. In *Macbeth* the price is generally paid with one's life. After the murder, Lady Macbeth's immaturity and arrogance reveal themselves once again. She tells her horrified husband, who cannot picture washing off Duncan's blood clean from his own hands, that "A little water clears us of this deed. / How easy is it then!" (2.2.66- 67).

Sigmund Freud's study "Some Character-Types met with in Psychoanalytic work", first published in 1916, offers a useful reading of the partnership at issue here. Freud conceives of both characters as though they were one subject split in two. According to this perspective, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth would operate as the two parts of a coin, completing each other. The emotions which break out in Macbeth after the murder develop further in her, not in him. It is Macbeth who hears a voice cry "Sleep no more; / Macbeth does murder sleep, the innocent sleep" (2.2.35-36), but it is she who agonizes with somnambulism and, at the end, hallucinates with the sight and smell of blood in her hands, which Macbeth then assumed it was impossible to clean and now it is she who does. Freud's analysis contributes to reading the sick side of the romantic partnership Shakespeare represents in *Macbeth*. That is, the illness that pervades this play is also found in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's marriage, commanded as they are by the inversion expressed in "fair is foul and foul is fair". Their immense love for one another, frequently noted by critics, actors, readers and viewers, might

represent the good side of a companionship, but in the play, that love dissolves and what seemed fair is shortly made foul.

Their partnership also challenges gender norms. At times Lady Macbeth plays what would be considered "a man's part", as she is full of bravery and boldness, willing to sacrifice her humanity for her murderous intentions. Yet, Lady Macbeth lives in a men's world, where violence and bloodshed are highly praised and, as much as she tries, she does not succeed in having a place there. She engages in sexual taunting with her husband, challenging not only his love, which at some point we may believe that that is really why he decided to murder Duncan, but his masculinity. After Macbeth announces that he would

take a step back and that they "will proceed no further in this business" (1.7.31), the particular love that binds both of them reappears once again. Lady Macbeth, outraged that her husband had broken "this enterprise" to her and was now threatening to give up on that, says "From this time, / Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valour / As thou are in desire? ... When you durst do it, then you were a man" (1.7.38-49).

Considering Lady Macbeth's words of affection, thinking that they are mainly directed to her husband, the term "love" is only twice on her lips. First, to challenge Macbeth's manhood as shown in the quote above, demanding that he murder the king almost as an act of love or even as a proof of commitment to their partnership. The second time Lady Macbeth says "love" she claims to know very deeply the feeling of maternal love, as she once loved the babe that milked her. But we know the violent image that follows this affirmation, as her fantasies convey the thoughts of killing that very suckling child.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's referred dialogue takes places right before the murder scene and, up to this moment in the play, both characters seem to be in perfect tune, in mutual need of one another. Macbeth exposes how deep he requires the undaunted mettle that he assumes to constitute his wife's disposition. They are allies, or partners in crime, and Lady Macbeth does agree to be Macbeth's accomplice without any hesitation, as she receives his news and accepts them without questioning, as though she already knew them. But, once Macbeth murders Duncan, he initiates his irreversible process of separation – of Lady Macbeth and of human kind as a whole. He drifts apart and abandons his partner more and more, leaving her ignorant of what is to come, as, for instance, his plans of murdering Banquo (3.2). The banquet scene (3.4) still shows Lady Macbeth's attempt to be in control of events. As she faces her husband's overwhelming horror in the presence of others and tries to calm him down as she can, again investing in personal appeals and on threats to his manhood, she addresses and dismisses all the lords attending the feast. In this moment, she still has self-control in spite of the public chaos that constitutes their first appearance as king andqueen, but she gradually and decisively disappears afterwards.

I suppose, in many ways, that the dissolution of the partnership represents much of what Lady Macbeth dies of, as the power she has within the bond with Macbeth is lost as well. She gradually loses her place and agency in the all-male community of war and politics in the play, she loses her power in the household after the banquet, and she has nothing left to live for. My point here is to read Lady Macbeth's agency in the scopeof the

play, and what follows her reading of the letter is an extensive and complex moment in soliloquy, which grants us the possibility of assessing the representation of the character's self, actions and wishes.

3.4 "That I may pour my spirits in thine ear": Female transgression and language

> What beast was't then
> That made you break this enterprise to me? When
> you durst do it, then you were a man; And to be
> more than what you were, you would
> Be so much more than man.
> (*Mac*. 1.7.47-51)

> My hands are of your colour, but I shame
> To wear a heart so white.
> (*Mac*. 2.2.52)

Lady Macbeth is a character that makes use of her verbal skills to conceive a place for herself in a world commanded by codes of manliness and by the logic of a masculine warrior culture. She also uses domineering rhetoric to engage with her husband and manipulate him to get her where she wants to be. She uses the power of her language to her own benefit and to pursue what she most desires, particularly when she is alone or in the company of Macbeth. That is, Lady Macbeth knows how and when to hold her tongue. I refer here to her artful fainting after Macduff discovers Duncan's corpse, in act 2 scene 3. If her sudden loss of consciousness is interpreted by characters as genuine and, above all, feminine, she was partially successful, capable of

using the resources she has at hand, especially to try to shield herself and Macbeth from any connection to the murder of Duncan. She asks the men onstage to "Help me hence, ho!", to which both Banquo and Macduff answer "Look to the lady" (2.3.121). Macbeth himself does not assist her at any point here and we can read it as an indicator of his drifting apart from her. Right after the murder scene we also witness signs of their partnership dissolving. Macbeth is too horrified by his deed to take back the daggers to Duncan's chamber and exclaims "I'll go no more: / I am afraid to think what I have done; / Look on't again, I dare not" (2.2.49-51). Lady Macbeth then rebukes her husband's lack of courage – "Infirm of purpose" (2.2.52) –, her naive arrogance once again not leaving any margin to doubt or reflect on their fatal transgression. She says to him, "My hands are of your colour, but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (2.2.63-4).

