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Female Transgression and Educational Messages in Early Modern Culture and Drama

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Abstract

This MA dissertation focuses on the influence of the Italian Renaissance on English culture and society. The overall structure takes the form of three chapters. Chapter One looks at the effects that this new current had on the education of English women during the early modern period: virtuous models of behaviour for women are proposed to define woman's role in society. The main aim of this chapter is to investigate contributions of Italian Renaissance thought and how they were proposed in early modern England. During this period, through prose, poetry, and artistic works female behaviour models were suggested. Chapter Two and Three focus on plays from the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres. The educational message addressed to women is explicit, especially in two plays from approximately the same period which use the city of Padua as a setting: William Shakespeare's comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* and John Webster's revenge tragedy *The White Devil*. In the first play a parallel between the Italian setting and Shakespeare's England is shown, with the vivid descriptions of sixteenth-century scholars and the investigation of how the theme of education is linked to the taming of the shrew. In Webster's play, the focus is on the consequences for the female protagonist after her adultery. In the trial scene, the woman faces the situation using her daring eloquence as a defence. Her transgressive words lead her to dark consequences. A parallel between the play and historical accounts of Vittoria Accoramboni is also explored. The thesis ultimately proposes to investigate how female transgression was represented in the above plays, and how educational lessons were imparted to their female protagonists as a result of their transgressions.

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A Note on the Texts

Dates given in this book are based on information from recent editions and refer to the likely date of composition and first performance (rather than publication). All quotations from William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* are from The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Barbara Hodgdon, 3rd series (London: Bloomsbury 2010), unless otherwise stated. All quotations from John Webster's *The White Devil* are from New Mermaids, ed. Lara Bovilsky, (London: Methuen Drama Bloomsbury 2021).

Introduction

This MA dissertation discusses the education of women in a specific historical moment: the early modern period in England. Some characteristics of the new current of thought that developed in Italy during the fifteenth century, Renaissance Humanism, are presented through the illustration of its manyfold aspects. Important artists such as Leonardo and Leon Battista Alberti influenced English culture through their works, ideas, and scientifical knowledge. During this period, sciences, arts, literature, and humanistic studies were the object of interest for foreign travellers who came to Italy.

Focussing on the condition of women, the first chapter of this thesis explores the extent to which humanist ideas transformed English thought. Female figures are presented through the lens of humanism, as exemplified by Leonardo's famous portrait of Ginevra de' Benci. She appears as a woman associated with the concept of pure beauty and virtue. The woman of humanism, in fact, is envisioned as chaste, ethereal and deprived of sensuality. Castiglione and Roger Ascham, on the other hand, provide a different view. The two writers in their respective works *Il Cortegiano* and *The Scholemaster* encourage women to approach studies, acquire general culture and become learned ladies, while they always need to maintain a moral decorum.

The recurring theme through the entire dissertation is the educational messages, with their conventions addressed to women, that were conveyed during that period. Linked to this theme are the side effects of not observing the rules that society required, both in the social and legal contexts. Considering English theatre as a specific form of expression in which dramatic plays were enacted, in Chapter 2 and 3 the issue of woman's education is investigated through some significant dramatic scenes. During the sixteenth century, the success of playwrights was given by their ability to entertain the audience, and the social troubles of the common people were often represented in their plays. On stage, the female characters, even if interpreted by boy actors, gained more space for representation. Approaching two remarkable plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (approximately 1589) and John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), a specific direction of this analysis considers the educational messages that were imparted to women. These teachings were intended to show the female sphere the appropriate behaviour they should adopt. It is observed that

in Shakespeare's plays, however, the represented women are also expressing desires for freedom, rebellion or affirmation.

The plays taken in consideration both have the city of Padua as their setting. Italian culture during the sixteenth century had, after all, an influent educational impact in England. Moreover, the University of Padua was widely known and frequented by English students, who brought back home foreign ideas and foreign literature. Some English students of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who attended the Faculty of Medicine in Padua are briefly mentioned. Also of importance is the figure of Galileo Galilei, whose astronomical theories and discoveries influenced scientific studies during the Elizabethan period. A brief history of the University of Padua is illustrated with a particular focus on its medical school and the influence that the Venetian rule of the time had on Henry VIII.

The structure of the thesis is divided into three parts:

Chapter 1 describes some currents of thought related to Renaissance Humanism, with a specific focus on female figures and female education. An investigation of the influence on the English views of Roger Ascham and Castiglione is provided. The chapter concludes with a description of the English theatre in Shakespeare's time, with a consideration on women of that period.

Chapter 2 focuses on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. It presents an overview of the Paduan setting used for the comedy and describes the city of Padua as 'nursery of arts'. Then follows an investigation into the possible sources and origins of the play through Barbara Hodgdon's analysis. One part is dedicated to an analysis of the structure and plot of the play. There are evident analogies between the scenes of the play and real-life events of early modern English society. The dissertation continues with a series of examples concerning the consequences experienced by married couples after behaviours that were considered amoral. It follows an analysis of some scenes of *The Taming of the Shrew* related to educational themes addressed to the two female protagonists, Bianca and Katherina. The different personalities of the two female characters of Shakespeare's Italian comedy are analysed in detail, especially through the dialogues with the men who want to marry them. Attention is given to what the writer of

the play may intend to convey with the issue of female education. The chapter argues that Katherina's discourses – especially her last monologue – are valid suggestions to induce women to the convenient conduct required by the English society of that period.

Chapter 3 presents a play by John Webster, coming from the genre of revenge tragedies: *The White Devil*. Its characters are involved in adultery, political plotting, and bloody revenge. Webster's play is analysed, and the darker and more dramatic aspects of revenge tragedies are described. A second section shows the figure of the vicious, vengeful character with evil intentions, who conspires with cruelty: the 'Machiavellian villain'. Webster's tragedy offers the opportunity to present various themes of the Jacobean period: Italy becomes the setting for the tragedy; the characters' confrontations and conflicts in the play include the figure of a cardinal; the court in Rome shows injustice in the judgement of Vittoria. The biography of Vittoria Accoramboni, real protagonist of the story, and the accounts of her life contained in the Fugger newsletter are confronted with the character written by Webster. The chapter argues that *The White Devil*'s tragic events and the corrupt and violent behaviour of many characters have similarities with the scandalous events at the court of James I, King of England and Ireland. The analysis of the play shows the eloquent and learned language that Vittoria expresses. Her words of defence, however, do not lead her to a fair and just sentence. This, as maintained in the chapter, proves that a woman was not allowed to use such daring, free, and impudent language, and that she was punished and (re)educated when she did so. This dissertation proceeds with the illustration of some historical accounts related to adultery and sexual crimes from Ruggiero's *I confini dell'eros*. Attention is also given to the sentences that the court of Venice issued against adulterous women in order to educate them in moral behaviour. In conclusion, an insight into theme of misogyny in the play is thoroughly showed. The misogynistic language is explored with a focus on the words of accusation and of defence, delivered by the dramatis personae.

Various works of contemporary scholars have been referenced in this dissertation. In order to present the general context of literature, religion, and politics, the text *The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* by Jerry Brotton and the chapter 'The Sixteenth Century' from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* by Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan have been of utmost importance. For the part concerning the figure of

Shakespeare and his play *The Taming of the Shrew*, among the numerous texts and articles, the following books were relevant: *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays* by Murray J. Levith, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* by Juliet Dusinberre, *Women and the English Renaissance* by Linda Woodbridge, Still Harping on Daughters by Lisa Jardine, and the 'Introduction' in *The Taming of the Shrew* by Brian Morris. From the following books important insights into the society of Padua and its English students during the Renaissance were gathered: *I confini dell'eros* by Guido Ruggiero and *Padua and the Tudors* by Jonathan Woolfson. Concerning the playwriter John Webster and his work *The White Devil*, Dympna Callaghan's *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* and Laura Tosi's *La Memoria Del Testo* were a relevant resource. Also essential for outlining the cultural and geographical background were the early modern writers and travellers Roger Ascham, Thomas Coryat and Fynes Moryson with their accounts of Italy.

CHAPTER 1: Women and Education in Early Modern England

1.1 Renaissance Humanism

1.1.1 Lifting the Common Veil

The 'Renaissance' bears an unsteady light in European history. The term outlines a 'rebirth', a turning point in Western cultural history between the years 1400 and 1600. This is evident in the cases of new visions of the world, such as maritime explorations but also through the diffusion of printed books, literary and artistic expressions, and "scientific" studies. At this turning point, Italy was undoubtedly avant-garde compared to the other European countries. The word 'Renaissance' was connected for the first time with a historical period in the book *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien. Ein Versuch* (1860), written by the 19th century Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt. For him the Renaissance has the appearance of a veil that is lifted, showing the lights of human understanding, of individualism and self-reliance, and of pragmatism and the real world. In his book he asserts that:

> In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness - that which was turned within as that which was turned without - lay dreaming or half-awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. […] In Italy this veil first melted into air.[1]

As a Renaissance city-state, the city of Florence is a classic example of that period: it was the breeding ground for a rediscovery of classical culture. These studies fostered a renewed recognition and admiration for ancient Greek and Latin writers and laid down the basis of an innovative view concerning the function and the purpose of culture with a new interest in philological research and the study of classical antiquity, called 'Humanism'. The concept of *studia humanitatis* took shape and influenced the fifteenth-century western world. As Robert Stewart asserts in a vision similar to the one of Burckhardt, intellectuals approached knowledge with a fresh disposition of trust, faith and optimism, far from a supposedly "close-minded" feudal world.[2] Classical studies

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[1] Jacob Burckhardt, *The civilisation of the renaissance in Italy*, trans. by S. G. C. Middlemore, 1892, p. 70. See the chapter 'Swiss Renaissance' in Brotton, pp. 11-13, for an accessible and updated insight.

[2] Robert Stewart, *Cronologia Illustrata Dei Grandi Fatti Della Storia: Dalla Caduta Dell'Impero Romano al Nuovo Assetto Mondiale* (Milano: Idealibri s.r.l., 1993), p. 112.

were responsible for shaping human beings in their entirety, in perfect harmony with all his faculties. One of the main themes of this new current of thought is to praise the dignity of man: therefore, he becomes the centre of the world he is living in, or, in philosophical terms, he becomes a mirror that reflects the whole universe. During the Middle Ages, knowledge had the purpose to lead men to salvation: in Western Europe the centres of cultural diffusion were well-rooted in Christian culture, and in monasteries it was believed that learning the truth of different subjects would have led to the supreme truth: God. Therefore, the curriculum was built mainly around theology.

However, in the following general imaginary of this cultural "rebirth", ever before the fifteenth century the recognition by historians of principles used for intuitions, conceptions, and innovations in human thought and in the visual arts was essential. Therefore, it is certainly not possible to separate the Renaissance from the Middle Ages that preceded it: the historical process is a continuous movement composed of often unrelated elements and uneven geographical areas, where visions of the world and ways to live and to speak brought an outburst of creativity in artists, or on the contrary recalled Christian dogmas of the Middle Ages.

As Logan and Greenblatt vividly illustrate, "during the fifteenth century a few English clerics and government officials had journeyed to Italy and had seen something of the extraordinary cultural and intellectual movement flourishing in the city-states there".[3] After this sort of pilgrimage full of dangers and risks, a very small number of Englishmen – and, as reported by Logan and Greenblatt,[4] to a smaller extent Englishwomen – saw something of the remarkable architecture, painting, sculpture, and design growing in the Italian city-states.

Among the protagonists of this group of inventive artists, Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519) was the "most worthy of painters, perspectivists, architects and musicians, one endowed with every perfection", as the mathematician Fra Luca Pacioli argued.[5] Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* is one of the ideals of the Renaissance: the focal point of the

[3] 'The Sixteenth Century', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, 8th ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p. 485.
[4] Ibid., p. 485.
[5] Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*, Very short introductions, 2006, p. 109.

drawing is the representation of human proportions based on a classical treatise of architecture written by the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (between the first century BC and the first century AD). Vitruvius' architectural orders – such as the 'geometricae rationes' – are transposed from architecture to anatomy in Leonardo's drawing: the man with his arms and legs wide apart outlines the forms of a square and a circle, creating perfect proportions.

Another interpreter of the Vitruvian rebirth is the humanist author and architect Leon Battista Alberti (1406 – 1472), to whom we owe the church Santa Maria Novella in Florence and the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini, true architectural masterpieces. In his *De Re Aedificatoria* (1485), he goes back to the writings of Vitruvius, attempting like Leonardo to create perfect proportions with renewed interest and imitation of classic ideas: architecture asserts itself as a universal discipline. These innovative visions rapidly circulated among the Italian cultural centres: inside a great plurality of exclusive courts of important cities of the peninsula – Rome, Florence, Urbino, Naples, Mantova, Ferrara, Milan and Venice – scholars, men of letters, and artists were invited, accommodated, and protected in exchange of services. As a result of this, a lively circulation of ideas encouraged to reach a significant cultural homogeneity.

Other 19th-century historians, like the French Jules Michelet, represented in their writings this 'rebirth' like a particular spirit or attitude, as well as a specific historical period in which Graeco-Roman culture elevated man in dignity, self-assertion, and self-will. In other words, he praised virtues that celebrated man's individuality: Reason, Truth, Art, and Beauty. In addition to these views, it was generally assumed that art and life in this period were banded together, as we understood before through the artistic and architectural heritage of Italian artists.

Subsequently, a more global perspective is illustrated by Jerry Brotton: he asserts that Burckhardt's "focus is exclusively on Italy; he makes no attempt to see the Renaissance in relation to other cultures".[6] As Brotton pointed out, a different approach towards the Renaissance became universally accepted: the old theory of an ideal European society as the origin of a 'civilised' modern world was a second time lifted like

[6] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

a veil during the 20th century and the expression ‘the early modern period’ was used for the first time in a very influential book: *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) by Stephen Greenblatt.

I was interested in the author’s choice of showing as a front cover a famous painting by Hans Holbein the Younger: *The Ambassadors* (1533). It is a double portrait of two French men with at the centre various objects on a table: a celestial globe, two sundials, a quadrant used both for nautical science and for astronomy to measure the altitude angle of an astronomical object above the horizon, and a torquetum (a navigational instrument) are placed on the upper shelf. Then a terrestrial globe, books of arithmetic and hymns, and a lute are arranged on the lower shelf. Apart from varying and conflicting interpretations about the meaning of these instruments, above all they represent the seven liberal arts that had formed the two levels of teaching since the Middle Ages: the lower division called *trivium* refers to Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric; the upper division, the *quadrivium* includes Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy. These subjects formed the humanities curriculum, which it composed part of the new Renaissance education, exclusively addressed to men. In this cultural and social advancement, women were destined to play a secondary position both in the humanities curriculum and in society. Those early sixteenth-century scholars who were participating in the Renaissance had been taught by male professors and they were sharing their knowledge with other educated men, such as the two sitters in the painting. Holbein portrays two distinguished Frenchmen, “skilled in the art of argument and persuasion”,[7] on a diplomatic mission on behalf of King Francis I of France: precisely an ambassador and a bishop, Jean de Dinteville on the right and his friend Georges de Selve on the left.

[7] Ibid., p. 3.

1. Hans Holbein's The Ambassadors, 1533, a symbol of Renaissance humanism. Its enigmatic figures and objects provide several interpretations

1.1.2 Women and Humanism

Holbein's *The Ambassadors* is a celebration of the knowledge and the status of the two men, Dinteville and Selve, at that time involved in a diplomatic mission report on Henry VIII's attempt to divorce Catherine of Aragon. The king secretly married Anne Boleyn and these deliberate actions represented a great controversy because he was taking over a specific power without authority: he attempted to administer canon law, the law that

controlled divorces.[8] The two characters of the portrait were sent to England in 1533 by the king of France "to prevent Henry's split from Rome and act as Francis' intermediaries in the negotiations".[9] These negotiations led to a tragic ending: Pope Clement VII refused to grant divorce. Just one year after Dinteville and Selve's diplomatic mission, Henry proclaimed himself "Supreme Head of the Church in England" through the Act of Supremacy. The imminent English Reformation was not laid down only because of ecclesiastical disagreements; but among the different contributing facts of social and political nature, there was a reason related to the female sphere and to humanism concerning an argument over a woman: Henry's first wife. Of this fact, Holbein did not leave any trace in the painting, as if this issue was not significant.

With regard to painted portraits circulating in Europe during this period, there are a number of important differences between male portraits and female ones. From the work of Elizabeth Cropper an interesting perspective concerning the representation of beauty in women's pictorial representations emerges. In her essay *The Beauty of Woman* (1986) she holds the view that during the Italian Renaissance some lyrical poems and numerous portraits of female characters remained true to courtly love's conventions: the aim was to represent an ideal beauty, "in which the question of identity is immaterial. No unidentified male portrait, on the other hand, is ever said to be a beautiful representation made for its own sake".[10] An evident example is Leonardo's portrait of a woman – ritratto 'mulìebre' – later recognized to be Ginevra de' Benci, and now at the Washington National Gallery of Art.

The portrait of this beautiful woman is part of a different discourse that Cropper introduces: the subject is painted within rigid canons of physical beauty, and only the plant in the background that adorns the young woman's face helps us to identify the sitter's identity. The curls of her hair blend in with the twigs and leaves of the juniper behind. Then a scroll with carved the inscription *VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT* – 'with her Beauty she adorns Virtue' – ties a juniper twig with other branches together. Here the

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[8] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 491.