Although speaking in soliloquy, Lady Macbeth addresses her husband constantly, as if he existed for her even when he is not there. After reading his letter, she is transported beyond the present to the golden future she imagines for them, and she exclaims

LADY MACBETH
Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature, It is
too full o'th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great, Art
not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou'dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, 'Thus thou must do', if thou have it; And
that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valour of my tongue All
that impedes thee from the golden round, Which
fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal. (*Mac*. 1.5.15-30)

This soliloquy is our first indication of Lady Macbeth's restless desire to pursue power and her unchecked will to the "golden round". Her disposition, up to this point, in which she has read Macbeth's letter but has not yet received the news of Duncan's future arrival at Inverness, is radically distant from any ethical or moral considerations. This speech locates Lady Macbeth's agency in the "valour" of her "tongue", that is, her power in relation to her husband is to "pour her spirits" in his ear, and move him to action, "To catch the nearest way" to the throne. She believes that ambition should be tended with "illness" and complains that Macbeth "wouldst not play false" to obtain

what he deeply desires. Here, Lady Macbeth acknowledges her husband's often disclaiming of personal agency – "that which rather thou dost fear to do, / Than wishest should be undone" – and that is where she conceives a place for her, as she counterbalances his seemingly lack of initiative with inflexible will and supposes that her powerful speech will be able to push him towards the murder.

Stephen Greenblatt suggests that "Lady Macbeth in effect works to liberate that will to power in her husband, freeing him from his 'sickly' fears of damnation so that he can act with a ruthless blend of murderous violence and cunning" (1997, p. 2558), thus underscoring the power of Lady Macbeth's language to unleash a transgressive mode in her husband. In Elizabethan-Jacobean patriarchal culture, men were mostly considered valorous and rational, whereas women were frequently conceived as garrulous, tell-tales and ungoverned by reason, which arose a great deal of fear and anxiety directed towards

feminine speech. Lady Macbeth actually convinces Macbeth not by being garrulous or deprived of reason, but by using the logic of manhood and masculinity to persuade Macbeth, by calling him a coward. She, in fact, has the rhetorical power to encourage and manipulate her husband.

While meditating on Macbeth's supposedly strong moral values, Lady Macbeth says he is "too full o'th'milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way", which she assumes constitutes his good and tender nature. To her, "ambition", "illness", "highly" and "play false" are terms of praise, whereas the "milk of human kindness" and "holily"are terms of blame. I believe that here she is already in gradual contemplation about how she will be able to manipulate and influence Macbeth to push him forward to action, instead of purely complaining of his seemingly fair inclinations. It shows her planning ahead and considering her power to act. The "spirits" she wants to pour in his ear, sightless substances, can mean her language, but also can be the same "spirits" she invokes in the second part of the soliloquy, which I discuss next. As virtually every part of Lady Macbeth's soliloquy culminates on effects over her body ("unsex me here", "make thick my blood", as we will see further), it seems to me that the metaphorical language of pouring her spirits into Macbeth's ear gains a new meaning if we consider the power of her rhetoric, which is able to literally move him to action, as though her words acquire a physical power over him.

By acknowledging what she deems Macbeth's weaknesses and also the role she has in their partnership, Lady Macbeth conceives a place for herself in the play. She knows she incites admiration from her husband and thus positions herself without a
trace of hesitation or conflict to counterbalance his weaknesses. As she accepts her part in the deed – Duncan's "fatal entrance" under her battlements –, to Lady Macbeth there seems to be no real separation between desire and deed, which costs her an invaluable price.

3.5   "Unsex me here": Lady Macbeth, self and body

> By the pricking of my thumbs,
> Something wicked this way comes.
> (*Macbeth*, 4.1.59-60)

Lady Macbeth says the second part of her soliloquy after the brief entrance of the Messenger, who informs her that "The king comes here tonight" (1.5.29). Her immediate response – "Thou'rt mad to say it" (1.5.30) – sounds as a startled reaction, as if suggesting

that the Messenger's interruption of her speech alone onstage echoed her treacherous thoughts, or that the news of Duncan's arrival was another indication of the "fate and metaphysical aid" that she had mentioned instants earlier.

My interest here is to read Lady Macbeth's soliloquy foregrounding the inward processes she attempts to carry out, bearing in mind that her trajectory reveals both instances of construction (fashioning) and deconstruction of her selfhood. After reading Macbeth's letter and hearing the news of Duncan's arrival, Lady Macbeth is powered by seduction, agency and desire and speaks her soliloquy. It is as though she says a wicked prayer to the evil spirits that she supposes will shield her for murdering the king. By herself onstage, we hear Lady Macbeth beg

LADY MACBETH
Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, And
fill me from the crown to the toe, top-fullOf direst
cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever, in your sightless substances,
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,And
pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,Nor
heaven peep through the blanket of the darkTo cry,
'Hold, hold'. (*Mac.;* 1.5.38-54)

The vivid imagery in this soliloquy is focused on the character's body and the words she utters pervade her femininity, her blood and breasts, culminating in her wishing away her own humanity. We notice her lines indicate that she prays for herself, as she uses object pronouns such as "me" and "my" throughout the speech, and that means she turns the action to herself, her body and her future moves. She voices her desires by means of an anti-prayer, which is underscored by her calling of "you spirits / That then on mortal thoughts" and "murdering ministers". The words "remorse" and "compunctious visitings of nature" seem to signal the character's inner conflict, adivision between her wishes and that which she is frightened of becoming, should shego on with the murder of Duncan. That is why we can see the influence of the morality plays in this soliloquy, as this medieval form of theatre can be described as a *psychomachia*, or the representation of a conflict that takes place in an individual's soul.The plot of morality plays' was the *psychomachia* itself as it

dealt with allegorical characters struggling over the control of a man's soul. In Lady Macbeth's soliloquy we read an internal conflict taking place in her mind alone and not dramatised by different characters.