[9] Brotton, p. 6.

[10] 'The Beauty of Woman: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture', in *Rewriting the Renaissance: the discourses of sexual difference in early modern Europe*, ed. by Elizabeth Cropper, Women in culture and society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 178.

main discourse focuses on the challenge to firmly fix beauty itself in a portrait, therefore the interest in the identity of the represented subject is secondary and limited in just a detail of a plant. In a rising humanistic culture, the sentence ‘Beauty adorns Virtue’ takes on an educational meaning that demonstrates a restrained representation of the woman or, in other words, a “discourse from which the woman herself is necessarily absent”.[11] The woman’s picture encompasses the function of a synecdoche, a traditional figure of speech in which the meaning of a word is transferred to another one for a whole or a whole for a part. In this case, the feminine portrait holds the meaning of ‘pure beauty’, because no other element to decorate her figure appears. Nevertheless, Ginevra de’ Benci was well-known to be an intelligent, educated, and cultivated woman. Cropper concludes that the rhetoric and the canon of Italian pictorial representations of women takes no notice of the individual woman’s identity: “distinctions between the representation of beauty and beauty represented are often elided, and, as a result, peculiar problems of identity and efficacy are attached to the interpretation of female portraiture”.[12]

[11] Ibid., p. 190.
[12] Ibid., p. 176.

2. Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci by Leonardo da Vinci, 1474-78

Alongside the art of painting, Italian lyric poetry was influent in Europe. In England, this tradition spread later, only during the sixteenth century. In the country, during a time of political stability with Henry VIII's reign, Petrarch (1304—1374) became well-known as many English poets were inspired by his sonnets and developed a

similar structure.[13] For example, the courtier-diplomat Sir Thomas Wyatt translated the famous sonnet sequence from Italian into vernacular English.[14] It is well established that Petrarch has been one of the leading figures of the tradition of courtly love; he worked for Giacomo and Giovanni Colonna, but also for great lay patrons as The Carraresi from Padua.[15] Petrarch moved in the service of various noblemen even outside Italian borders. He travelled to various cities in northern Europe, and this gave him the opportunity to enrich his human and cultural experiences, as Rico and Marcozzi argue.[16] Consequently, his works, sonnets, and poems contributed to enriching the European literary and cultural context.

As Brotton asserted, "the rise of courtly culture in Italy and northern Europe provided scope for the cultivated sensibility of lyric poetry, with its focus on a beloved mistress".[17] In this tradition of courtly love, one interesting observation concerns the person to whom the poem is addressed, a female subject. In this context, the challenge of putting a woman's courtesy and kindness into words becomes the poet's main challenge. Therefore, the choice of representing an unachievable and chaste mistress in a poem only shows an exploration of the internal thoughts and inner laments of the poet as a "literary artificer".[18] Therefore, the purpose of this literary form is to demonstrate the poet's abilities and craft in writing. On the other hand, the beloved woman remains relegated to a subordinate position, she herself becomes a symbol in the hands of a poet.

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[13] Helen Hackett, *A Short History of English Renaissance Drama*, I.B. Tauris Short Histories (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 9.

[14] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 592.

[15] Guido Baldi and Giuseppe Zaccaria, 'L'età umanistica e l'età del Rinascimento', in *Dal testo alla storia dalla storia al testo. Edizione modulare 1 di Giuseppe Zaccaria, Giusso Silvia, Guido Baldi, Mario Razetti*, 2001, p. 40.

[16] Francisco Rico and Luca Marcozzi, 'PETRARCA, Francesco', *Enciclopedia Treccani, Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani - Volume 82*, 2015 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-petrarca_(Dizionario-Biografico)> [accessed 18 October 2023].

[17] Brotton, p. 117.

[18] Hackett, p. 9.

1.2 The Education of Women at the Time of the Virgin Queen

1.2.1 The Effects of Humanistic Culture in Early Modern English Society

There is a growing body of literature that recognises the inferiority of women in humanistic culture. In the present section I want to introduce this issue starting from the diffusion of books after the discovery of new technologies and the consequent increased availability of foreign literature.

An event of great cultural and social importance was the introduction of print, which deeply affected the appearance of culture itself and that brought, during the sixteenth century, a revolution in communication.[19] This technology enabled the spread of culture among people who otherwise could never have afforded to buy a book. The name linked to this event was Gutenberg: it was discovered to be written inside money registers for wine and taxes, with other members of the goldsmith's guild of Strasbourg. It belonged to the German typographer and inventor, Johann Gensfleisch Gutenberg, who is considered to be the inventor of the movable-type printing press. After different attempts, he managed to create a durable type, made of different metals. This permitted him to produce sharper and more precise letters, in contrast to the earlier technique of woodblock printing. Together with Johann Fust and Peter Schöffer – the project backer and the manuscripts and texts designer, respectively –, "Gutenberg and his team printed a Latin Bible in 1455 and in 1457 issued an edition of the Psalms".[20]

The consequences of this invention represented a real turning point in how literature, in all its functions, was considered. Manuscripts differed from printed books in a number of important details: the former required a long and elaborated work. Moreover, when they were finished, they resulted precious because of their valuable appearance and their rare and unrepeatable qualities. By contrast, printed books allowed a more rapid transmission of ideas, introducing for the first time the concept of 'audience'. Initially, even if printed books were purchased by a limited number of readers, because of the low level of literacy and widespread poverty in different sections of population, they nevertheless established a direct and privileged contact between readers and writers. The

[19] Brotton, p. 48.
[20] Ibid.

public, from common readers to privileged intellectuals, gained a distinctive identity and substance: they could all easily purchase books and freely use them. The effect of this "was a subsequent rise in both literacy and schools, creating an unprecedented emphasis on education as a tool of socialization".[21] So, the spaces and the frontiers of literary works unexpectedly expanded, because of the large production of series of books, letting new ideas circulate.

Turning now again to Holbein's painting, the books represented are a valuable pretext to introduce educational and religious aspects in early modern English society. The printed volumes in *The Ambassadors* guide us both to religious debates of that period and to the mathematical sciences, also named *quadrivium*: measuring, geometry, and arithmetic. Martin Luther, a German monk who led the Protestant Reformation through Europe in the fifteenth century, freed believers from the control exercised by the ecclesiastical institution through the confessional. His commentaries on the books of the Bible and his translation of the Bible into German allowed each individual to have direct contact with the Word of God.[22]

In England, thanks to the popularity of print, translations of the Bible into the vernacular English had a wide circulation and they could be purchased by an increasing quantity of people.[23] In fact, Holbein fixed this event in the painting with a Lutheran book. This was a translation in German of the hymn *Veni sancte Spiritus* – Come, Holy ghost – , an invocation of God's good grace. Next to the hymn book, an arithmetic book is painted with calculations inside it. According to recent studies, Holbein showed an account book in order to stress the social changes happening in those times: the category of merchant bourgeoisie was actually in expansion; for example, Georges de Selve was a descendent of a merchant family from Limousin in early modern France.[24] Therefore, practical skills were required for a career as an ambassador, and they could be obtained with a humanistic education. This new learning connected culture, art, and music with business and

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[21] Ibid., p. 41.

[22] Paolo Ricca, 'Lutero e il luteranesimo', *Enciclopedia Treccani*, 2006 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lutero-e-il-luteranesimo_(Enciclopedia-dei-ragazzi)> [accessed 18 October 2023].

[23] Stewart, p. 125.

[24] Robert J. Kalas, 'The Selve Family of Limousin: Members of a New Elite in Early Modern France', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 18.2 (1987), pp. 147–72, doi:10.2307/2541174.

finance,[25] as we observe in Holbein's depiction of the lute and the flutes close to the previously mentioned books. The musical instruments refer to the practice rather than the theory of music. In this context, the importance of print encouraged the progress of ideas in education. This affected European society in general on a social scale, as well as on a literary and textual scale.[26] Humanists were therefore not only scholars, but they were people actively participating in the civil and political life of their city, holding important public offices, as we saw for the growing class of merchants.

A formal convention in history, as Tavoni in the *Enciclopedia dell'Italiano* (2011) argued, is that the humanistic and the Renaissance periods coincide with the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[27] During this time, a rise and consolidation of national languages such as Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, English, and German took place, each with different dynamics and in different social areas. These vernacular languages asserted themselves in different social areas as languages of culture that were competing with Latin. Moreover, there was a significant positive impetus to this process: the invention of the press. As an incredible engine, it led to a linguistic unification, because, as Tavoni asserted, it forced the unified book market to extend over the entire territory.[28] For instance, an account book contained scientific and technological parts, the 'scienza volgare', that was useful for artists and craftsmen. They received merely an empirical education, and they lacked both in scientific theory and literary education. In Italy Leonardo da Vinci was the very example of the 'omo sanza lettere' – man without letters –, with just an empirical education. In the two centuries examined here, the areas of the vernacular languages expanded in the different nations of western Europe. But at the same time, Tavoni showed that Latinisms were often used in quantity,[29] and the recourse to Latin remained essential.

Fifteenth-century England saw the success of humanist literary education: this education established a system where men could climb the social ladder and access to

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[25] Brotton, p. 5.

[26] Baldi and Zaccaria, p. 76.

[27] Mirko Tavoni, 'Umanesimo e Rinascimento, lingua dell'', *Enciclopedia Treccani, Enciclopedia dell'Italiano*, 2011 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/umanesimo-e-rinascimento-lingua-dell_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)> [accessed 6 July 2023].

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

prestigious job positions. As Grafton and Jardine observed, “at the level of the school, it offered literacy in Latin of a sort to thousands of boys”,[30] and by the end of the century, Helen Hackett notes, free grammar schools were created in England with the help of the funding of private benefactors.[31] The comedies of Terence, the rhetoric of Cicero, and the poetry of Ovid, Virgil, and Horace were some of the books that boys studied. At the university young men could receive an instruction in logic and semantics. Then, “at the higher level still of the professional faculties of law, medicine, and theology, it trained men for employment in powerful and lucrative occupations”,[32] as Grafton and Jardine explained.

However, women’s situation was completely different. If the purpose of education was “to train the sons of the nobility and gentry to speak and write good Latin, the language of diplomacy, of the professions, and of all higher learning”,[33] girls, in dramatic contrast, had a far more ambivalent position within humanism. Together with Petrarch, also Leon Battista Alberti with his humanistic rhetoric had an important literary influence in England. He wrote books in his Tuscan mother tongue, the vernacular language of his region. Those books and treatises were describing the local merchant economy and at the same time they gave instructions on the ethics of noble families of merchants.[34] In his treatise *On the Family* (1444), he proclaimed that married women were destined to live a life confined by the borders of the domestic sphere:

> the smaller household affairs, I leave to my wife’s care . . . it would hardly win us respect if our wife busied herself among the men in the marketplace, out in the public eye. It also seems somewhat demeaning to me to remain shut up in the house among women when I have manly things to do among men, fellow citizens, and worthy and distinguished foreigners.[35]

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[30] Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Duckworth, 1986), p. xii.
[31] Hackett, p. 8.
[32] Grafton and Jardine, p. xiii.
[33] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 491.
[34] Tavoni.
[35] Brotton, pp. 45-6.

Alberti wrote instructions on women's conduct and on the behaviour they should keep. He gave men the role of imposing their teachings, considering them wiser and more able to make intelligent decisions than women. As a consequence, as Brotton argued, Alberti's thought influenced a large part of humanists towards elite women who showed a vocation for learning and dared to stray from their assigned role. "They did not completely reject women's pursuit of learning, but were adamant that it should only go so far".[36]

In the Italian humanistic view, the final accomplishment for educated people was the access to a profession. But the educated woman, the professed 'learned lady', was destined to pursue a secluded life, using her intellectual abilities as an ornament, like her skill in needlepoint, or her ability to perform on lutes or virginals. Given this situation, it is barely surprising that "as signs of *cultivation* all such accomplishments satisfactorily connote a leisured life, a background which regards the decorative as adding lustre to rank and social standing".[37] The consequence of this training is somewhat counterintuitive and discontinuous, because in the world of the professional humanist, the practical outcome for women counted for nothing, as it was not meant for the public sphere. The book *From Humanism to the Humanities* by Grafton and Jardine noted that this situation which weighs on women and which seems to depend solely on the will of men, causes "misunderstanding, puzzlement, uneasiness, textual difficulty in the letters exchanged between accomplished women and professional men".[38] Women were performing the expected roles of "pious and suitable companions for their husbands, and mothers for their children".[39] These were considered virtuous women, who belonged to the category of Christian modesty that was approved and popularized by Alberti in his treatise *On the family*: in her soul the wife is the equal of her husband, but in the flesh, the husband is superior to the wife, who must obey him in all things that are permitted and honest.[40] Catholic priests, clerics, and moralists who followed the guidance of Sacred Scripture were talking about equality within marital partnership, explaining to women the 'correct' conduct to follow. On the surface these instructions seemed to give to them equal rights

[36] Brotton, p. 46.
[37] Grafton and Jardine, p. 56-7.
[38] Ibid., p. 56-7.
[39] Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Harvester Press, 1983), p. 54.
[40] *I Libri Della Famiglia - Alberti Leon Battista; Romano R. (Curatore); Tenenti A. (Curatore)*, ed. by R. Romano and A. Tenenti (Torino, 1994), p. 263.

within marriage, but in reality, this partnership confirmed "a self-evident natural inferiority of the female of the species",[41] as Jardine strongly expressed in her *Still Harping on Daughters*.

A willing submission to a husband's authority maybe could give to women a freeing possibility:

> As long as woman uses her natural intelligence to set off the main abilities with her own grasp on religion, learning, household management, she is his supreme ornament, 'a chain of gold to adorn [his] neck'. But the minute she shows signs of independence (inevitably represented on stage as adultery and sexual rapaciousness) those gifts become responsible for her downfall: they masked her 'normal baseness, they provided the means of her acting of her own free will.[42]

In this investigation, it is evident the favourable outcome of literary education of this period, that from Italy moved overseas and it influenced England from the early decades of the sixteenth century. It created employment opportunities for men, but for women it only gave suggestions on their appropriate appearance and good manners. Educational treatises, sermons and literature brought them no additional freedom. On the contrary, they helped to define and limit her role.

1.2.2 The Precepts of Ascham and Castiglione and Their Influence on English Education

As far as education of women is concerned, one name among the early modern English humanists stands out: the tutor of Queen Elizabeth I, Roger Ascham (1515-68). He was educated at St. John's College in Cambridge. There in 1538 he was appointed lector of Greek, and he also commanded Latin, which caused great interest in him. His trust and commitment to classical education was meant to guide learners to correct moral values

[41] Jardine, pp. 39-40.
[42] Ibid., pp. 38-9.

and to the pleasure of learning. He used Latin to communicate with other men of letters living abroad, but according to Sanders, he did not support Latinate neologisms.[43]

At the same time, the diffusion of books in vernacular languages on the Continent brought Ascham to choose "the rudeness of common and mother tonges",[44] advocating the weight and relevance of English as a formative instrument for his fellow countrymen. In *The Scholemaster* (written circa 1563 and published posthumously in 1570) he indicated innovative teaching methods and "attempts to set out, in plain and unfussy English, the advantages and uses of a classical education".[45] Its target are not only pupils of the class of aristocracy, but also men who learn Latin at home. According to *The Imagery of Roger Ascham* by Linda B. Salamon, *The Scholemaster* traces an account of Ascham's personal experiences and anecdotes, "from the good effects of praise and the ill effects of memorization [and the consequent corporal punishment for not having achieved a result,] to the brilliance of Elizabeth" [46].

Ascham admired the classical Roman world and ancient Greek and Roman writers, while he denounced Roman Catholic beliefs and practices. Ascham, like many Protestants of the period, did not accept the Roman Catholic Church as authority, and Catholic practices were called 'papistry'. Despite his opinion, academic biblical study was spreading among Protestant writers, but medieval chivalric stories and books with the ethic of courtly love, like the Petrarchan sonnets mentioned before, were for intellectuals such as Ascham and More without morality. As Dusinberre pointed out, "they rejected chivalry because it romanticised experiences and attitudes which they felt to be degrading".[47] In the following passage of *The Scholemaster* this sentiment is clearly expressed:

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[43] Andrew Sanders, 'Renaissance and Reformation: Literature 1510-1620', in *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 99.

[44] Ibid., p. 99.

[45] Ibid., p. 99.

[46] Linda Bradley Salamon, 'The Imagery of Roger Ascham', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15.1 (1973), pp. 5–23.

[47] Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1996), p. 142.

> Whan Papistrie, as a standyng poole, covered and overflowed all England, fewe bookes were read on our tong, savyng certaine bookes Chevalrie, as they sayd, for pastime and pleasure.[48]

> These be the inchantementes of Circes, brought out of Italie, to marre mens maners in England: much, by example of ill life, but more by preceptes of fonde bookes, of late translated out of Italian into English.[49]

Medieval chivalric books with their moral teachings and frequent marvellous events are therefore considered just for entertainment and pleasure. Their message was dismissed as simplistic and ignorant.

Coming back to Ascham's ideal picture, courtly love could affect "the will of a young ientleman, or a yong mayde, that liveth welthelie and idelie".[50] On the contrary, an education of language, joined together with an education of values, completed a proper education towards moral 'decorum', so vital in Ascham's book. It is a formula for the education of his pupil Elizabeth that we can find in a letter written in 1550 to his most regular Protestant correspondent, Johannes Sturm:

> She had me for her tutor in Greek and Latin two years … She talks French and Italian as well as English; she has often talked to me readily and well in Latin, and moderately so in Greek. When she writes Greek and Latin, nothing is more beautiful than her hand-writing. She is as much delighted with music as is skilful in the art … She read with me almost all Cicero, and great part of Titus Livius; for she drew all her knowledge of Latin from those two authors. She used to give the morning of the day to the Greek Testament, and afterwards read select orations of Isocrates and the tragedies of Sophocles. For I thought that from those sources she might gain purity of style, and her mind derive instruction that would be of value to her to meet every contingency of life. To these I added Saint Cyprian and Melanchthon's Common Places, &c., as best suited, after the Holy Scriptures, to teach her the foundations of religion, together with elegant language and sound doctrine. Whatever she reads she at once perceives any word that has a doubtful [forced] or curious meaning … She likes a style that grows out of the subject; chaste because it is suitable,

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[48] Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster; Written between 1563-8. Posthumously Published. First Ed., 1570; Collated with the 2d Ed, 1572. Edited by Edward Arber*, ed. by Edward Arber (London Constable, 1923) <http://archive.org/details/aschamschole00aschuoft> [accessed 3 August 2023], p. 80.

[49] Jason Lawrence, *Who the Devil Taught Thee so Much Italian?: Italian Language Learning and Literary Imitation in Modern England / Jason Lawrence* (Manchester New York: Manchester University press, 2005), p. 2.

[50] Ascham, p. 80.

> and beautiful because it is clear. She very much admires modest metaphors, and comparisons of contraries well put together and contrasting felicitously with one another. Her ears are so well practised in discriminating all these things, and her judgment is so good, that in all Greek, Latin, and English composition, there is nothing so loose on the one hand or so concise on the other, which she does not immediately attend to, and either reject with disgust or receive with pleasure, as the case may be. I am not inventing anything, my dear Sturm; it is all true [4 April 1550].[51]

In these words, comes out a vivid description of Ascham's vision of education and the nature of women's learning: virtue goes hand in hand with knowledge. The brilliance of his royal pupil Elizabeth is described through her beautiful style of writing: chaste, pure, and modest. Indeed, as Grafton and Jardine argue, from this letter it is "curiously difficult to disentangle her grasp of religion and morals from her polished mastery of Latin and Greek".[52] Again, Ascham believes that to achieve a moral 'decorum' is a fundamental step in education, together with the pleasure of learning a humanist educational programme. Sanders in *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* points out that Ascham's pleasure of discovering classical studies is demonstrated in the Preface of his treatise *The Scholemaster*: it begins with Ascham's reading Demosthenes in Greek to Elizabeth.[53]

However, as Lisa Jardine stated, "Elizabeth was a female pawn in the English Royal inheritance struggle".[54] Docility and obedience continued to be qualities attributed with aristocratic women, who were encouraged to learn Greek at the expense of Latin. The latter, as explained above, was in fact the main language used for civil affairs and cultural exchanges between different states and did not necessarily have to be learned by women. Nonetheless, Jardine observed that women "continued to be deprived of significant personal freedom, or anything we might term 'liberation'".[55] In the same vein, Dusinberre argued that the beliefs in Ascham's treatise affected the behaviour of women

[51] Roger Ascham, 'Ascham to Sturm', in *The Whole Works of Roger Ascham* (1550), pp. lxii–lxiii.
[52] Grafton and Jardine, p. 143.
[53] Sanders, p. 99.
[54] Jardine, p. 169.
[55] Ibid., p. 169.

and fostered their stereotypes, despite the fact that "the creature evoked […] by the courtly lover" had no relation to the woman as an individual.[56]

In addition, the knowledge of Italian customs, paintings, sculptures, and writings deeply transformed English culture and the quality of life of its upper classes. One literary contribution to this change was also given by Castiglione's book *Il Cortegiano*, published in Italy in 1528. Castiglione had the privilege of teaching Italian to the young Princess Elizabeth.[57] His work describes, with the form of dialogues between men and women, the qualities of an ideal courtier in the court of the duke of Urbino. Translated into English by the humanist and diplomat Thomas Hoby in 1561 with the title *The Book of the Courtier*, it became a point of reference for principles and actions in support of national languages in many European monarchies.[58] In other words, throughout England the translation of notable literary works in vernacular languages became fashionable, in order to introduce into humanist studies an appropriate and international training of courtiers. Under this cultural wave, the work of Castiglione, quoting Jardine, "became the Bible of aspiring courtiers".[59] The values of a male courtier were exclusively weighed in terms of behaviour when he was with other people and in terms of social achievements.

An example of this is the survey carried out by Jardine in which "the ability to dispute elegantly on the finer features of the Latin language",[60] or a natural aptitude in speaking poetically, are of great importance for defining a true courtier. This figure, as Castiglione recounted, masks his efforts to memorize lines and secret practices with *sprezzatura* technique, translated by Hoby as "recklessness". It is not a literal translation, as Greenblatt and Logan highlight:[61] as a matter of fact, it is unpretentious elegance, or, in the words of Hackett, it shows an "unaffected grace which makes excellence appear effortless".[62] A courtier's speech aims to be persuasive and charming. In one of the passages in the book, the ideal love of the Italian Neo-Platonist Peter Bembo that originates from the Greek philosophers of the past, is illustrated as "the yearning of the

[56] Dusinberre, p. 6.
[57] Lawrence, p. 6.
[58] Tavoni.
[59] Jardine, p. 55.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 645.
[62] Hackett, p. 9.

soul after beauty, which is finally identical with the eternal good".[63] This image rises an additional issue: the ability to represent perfect beauty had the deplorable side effect to praise a woman to the point of deifying her. Woodbridge in her bold *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* suggested that "such deification, by making Woman more than human, reinforced the antifeminist contention that she was other than human". This statement is a clear reference to the previously mentioned Petrarchan poetry, in which "etherealization and desensualization of women led to intense disillusionment with any woman displaying normal sensuality".[64] Book IV of the *Il Cortegiano*, through a dialogue between Bembo and Emilia, represented that idealised perception of women:

> When Bembo had hitherto spoken with such vehemency that a man would have thought him, as it were, ravished and beside himself, he stood still without once moving, holding his eyes toward heaven as astonished; when the Lady Emilia, which together with the rest gave most diligent ear to this talk, took him by the plait of his garment and plucking him a little, said: "Take heed, M. Peter, that these thoughts make not your soul also to forsake the body."[65]

In this passage Bembo is learning what love is, for the purpose of becoming a perfect courtier. His discourse defines 'beauty' not merely as the beauty of a woman, but as a contemplation of natural elements such as the earth, the sea, rivers, cities, and so on. The remark of Emilia brings the discourse on a less imaginative and more pragmatic level.

The work of Castiglione showed his view on women's status in Italian society. His view influenced many centres throughout Europe and soon it was translated into all the main European languages. A key aspect of this conduct book is to be found in Book III. In the view of Woodbridge,[66] this part portrays in words the ideal female courtier, and what is striking is that Castiglione, living and writing for the court of Urbino, expressed revolutionary opinions concerning women's status. These innovative thoughts seem to anticipate certain feminist concepts that would pervade European society many years later: he attempted to proclaim "physiological distinctions irrelevant and understood

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[63] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 645.
[64] Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 54.
[65] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 659.
[66] Woodbridge, p. 54.

women's desire for liberty".[67] It is interesting to notice that from the words of this Italian writer it emerges the determination to display the feminine public image at the same level of men. However, as Woodbridge states, these multi-speaker dialogues do not affect the logic of the present.[68] They will not be able to overcome the prejudices that still make the condition of women immutable.

During the same period the German physician, soldier, and theologian Heinrich C. Agrippa (1486-1535) wrote a book declaring the theological and moral superiority of women, entitled *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (1529) – or *The Glory of Women* – that was translated in English in 1652. His revolutionary humanist thoughts favoured and followed the ones of Castiglione and they firmly contrasted with the Scriptures, in which women were commanded to be submissive to husbands' authority. Dusinberre found that "the theological basis for women's subjection had been persistently queried and discredited throughout the sixteenth century […], and the Puritans, eager campaigners against wife-beating, were anxious to divest Antipholus of his rope even if it meant conceding an unBiblical liberty to his wife".[69] Agrippa in *The Glory of Women* argued that on a spiritual level men and women should be seen as equal, because their only difference "consists […] in the different Scituation of the parts of the Body, which the office of generation did necessarily require".[70] During that time, this was a very progressive statement, and the observations of both Castiglione and Agrippa supported the rights of women to express their individual conscience.

Dusinberre in her book *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1996) demonstrated that in England these foreign Humanist ideas were very positively received by English Protestant writers and intellectuals. Through their writings and actions, they initiated a campaign in favour of individual women's education, in order to create favourable social conditions for their lives and to let them obtain more rights both in English society and in the domestic sphere. Their argument in opposition to the principles of the Roman Catholic Church is well described by Dusinberre: "If God created a

[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., p. 58.
[69] Dusinberre, p. 78.
[70] Ibid., p. 87.

partnership in Eden, He must have allowed freedom of conscience to both halves".[71] Thus, it should logically follow that education ought to be equal for men and women.

Intellectuals of the early modern period like Roger Ascham saw education as an instrument to achieve virtue, as previously stated. In particular, with regard to female education, they saw it as a tool for the personal improvement of women, with a consequent positive impact on the upbringing of their children, hence of the future English society, as Dusinberre reported.[72] But by keeping women once again within the limits of a family context, the broader image of female equality and liberty outside the domestic sphere seems a long way to go. Living inside a patriarchal society, women remained overshadowed by the husband's figure. The words of Jardine are poignant to describe this situation: "the characteristics of humanism which opened its pursuit to women made it unsuitable as a means of consciousness-rising. In fact, one is tempted to conclude exactly the opposite: that humanist education conveniently distracted able women from any studies which might have led them to notice that change was opening up possibilities for emancipation in social and political fields".[73]

In fact, there had previously been premonitory signs concerning the issue of greater individual freedom for women. One such example is the life of Isotta Nogarola, who was born in Verona in 1418 to Leonardo and Bianca Borromeo from Padua. Their family was one of the most eminent, and all of the members, apart from the mother who was illiterate, received a moral and cultural education [74]. Isotta did not marry, but she decided to continue a scholarly path, which led her to a rather unusual life, differing from the cliché of women of that time in Italy. Lauro Quirini, an exponent of Venetian humanism in both its political and pedagogical aspect, wrote of her that "the greatest praise is justly bestowed upon you, illustrious Isotta, because you have overcome, as one might say, your own nature".[75] In these lines a tendency to degrade the efforts of a female scholar are evident: as Jardine argued, Isotta's highest award was "to overcome woman's

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[71] Dusinberre, pp. 86-7.
[72] Ibid., p. 208.
[73] Jardine, p. 52.
[74] Lorenzo Carpanè, 'NOGAROLA, Isotta in "Dizionario Biografico"', 2013 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/isotta-nogarola_(Dizionario-Biografico)> [accessed 4 October 2023].
[75] Jardine, pp. 56-7.

essential nature, to become *other* than woman".[76] A woman is virtuous only when the goals she pursues are socially acceptable.

For example, to a virtuous woman the pursuit of rhetorical studies (ethic-political studies related to the *vita civile*) is not her concern, because Quirini's view states firmly that "the woman of fluent speech (*eloquentem*) is never chaste".[77] Here we are again in front of an intellectual verdict that consigns Isotta to marginality, and as Grafton and Jardine observed, "because she could not enter the public arena, by virtue of her sex, [she] withdrew […] to the nearest thing she could contrive to a secular cloister – her 'book-lined cell'".[78] For the reason of being excessive articulated in her speech because of her knowledge, she was accused of being indecorous and even promiscuous. This view of humanist educators reached England during the early modern period and influenced generations of scholars and historians of humanism, as Grafton and Jardine asserted.[79]

Moving back to England's society, it is with no doubt that these findings indicate that the attainment of a consideration of women as individuals still had to be achieved, so much so that only upper-class women could consider themselves accepted:

> The upper-class girl shared her brothers' Latin and Greek tutor, while middle-class girls were barred from grammar school; the aristocratic lady fought off the Roundheads and held the manor together in her husband's absence, while the middle-class wife was debarred from the weavers' guild. The aristocracy gave England a queen who reigned as one of the nation's greatest monarchs; the middle class could boast no lady mayor of London.[80]

Middle-class women received a basic education and, as Woodbridge's results showed, the English lower class was unable to bring its rights to the fore. In conclusion, along the same lines, Greenblatt and Logan consistently argued that the reality of women's social life during Tudor England was a controlled and often repressed one, and "the relatively

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[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., p. 57.
[78] Grafton and Jardine, p. 45.
[79] Grafton and Jardine, p. 34-5.
[80] Woodbridge, pp. 54-5.

few dissenting voices were vastly outnumbered by those writers who cited alleged scriptural, medical, moral, historical, and philosophical 'proofs' of male superiority".[81]

1.3 Women and Early Modern Drama

1.3.1 Early Modern Theatrical Plays and Their Impact on Society

The effect of humanism on literature came to England as a very slow wave. Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard earl of Surrey introduced the Petrarchan sonnet in their printed anthology of poems *Tottel's Songs and Sonnets* published only in 1557, almost two centuries after Petrarch first wrote his sonnets. These English courtly poets stylized the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet through their translations into vernacular English without passing through the French language, as was customary at the time; nevertheless, this imitation of Italian poems was not continued. Praz asserted that at the end of the century Thomas Watson and Philip Sidney, two courtiers and the fathers of the Elizabethan sonnet, considered the works of French lyricists to be as popular as the Italian poems.[82]

The study of classical models, on the other hand, continued to circulate in England, using the filter of Italian and French translations. A key aspect to consider is that the literary reception of humanistic works, even when it spread through the social fabric, always concerned very restricted groups belonging to the aristocracy and wealthy upper classes. This exclusive readership effectively represented the cultivated and sophisticated characteristics of sixteenth century literature. The conventional style and the lack of realism in works of literature of that time represented a sign of a growing separation from lower classes of the population who still showed a high percentage of illiteracy. In fact, as Baldi and Zaccaria remind us, literary circulation in the lower classes was almost non-existent.[83]

[81] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 662.
[82] Mario Praz, *Storia Della Letteratura Inglese*, Sansoni Ed. Nuova (Firenze, 1979), pp. 59-60.
[83] Baldi and Zaccaria, p. 80.

It would be useful at this phase to consider the social impact of performances in theatres and street shows in England in the same period. Greenblatt argued that at the beginning of the sixteenth century the English language scarcely had any reputation abroad. Moreover, "there were those at home who doubted that it could serve as a suitable medium for serious, elevated, or elegant discourse".[84] Nevertheless, by the end of the century, an increasing "linguistic self-confidence" developed:[85] England, while still remaining rather peripheral to the continent, saw its vernacular language transformed into an immensely powerful means of expression and communication. Poems, plays, and prose works written by a number of brilliant writers enriched English literature. As it is commonly recognised, the works of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the translators of the Bible, to cite only a few, "continue after more than four centuries to thrill readers".[86]

At this point a clarification is due: the historian Burckhardt defined the Renaissance as an Italian fifteenth-century event, which developed the figure of 'modern man'. Consequently, an innovative spirit of self-conscious construction of individuality developed throughout Europe. If we were to apply this definition to England, during the sixteenth century this country witnessed this change through its literature: Greenblatt in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) saw in fictional characters like Faustus and Hamlet a self-conscious meditation on their own individualities. On this point, as Brotton showed, "they started to look and sound like modern men".[87] In contrast to the book's title, Greenblatt started to use the phrase 'the early modern period' to identify the Renaissance. In Brotton's words, "instead of focusing on how the Renaissance itself looked back to the classical world, 'early modern' suggests that the period involved a forward-looking attitude that prefigured our own modern world".[88] These observations clearly indicate that especially for historians, the term Renaissance has been useful to divide the past into meaningful sections, and indeed continues to be so. But, as Hackett argued, "we need to be mindful of the extent to which it is a later construction, and of the assumptions that underpin it".[89]

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[84] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 485.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., p. 486.
[87] Brotton, p. 16.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Hackett, p. 5.

Returning to the English theatrical plays, during the fifteenth century medieval drama reached its peak. Praz explained that the great cycles of plays with biblical subjects were presented to spectators sometimes in fixed locations, while at other times they were movable, like for example on pageant wagons.[90] Also known as 'mystery plays' (from Latin *ministerium* occupation), they initially were under the control of the church, but later they became a monopoly of guilds: as Hackett showed, "the Shipwrights, for instance, presented the Building of the Ark, while the Bakers presented the Last Supper".[91] Hackett reviewed late fifteenth-century documents that "record some 50 pageants in total […] with over 300 speaking parts in the surviving York text".[92]

Praz, again, draws our attention to the fact that later, during the sixteenth century, the unceasing preponderance of theatre performances prevented the lively part of the English medieval experience from being lost.[93] The development of theatre during this period was also favoured by the new instrument of print, that allowed a dissemination of knowledge and ideas to a larger audience. Drama was already a popular form, and performances in theatres and street shows stimulated a collective participation at different social strata. Since performances were not strictly linked to reading, also the lower classes could enjoy this entertainment. Consequently, theatre appealed to both women and men, and the population would meet inside theatres, experiencing and sharing stories of their society, their pain, and their struggles.