When Lady Macbeth invokes the "thick night" to cover itself in the "smoke of hell" so that heaven doesn't "peep through the blanket of the dark" to stop her from shoving a knife through Duncan's body, she gives us further signs that her anti-prayer soliloquy not only conjures supernatural spirits, but also deals with her own humanity, mainly her sense of guilt, which emerges with great strength in the sleepwalking scene. It is worth noting that while the character is claiming her power to act and wishing that remorse and pity do not "Shake" her "fell purpose", she never actually abandons her human emotions to do it, however deeply she wants it. The line "That my keen knife see not the wound it makes" shows the desire of having her own body blind while bearing the deadly weapon carving Duncan's body. We can read it as yet another evidence of Lady Macbeth's internal division, as the character gradually turns into something which she herself is frightened of. This speech echoes Macbeth's "Stars hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires, / The eye wink at the hand – yet let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see" (1.4.51-54, my emphasis.), in the sense that both speeches express clarity when it comes to the characters' desires and they also show a division between conscience and desire, body and wish.

There are no new-born babes or heaven's cherubim in Lady Macbeth's speech, as her soliloquy serves to shield herself in order to be able to take action and here is an

important point through which we may assess her agency in the play. Marjorie Garber suggests that in the opening scenes what we read in Lady Macbeth is rigidity, resolution, the very opposite of frailty and "the rejection of a restricted notion of a woman's place". That is why "Lady Macbeth is the strongest character in the play" (2004, n.p). When she commands the spirits to "unsex" her, I suppose we can read her attempt to cast away her own humanity and this point pervades her speech from beginning to end: "unsex me here", "Make thick my blood", "Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall". In other words, Lady Macbeth assumes that her strength to kill may come not only from suppressing what makes her specifically female, as "unsexing" and "thickening of the blood" refer to features common to every living human. She seems to believe, according to her soliloquy, in undoing almost all that governs human experience.

When Lady Macbeth supplicates to the "murdering ministers" to "take my milk for

gall", she shows to be willing to give up on her female and maternal body so that she is taken over by diabolic agency. In her asking to be gall-filled, Phyllis Rackin suggests that the character implies her desire for a diabolical trade, "in which she will exchange those benevolent feelings for the poisonous bitterness that will enable her to murder Duncan" (RACKIN, 2005, p.123). In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, both lactation and killing were associated, as the fierce Scotswomen nursed their own children according to the belief that strong mothers generated strong offspring. In early modern England, however, breastfeeding was quite rare among women in higher classes and the use of wet nurses was widespread, and a woman of Lady Macbeth's social status would probably not have given suck to her own baby, even though Shakespeare's character claims she has done it and the elements in this soliloquy resonate, all the while transgressing, contemporary beliefs.

This speech also contributes to the atmosphere of darkness that hovers through the play, as Lady Macbeth invokes the "thick night" to come and cover itself in "the dunnest smoke of hell". By the end of the play, the character was not only incapable of disguising herself in the "blanket of the dark", as she, in fact, deeply feared darkness and held a candle by her side continually. Her wicked prayer, or her anti-prayer soliloquy, does not enable her to kill as she had wished and it is her own humanity that dominates her actions. As the sleeping Duncan resembled her own father, she could not murder him. In the aftermath of the murder (2.2), Macbeth thinks "brain-sickly of things" and is too horrified to go back to the crime scene and leave the daggers he used

there, as he should have done to incriminate the officers. Lady Macbeth, showing that she still has power to act, collects the bloody weapons and reprimand's her husband

> Infirm of purpose;
> Give me the daggers; the sleeping, and the dead, Are
> but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood That fears a
> painted devil. If he do bleed,
> I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
> For it must seem their guilt (*Mac.* 2.2.52-57).

She commands the action here and, as a perverse housewife, arranges the scene of the crime to fit their needs. Returning to meet with Macbeth, she rebukes him once again for weakness and cowardice. As we know, the Lady's future actions reveal more of her humanity and fear, quite the opposite of the ostensive, and, I would say, false freezing of emotions she displays in these initial moments (1.5; 1.7; 2.2). In her attempt to transform herself in someone who is capable of killing, verbalised through her "unsex he here" speech, we observe that her future moves do not grant her the quality of a killer. Lady Macbeth never commits any sort of cold-blooded murder, no matter how strongly she begs

for or threatens to do it. In what follows, I explore the issues concerning the representation of maternity in the protagonist; bearing in mind that her "unsex me here" soliloquy anticipates important points of her conceptions of femininity as well as motherhood.

3.6 "He has no children": Maternity and the barren world of *Macbeth*

> Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, And
> put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
> Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,
> No son of mine succeeding.
> (*Macbeth*, 3.1.60-63)

> He has killed me, mother.
> (*Macbeth*, 4.2.86)

Maternity is an issue that pervades the representation of Lady Macbeth's character. Her assertion that she has "given suck" (1.7.54) has been extensively discussed by critics, especially questioning whether she has had children or not. Nicholas Brooke (2008), in his introductory study to *Macbeth*, mentions Dover Wilson's comment on Lady Macbeth's supposed motherhood: "Whether this be true or not does not appear; but the lady says it, and she must say it, in order to give emphasis

to her speech" (WILSON *apud* BROOKE, 2008, p. 14). The famous essay "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" (1933) by L. C. Knights poses a question that we are not able to answer, and never will, as the playtext does not provide us with any conclusive evidence concerning the veracity of her maternity. And yet, the character's intimate evocation of breastfeeding, lactation and nursing allows us to wonder about the extent of her knowledge of it and, thus, it could indicate that, yes, she has had children. The fact that Macbeth does not question her, saying, for instance, "When was it that you've ever given suck?", can also make us wonder that there is a possibility that she might have done it.

Whether Lady Macbeth had *really* had children or not is not relevant to my discussion of the character, as it is inescapably through maternity – factual or fictional –that she conceives herself and defines, in her own terms, what it is to be a woman. Her requests in soliloquy to be unsexed, blood-thickened and gall-filled all point to her belief that the power to act may come from the total absence of sex and gender, but they also indicate that her murderous intentions demand of her a complete transgression, or rupture even, with

gender prescriptions. That is, her attacks on reproductive operations and bodily passages also represent an attack on maternity and maternal purpose, that of breeding (by means of sexual intercourse) and nurturing (by means of lactation).