By the mid-sixteenth century, thanks to an extraordinary level of dramaturgy and a flourishing of outstanding writers, the stories performed brought true accounts of political, religious, and cultural themes. English drama therefore, in the words of Hackett, had the role to be "a medium of philosophical reflection upon what it is to be human".[94]

In London, the court relied on public drama companies and Queen Elizabeth, together with her entourage, was determined to defend playwrights from the attacks of the most intransigent Protestants, who considered the theatre immoral. The task of playwrights was to please the more cultured spectators by representing noble characters

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[90] Praz, p. 49.
[91] Hackett, p. 29.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Praz, p. 60.
[94] Hackett, p. 2.

and great historical events, and at the same time to please the popular taste with dreadful deeds, *coups de théâtre* – unexpected events –, and the insertion of comic scenes. Moreover, the drama offered a great opportunity for men "who were not courtiers, or who had not had a university education",[95] to display their talents. In many plays it is often evident the desire of writers to distinguish themselves by demonstrating rhetorical skills. According to Hackett, "a central component of Renaissance education was training in rhetoric – the art of using language effectively, especially for persuasion – and we see this reflected in the work of the dramatists".[96]

The success of these playwrights did not rely upon their connections to the establishment or on "the élitism of poetry, the aristocratic game of literature".[97] On the contrary, it depended on their skill to entertain the people. As noted by Brotton, the public theatre in England "was increasingly based on investment and profit rather than courtly patronage or religious piety, a situation that allowed for increasingly complex and naturalistic representations of society and the individual".[98] Because of its commercial purpose, the theatre forced the playwrights to "leave the hothouse of academic school drama, and of elegant interludes for the court",[99] and meet the general audience. Therefore, many dramatists were in a favourable position for representing the concerns of London society at a time of great changes in society, with issues of most public interest, new activities, and new ideas. It is further observed by Dusinberre that their talent did not always come from a proper education: Shakespeare was a theatre man performing in playhouses, "Jonson was a brick-layer's stepson and his apprentice, and Middleton, whose father was also a brick-layer, struggled through his studies in an Oxford stocked with courtiers",[100] as Dusinberre reported. These dramatists often criticised and condemned court gentlemen, with their extravagant language and their showy appearance. Osric in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600) is a good prototype of the Jacobean spineless courtier, one of the numerous examples of 'water-fly', which indicates a superficial and trivial person:

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[95] Dusinberre, p. 12.
[96] Hackett, p. 3.
[97] Dusinberre, p. 12.
[98] Brotton, p. 120.
[99] Dusinberre, p. 10.
[100] Ibid., p. 12.

HAMLET: Your bonnet to his right use: 'tis for the head.

OSRIC: I thank your lordship, it is very hot.

HAMLET: No, believe me, 'tis very cold; the wind is northerly.

OSRIC: It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.

HAMLET: But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot, or my complexion –

OSRIC: Exceedingly, my lord; it is very sultry, as 'twere- I cannot tell how.

(5.2.79-86)[101]

This dialogue provides a comic moment in the play, and the young courtier appears as the victim of Hamlet's game, who parodies and despises him and his redundant verbosity. In this part one can read Shakespeare's strong scepticism about noblemen and university men in general, such as lawyers, doctors, pedagogues. They were often seen as men who used flattery to win favours, like Osric.

Recent studies, such as *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* by Juliet Dusinberre (1996), noted that during Shakespeare's period of activity, through their writings dramatists condemned and exposed false literary attitudes to women. Shakespeare himself wrote by and for women, supporting them against literary men who imposed stereotypes on them. As Dusinberre showed, to defend women "was to reinforce [the dramatist's] own position and make it stand for positive values",[102] then she continued asserting that "it was really class identification"; in other words, the good middle-class man became the rival of the ethically immoral aristocrat.

Another important aspect of Elizabethan theatre is widely known fact that women were not given any active part. Although plays were speaking of women and their female role, it was not the custom for women to act in it. As is well known, professional companies were composed exclusively of male actors and the female roles were played by young men or boys. Chapter 1 ('Female Roles and Elizabethan Eroticism') of Jardine's book *Still Harping on Women* (1983), argues that the staging of female parts by boys

[101] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Arden Shakespeare (Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 439-40.
[102] Dusinberre, p. 12.

actually "created considerable moral uneasiness".[103] Boy actors who had to disguise themselves by wearing women's clothing, using make-up and cosmetics, created sexually distorted personalities, often considered androgynous: "the sexuality associated with the effeminate boy […] is that of Hermaphrodite".[104]

In Shakespeare's lifetime middle-class women started to express their feelings, to speak out their ideas, and to make their voice heard. Dusinberre is of the opinion that women did not learn Latin as Shakespeare did, however they "were less silent than they had been fifty years earlier, and more to be reckoned with".[105] There was a perceived need to give women a proper representative space. Shakespeare in many of his plays represented female characters, both fictional and real, with their difficulties, enabling them to get a just consideration in a male world. As it appears in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), the English bard brought to the audience another important controversy of that time:

> PORTIA: If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree: such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me, the word 'choose!' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.
>
> (1.2.12-21)[106]

Portia in her discourse claims that there are many restrictive rules that women must follow, however it is not easy to put them into practice. Shakespeare, through the role of Portia, brought to the audience another important controversy of that time: the dilemma that every woman of that period faced, that of being free to act as she wished or being forced to follow her father's instructions. The figure of Portia highlights women's needs to rebel against their fathers' will, in order to assert their ideas. To achieve her affirmation,

[103] Jardine, p. 9.
[104] Ibid., p. 17.
[105] Dusinberre, p. 213.
[106] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Penguin Classics, 2005), p. 12.

Portia is forced to transgress the rules, going so far as to disguise herself as a male. While at the beginning Portia denounces the inertia imposed on her by her father, ('the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father'), in the last act she takes on a double role: she disguises herself as a male lawyer in order to express and demonstrate her intellectual faculties, this being the only way she has to be heard.

CHAPTER 2: Padua and the Theatre of Education: William Shakespeare's *Shrew*

2.1 Padua City of Education for English Scholars

> Allowing that the honour of being home to the scientific revolution might be said to belong to one single place, that place is Padua.
>
> (H. Butterfield, 1958)

It is now well established and familiar "the course of the [cultural] currents that have flowed for so many years between [Italy] and England".[107] The connection between the English sixteenth century and the Italian fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is evident if we consider the influence of the classical and Italian culture and literature on the European Renaissance. In this first section, a description of the cultural and environmental characteristics of northern Italy that English travellers and scholars brought back home as result of their many travels is presented. The relevance of English reports on such experiences are also highlighted.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Roger Ascham's vision of moral decorum and education condemned Italian travel and the 'Englishman Italianated':

> He . . . bringeth home into England out of Italie, the Religion, the learning, the policie, the experience, the maners of Italie. That is to say, for Religion, Papistrie or worse.[108]

In his writings, Ascham took back to England a miserable vision of his trip to Italy characterized by the absence of moral decorum, and he warned his fellow countrymen against the "enchantments of Circe brought out of Italy". [109] In Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe used magic to first enthral Ulysses' men, and then change them into swine. Therefore, the peninsula appeared as Circe's court itself in his *The Schoolmaster*. As a result, an Englishman who travelled there would come back to his homeland "Italianato, e un

[107] A. C. Krey, 'Padua in the English Renaissance', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 10.2 (1947), pp. 129–34 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3815641>.
[108] Levith, p. 41.
[109] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 644.

diabolo incarnato".[110] Ascham was certain that the people from Italy had "in more reverence, the triumphes of Petrarche: than the Genesis of Moses".[111]

By contrast, there were also those travellers who claimed that their travel experience in Italy was positive. Fynes Moryson (1566-1630) gave an important contribution with his observations on Italy in his book *An Itinerary* (1617). As Levith reported, Moryson wanted to do "a sociological survey of the civilised world of his time".[112] As if in opposition to Ascham's view, he wrote:

> Surely many fall into vices abroad, but more at home; many returning from forraigne parts, after they have abroad satisfied their disordinate appetites, by giving youth his swinge [...] doe at home cast off their vices, and returne to the old bounds of shamefastnesse, which at home they never violated; adding to their old vertues the luster of forraigne ornaments.[113]

Along with the description of various countries, when Moryson reached Northern Italy, he praised the many famous physicians who were also surgeons in the Veneto region.[114] He was referring in particular to the University of Padua – also called '*Studium* generale' –, where public anatomy lectures were very successful during that period.

Another early traveller was Thomas Coryat (c. 1577-1617), "son of the Rector of Odcombe, in Somerset".[115] With the title of *Coryat's Crudities, Hastily Gobbled up in Five Months' Travels* (1611), his book gave an account of a 1608 visit to Italy. Coryat carefully recorded everything he saw in each destination of his journey. He described forks, umbrellas, and even the fashion among women of going topless. He recounted a visit to a courtesan, assuring the reader that it was done "for purely academic reasons".[116] He also listed foreign foods that caught his taste, such as fried frogs. At that time, as Del

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[110] Levith, p. 6.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid., p. 41.
[114] Giuseppe Trebbi, 'Le professioni liberali. Storia di Venezia', *Treccani*, 1996 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/le-professioni-liberali_%28Storia-di-Venezia%29/, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/le-professioni-liberali_%28Storia-di-Venezia%29/> [accessed 23 December 2023].
[115] Douglas Guthrie, 'Harvey In Space And Time', *The British Medical Journal*, 1.5018 (1957), pp. 575–79.
[116] Levith, p. 6.

Negro (1994) observes, Venice's gondolas were a reason for surprise and amazement: these boats were judged to be the most beautiful ever seen; furthermore, Coryat considered them a valid alternative to the better-known means of transport like horses or carriages.[117] The part of his book dedicated to Padua only briefly mentions the university and its students of different countries. Coryat observed:

> When the number of the Students is full, there are at the least one thousand five hundred here : the principall faculties that are professed in the University, being physicke and the civill law : and more students of forraine and remote nations doe live in Padua, then in any one University of Christendome. For hither come in, many from France, high Germany, the Netherlands, England, &c. who with great desire flocke together to Padua for good letters sake, as to a fertile nursery, and sweete emporium and mart town of learning. For indeed it hath bred many famous and singular learned men.[118]

This description of the University is interesting, although it highlights above all its international relevance for scientific and legal studies, without a word about medical studies. At any rate, these early findings match contemporary surveys, such as that conducted by Maria Beatrice Autizi: in her volume *L'Università di Padova*, she suggested that, during the course of the sixteenth century, scientific studies at the University progressed so much that Padua became the centre of the scientific renaissance.[119]

It is also worth recognizing that, in addition to scientific studies, Padua was also appreciated in legal studies – divided in civil and canon law. A large number of Englishmen in the sixteenth century "attended the Paduan law school, and emerged from it to become political counsellors, privy councillors, diplomats, and secretaries, and advocates in the conciliar and ecclesiastical courts of the Tudor polity".[120] Compiling an

[117] Piero Del Negro, 'Lo sguardo su Venezia e la sua società: viaggiatori, osservatori politici. Storia di Venezia (1994)', *Treccani*, 1994 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lo-sguardo-su-venezia-e-la-sua-societa-viaggiatori-osservatori-politici_(Storia-di-Venezia)/> [accessed 28 December 2023].

[118] Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities : Hastily Gobled up in Five Moneths Travells in France, Savoy, Italy, Rhetia Commonly Called the Grisons Country, Helvetia Alias Switzerland, Some Parts of High Germany and the Netherlands : Newly Digested in the Hungry Aire of Odcombe in the County of Somerset, and Now Dispersed to the Nourishment of the Travelling Members of This Kingdome v.1* (Glasgow : J. MacLehose and Sons, 1905) <http://archive.org/details/coryatscrudities01coryuoft> [accessed 1 May 2023], pp. 297-98.

[119] Maria Beatrice Autizi, 'Il Seicento. Dallo splendore alla decadenza', in *L'Università di Padova* (Treviso: Editoriale Programma, 2022), p. 69.

[120] Jonathan Woolfson, *Padua and the Tudors: English Students in Italy, 1485-1603* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1998), p. 41.

impressive biographical register of English visitors to Padua, Jonathan Woolfson extensively explored archives and finally published *Padua and the Tudors: English Students in Italy, 1485-1603* a significant book of intellectual history.

In 1405, Padua lost its independence and was subdued to Venice, and until 1797 was part of the Serenissima Republic, that later "enlarged the University with privileges and many ornaments",[121] as Moryson wrote in his *An Itinerary*. In the period of the Serenissima Republic, Paduan students of law collaborated with the Venetian government, often offering legal advice. These students "sometimes acted as official legal counsellors for the Republic".[122] This college of jurists was also consulted by other institutions of the peninsula and the prestige of its judgments, as Woolfson noted, became well-established even abroad as "a source of interpretation [and validation] of European law".[123]

It is well-known that Henry VIII requested a legal consultation to the University of Padua regarding his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The procedures established by the college required the approval of the Venetian government, because this was an international issue which concerned a monarchy, and in this case the Serenissima Republic did not approve the king's request. Therefore, the resolution of this important affair ended up in a cul-de-sac, even though a judgment in favour was produced in Padua. Richard Croke, Henry VIII's agent in Padua, wrote about the pronouncement by the college of jurists in November 1530: "as yet there is nothing done *collegialiter* … All the college would gladly determine with your highness, wer[e it not for] fear of the Senate which hath commanded the contrary".[124]

If in the second chapter of Woolfson's book, titled 'Students of Law', the focus is on the importance of the legislative rules that were used in England. The third chapter refers to English students who belonged to the faculties of medicine and natural philosophy: these two subjects played an even more important role in English society and in addition they "had a central importance in humanist learning".[125] In fact, the University

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[121] Levith, p. 42.
[122] Woolfson, p. 41.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Woolfson, p. 42.
[125] Woolfson, p. 73.

of Padua was particularly renowned as a medical school and among the most important Englishmen who studied there, was John Caius. As noted by Levith, the Cambridge College was named after him, and Edward VI and Mary and Elizabeth had Caius as their personal doctor.[126]

Another important student was Thomas Linacre (1460-1524): it is said that he was the only Englishman, until the 1520s, to achieve a level of classical erudition comparable to that of his Italian contemporaries.[127] According to Mario Praz and other scholars,[128] Linacre brought back to Oxford innovations in the medical practice and left many revised translations of Galen – a Roman-Greek physician, surgeon and philosopher of the second century – who had the merit of reaching a considerable European audience and "had a major role in the sixteenth-century transformation of European medicine".[129] In 1523, he became tutor to Princess Mary, the future Mary I, as reported by Autizi.[130] Even today, on the first floor of the ancient Renaissance courtyard of Palazzo Bo there is an entrance to a room with some portraits of famous foreign students, including Linacre and Harvey. It is interesting to note that on an architrave at the entrance to the famous anatomy theatre, one can read the inscription HIERONYMO FABRICIO AB AQUAPENDENTE XXX IAM ANNOS ANATOM. PROFESSOR. This important teacher of anatomy in 1594 supported the inauguration of the first permanent anatomy theatre, and in the words of Monica Panetto and Fabio Zampieri,[131] for many centuries the anatomy room became a 'laboratory room' – aula-laboratorio –, the site of fundamental discoveries in the medical field. The lessons held by Girolamo Fabrici d'Acquapendente had a great influence on another important English scholar: William Harvey (1578-1657).

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[126] Levith, p. 42.
[127] Woolfson, p. 39.
[128] Roberto Almagia and others, 'INGHILTERRA in "Enciclopedia Italiana"', 1933 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/inghilterra_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)> [accessed 19 July 2023].
[129] Woolfson, p. 40.
[130] Maria Beatrice Autizi, 'Il Seicento. Dallo splendore alla decadenza', in *L'Università di Padova* (Treviso: Editoriale Programma, 2022), p. 61.
[131] Fabio Zampieri and Monica Panetto, 'La scienza nascosta nei luoghi di Padova: il teatro anatomico', *Il Bo Live UniPD*, 2018 <http://ilbolive.unipd.it/it/news/scienza-nascosta-nei-luoghi-padova-teatro> [accessed 3 January 2024].

3. Architrave by Andrea Moroni, C. 1547-88

Harvey was a pupil of Acquapendente and afterwards he became professor in Padua. To Harvey we are indebted for the discovery of the circulatory system governed by the heart.[132] In his early 17th-century work *De Motu Cordis*, he first described the circulation of blood. An interesting observation is that of A. C. Krey, who in his article *Padua in the English Renaissance* wrote:

> The fact that Thomas Linacre at the beginning, John Caius in the middle, and William Harvey at the end of the sixteenth century – perhaps the three most distinguished physicians of England – all obtained their medical training at Padua provokes the obvious inference that there must have been many other English scholars who also studied there.[133]

[132] Autizi, p. 70.
[133] Krey.

William Harvey, a younger contemporary of William Shakespeare and the traveller Tom Coryat, is a living testimony of the importance of the University of Padua as the centre of the scientific renaissance. Harvey's expertise in science was requested by Charles I (1600-1649), son of James I, when a hunt of the Pendle witches broke out in Lancashire in 1634. At that time in England the expansion of commerce transformed more and more ordinary life; the importance of material goods became more important than humanistic ideals that were promoting virtue. The clerics responded by claiming that the future of humankind depended on the importance given to immaterial goods, and that the spiritual part of man needed to be cultivated.[134] "Exorcism was a key area for puritans and Jesuits to make rival claims to unique dispensation of divine power".[135] This provoked a hunt for witches and heretics. People accused to be possessed by demons – such as hysterics, frauds, and women accused of witchcraft – were pointed as targets, and Harvey was commissioned by Charles I to examine those charged. In the case of the Pendle witches, Harvey was asked to oversee the examination of four women accused of witchcraft. The presumed evidence for considering someone to be a witch was well known. Harvey applied this evidence but nothing of interest emerged from the examination, because he interpreted it in an entirely natural manner, using a scientific point of view. These four women were rightly discharged. If Harvey had been an advocate of witchcraft, he could easily have given a different interpretation, in order to accuse them of witchcraft. Harvey's relevance as a physician is evident in his use of scientific knowledge for the purpose to provide a rational interpretation at a time when lack of virtue resulted in accusations against women.

As Woolfson asserted, foreign travel was becoming an educational tradition and also "a rite of passage for the young and self-consciously English gentleman, and the literature which it generated was another 'form of nationhood'".[136] Therefore, these English visitors had the merit of bringing back not only the medical-scientific and cultural knowledge acquired in foreign countries, but, as we can read in Coryat's book, also the description of the cultural environment and its characteristics. Coryat, as Guthrie

[134] Harold J. Cook, 'Victories for Empiricism, Failures for Theory: Medicine and Science in the Seventeenth Century', in *The Body as Object and Instrument of Knowledge: Embodied Empiricism in Early Modern Science*, ed. by Charles T. Wolfe and Ofer Gal, Studies in History and Philosophy of Science (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2010), XXV <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-3686-5>, p. 12.

[135] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft : A Very Short Introduction*, Very short introductions, 2010, p. 59.

[136] Woolfson, p. 124.

reported, travelled the same route as Harvey and "records the prevalence of brigands and advises all travellers to carry a stout stick".[137]

2.1.1 The Venetian influence on 16th-Century Padua and English Scholars

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, from the first decades of the fifteenth century the University of Padua but also the city itself benefited from privileges and many architectural enhancements under the rule of Venice, as noted by the traveller Fynes Moryson. Essentially, a sort of monopoly of higher education was established in the Venetian territory, with the University of Padua as its central point.

The other surrounding cities such as Treviso, Vicenza, and Verona abandoned any ambition to establish their own university, primarily because Venice imposed a rule to its citizens prohibiting the attendance at any northern Italian university other than Padua, threatening severe fines to those who did not observe it. This can be defined as a true Venetian academic protectionism towards the University of Padua. One of the most peculiar privileges described by Levith was applied for a student accused of murder in Padua; this student was merely given the penalty of banishment from the University and the expulsion from the city.[138] Another benefit Padua gained was a military protection that Venice provided: Renaissance walls surrounding its perimeter fitted with gates that are still visible, in part, today.

In 'Padua in the English Renaissance', Krey asserted that Venice, being the only autonomous Italian state left, "was the residuary legatee of the whole Italian Renaissance".[139] Since the city was famous for its commercial and maritime traditions and expertise, a multitude of people of different geographical backgrounds and religions were free to visit and stay there. Not only did scholars, artists, and craftsmen from all over Italy go to Venice, but foreigners from different parts of Europe were also passing

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[137] Guthrie, p. 576.

[138] Murray J. Levith, *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays* (Basingstoke, London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 42.

[139] Krey, p. 133.

through. They contributed to the promotion abroad of the artistic beauty and the cultural heritage of the place.

At the same time, the cultural and scientific relevance and the international atmosphere of the University of Padua were being recognized. Thanks to the freedom of thought that this educational environment offered, Protestant Englishmen from Shakespeare's period were allowed to study in Padua, like their Catholic predecessors such as Linacre. Linacre, after all, was not only a translator and physician, but also a priest of the Roman Catholic Church.[140] John Caius (1510-73) also came to Padua to study for a doctorate in medicine. During this period, he taught philosophy, and he established numerous contacts with other scholars during his travels in search of medical manuscripts. He became "a formidable hunter of Galenic texts and emendator of the Galenic corpus"[141] throughout Italy. Caius is known for his annotations and publications on Galen. His notes and suggestions demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of Greek. He also commented on the work *De humani corporis fabrica* of 1543 written by the great anatomist Andreas Vesalius.[142] Caius is considered part of the illustrious medical tradition of Padua and the developments in practical medicine.

2.2 Padua and the Sciences in the 16th Century

Overall, these cases of Englishmen studying in Padua demonstrate the relevance of Padua for "good letters sake, as to a fertile nursery, and sweete emporium and mart town of learning",[143] as Coryat wrote in *Coryat's Crudities*, using very similar words to William Shakespeare in his *The Taming of the Shrew*:

> Tranio, since for the great desire I had
>
> **To see fair Padua, nursery of arts,**

[140] William D. Sharpe, 'Thomas Linacre, 1460-1524: An English Physician Scholar of the Renaissance', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 34.3 (1960), p. 233.

[141] Jonathan Woolfson, *Padua and the Tudors: English Students in Italy, 1485-1603* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1998), p. 137.

[142] Vivian Nutton, 'John Caius and the Eton Galen: Medical Philology in the Renaissance', *Medizinhistorisches Journal*, 20.3 (1985), p. 248.

[143] Coryat.

I am arriv'd for fruitful Lombardy,

The pleasant garden of great Italy, . . .

Here let us breathe and haply institute

A course of learning and ingenious studies . . .

Tell me thy mind, for I have Pisa left

And am to Padua come, as he that leaves

A shallow plash to plunge him in the deep,

And with satiety seeks to quench his thirst.

(1.1.1-24)[144] (my emphasis in bold)

In this passage positioned at the very beginning of the play, right after the *Induction*, Shakespeare sets the arrival of Lucentio and Tranio in Padua, describing the impressions, feelings and emotions that a young foreigner experiences when arriving in a great city. The 'arts' Shakespeare refers to are not painting or sculpture, but rather the seven liberal arts: Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric, along with Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy. Interestingly, as Levith noted in his *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays*, "like Shakespeare's Lucentio, the great Galileo left the confining atmosphere of Pisa for Padua".[145] This ingenious and evocative description of these two universities creates a curious parallel between the career of Galileo, Shakespeare's contemporary, and one of the main characters in the play; Galileo left the rigid atmosphere of Pisa, his first university, for Padua, where he lived and worked with considerably more freedom for 18 years.

The scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) gave his lectures in the Great Hall of Palazzo Bo, teaching Mathematics, Physics, and Mechanics; therefore, he explored the physical world with an innovative approach called the quantitative method. This method could be applied to the *quadrivium* (Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy) but also to Medicine. Galileo also had the merit of consolidating the heliocentric theory in his book *Sidereus Nuncius* (1610) published in Latin in Padua. In Elizabethan England, Ptolemy's geocentric theory was still in use, with the Earth at the centre and the Sun and

[144] William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. by Barbara Hodgdon, 3rd, The Arden Shakespeare (Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 159-61.

[145] Levith, p. 42.

the seven planets revolving around it. Astrology was still considered a science and the other occult sciences, such as alchemy, numerology, and magic, were largely followed.[146] Galileo's astronomical theories and discoveries had the effect of disrupting the order of Elizabethan society, inspiring John Donne to observe: "[T]is all in pieces, all coherence gone".[147] Galileo used Latin as an ever-present and commonplace language, spoken among a large number of people across Europe and even beyond. As Knight and Tilg observed, "by the time Erasmus was writing his Colloquies and Shakespeare his comedies Latin had been a paradigmatic world language for well over a millennium".[148] While on one hand vernacular languages were gaining importance, on the other Latin was still the only international language of early modern Europe.

In England the universities of Oxford and Cambridge offered a rather narrow formal curriculum, but there was a wide range of additional intellectual and literary activity, in which classical writers were widely present.[149] By contrast, the University of Padua, under the protection of the Venetian state, offered an intellectual environment that was free from the religious repression imposed by the Catholic Church, "the University was an intellectual island in a stormy sea of general intolerance".[150] As a consequence, abroad the University of Padua developed a certain fame also for science,[151] particularly in the field of medicine. In conclusion, during Elizabeth's reign a trip to Italy from England had the purpose to enrich a courtier's knowledge. Like Lucentio and his personal servant Tranio, young men went abroad to complete an education, as *The Taming of the Shrew* exemplifies.

2.3 The Setting of *The Taming of the Shrew*

As has been evidenced so far, a most probable reason why Shakespeare set the comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* in Northern Italy is because of the popularity of the place for

[146] Mark A. Senn, 'Shakespeare and the Land Law in His Life and Works', *Real Property, Trust and Estate Law Journal*, 48.1 (2013), p. 116.
[147] Ibid., p. 116.
[148] Sarah Knight and Stefan Tilg, 'Latin: The Renaissance's World Language', *OUPblog*, 2016 <https://blog.oup.com/2016/03/latin-renaissance-world-language/> [accessed 19 July 2023].
[149] Hackett, pp. 8-9.
[150] Levith, p. 42.
[151] Woolfson, p. 4.

Englishmen. The play that will now be the object of analysis opens in the first act with a high praise of Padua, designating it, as seen above, as a 'nursery of arts'. In this part the Bard's admiration for the university is evident: such a remark was not written by him for any other university, not even Oxford or Cambridge,[152] as Krey has noted. Since it does not appear that he himself was a student in Italy, this homage to the University of Padua would seem to imply that the educated world of England of his time had a thorough knowledge of both contemporary Italy and Padua in particular.[153]

Shakespeare, as he does with his other Italian settings, addresses Padua in a generic way with Lucentio's observation when he arrives to "fruitful Lombardy, / The pleasant garden of great Italy". The sources here are not clear, but this proverb might be indebted to Florio's *Second Frutes* (1591); it seems likely that Shakespeare's knowledge of northern Italy came from reading John Florio's collections, standard knowledge for many intellectual Englishmen where the Italian proverb "Lombardie is the garden of the world" appears.[154] Coryat himself wrote about that part of the country using similar words: "as Italy is the garden of the World, so is Lombardy the garden of Italy".[155] Coryat is also particularly generous with his description of the city of Padua. He describes it as a paradise, admiring the flat region in which it is situated.[156]

In the comedy, Shakespeare also mentions the city of Pisa twice, but he omits a description of its artistic beauties such as, for instance, the characteristic leaning towers. Rather, he focuses on portraying its citizens as "grave" (1.1.10; 4.2.95). Another setting that appears in the play concerns the city of Verona, which Shakespeare treats generically: he does not mention the famous amphitheatre and he leaves out the river that runs through the city. He prefers to address it in a short passage, defining it merely with the adjective "old" (1.2.49), even though Moryson, well known at the time for his work *An Itinerary*, used poetic images to describe Verona. Moryson describes it as "built in the forme of a Lute, the necke whereof lies towards the West, on which side the River Athesis ... doth

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[152] Krey, p. 132.
[153] Ibid., p. 132.
[154] Jason Lawrence, *Who the Devil Taught Thee so Much Italian?: Italian Language Learning and Literary Imitation in Modern England* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University press, 2005), p. 121.
[155] Coryat, p. 384.
[156] Coryat, p. 274.

not only compasse the City, but runs almost through the center of the body of this Lute", and he speaks of the "many ruines of an old Theater" and the "wall of bricke",[157] that surrounded the city itself.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare sets the scene in the city of Padua, but he does not include detailed descriptions of places. In this work he shows that his limited knowledge of the Italian territory's geography is similar to that of contemporary plays like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. *The Taming of the Shrew* is generally believed to have been written a year or two before *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, but its context discloses a considerable effort to use Italian source materials and to combine them with the language and the literary traditions of the foreign country,[158] as asserted by Lawrence in his book *'Who the devil taught thee so much Italian?'*.

The Italian territory had a specific function for Shakespeare. As a foreign country, it fed the imagination of his fellow countrymen as it was a place of interest for Englishmen. As already mentioned, the translations of Italian books became very influential in England. Therefore, Italian fashion and its culture were followed and imitated. In addition, Italy was the home of Machiavelli and the Pope, as written in Levith,[159] but it was also considered a country with one of the most modern civilisations of the time, and one of the most advanced societies. Levith observed that "in politics and warfare, science and technology, finance, banking and commerce, art, music, and literature, Italy was the leader".[160] For Shakespeare, Northern Italy became a mirror of the England of his time. In his plays, Italian cities possess details of his home territory: for instance, as Levith demonstrated, the river in Verona, could well be the Thames in London. Although "there are 'alehouses' not wine cellars in Shakespeare's Italy",[161] spectators will see that wine, a typical Italian drink, is also mentioned in the play. In the scene that follows Katherina and Petruccio's wedding, for instance, Gremio anxiously

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[157] Levith, p. 44.

[158] Jason Lawrence, *Who the Devil Taught Thee so Much Italian?: Italian Language Learning and Literary Imitation in Modern England* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University press, 2005), 123.

[159] Levith, p. 4.

[160] Ibid., pp. 4-5.

[161] Ibid., p. 11.

describes what happened during the ceremony and gives an impression of Petruccio's behaviour who asks for wine:

> . . . But after many ceremonies done
>
> He calls for wine. 'A health,' quoth he, as if
>
> He had been aboard, carousing to his mates
>
> After a storm; quaffed off the muscadel
>
> And threw the sops all in the sexton's face . . .
>
> (3.2.168-72)[162]

Wine, in comparison to beer, was indeed considered a drink consumed by the more upper-class population.

2.4 The Sources of the *Shrew*

When Shakespeare wrote *The Shrew* around 1589, he was about twenty-five years old, and his literary heritage was not as large as it would later become. He had come to London from Stratford and Brian Morris, editor of the 1981 Arden edition of *The Taming of The Shrew*, assumed that he had not yet achieved a solid reputation to attract public interest.[163] This supposition might be closer than others to the true story of the authorship of *The Shrew*. Nonetheless, the question of attribution remains to this day tricky.

What is certain about the play is little: it first appeared in print in the Folio of 1623; the subplot (the 'Bianca plot') of the anonymous *A Shrew* and the Shakespearean *The Shrew* had George Gascoigne's Supposes (performed in 1566) as main literary source.[164] This theory is reinforced by Lucentio's words "while counterfeit supposes bleared thine eyne" (5.1.108), which is clearly an allusion to Ariosto's *I Suppositi*, later translated by

[162] Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, p. 235.

[163] Brian Morris, 'Introduction', in *The Taming of the Shrew*, by William Shakespeare, 2nd, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 65.

[164] A translation of Ariosto's *I Suppositi* (1509).

Gascoigne. The so-called 'suppositi' are deceitful people, acting under false identities, or as stated in Gascoigne's title, "false assumptions of identity, impersonations".[165]

However, the question of attributing the authorship of *The Shrew* remained unresolved for a long time. The debate was about the doubt that the original work could merely be an anonymous text. At present, there are some editorial scenarios concerning this issue that offer three different answers to these questions. In the introductory part of 2010 Arden edition, Barbara Hodgdon wrote that over the course of time numerous editors outlined different possible scenarios for the question of the text attribution. From Hodgdon's selective history three assumptions appear: Shakespeare was inspired by the anonymous play *The Shrew*, but since Shakespeare for a short time remained himself an anonymous author, he could possibly be the author of both plays. The second assumption suggests that Shakespeare's *The Shrew* is the original play, while *A Shrew* remains a mere copy. Following this theory, they could both derive from a further Shakespearean text of which there is no trace. In the third assumption, the text *A Shrew* represents a record of a previous theatrical performance. As Hodgdon noted, "*A Shrew* has been considered to represent (a) a report of *The Shrew* made by members of the Queen's Men, with or without a writer's assistance (Honigmann, 'Lost'; Morris, 46); (b) a 'derivative text dependent on *The Shrew* but . . . rewritten more extensively (especially in the subplot) than is usually the case with memorially reconstructed texts' (Thompson, 182); or (c) a memorial reconstruction and thorough adaptation of *The Shrew* (Miller, 11)".[166]

This brief but informative account presents a complicated textual debate about the sources of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Yet there is now wide consensus that the choice of the Paduan setting is a consequence of the special qualities and especially the popularity of the university environment. Gascoigne's play was set in Ferrara, while the anonymous *A Shrew* was set in Athens, a city linked to the classical era of the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato. If it is true that *The Shrew* followed Ariosto's play, Shakespeare probably used the characteristics of these two locations – Ferrara in Italy and Athens in Greece – in order to shuffle his playing cards and to create a play set in the city

[165] Barbara Hodgdon, 'Commentary to The Taming of the Shrew', in *The Taming of the Shrew*, by William Shakespeare, 3rd, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 289n.

[166] Barbara Hodgdon, 'Introduction', in *The Taming of The Shrew*, by William Shakespeare, 3rd, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 20.

of Padua, appropriate to the popular taste of his audience. Thus, he enriched his comedy both with an Italian flavour, of great interest in his times, and with concepts and precepts of the classical education and culture.