For these reasons I believe that we can add to Janet Adelman's (1992) discussion of maternal malevolence in *Macbeth*. To the critic, "maternal malevolence is given its most horrifying expression in Shakespeare in the image through which Lady Macbeth secures her control over Macbeth" (ADELMAN, 1992, p. 134). The image here refers to the dashing out of the child's brains (1.7), and, as I suggested above, Lady Macbeth dissimulates and tries hard to rhetorically work her way through her husband's less single-minded disposition. She, once again, makes use of her rhetorical powers to move her husband to action, and not by sexual taunting alone. Furthermore, I do suppose that this speech of hers, visceral and violent as it is, cannot *secure* control over Macbeth. Stephen Greenblatt's argument supports this point of view, as Lady Macbeth's words at issue

> cannot by themselves account for Macbeth's decision. He counters his wife's sexual terrorism with a clear sense of the proper boundaries of his identity as a male and as a human being: "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7). As for Lady Macbeth's fantasy of murdering her infant, it might have served rather to deter Macbeth from his unnatural crime than to spur him toward it. Virtually everyone is subject to terrible dreams and lawless fantasies (…) but not everyone gives way to them in waking reality. Macbeth, who is fully aware that "wicked dreams abuse / The
>
> curtained seep" (2.1), nonetheless crosses the fatal line from criminal desire to criminal act (GREENBLATT, 1997, p. 2558, my emphasis).

Macbeth signals the importance of maternity to their bond, as he exclaims in the moment he has yielded to the regicide, "Bring forth men-children only" (1.7). This line also represents a way of rewarding Lady Macbeth with a reference to her ability to procreate. Lady Macbeth uses language to pursue her desires, to persuade Macbeth, to fake appearances in front of her guests, and ultimately to try and keep control of the events around her. But if she is powerful and has agency at the beginning, her trajectory shows hopelessness and abandonment, a total loss of place and power at the end.

As I see it, the power of the imagery Lady Macbeth uses does make the "babe that milks" her (1.7.55) strikingly vivid. Her fantasies of infanticide resonate in other speeches in the play that also talk about babes in grotesque contexts. For instance, the Third Witch's "Finger of birth-strangled babe" (4.1), which she adds to the demonic cauldron, Macbeth's future references to infants, which take a sick and horrific turn from pity as a naked new-born babe, to when he promises to "give to the edge o'the sword / His wife, his babes" (4.1), planning to slaughter Macduff's family.

In *Macbeth*, two mothers are killed, one that might have had children or if she had not, she behaves as though she did. The other is brutally murdered together with her kids, whose deaths were commanded by the same character who once envisaged pity as a naked new-born babe. Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are fundamental female characters, who, nonetheless, have less and less room in the bloody community of the play, which gradually eliminates the presence of women and is finally ruled by Malcolm, who is "yet / Unknown to woman" (4.3.125-126). Macbeth's final moments also reveal an impossible fantasy of a world emptied of female presence, as he cruises the battlefield taking the witches' equivocal language literally, trusting that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.194-95; 5.7.42-43). The paradox in Macbeth's assumption is resolved when Macduff reveals that he was "Untimely ripped" (5.7.46), meaning he was prematurely removed from his mother's womb by surgery and stressing the impossibility of someone not born of a woman's body.

In *Macbeth*, characters who represent nurture and care are killed, as Duncan, Banquo and Lady Macduff. In act 3 scene 6, there is also a reference to King Edward of England, Edward the Confessor, who ruled from 1042 to 1066, and was regarded as a healer. He contrasts with the images of a diseased Scotland present in *Macbeth*. For instance, when Macduff compares his country to a sick body, exclaiming

> O nation miserable!
> With an untitled tyrant, bloody-sceptered,
> When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again? (*Mac.* 4.3.104-106)

Or when Malcom, in the same scene, responds to Macduff's famous cry, "Bleed, bleed, poor country", saying

> I think our country sinks beneath the yoke; It
> weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gashIs
> added to her wounds (*Mac.* 4.3.39-41).

King Duncan speaks a language of fertility, as he welcomes Macbeth by saying "I have begun to plant thee and will labour / To make thee full of growing" (1.4.29-30), and, in sequence, "My plenteous joys, / Wanton in fullness, seek to hide themselves / In drops of sorrow" (1.4.34-36). Here we may grasp a different notion of maternity, as these lines bear in them a wish to invest, harvest and grow the Scottish community, revealing a notion of care more akin to the one related to femininity, kindness and nurturing, all of which Lady Macbeth seems to deconstruct. However, the same character who cherishes an ideal of

community based on nourishment and healthy growth will be baffled and state that "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face" (1.2), once he is betrayed. Duncan will, yet again, not be able to read Macbeth's mind's construction and hand over the title of a traitor to another.

Macbeth first encounters the witches upon a heath (1.3), a barren place or a wasteland that breeds delusion and disturbs the natural world. After the witches vanish, "As breath into the wind" (1.3.82) says Macbeth, Banquo notices the feverish ground, "The earth hath bubbles, as the water has" (1.3.79). Jan Kott mentions that "In the world of *Macbeth* there is no margin left for love, or friendship; not even for desire. Or rather, lust, too, has been poisoned with the thought of murder" (KOTT, 1966, p. 89). Kott illuminates the idea of desolation, death and violence present throughout the play and he understands *Macbeth* as a nightmare, a terribly long, endless night of wicked dreams.

3.7   **"What's done cannot be undone"**

> Nought's had, all's spent,
> Where our desire is got without content: 'Tis
> safer to be that which we destroy Than by
> destruction dwell in doubtful joy.
> (*Macbeth*. 3.2.5-8)

From the outset, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's marriage is a harmonious partnership, that at first seems to represent companionship, togetherness and complicity, but ends up fatally for both parts. They publicly appear to the Scottish nobility crowned as queen and king for the first time, in act 3 scene 4, while hosting a big feast, and the sequence of events is disastrous. Macbeth meets the First Murderer, who had been assigned to kill Banquo and gives him the news that Fleance had fled, which breeds a great deal of fear in Macbeth. His wife, partially aware of the state of events, addresses him in domestic terms, saying that he does "not give the cheer" and that "the sauce to meat is ceremony; Meeting were bare without it" (3.4.34-37).

As Macbeth drowns deeper and deeper in terror, hallucinating with Banquo's ghost, which Ross notices and says "Gentlemen, rise, his highness is not well" (3.4.52), thus stressing that Macbeth's madness is publicly shown, Lady Macbeth addresses all the lords in the room. She tries to assure them that the king had often had such fits, since his youth. She asks "Pray you keep seat" and warns them that "If much you note him / You

shall offend him and extend his passion" (3.4.54-57). Aside to Macbeth, her tone shifts from the female in charge of domestic affairs to taunting wife, "Are you a man?" (3.4.58-59) she asks him, telling him off. If Lady Macbeth had demanded that Macbeth killed as a confirmation of his manhood (1.7), at the banquet scene her rhetoric intensifies, stating that his "flaws and starts…would well become / A woman's story at a winter's fire, / Authorized by her grandam" (3.4.63-66). She feels shame for both of them, but it is hopeless, as from this point on Lady Macbeth will become more and more deprived of agency and her attempts to deal with her husband's folly will be useless, separate from one another as they gradually become.

When she addresses the absent Macbeth while sleepwalking, saying in vain "what's done cannot be undone" (5.1.64), her condition already states "A great perturbation in nature" (5.1.9), according to the Doctor. In this scene, real and unreal mingle dangerously inside Lady Macbeth. We can state, echoing A. C. Bradley, that the sleepwalking itself is a disturbed condition of the mind, which brings to the fore Lady Macbeth's guilt. What she had wished to freeze and cast away in soliloquy emerges now with great force. If she has "at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching" (5.1.10), sleepwalking is a paradoxical state at its highest, and only what is unreal becomes her reality. At this moment, to Lady Macbeth, nothing is, but what is not.

The Lady, at a state of total abandonment and helplessness, carries a burning candle "by her / continually; 'tis her command" (5.1.21-22), and although her eyes are open, her senses are shut. She obsessively rubs her hands in an attempt to wash off the imaginary blood she sees and smells that yet is not there. Evidently her actions here echo those that took place after the murder of Duncan, when she tried to tell the disturbed Macbeth, revealing to us her sheer immaturity and arrogance, that "A little water" would cleanse his hands. In the aftermath of the assassination, Macbeth utters in soliloquy what I believe to be one of the play's most vivid images. He says, horrified by the sight of his bloody hands, deeply frightened by the confrontation of his own deed and, overall, by the confrontation of the very stuff he is made of

> **MACBETH**
> What hands are here? Ha, they pluck out mine eyes. Will
> all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean form
> my hand? No, this my hand will rather The
> multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green, one red (*Mac.* 2.2.58-62).

Shakespeare's use of two terms originating from Latin, "multitudinous" and

"incarnadine", convey the climax of Macbeth's speech. It sounds to me extravagant, as though the verbal imagery can in fact reach our imagination and cast us into the immense red, bloody sea that Macbeth envisions. The boundless sea made of the colour of blood and the impossibility of washing it off of murderers' hands thus return to haunt Lady Macbeth, the one who was supposed to be frozen, numb in morality, remorse and guilt. She is the one who succumbs most dreadfully. If Macbeth has, at last, torn "to pieces that great bond / Which keeps" him "pale" (3.2.52-53), that is, weak, feeble and human; Lady Macbeth experiences humanity inside out and a growing horror takes over her completely in the sleepwalking scene.

"Yet here's a spot" (5.1.31) she exclaims, rubbing her hands for several minutes. Lady Macbeth goes on to recall earlier conversations she had had with Macbeth, questioning then and now his fear. Her long lost undaunted mettle (or unreal altogether?), that was able to make her say to him, bravely, "But screw your courage to the sticking place, / And we'll not fail" (1.7.61-62), vanishes away. Nevertheless, the Lady faces the fact that there are no clean murders and there is a high price to be paid, as she appears now as a ghost, spreading information and spilling the beans, revealing Macbeth's crimes. If, up to now, no one could have been said to actually *know* and give any proof of Macbeth's crimes, it is in this moment that she speaks what she should not.

Yet her revelations do not reach others apart from the Doctor and the Nurse and cannot be said to influence Macbeth's downfall, severed as they are as a couple. The Lady thinks on Macduff's wife and asks, "Where is she now?" (5.1.40). The play once again occurs on the border of remorse and reality, uncannily blurring boundaries. The dead who could walk from their graves, reappear now, "I tell you yet again Banquo's / burried; he cannot come out on's grave" (5.1.60). When she says "Go, get some water / And wash this filthy witness from your hand" (2.2.47-48), her imagery may perhaps be signalling a hint of her initial horror at the sorry sight of Macbeth's bloody hands. At the end, she says to herself, "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (5.1.41).

It is through her marriage and maternity that Lady Macbeth most conceives of herself, as they are the two defining points in this character and thanks to them she exerts great part of her agency, especially in relation to persuasion, manipulation and power. Her rhetoric grants her the power to dissimulate in front of others, and it is particularly through language that she is able to move about the world of *Macbeth*. Her soliloquy and private moments with Macbeth allow us to read how her agency works in the play, but it is necessary to acknowledge that she loses her powerful place as the play moves towards the

end.