R. Warwick Bond in his account of 'Other Sources' gave a list of texts that showed similar events to Shakespeare's play, but he mainly focussed his hypotheses upon an old prose writing entitled *The ancient, true and admirable history of Patient Grisel*.[167] This was for him a probable source of inspiration, because the character of Griselda was commonly known as a model of wifely obedience. The story of this patient woman appears in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1348-51), in ballads and tracts, and in England her fame seems to date as far back as Shakespeare's period: to indicate a calm, gentle, and compliant woman, it seems that the name Grissel was used, just like the story's protagonist. However, Bond, at the end of his examination, "stood on the uncertainty principle",[168] without establishing a specific source for *The Shrew*.

H. B. Charlton in his *Shakespearian Comedy* (1938) observed that in many Shakespeare's plays a fundamental contribution derived from Italian comedies comes into view.[169] At that time, Italian literature was admired, and Roman comedy was respected at an academic degree. Given this situation, there were nevertheless not many English comedies based on the model of Italian plays; therefore, *The Shrew* had the advantage of being a new, unconventional, and fashionable work. Shakespeare shaped both traditional and popular English dramaturgy by enriching it with classical and foreign influences, which were more socially valued. For this reason, he presented a plot in which the theme of the domestication of a woman is related to an Italian context, where the characters have Italian names, and the setting is a city on the Italian peninsula. The title of the play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, seems directly connected to the fashionable and controversial theme of the rights and duties of marriage and to the debate on the social position of married

[167] Brian Morris, 'Introduction', in *The Taming of the Shrew*, by William Shakespeare, 2nd, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 69-70. For further research, read *The Taming of the Shrew* 1904 Arden ed.

[168] Barbara Hodgdon, 'Introduction', in *The Taming of The Shrew*, by William Shakespeare, 3rd, The Arden Shakespeare (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 21.

[169] Morris, p. 111.

women. Adding an Italian atmosphere, Shakespeare made his play modern and more subtle.

It would be useful at this stage to consider the structure and the plot of the play: the opening act, called ‘Induction’, shows the drunken beggar Christopher Sly on a moor. He is fooled and ridiculed by a lord and his servants, as they let him believe to be a nobleman, calling him your honour. Sly accepts his higher status only when he is introduced to his wife. He is presented with two dreams: the dream of being a lord and the dream of Petruccio who attempts to tame Katherina, or *The Taming of the Shrew*. The main play has two storylines with parallel narratives that are closely connected with each other. The general plot of Shakespeare's play can be outlined as follows: Baptista Minola is a rich gentleman of Padua with two daughters. Katherina, the first-born, has such a terrible temperament that she is referred to as ‘the shrew’; Bianca, the pretty second daughter, seems more obedient to her father’s will. Baptista presses the shrew to marry before her sister. Petruccio, a wealthy young man, decides to marry her. Both his father and his friends warn him against the shrew’s behaviour, but the young man is nevertheless determined to marry her.

Petruccio shows extravagant manners: he arrives late for the wedding, riding on a small infirm horse, and dressed in bizarre garments. He demands to leave immediately at the very end of the ceremonies, with the bride also mounted on horseback, and not inside a carriage. On the way home the bride falls off her horse into a muddy ground, and the bridegroom strikes one of his servants for this. At home the husband never ceases to outwit her. Through a series of actions, the groom leads his spouse to moderate her temper. He deprives her of food and clothing, arguing that she deserves more and that nothing is good enough for her. Later, on the way back to Padua, in order to meet the bride’s father, the man forces his wife to agree that the sun is the moon, that the time of day differs from the real time, and that an old man they cross on the street is not an old man, but a young woman.

The subplot, intertwined with the first, shows Lucentio, a young student, who travels to Padua with his servant to study at the university there. However, he meets Bianca, the shrew's sister, and falls in love with her, but he cannot court her until her older sister marries. Lucentio devises a solution: he disguises himself as a tutor in order to

approach and woo her. Other suitors attempt to woo Bianca, but in the end the competition is won by the disguised young man who reveals his true identity.

At the end, the father of the two daughters holds a feast. After their meal, the couples tease and entertain one another, then the husbands decide to make a bet on who has the most obedient wife. The three wives exit the scene and when each husband calls his bride, she needs “To come at first when he doth send for her” (5.2.69).[170] Petruccio, husband of the domesticated shrew, wins, because Katherina returns immediately, throws her cap to the floor, makes the other wives come back to the feast hall, tells the women the proper duties of a wife, and in the end kisses her husband.

2.4.1 Other Sources and Educational Aspects

As Morris and Hodgdon asserted in their introductions to Shakespeare’s play (written in 1981 and in 2010 respectively), the general and well-founded concept of ‘source’ has expanded considerably in recent years, to encompass a broader and more elaborate meaning.[171] The plays of the Bard described many aspects of his life in Warwickshire, a county in the west of England. Shakespeare was born and lived in that area, therefore he surely gathered countless stories from the local population. As Morris stated, “the real sources of *The Shrew* rise in Shakespeare's experience of Warwickshire”.[172] The description of houses of mercantile London, the allusions and depictions of taverns and street life lie between the lines of the play. Shakespeare also recorded life situations of characters who were part of his past. In particular, he addressed women, through the illustration of their conditions, expectations, frustrations, achievements, and sacrifices that they had to face. In other words, the sources did not only come from various books consulted by Shakespeare, but they also encompass the array of traditions and influences that were part of the playwright’s life experience, and from which he drew inspiration for his own writings. Those who venture into a philological analysis of the Bard’s works, collect a continuous flow of memories and materials, both written and visual, that reveal connections between Shakespeare’s plays and the customs of that time, with languages

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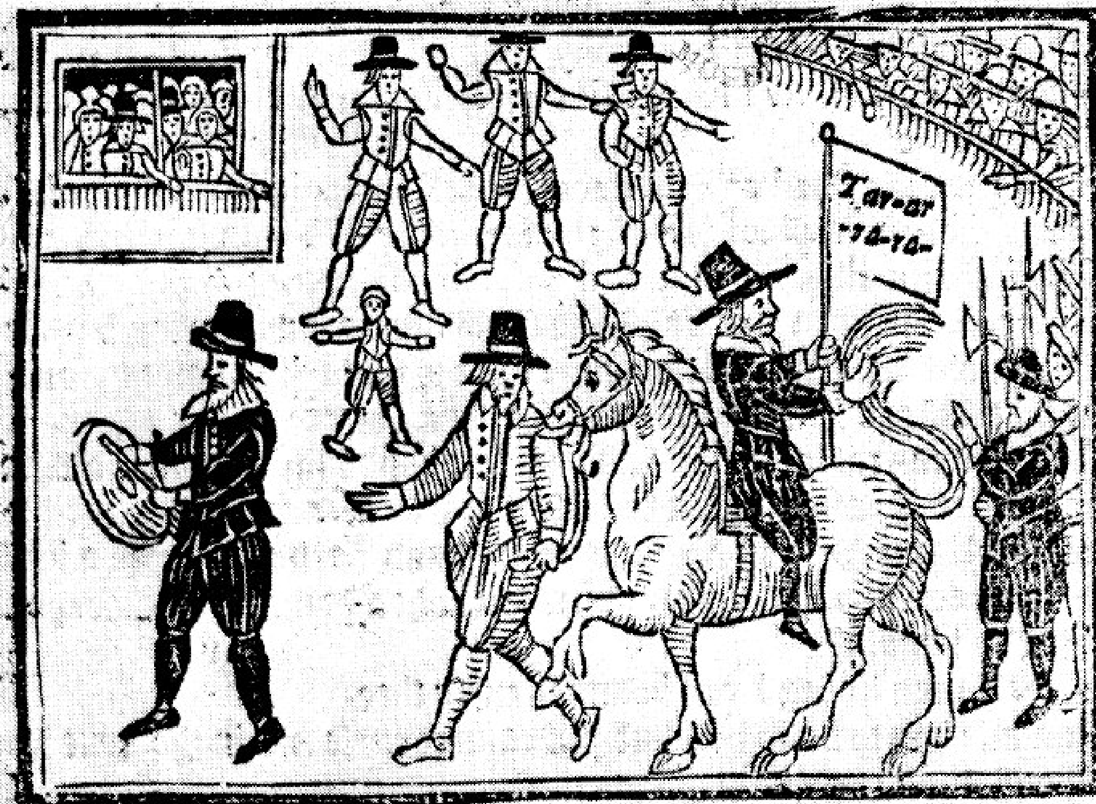
[170] Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew,* p. 297.
[171] Morris, pp. 68-9.
[172] Morris, p. 69.

and dialogues of common and more cultured people, with judgements and opinions of the early modern period.

An interesting document that recounts an account of a series of events related to a common social aspect characteristic of Elizabethan culture will be the next object of analysis. It represents a social anxiety of the period that permeated power relations and that was evident in conduct books, sermons, and homilies: the necessity to maintain a natural and divine order in gender relations. The document narrates an event that took place in 1604 at Wetherden (Suffolk County), just over 200 km from Warwickshire County, where Shakespeare was born. The story recounts of a certain Nicholas Rosyer, who works as a tanner. He returns home drunk, after some time spent in an alehouse. When he arrives home, he is received by his wife with offensive words. The wife throws him out of the bridal bed and hurts him: she hits the man several times in the face and arms, and she even spits on him. The desperate husband returns to the alehouse and continues to drink. Then a neighbour, a certain Thomas Quarry, hears about the event and organises a procession with other citizens with the purpose to express disapproval of matrimonial violations and to denounce the incident in the public square. Quarry, wearing a woman's skirt, "ryde abowt the towne upon a cowlstaff" followed by a procession of villagers.[173] According to a definition offered by E. C. Cawte, a cowl is "a tub... applied with two ears which could be borne by two men on a cowl-staff and a cowl staff is a stout stick used to carry a cowl . . . . It was formerly a familiar household requisite, and a ready weapon".[174] While Quarry rides, he admonishes and scolds the women of the neighbourhood. Therefore, the ceremony re-enacts the troubled relationship between the couple, and it also addresses problematic gender relations.

[173] Karen Newman, 'Renaissance Family Politics and Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew"', in *The Taming of the Shrew*, by William Shakespeare, A Norton critical edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1991), pp. 248.

[174] E. C. Cawte, 'Parsons Who Rode the Stang', *Folklore*, 74.2 (1963), p. 399n.



4. A cowl staff riding that targeted a vicar and his wife

The cowl staff riding involves the villagers, who parade through the streets making fun of the married couple. Such an incident is experienced as entertainment by the villagers, and it allows them to reassert what is the correct attitude to follow. The purpose of the parade is to scorn the tanner and his wife, and to admonish the behaviour of the woman, guilty of the offences towards her husband. In the end, the couple is shamed, and other women of the neighbourhood are dissuaded from acting in the same disrespectful manner towards their husbands. The so-called “skimmington riding” or cowl staff riding, was a folkloristic public response to incidents of domestic violence. [175] First, it exposed to all the community a bad behaviour, then at the same time it had the intention to educate women to be respectful, virtuous, and submissive towards their husbands. The result of this ‘entertainment’ shows its darker purpose: it aims to redeem the morally dissolute behaviour of women, and it exposes the anxiety about gender relations in Elizabethan England.

[175] Ibid., p. 399.

The practice of cowl staff riding, as Cawte in his journal article *Parsons Who Rode the Stang* (1963) attested, did not only occur among the lower-class people, but accounts revealed accusations to members of the church.[176] This is exemplified in the case of a vicar's wife, occurred in Buckinghamshire between Aylesbury and Buckingham, in February 1678, during Candlemas. The account shows the story of an old vicar, Rev. Hugh Hart. He is described as a delicate man, a lover and collector of books, who is respected in the village. He is married to an extremely shrewish woman with an unpleasant disposition. One day the wife, after a quarrel, beats him. The community becomes acquainted of the fact, even if the couple tries to keep the event private. During the last day of Candlemas, the Men Servants of Bottle Claydon "made a Riding" to spread the word and to show the issue in a public square.[177] This time the couple do not parade, but an effigy was carried by some inhabitants instead of the transgressor. Another account on this topic is illustrated in the image below, which describes the events that took place in Waterbeach, Cambs in 1602. The local vicar and his wife are mocked with an effigy during a cowl staff riding. With these accounts, it is evident that the respect of moral behaviour was a very relevant and crucial part of the Elizabethan mentality.

William Gager (1555-1622), one of the most famous Latin playwrights of that period, argued in one of his essays that 'lawful correction' was morally positive and justly permitted by the law.[178] Although he reported that domestic violence was considered the greatest possible disgrace by the clerical establishment, Gager believed that the loss of patriarchal control was a much more serious issue. Consequently, he justified violence to prevent immoral behaviours.

Most likely, these accounts inspired ballads, verse tales and folk literature, and as it appears from the accounts mentioned before, there was a tendency to forcefully instil a lesson to the population but especially to women, who were forced to avoid rebellion and to adopt a submissive behaviour. Public parades aimed to punish actions that were considered evil, but they were also an irreverent celebration that could end in public amends or in a reunification of the couple. On this subject, Hodgdon wrote that "like

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[176] Cawte, p. 400.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Brian Weiser, 'William Gager, Shame, Honour, and Marital Violence', *Institute of Historical Research*, 2021 <https://www.history.ac.uk/node/7838> [accessed 24 February 2024].

many plays, where a final speech attempts to impose a (rhetorical) order, these staged lessons in the proprieties of gender relations offered one model for healing the social fabric".[179]

In several folktales from different places of Northern Europe and the British Isles, recurring elements that could be related to variants of the story narrated in Shakespeare's *The Shrew* are described. For example, a man who wants to instruct his troubling wife in a correct behaviour, or wagers on the wives' submission. In Hodgdon's 'Introduction', elements and references that strongly suggest the existence of these folktales are presented. Surveys such as that conducted by Jan Harold Brunvand in his journal article *The Folktale Origin of The Taming of the Shrew* (1966), have highlighted structural similarities to the taming plot in oral folklore traditions. Brunvand analysed "35 literary versions and 383 oral versions representing thirty countries or national groups".[180] This research sought to address the following question: did the presence of oral and literary tales around the taming of a non-educated woman provided a primary model for Shakespeare's *The Shrew*? It has commonly been assumed that an earlier existence of variant shrew-taming tales certainly had a popular diffusion among the English audience of the early modern period. Joy Wiltenburg in his book *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (1992) observed that "ballads, verse tales and folk literature sought […] to pressure women to avoid rebellion in favour of submissiveness". [181] It is believed that those people who were strictly following the laws related to the private conjugal sphere and adhered to the precepts that the English society required, found in these tales expressions of their unspoken and repressed desires for transgression and rebellion. The plot of these stories, however, show to them some consequences of bad behaviours: repercussions when rules were violated, the humiliation of public punishment, and related legal aspects. Men as well as women were exposed to public scorn or abuse, imprisoned in a bridle-cage, or paraded around the town, as Hodgdon reported.[182] These rituals represented a moment of great shame for the accused ones, but at the same time an occasion of entertainment for

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[179] Hodgdon, p. 46.
[180] Hodgdon, p. 44.
[181] Hodgdon, pp. 45-6.
[182] Hodgdon, p. 46.

those people who participated as accusers and for the attenders. The ceremony often ended with a public amend or a reconciliation of the couple.

It is possible that Shakespeare could have gathered suggestions from some narratives throughout Europe for the writing of his *Shrew*, as there are some recurring plot-events and motifs that reach back to early medieval exemplum literature. In his detailed study on texts of Tale-Type 901 – based on the Aarne-Thompson-Uther index of folktale types which recur throughout European culture – Brunvand presented a compelling map of events in *The Shrew*'s plot found in other tales, identifying a wide range of motifs and narrative elements which can be detected in Shakespeare's comedy. What is striking about the recurring narrative images are the suggestions for a correct behaviour and the presence of educational messages to the female gender. For example, one of these elements is the presence in the tales of two young women, two sisters, opposite in character and attitude (1.1); another common element is the suitor's manifested desire to tame the shrew and the bet that he will succeed (1.2; 2.1; 5.2); the tactics of taming the woman are described: depriving the wife of food and forcing her to repeat the absurd statements of her husband (4.3; 4.5); another recurrent situation is the obedience eventually showed by the woman towards her husband, confirming her domestication (5.2).[183]

It is clear that from many sides there was an attempt to reduce female behaviour to the rules and customs of the period. Therefore, women were led to domestication, and those who had a rebellious attitude caused concern for the resulting social shame. As was pointed out at the beginning of the previous paragraph, the events that happened in 1604 at Wetherden have both a remarkable and a singular relationship with Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. This analogy occurs in the relationship of a couple, with the submission of the woman to her suitor. A reasonable consequence is that *The Shrew*'s theatrical production may have derived suggestions from these accounts which illustrate Elizabethan culture; as Newman noted, these events formed and fostered a "community

[183] Jan Harold Brunvand, 'The Folktale Origin of The Taming of the Shrew', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 17.4 (1966), pp. 345–59, doi:10.2307/2867908.

fantasy" that realized on stage the situation in which the shrewish wife was shamed and submitted.[184]

2.5 The Parodic Guise of the Androcentric Culture in *The Taming of the Shrew*

Shakespeare's 'Induction' is a clever meta-theatrical expedient that lets the play begin with the appearance of a mender of pots and pans who is clearly in a drunken state and a hostess who shouts insults and threats at him. According to Hodgdon, the woman's intrusion with her offensive speech is a prelude to Katherina's behaviour in her encounter with Petruccio presented in Act 2 Scene 1.[185] Using this theatrical device, it is possible that Shakespeare showed the brief argument between the drunken Sly and the woman in order to draw attention to the traditional notion of gender relations. Moreover, as Newman highlighted in her article *Renaissance Family Politics and Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew"* (1986), this animated dialogue between the hostess and the drunkard Sly recalls the incident of 1604, in which the drunken tanner is beaten by his wife.