Lady Macbeth is the "fiend-like Queen" in the eyes of Malcolm and, in an absolutely grotesque final moment, the heroic Macduff offers Macbeth's head to the new Scottish ruler, who promptly notes the decapitation of "this dead butcher" (5.7.99). Once again we perceive the resonation of "fair is foul, and foul is fair" in this moment. Macduff himself bearing a human head in his hands is *not* the butcher we would visibly notice, but a triumphal martial hero, whereas the beheaded Macbeth is the dead slayer, and the new Scottish world seems full of future promises of restoration. As to the sleepwalking scene, the Lady's final moments are anything but fiend-like, and her words while she is mad and alone symbolise the idea represented in "What's done cannot be undone". The dissolution of the partnership accounts for a great deal of the Lady's tragedy, as she is wrecked by abandonment, separation and displacement, both in the private and in the public sphere. Lady Macbeth's commanding force of agency in the first half of the play, which revealed her power to act driven by self-interest, ends up drained. This self-interest was always shared with Macbeth and when their alliance, in perfect tune as it remained up to a point, dissolves, the Lady gradually succumbs. The final effect of the separation is destructive and fatal; however, her force of will, power

and rhetorical strength are imprinted in the play and in the mind of readers and audience, from the very first moment she enters the stage.

CONCLUSION

In early modern England, women were generally excluded from formal education, as they were not admitted in schools or universities where rhetorical training was provided. Yet, the two Shakespearean female characters discussed here, Helena, form *All's Well*, and Lady Macbeth, from *Macbeth*, surely among others, suggest that belonging to a rhetorical culture certainly affected women, as it is mostly through language that these characters exert their power, constantly showing indispensable awareness of the other whom they address. Helena's and Lady Macbeth's vocal and rhetorical strength added to their agency set them apart from early modern gender models that prescribed women's silence and submission to men and that is why both of them challenge important ideals concerning the female sex at the time. The inversion in gender roles as well as the construction of selfhood are points which bring both Helena and Lady Macbeth together.

My interest in this work was to read Shakespeare's treatment of these two characters and examine how he dealt with the widespread gender norms of his time in *All's Well* and in *Macbeth*. I was also keen on studying female characters, knowing that only near the end of the twentieth century did they become more serious objects of literary criticism. Besides, my goal was to explore the representation of subjectivities in both plays and to read how Helena and Lady Macbeth experience the construction of their selfhood. My research involved gaining insight into the cultural time in which Shakespeare wrote his plays, bearing in mind that it was a period decisively pervaded by the marks of a rhetorical culture. I also endeavoured to acquire an understanding of the history of sixteenth and seventeenth-century English women to close read these two female characters that Shakespeare imagined, considering that their treatment in both plays contrasts with some of their contemporary gender attributions.

Concerning Helena, the confrontation of gender norms is widely felt in the play. In her first soliloquy, she gazes at her love, Bertram, and virtually objectifies him, thus, momentarily, adding a twist to the tradition of poetry writing. That is, women were in general placed as sources of inspiration, *not* in the place of the subject-writer, who uses the pen to create and express one's love. By appropriating the male gaze to herself, Helena shakes, even if for a moment, the gendered relations between muse and author, object and subject. This character also plots and pays for a substitution in bed to fulfill, at last, her wish of marrying the man she wants. The fact that she is the very agent and sponsor of her

first sexual intercourse surely transgresses the social code of female compliance, which commanded women to be chaste and stated that virginity was their most precious jewel. As to Helena's agency, it derives mostly from her learning in medicine, as it grants her with the courage and the wealth to enjoy an untypical mobility. After travelling to Paris and curing the King of France, Helena gets the right to choose Bertram as her spouse, and, in this moment, a man is made into a fee to satisfy a woman's wish. This is, as I see it, the most decisive confrontation of gender norms in *All's Well*.

Lady Macbeth's agency derives firstly from the power she has in the partnership with Macbeth. She also makes use of her female attributes to exert influence over the events around her, particularly those that concern the acquisition of power. Maternity is pivotal when reading Lady Macbeth and she is a character that does use her condition of being a mother, whether factual or fictional does not matter here. Unlike the early modern gender prescriptions, up to act 3, at least, in which we witness Lady Macbeth's active participation in the play, she is not submissive to her husband. On the contrary, within the walls of the castle she exercises great influence on him thanks to her speech, to the valour of her tongue.

It is noteworthy that Lady Macbeth is a woman in a men's world, one that is striving to live in a community guided by martial values, who is married to a general whose seemingly fair nature, which is "too full o'th'milk of human kindness" (1.5), is capable of carving his enemies' bodies at war. It is through her soliloquies that Lady Macbeth voices the extent to which her affections, her sex and her humanity could be an impediment to killing the king. Although she is never actually emptied of human emotion, it is while she is alone that she is able to communicate her desire to be free of remorse and guilt, both of which, nevertheless, emerge disastrously in the final sleepwalking scene. As she gradually loses space at home and in her marriage, her power and agency also fade away, and Lady Macbeth goes mad as the dissolution of the partnership intensifies.

In the two cases studied here, it is clear that both characters experience the construction of themselves quite differently. Undoubtedly the comic world of *All's Well* was more hospitable to its women than the tragic one of *Macbeth*. The discussion of female subjectivities is, for sure, relevant, but we may venture to ask: in what ways is the process of self-fashioning broad enough to encompass women characters in Shakespearean drama? Both Helena and Lady Macbeth show that they are aware of how to use their power over others and that it should be done mainly through language. Enjoying different doses of power and resources, these two characters do have scope of action to fashion themselves. Helena makes use of her knowledge and, equally important, of her condition of being a

maid, combining both of them to her advantage, as they eventually lead her toward the position she wishes to occupy as Bertram's wife. Lady Macbeth's strength, theatricality and dissimulation grants her much of her resources in the play, and much of her own self is constructed in relation to where she stands in the partnership with Macbeth. She decides to imagine herself as the very opposite of how she supposes her husband to be – weaker, "infirm", irresolute. But by believing too much in the fantasy she created for both of them, once Macbeth begins to drift apart and their bond disintegrates, Lady Macbeth's striking force of will disappears and we get to see how fragile and vulnerable this character really is. The mistaken idea she had of Macbeth and of herself leads to such a disaster that when Macbeth turns out to be other than what she had imagined, nothing is left of Lady Macbeth. A great deal of her tragedy lies precisely there, in the impossible imaginary construction she builds of them. She was supposed to be numb in morality, deprived of emotion, but all this hopeless fantasy re-emerges in the last scene, when the guilt she did not get rid of returns powerfully, taking over her actions, her sleep and her speech, making her overcome by horror.

Particularly when we think of Helena's trajectory, even though we can distrust the happiness of the marriage, the fact is that there is a female protagonist who got what she wanted in the first place. She is a powerful character, who has, thanks to her learning, the means to act as she will and her agency not only drives the core of the action in *All's Well*, but it also enables her to have her way. Helena's last moment in soliloquy (3.2) shows us her final attempt, through language, at fulfilling a personal wish in relation to her love, Bertram, as she imagines herself as someone who actually wields influence over his actions, a man who bluntly rejects her throughout the play and leaves for the wars refusing to consummate their marriage. Finally, the breaching of rank barriers materialised in the final wedding, in which a nobleman and a lower-class girl are together in lawful union, granted by the King, with a legitimate heir on the way, represents that Helena indeed achieved a different construction for herself. She ascends socially by marrying her social superior and, if she starts off as a poor physician's daughter, she ends the play as the future Countess of Roussillon, or at least her last words suggest that this position is about to be available, "O my dear mother, do I see you living?" (5.3).

As to Lady Macbeth, the love bond which accounted for the great part of how she conceived of herself, that is, her project and wishes, dissolves and the effect destroys her. She cannot find a new place in the tragic world of the play and ends up abandoned, addressing an absent husband as though she were a ghost, one that brings up memories of

past crimes when it speaks, "Sweet remembrancer!" (3.4), as Macbeth called her. Lady Macbeth puts into practice the idea of exercising power over someone else through language and this works in her favour up to the point when she gets her husband to do as she wanted it. However, the Lady's construction reveals a rather negative side of womanhood, I would say, particularly concerning her part as a wife and a mother, both of which were fundamental roles for early modern women. Lady Macbeth collapses due to the separation from Macbeth and from what the partnership represented to her. She also conceives of maternal love through two radically conflicting images, nursing and killing, both of which she uses to try to persuade her husband to do as he had promised he would.

In *All's Well* and *Macbeth* alike, the presence of female agency stands out; yet, in the former, female characters remain alive and with their wishes at least partially fulfilled. In the latter, however, we witness a devastation of female presence in the play. The discussion I employ here acknowledges that both Helena and Lady Macbeth are characters who invite us to deal with topics that speak to the present times. In the case of *All's Well*, it is a play about gender roles and significant shifts concerning them. It also looks into issues of class and social barriers, suggesting a general disbelief in relation to marriage. In *Macbeth*, I think that it allows us to read a contemporary view of marriage, as the play and its female protagonist reveal the problems and limits of a partnership that seemed to be in perfect tune, but its dissolution shows the tragedy that arises from the impossibility of two being one. Lady Macbeth and Helena are characters who defy, in their own terms, the order imposed on them and I assume that they show us how the breaches within larger, social and political structures can open up opportunities to exercise one's agency.

Thus which reading can we make of these two female characters, one who more clearly occupies social roles traditionally reserved for men, as a physician and a wooer, and the other, who decides to conceive a powerful, resolute self and uses domineering rhetoric to engage with her husband, exercising her strength and authority over him? Helena's and Lady Macbeth's transgressive actions in the plays – mostly the bed trick and the regicide – added to their transgression when it comes to language, considering that it involves a momentary appropriation of a male rhetoric in terms of knowledge, domination and authority through speech, show that both of them are characters who confront and disrupt the early modern expectations of gender. I believe that such transgressions suggest that Shakespeare indeed experiments certain doses of freedom in his drawing of Helena and Lady Macbeth. In fact we can propose that Shakespeare dealt with diverse notions of woman to compose his own characters, the current conceptions of gender of the culture in

which he wrote are but a part of how he imagines and constructs his female characters.

REFERENCES

ADELMAN, Janet. *Suffocating mothers:* fantasies of maternal origin in Shakespeare's plays, Hamlet to The tempest. New York: Routledge, 1992.

ALTMAN, Joel B. *The Tudor play of mind*: rhetorical inquiry and the development of Elizabethan drama. Berkley: University of California Press, 1978.

AMUSSEN, Susan D. The family and the household. *In:* KASTAN, David Scott(ed.). *A Companion to Shakespeare.* Malden: Blackwell, 1999, p. 85-99.

AWAD, Mona. *All's well*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021.

BAMBER, Linda. *Comic women, tragic men.* Stanford: Stanford University Press,1982.

BLOOM, Harold. *Shakespeare the invention of the human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

BOAS, Frederick. S. *Shakspere and his predecessors*. London: John Murray, 1910. [1896]

BOCCACIO, Giovanni. *Decameron*. Translated by John Payne. New York: Walter J. Black, 2002. [1353] [*epub*]

BRADLEY, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy:* Lectures on *"Hamlet", "Othello", "King Lear", "Macbeth".* London: Penguin, 1991. [1904]

BROOKE, Nicholas. Introduction. *In:* SHAKESPEARE, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Nicholas Brooke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.1-81.

CASTIGLIONE, Baldassare. *The book of the courtier*. Translated by Leonard Eckstein Opdycke. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901. [1528]

CLARK, Sandra. Introduction. *In:* SHAKESPEARE, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. The Arden Shakespeare Third Series.London/NY/Oxford/New Dheli/Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 1-124.

CORCORAN, Neil. *Reading Shakespeare's soliloquies*: text, theatre, film. Bloomsbury:The Arden Shakespeare, 2018.

DOBSON, Michael; WELLS, Stanley (ed.). *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*. First edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

FREUD, Sigmund. Some Character-Types Met With in Psychoanalytic Work. *In*: FREUD, Sigmund. *Thestandard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV(1914-1916). London: The Hogarth Press, 1937. p. 309-333 [1916].

GARBER, Marjorie. *Shakespeare after all*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004. [*epub*]

GERSTELL, Emily. "*All's* [not] *well*: female service and 'Vendible' virginity in

Shakespeare's problem play". *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, Firenze, v. 4, p. 187- 211, 2015.