Scene 1 of the 'Induction' continues with the arrival of a lord who tricks Sly into believing that he belongs to the high rank. He attempts to re-educate the poor worker, by offering him another image of himself, another identity, the one of a polite and cultured gentleman. The lord persuades his servants to offer Sly "low submissive reverence",[186] by proposing to him several activities suitable for a higher social class. The scene closes with instructions sent to "Barthol'mew my page" (Ind.1.104)[187] to disguise himself as a lady and personify the drunkard's wife:

> Tell him from me, as he will win my love,
>
> He bear himself with honourable action,

[184] Newman, p. 249.
[185] Barbara Hodgdon, 'Commentary to The Taming of the Shrew', in *The Taming of the Shrew*, by William Shakespeare, 3rd, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 147n.
[186] Newman, p. 249.
[187] Shakespeare, p. 147.

Such as he hath observed in noble ladies

Unto their lords by them accomplished.

Such duty to the drunkard let him do,

With soft low tongue and lowly courtesy,

And say, 'What is't your honour will command,

Wherein your lady and your humble wife

May show her duty and make known her love?'

(Ind.1.108-16)[188]

The transformation of the lord's page into Sly's wife, submissive and well-educated, will make Sly appreciate his newly acquired role and it will complete his illusion of transforming into a lord. Therefore, he is convinced of his new identity only when he is introduced to his wife; shortly after that, he exerts his power on the woman by demanding her social and sexual submission. "Madam, undress you and come now to bed" (Ind. 2.114). In this part, according to Newman, the typical concept of androcentric culture is evident.[189] This aspect, however, is showed in a parodic guise: Sly, in order to attest his sexual and social masculine identity, needs the presence of a woman, who is, in fact, a man in disguise.

According to Mackay, in the 'Induction' Shakespeare "plays with the range of meanings of discipline and disciplinarity and does so in a way that subtly begins to privilege a vernacular study over a Latin one".[190] He implements a new idea of education that developed in England during the early modern period, remarkably around the time that he was writing *The Taming of the Shrew*, as Mackay noted.[191] This new model promoted radical changes in the methods of study and teaching through various guidebooks. A notable and important example of these changes in education is the attempt

[188] Shakespeare, p. 147.

[189] Newman, p. 249.

[190] Elizabeth Ann Mackay, 'Good Grammar, Possessive Pronouns, and Preposterous Possessions in The Taming of the Shrew', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 17.1 (2017), p. 38.

[191] Mackay, p. 36.

by some English grammarians to remove any violent means of punishment in their disciplinary practices. By following this program, the learning process would occur more easily because pupils were guided through a "Labyrinthus", a method "without griefe to the learner, or paine to the teacher", wrote Bullokar in 1580.[192]

In the dialogues of his comedy, Shakespeare represented and promoted a vernacular language, rather than a more cultured and erudite Latin. However, in the scenes with Sly and the lord's servants he showed an evolving educational context: the servants follow the lord's suggestion to persuade the beggar that he is "a lord, and nothing but a lord" (Ind. 2. 59),[193] and they induce him to use a more refined language: when the servants notice his disorderly speech, his "very idle words" (Ind. 2. 81),[194] surprisingly, Sly's linguistic register is somewhat transformed. Thus, in the 'Induction' Shakespeare displays an educational lesson that invites the use not of Latin, but of a polished vernacular language along with a proper behaviour. In the end, however, Shakespeare leaves Sly in his early condition of a rural, coarse, and uneducated man. The beggar, who is very attracted to the attitudes of the upper class, eagerly accepts the invitation of the disguised page to attend the play.

2.6 'I am no breeching scholar in the schools' (3.1.18): Unruly Bianca

At the beginning of Act 1 the situation changes radically: from the English setting of folkloristic alehouses and of the noble people's entertainments, with the play-within-the-play the setting shifts to Northern Italy. As Levith noted, "the North of Italy was the most popular place to travel on the continent for the English".[195] And, as previously mentioned, it is most probable that Shakespeare chose Padua because of its fame of great learning centre. The opening dialogue between Lucentio and Tranio – a gentleman from Pisa and his personal servant – initiates an argument about which curriculum is best to follow.

[192] Ibid., p. 38. Another writer John Hart in his *Orthographie* (1569) demands, "teach not your scholler as you were taught". He thereby exhorts teachers not to "admonish" students for mistakes (Biiv, Cir).

[193] Shakespeare, p. 153.

[194] Ibid., p. 154.

[195] Murray J. Levith, *SHAKESPEARE'S Italian Settings and Plays*, Contemporary Interpretations of Shakespeare (Basingstoke, London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 90.

Lucentio aspires to become a scholar of philosophical studies with virtuous attitudes that, he thinks, will lead to happiness:

> . . . Tranio, for the time I study
>
> Virtue, and that part of philosophy
>
> Will I apply that treats of happiness
>
> By virtue specially to be achieved.
>
> (1.1.17-20)[196]

The idea that virtue causes happiness is fundamental to Aristotle's *Ethics*. Tranio suggests that he should pursue a larger course of study (1.1.28-40):[197] not only philosophy, but also logic, rhetoric, music, poetry, and mathematics:

> *Mi perdonato*, gentle master mine,
>
> I am in all affected as yourself,
>
> Glad that you thus continue your resolve
>
> To suck the sweets of sweet philosophy.
>
> Only, good master, while we do admire
>
> This virtue and this moral discipline,
>
> Let's be no stoics nor no stocks, I pray,
>
> Or so devote to Aristotle's checks
>
> As Ovid be an outcast quite abjured.
>
> (1.1.25-33)[198]

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[196] Shakespeare, pp. 160-61.
[197] Ibid., pp. 161-62.
[198] Shakespeare, p. 161.

Tranio's reply begins with "Mi perdonato", providing an Italian expression which is, however, quite inaccurate. He reminds Lucentio that the pursuit of the Aristotelian virtue should not be his first aim, and he continues with a series of indications:

> Balk logic with acquaintance that you have
>
> And practise rhetoric in your common talk;
>
> Music and poesy use to quicken you;
>
> The mathematics and the metaphysics,
>
> Fall to them as you find your stomach serves you.
>
> (1.1.34-38)[199]

Tranio concludes with the observation that the time in which one is learning should be a pleasure, because only in that way success and profit can be achieved. He suggests to Lucentio that he should study what he likes best: "In brief, sir, study what you most affect" (1.1.40).[200] This intellectual dialogue between these two characters who attempt to plan a rich and comprehensive curriculum is suddenly interrupted by Bianca's entrance in the scene.

Bianca is presented as the younger daughter of Baptista; she shows a silent appearance with a "mild behaviour and sobriety" (1.1.71),[201] and with a name – the Italian for 'white' – that sketches her seemingly pure soul. The young woman appears in the company of her father, her sister Katherina and two suitors. The group of people lead a lively conversation on the topic of marriage, while Lucentio is overwhelmed at the sight of Bianca. He turns to his servant, and exclaims: "Hark, Tranio, thou mayst hear Minerva speak" (1.1.84).[202] Then he continues: "And let me be a slave to achieve that maid" (1.1.218).[203] The young man immediately falls in love with Bianca: enchanted by her harmonious words, he compares her voice to that of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom but also, according to Waldo and Herbert, "the mythical originator of musical

[199] Ibid., p. 162.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Shakespeare, p. 164.
[202] Ibid., p. 165.
[203] Ibid., p. 173.

instruments".[204] At the beginning of Act 3 Hortensio, the second servant of Lucentio, uses again a musical definition to describe Bianca: she looks like "the patroness of heavenly harmony" (3.1.5),[205] and in this way Hortensio supports the idea that she appears in her manners both as the mythical goddess Minerva who rules wars for a just cause, but also as the one who oversees the intellectual activities, among them music.

Act 3 introduces the scene of the Latin lesson: Lucentio, disguised as the master of letters Cambio, and Hortensio, disguised as the music master Litio, engage in a dispute in which it seems compulsory to establish the order of the arts to be taught to Bianca. The expression 'preposterous' – literally, a person who reverses the natural order of things having for last which ought to be first – is given to Hortensio by Lucentio, as he places music before letters or philosophy:

> HORTENSIO: Then give me leave to have prerogative,
>
> And when in music we have spent an hour,
>
> Your lecture shall have leisure for as much.
>
> LUCENTIO: Preposterous ass, that never read so far
>
> To know the cause why music was ordained!
>
> Was it not to refresh the mind of man
>
> After his studies or his usual pain ?
>
> Then give me leave to read philosophy,
>
> And while I pause serve in your harmony.
>
> (3.1.6-14)[206]

In this contest between Lucentio and Hortensio, the prevalent view of that period in which music was marked as subordinate or second comes out; in other words, music should come after more elevated studies. In conduct books it was indeed considered a subject

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[204] Laurie E. Maguire, 'Cultural Control in "The Taming of the Shrew"', *Renaissance Drama*, 26 (1995), 88.

[205] Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew,* p. 219.

[206] Ibid., p. 219-20.

intended to relieve the scholar's mind after studies or hard work. This idea recalls influential texts such as Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*. This work had a great impact on the highly appreciated conduct books that were read by people devoted to social climbing. Paraphrasing Castiglione, "the frequent or unsolicited performance of music by members of the aristocracy is strictly condemned because such a pursuit would break down the distinctions between a nobleman and his music-performing servant (much less 'fiddlers,' or mechanical practitioners of the art)".[207] In conduct books, music was therefore considered primarily a form of entertainment, not essential in lessons imparted by tutors. What Hortensio (or Litio) attempts to do with music before being interrupted, shows the reversal of a natural order, an inversion between first and second, between superior and inferior in the hierarchy of the arts themselves. In return, Lucentio (or Cambio) defines him as a "fiddler" along with a "forward" and a "preposterous ass". With the term "fiddler" Lucentio emphasises the "contempt for musicians as practitioners of a 'mechanical' art".[208] A disdain even more manifest is that for the artists called 'fiddlers', a term used to refer to someone who plays the violin in folk music. That instrument was considered rather vulgar, and it represented the lower social status of some musicians of that period.

This scene in Act 3 first of all represents a change of roles of a student and his servant, Lucentio and Hortensio, who become masters in order to conquer Bianca's heart, and secondly an inversion of the arts order to establish a right sequence of importance or "prerogative". However, there is much more at stake in this performance, where the "preposterous" becomes the indicator of another important theme: the reversal of Bianca's role. As noted above, music is associated with Bianca, and in *The Courtier* it is meant "to be practised in the presence of women", because their "sights sweeten the mindes of the hearers, and make them the more apt to bee pierced with the pleasantnesse of musicke, and also they quicken the spirits of the very doers" (Book II, 101). This was a pleasure for men that needed restraint and subordination. Ascham shared a similar view when he wrote that "The minstrelsie of lutes, pipes, harps, and all other that standeth by

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[207] Patricia Parker, 'Construing Gender: Mastering Bianca in The Taming of the Shrew', in *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, ed. by Dympna Callaghan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 196.

[208] Ibid., p. 197.

such nice, fine, minikin fingering is farre more fit for the wommanishnesse of it to dwell in the courte among ladies”.[209]

Bianca embodies most of the characteristics of the woman of humanism; she is described as a quiet and educated woman, in contrast to the figure of her sister Katherina, known for her rather unfeminine behaviour. Baptista’s sweet second daughter is obviously submissive to her father’s will, content to obey his orders and inclined to follow the teachings imparted to her. In Act 1 she innocently answers to her father:

> Sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe:
>
> My books and instruments shall be my company,
>
> On them to look and practise by myself.
>
> (1.1.81-3)[210]

Bianca at first shows obedience to her father, but right afterwards she manifests a desire for freedom and rebellion. In the development of the plot, she cleverly manipulates situations to her own advantage. In the scene of Act 3 where Lucentio uses the term “preposterous”, Bianca shows another kind of behaviour. At first, she is eager to follow her recently acquired new masters Cambio and Litio in their lessons; then, she turns into the master of both of them and will even command her potential masters herself, proving to be anything but submissive and tame. She will refuse to follow the rules and refuses to be constrained and “mastered by a schoolboy’s times and seasons”,[211] echoing the words of her sister Katherina in Act 1, when she rejects “appointed hours” (1.1.103):[212]

> Why, gentlemen, you do me double wrong
>
> To strive for that which resteth in my choice.
>
> I am no breeching scholar in the schools:

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[209] Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster; Written between 1563-8. Posthumously Published. First Ed., 1570; Collated with the 2d Ed, 1572. Edited by Edward Arber*, ed. by Edward Arber (London Constable, 1923) <http://archive.org/details/aschamschole00aschuoft> [accessed 3 August 2023], Book 1.

[210] Shakespeare, p. 165.

[211] Parker, p. 198.

[212] Shakespeare, p. 166.

I'll not be tied to hours nor 'pointed times

But learn my lessons as I please myself.

(3.1.16-20)[213]

All these changes in Bianca's attitude recall earlier transformations of Lucentio and Tranio into Cambio and Litio, but also the subversion of the order of the arts. Bianca is affected by this game too: Shakespeare describes Bianca firstly as a woman associated to humanism and its values, secondly as an "appendix" (4.4.102)[214] or appendage of Lucentio, who will become her husband. In other words, she is subordinate to her husband. In the fourth scene of Act 4 Biondello, Lucentio's servant, comments that the young woman is considered "*cum privilegio ad imprimendum solum*" (4.4.91-2):[215] essentially she is seen as an object in the husband's possession, therefore not only does he hold exclusive rights granted by marriage, but also, in the suggestion of Hibbard, this could be "a pun on printing in the sense of 'stamping one's own image on [a woman] by getting her with child'".[216] However, this description of Bianca as an appendix will be challenged by Bianca's attitude of rebellion and rejection of the rules in the final, post-nuptial scene: her last lines for Lucentio are: "Fie, what a foolish duty call you this?" (5.2.131).[217] This last remark is proverbial, 'more fool you', when somebody indicates that something done is silly and without judgment. In conclusion, Bianca, who seems calm and naive, showing a quiet and submissive attitude, actually conceals a desire to pursue her own goals, eventually redeeming her status of subservient woman and wife.

2.7 'My tongue will tell the anger of my heart' (4.3.77): Domesticated Katherina

As previously argued, Padua provides an environment of learning and inventiveness for the major characters of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Levith wrote that as "the disguised Portia [in *The Merchant of Venice*] arrives from this city to plead Antonio's case in court, [also] Lucentio comes to Padua explicitly for education", and "Kate is tamed and taught

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[213] Ibid., p. 220.
[214] Ibid., p. 278.
[215] Ibid., p. 277.
[216] Hodgdon, p. 277.
[217] Shakespeare, p. 301.

by Petruccio".[218] This led Levith to assert that in "almost all the dramas set in Italy, learning and education are major themes".[219]

Katherina is the eldest daughter of Baptista Minola. She has a reputation for rude and aggressive behaviour. Her father wants her to marry but struggles to find her a husband. Hortensio is the first who perceives her as a devil: as Hortensio observes, "From all such devils, good Lord deliver us!" (1.1.66).[220] As Morris has noted, "the word (and its derivatives) is applied to her no less than fifteen times".[221] By this categorisation, Katherina becomes relatable to beings full of energy that deserve to be despised.