GOSSETT, Suzanne. Introduction. *In:* SHAKESPEARE, William. *All's well that endswell.* Edited by Suzanne Gossett and Helen Wilcox. London/NY/Dublin: The Arden Shakespeare Third Series, 2019, p. 1-119.

GREENBLATT, Stephen. *Renaissance self-fashioning*: from more to Shakespeare. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

GREENBLATT, Stephen; COHEN, Walter; HOWARD, Jean E.; MAUS, Katharine E. (ed.). *The Norton Shakespeare*. New York: Norton & Co, 1997.

HOWARD, Jean E. *The stage and social struggle in early modern England.* London; New York: Routledge, 2005.

HOWARD, Jean E. Female agency in *"All's well that ends well"*. *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, 106, p.43-60, 2006.

JAMES I. *Daemonologie*. The Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2008. Disponível em: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25929/25929-pdf.pdf. Acesso em: jun. 2022.

JARDINE, Lisa. Cultural Confusion and Shakespeare's Learned Heroines: 'These areold paradoxes". *Shakespeare Quarterly*, v. 38, p.1–18, 1987.

KELLY, Joan. Early Feminist Theory and the '*Querelle des Femmes*', 1400-1789. *The University of Chicago Press*, Chicago, v. 8, p. 4-28, 1982.

KOTT, Jan. *Shakespeare our contemporary.* Translated by Boleslaw Taborski. NewYork and London: Norton, 1966 [1964].

LOUGHNANE, Rory. The virginity dialogue in *All's well that ends well*: feminism, editing and adaptation. *In:* CALLAGHAN, D. (ed.). *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016. p.411-427.

MACHIAVELLI, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Translated by James B. Atkinson. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976. [1513]

MACK, Peter. *Elizabethan Rhetoric*: theory and practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

MACLEAN, Ian. *The Renaissance notion of woman*: a study in the fortunes of scholasticism and medical science in European intellectual life. Cambridge: Cambridge UniversityPress, 1980.

MANN, Nicholas. The origins of humanism. *In:* KRAYE, Jill. *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996,p. 1-19.

MARTIN, Randall (ed.). *Women writers in Renaissance England*: an annotated

anthology. Harlow: Pearson education limited, 2010.

MCDONALD, Russ. *Shakespeare and the arts of language.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

MEDEIROS, Fernanda T. de. Representações do amor em Shakespeare: três casais trágicos. *In:* HENRIQUES, A. L. (org.). *Literatura e comparativismo.* Rio de Janeiro: Letra Capital, 2012. v. 8, p. 1-18.

MEDEIROS, Fernanda T. de. What does a Shakespearean Character Say when He or She Says 'I'? Exploring notions of 'self' in Shakespeare's drama. *Scripta Uniandrade,* v. 17, n. 3, p. 69-85, 2019.

MEDEIROS, Fernanda T. de. Por um te(x)to todo delas – Helena, Christine de Pizan e Isabella Whitney. *In:* SALGUEIRO, M.; CIANCONI, V. (org.). *Literaturas de Língua Inglesa:* leituras interdisciplinares. Rio de Janeiro: Letra Capital, 2021. v. 6, p.57- 70.

MENDELSON, Sara H. Women and Work. *In:* PACHECO, Anita. (ed.). *A companion to early modern women's writing.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. p.58-76.

MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essays.* Translated by J. M. Cohen. London: Penguin Books, 1993. [1580]

PACHECO, Anita (ed.). *A companion to early modern women's writing.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

PARTRIDGE, Eric. *Shakespeare's Bawdy.* London: Routledge Classics, 2005. [1947]

PLATT, P. G. Shakespeare and rhetorical culture. *In:* KASTAN, David Scott (ed.). *A Companion to Shakespeare.* Malden: Blackwell, 1999. p. 277-294.

RACKIN, Phyllis. *Shakespeare and women.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

RICHARDSON, Catherine. Domestic Life. *In:* KINNEY, Arthur (ed.). *The Oxford handbook of Shakespeare.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. p. 202-219.

SHAKESPEARE, William. *All's well that ends well.* Edited by Susan Snyder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. [1604-5]

SHAKESPEARE, William. *All's well that ends well.* Ed. by Russel Fraser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. [1604-5]

SHAKESPEARE, William. *Macbeth.* Edited by Nicholas Brooke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1606].

SHAKESPEARE, William. *Macbeth.* Ed. by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013. [1606]

SHAKESPEARE, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. The Arden Shakespeare Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2015 [1606].

SHAKESPEARE, William. *Othello.* Ed. by Norman Sanders. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. [1603-4]

SHAKESPEARE, William. *The tempest*. Ed. by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T.Vaughan. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Berkshire House, 1999. [1611].

SHAPIRO, James. *1599 – A Year in the Life of Shakespeare*. UK; USA: Perfect Bound, 2005.

SIM, Alison. *The Tudor housewife*. Buffalo: Sutton Publishing, 1996.

SMITH, Emma. *This is Shakespeare.* London: Pelican Books, 2019.

SNYDER, Susan. Introduction. *In:* SHAKESPEARE, William. *All's well that ends well.* Edited by Susan Snyder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.1-65.

TRAISTER, Barbara Howard. "Doctor She": Healing and sex in *All's well that ends well*. *In:* DUTTON, Richard; HOWARD, Jean (ed.). *A companion to Shakespeare's works:* the poems, problem comedies, late plays. London: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. p. 333-347.

VIVES, Juan L. *The education of a christian woman:* a sixteenth-century manual. Charles Fantazzi tranlator. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2000. 374 p. [1523]

WILCOX, Helen. Feminist criticism in the Renaissance and seventeenth century. *In:* PLAIN, G., SELLERS, S. (ed.). *A history of feminist literary criticism.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 27-45.

WILCOX, Helen. "ah famous citie": women, writing, and early modern London. *Feminist Review*. California, v. 96, p.20-40, 2010.