Studies such as that conducted by Brooks (1994) have shown that Katherina's education takes a different course from that of her sister Bianca. In the first scenes, Katherina shows lack of self-control and untutored manners. Her short-tempered behaviour manifests itself with actions: she bites and scratches other characters. The scene of the musical lesson (2.1.141-58),[222] where Hortensio returns brutally beaten by Katherina, proves ineffective: the young woman turns the traditional relationship between schoolmaster and pupil around, because she violently reacts against the unfortunate tutor, and she hits him with a musical instrument. With Katherina's attack on Hortensio with her lute, his desperate comment "Iron may hold with her, but never lutes" (2.1.145)[223] and the consequent comparison to a soldier, Shakespeare presents to the audience a parody of the physical and verbal abuse that traditionally was part of some punitive methods of schoolmasters. In contrast, Shakespeare shows in many parts of the play that the most effective and successful ways for education are not the coercive ones that students experience in schools or universities. The lessons that one learns from everyday life and practical experience reach concrete results; as Morris asserted, "formal education is contrasted to its detriment against the practical academy of experience".[224] Katherina experiences the teaching methods of Petruccio, who wants to educate her to behave in more appropriate manners. She will be instructed to use more sophisticated language and

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[218] Levith, p. 10.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Shakespeare, p. 164.
[221] Morris, p. 123.
[222] Shakespeare, pp. 200-2.
[223] Shakespeare, p. 201.
[224] Morris, p. 130.

to learn grammar. She will "study all this goodly speech" (2.1.264)[225] because through the knowledge of "goodly speech" she will be able to become a "pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous" (2.1.247).[226]

It is relevant to underline that Katherina's personality for most of the play is described from a male point of view, which creates an image full of stereotypes that show the characteristics of a certain type of female behaviour. Shakespeare presents the two sisters of the play in antithesis, favouring the idea that Bianca is the one predestined to marry, because she is pretty and obedient. When Petruccio arrives in Padua and is facing Katherina, his courtship becomes a challenge for him. Shakespeare, through the relationship between these two characters, enacts a social situation where courtship and the conquest of a woman pass through a series of educational and disciplinary norms and linguistic attacks:

> PETRUCCIO: Good morrow, Kate, for that's your name, I hear.
>
> KATHERINA: Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing.
>
> They call me Katherine that do talk of me.
>
> PETRUCCIO: You lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate,
>
> And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst,
>
> But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,
>
> Kate of Kate Hall, my super- dainty Kate,
>
> For dainties are all cates, and therefore "Kate"—
>
> Take this of me, Kate of my consolation.
>
> (2.1.181-89)[227]

This first encounter between the two main characters of Shakespeare's play offers the spectators a stimulating and comic cut-and-thrust dispute concerning the name of 'Kate'

[225] Shakespeare, p. 209.
[226] Ibid., p. 208.
[227] Ibid., p. 203-4.

and its various definitions. The audience experiences Petruccio and Katherina's duel in an interplay of provocations and biting replies. Petruccio juggles and manipulates the situation using his "epistemic language", as Baumlin observed; therefore, he effectively displays "a versatile and generative language which easily duplicates and reduplicates itself to meet [Katherina] at every turn".[228] He appears to be the master of the situation, certain of his success during his wooing. She, however, responds sharply by showing a rejection of the courtship with her rebellious replies. As Elizabeth Ann Mackay has asserted, the altercation between the two domineering characters seems structured on scripts of a grammar lesson:[229]

> PETRUCCIO: Myself am moved to woo thee for my wife.
>
> KATHERINA: Moved? In good time. Let him that moved you hither
>
> Re- move you hence. I knew you at the first
>
> You were a moveable.
>
> PETRUCCIO: Why, what's a moveable?
>
> KATHERINA: A joint stool.
>
> PETRUCCIO: Thou hast hit it. Come, sit on me.
>
> KATHERINA: Asses are made to bear, and so are you.
>
> PETRUCCIO: Women are made to bear, and so are you.
>
> (2.1.193–201)[230]

The first move in Petruccio's efforts to tame Katherina is similar to the training given to Sly by the Lord. Petruccio practices an experimental grammar on her, where nouns must be learned before other parts of the speech. In fact, he focuses on epithets and diminutives. There are homophonic terms like Kates and cates, moveable, jade, tongue, tail and tale, which become puns and wordplays with the purpose to offer the viewer a nomenclature

[228] Tita French Baumlin, 'Petruchio the Sophist and Language as Creation in The Taming of the Shrew', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 29.2 (1989), p. 242 <https://doi.org/10.2307/450473>.
[229] Mackay, pp. 39-40.
[230] Shakespeare, p. 204-5.

that must be known before grammatical rules; in other words, a proper order of learning. As written in the English and pedagogical guidebooks of the time in both Latin and English, students had to learn nouns as first topic, before the other parts of the sentence.[231]

Petruccio's change of 'Katherina' into 'Kate' in his initial approach "Good morrow, Kate" (2.1.181)[232] provides more complexity to the female character, as she is given a number of meanings. Some critics, including Laurie Maguire, suggest that an attempt to abuse power against an independent young woman is evident and manifest. The control or, more precisely, the shortening of the name of Baptista's fist daughter also suggests the idea of a reduction of the woman's personality and the affirmation of male dominance over the female. Maguire describes this aspect as "an assertion of Adamic dominion over independent creatures".[233] Maguire also argues that the diminutive of the name can hold an opportunity, which Petruccio offers to Katherina: that of adopting a new identity through the use of a new name.[234] Later, the woman will subtly reassert the full form of her own name in the controversial sun/moon scene, when she grants Petruccio the right to name everything as he pleases, even her own name:

> PETRUCCIO Nay, then you lie. It is the blessed sun.
>
> KATHERINA Then, God be blest, it is the blessed sun.
>
> But sun it is not, when you say it is not,
>
> And the moon changes even as your mind.
>
> What you will have it nam'd, even that it is,
>
> And so it shall be so for Katherine.
>
> (4.5.18-23)[235]

The transformation of 'Katherina the shrew' into 'plain Kate' seems to show to the spectators the woman's good disposition to agree to her husband's whimsical behaviour,

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[231] Mackay, p. 39.
[232] Shakespeare, p. 203.
[233] Laurie Maguire, 'The Naming of the Shrew', in *The Taming of the Shrew* (Norton Critical Editions, 2009), p. 125.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Shakespeare, p. 279-80.

with a playful acceptance of his mood changes. In these passages, however, her ambivalent attitude emerges. Katherina displays a submissive air, but at the same time her sarcastic language reveals her restless nature that conceals rebellion. Through this female figure, Shakespeare seemed to suggest to the audience the convenience for a woman to assume such behaviour: to satisfy her husband's request with the opposite purpose to achieve her own advantage. It is imperative to recognise that "no other Shakespearean heroine is binominal in this way",[236] as Maguire has emphasized.

In the second scene of Act 3, Katherina is waiting for her bridegroom. Petruccio arrives late at the wedding: he is dressed in unsuitable and poor clothes, and he immediately shows scorn for Katherina's attitude, as he believes that her irascibility reverses the natural order of things – in a similar manner to what previously described in the 'preposterous' scene. Consequently, her behaviour creates chaos and social disorder. This scene recalls the story of Isotta Nogarola mentioned before, when Lauro Quirini devalued her efforts as a scholar only because she was a woman. Petruccio in the play firmly asserts that a woman is virtuous only when the goals she pursues are socially acceptable. He addresses the guests with a speech that aims to establish a patriarchal power over Katherina. Several times Petruccio uses possessive pronouns to assert his rights:

> I will be master of what is mine own.
>
> She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,
>
> My house-hold stuff, my field, my barn,
>
> My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything . . .
>
> (3.2.230-33)[237]

In the words "I will be master of what is mine own", Petruccio "echoes the language of the tenth commandment".[238] As a matter of fact, one of the precepts of the early modern period concerning the education of married women involved their transformation into a

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[236] Laurie Maguire.
[237] Shakespeare, pp. 238-9.
[238] Hodgdon, 'Commentary to The Taming of the Shrew', p. 238n.

sort of good or commodity. As Mackay has argued, "this 'natural' grammatical order places Katherina 'second' as Petruccio's domestic property, as his inferior, as his wife".[239] In Petruccio's speech, the concept of marriage of that period is evident. From a female point of view, this attitude of Petruccio could appear controversial, but the public could also understand in Petruccio's words a statement of protection towards his own wife. For example, Petruccio discourages the guests who are present to interfere: he somehow defends Katherina; but, at the same time, he reaffirms that now the woman belongs to him by marriage law. Petruccio's rhetorical discourse of persuasion can also be read as a series of precepts that English grammar writers taught during lessons to their students, but this discourse could also follow the period's conduct books and sermons regarding men's behaviour towards their wives.

In the play, Katherina rebels several times against Petruccio. However, in many scenes her opposition proves to be useless against her husband's will: he continues to control and limit her untamed temperament. In the third scene of Act 4 a significant and comic dialogue concerning the choice of a hat is presented to the spectators. Here Katherina insists on wearing the garment expressing her reasons, which are systematically ridiculed and discredited by Petruccio. In the final scene, Katherina will renounce the hat:

> KATHERINA Why, sir. I trust I may have leave to speak.
>
> And speak I will . . .
>
> My tongue will tell the anger of my heart
>
> Or else my heart, concealing it, will break.
>
> . . .
>
> PETRUCCIO Why, thou say'st true. It is a paltry cap,
>
> A custard-coffin . . .
>
> KATHERINA . . . I like the cap,
>
> And it I will have, or I will have none.

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[239] Mackay, p. 47.

(4.3.75-87)[240]

Apparently, Petruccio instructs Katherina using coercion and violence. The reality is different: if the threat of violence is manifested, it is only a temporary strategy that often brings the situation to a comic ending. According to some critics including Richard A. Burt (1984), Petruccio's desire is to achieve a loving relationship with the woman who will become her independent and equal partner.[241] The continuous verbal skirmish between the two creates a protected situation in which their language and their choice of words establish a complicity of understanding. According to John Bean, Katherina is mastered "not by a Petruccio's whip, but when she discovers her own imagination, for when she learns to recognize the sun for the moon and the moon for the dazzling sun she is discovering the liberating power of laughter and play".[242] Only from that scene onwards does Katherina reveal her understanding of a useful and virtuous attitude for women: the need to comply with their husband's wishes with indulgence. In her great monologue at the end of the play, Katherina seems to teach women what is the right behaviour for a wife: a subservient attitude towards their husband, which between the lines displays a sense of advantage for their position as wives. With obedient and submissive manners, women will obtain their own benefits:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,

Thy head, thy sovereign: one that cares for thee

And for thy maintenance; commits his body

To painful labour both by sea and land,

To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,

Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe,

And craves no other tribute at thy hands

[240] Shakespeare, p. 265.

[241] Richard A. Burt, 'Charisma, Coercion, and Comic Form in "The Taming of the Shrew"', *Criticism*, 26.4 (1984), pp. 296-97.

[242] Richard A. Burt, 'Charisma, Coercion, and Comic Form in "The Taming of the Shrew"', *Criticism*, 26.4 (1984), p. 297.

But love, fair looks, and true obedience –

Too little payment for so great a debt.

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,

Even such a woman oweth to her husband.

(5.2.152–62)[243]

It is evident that in the play Katherina's submission is never passive: she constantly responds to Petruccio's charismatic assertions. In her final monologue, the educational message that Katherina shows to the audience is to follow the dictates and rules of behaviour that the social context demands, without losing one's own identity, nature, and temperament. With her words "Fie, fie ! Unknit that threatening unkind brow, / And dart not scornful glances from those eyes" (5.2.142-43),[244] Katherina is addressing the two women present in the scene – her sister Bianca and the widow –, who disagree with her suggestions and refuse to be submissive to their husbands. Their behaviour contrasts with the final willing attitude shown by Katherina towards Petruccio. This tension between these different female reactions ultimately creates confusion in the educational message of Shakespeare's play. Both Bianca and the widow do not accept their condition and refuse their marriage obligations, meanwhile Katherina voices "her praise of women's submission".[245]

It is important to remember that the three female figures attract the spectators' interest; they therefore provide points of reference for understanding and judging a wrong or corrected behaviour. They also embody the audience's "specular images, represented female bodies on display",[246] bearing a female rebellion inside. However, in the end Shakespeare's contemporaneous audience in all likelihood remained captivated by Katherina's speech. Her message could induce women to take advantage of their husband's love in order to act in the relative (and restrictive) freedom of marriage. Yet,

[243] Shakespeare, p. 302-3.
[244] Shakespeare, p. 301-2.
[245] Newman.
[246] Ibid.

Shakespeare concludes the comedy with a doubt for the audience: is this submission and taming sincere, or is it just a facade?

CHAPTER 3: Padua and the Theatre of Misogyny: John Webster's *White Devil*

3.1 The Historical and Social Frameworks of the Revenge Tragedy

In this part the literary genre of the revenge tragedy will be presented. Before proceeding to examine this subject, it will be necessary to introduce the cultural and literary context in which this genre began to be performed. John Webster, a young contemporary of Shakespeare, explored in his plays the moral dilemmas of the 'woman question' and denounced the way women were treated. This chapter will focus on the play *The White Devil* (1612), with the aim of investigating the language and behaviour of some of its female characters and the real-life situations of that period.

Several studies on William Shakespeare such as that conducted by Levith in *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays* (1989) show the importance of Italy as a setting in the Bard's plays. Shakespeare's Italian plays became so popular at those times because many Englishmen travelled and experienced the Italian culture and language, bringing back home the Italian fashion and the translations of books, as described in the previous chapter. Shakespeare with his *The Taming of the Shrew* most willingly represents Italy and more specifically Padua as a place where intellect is cultivated and the dialogues between the characters are intelligent and imaginative. The works in which an Italian setting appears are in majority comedies that are influenced by the travel narratives of Fynes Moryson and Thomas Coryat and the comic romance literature described in the works of Ariosto and Castiglione.[247]

Through his diverse characters represented in his Italian plays, Shakespeare gave to the audience life lessons, represented confrontations and tensions between fathers and daughters and, as Mario Praz observed in his work *Shakespeare's Italy* (1954), he inserted in his language "echoes of Italian poetry".[248] However, the Bard avoided portraying one of the most prominent religious conflicts of his time: the argument between Catholicism and Protestantism. Rather, he presented the religious conflict between Christians and Jews in a Venetian setting, thus choosing a less dangerous position. By way of illustration,

[247] Levith, p. 9.
[248] Ibid., p. 4.

Levith reported that "Shakespeare never satirizes obvious corruption in the Roman Church the way Marlowe and Webster do".[249]

It is also worth to remember that translations of Italian books such as *The Prince* (1513) by the Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli became very popular in England. For Renaissance Englishmen Italy was a place with contrasting features, where men represented the multiple vices and virtues of human beings. This attracted Englishmen, but also made them wary. Machiavelli embodied these Italian characteristics, especially in the political sphere, because he sharply theorised the need to exclude morality and religion from political activity.[250] Condemnations and controversies chased Machiavelli, who in his *The Prince* – a treatise on the exertion of power – showed his attempt "to represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined".[251] As Purcell reported, these theories were seen as political opportunism and provoked at once attraction and aversion; consequently, "Machiavelli was popularly seen as an evil influence".[252] For example, in his *A Report and Discourse* (1552), Roger Ascham disagreed with these foreign political theories and criticized those Englishmen who "with consciences confirmed with Machiavelle's doctrine . . . think, say or do whatsoever may serve best for profit or pleasure".[253]

The portrayal of the corrupt and opportunistic Italian character became popular on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. English literary criticism reduced Machiavelli's thought to the stereotypical 'Machiavellian', which followed the motto – never expressed by Machiavelli, but easily recognisable from its contents – of 'the end justifies the means'.[254] Interestingly, Shakespeare placed his 'Machiavellian villains' not in his Italian

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[249] Ibid., p. 8.

[250] Massimo Salvadori, 'Machiavelli, Niccolo', *Treccani*, 2006 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/niccolo-machiavelli_(Enciclopedia-dei-ragazzi)/, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/niccolo-machiavelli_(Enciclopedia-dei-ragazzi)/> [accessed 22 April 2024].

[251] Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. by George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin Group, 1961), p. 35.

[252] Stephen Purcell, *Webster: The White Devil*, Shakespeare's Contemporaries (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 97-8.

[253] Roger Ascham, 'A report and discourse', 1552 <https://www.proquest.com/books/report-discourse-written-roger-ascham-affaires/docview/2248551562/se-2> [accessed 23 April 2024].

[254] Salvadori.

plays, but in those set outside contemporary Italy.[255] As it appears in Shakespeare's play *Henry VI* (1591), the Bard let Richard, Duke of Gloucester, declare: "I can smile, and murder whiles I smile, […] And set the murderous Machiavel to school" (Henry VI, Part 3, 3.2.182-93). Machiavelli's thought certainly influenced the early-modern English political thought. Philosophers such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) observed "that nature, nor the engagement of words, are not so forcible as custom".[256] He considered that men behave "as if they were dead images and engines moved only by the wheels of custom". These thoughts suggested the way tyranny operated at the level of ideological legitimisation. Ideas and examples concerning the radical implications that power and ideology express are fittingly reflected in Flamineo's behaviour, a character in Webster's play. These new ideas created favourable conditions for the spread of a new dramaturgy during the early modern period, featuring the widespread diffusion of revenge tragedies. This moment led to an important cultural change in English history, due to both the influence of Italian Renaissance thought and the effects of the Reformation in England.[257]

In such a context, many elaborate writings which were performed in theatres during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began to highlight the psychological aspects of characters, whose thoughts reflected the moods, anxieties, and contradictions of individuals. In these plays the classical world was represented with the addition of typical medieval elements. As Almagia explains, in these plays Olympus is permeated with the realm of fairies, and temples with churches. Unusual versions of Seneca's drama translated into English were produced, and tragedies combined a Greek subject with the macabre and bloody realism of the late Middle Ages.[258] From the popularisation of this new interpretation of Seneca, tragedies that described the immorality of the state and the darker sides of the human personality were produced. Some of these plays carefully explored and represented human conditions such as seduction, sexuality, and the cruelty of death. In early modern England, these came to be known as revenge tragedies.

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[255] Ibid., p. 8. Levith briefly explores how the stereotype of the Machiavellian character developed in early modern English culture.

[256] Francis Bacon, *Essays* (Dent, 1972), p. 119.

[257] Hackett, p. 19.

[258] Almagia and others.

Among these works, *Gorboduc* (1562), composed by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, is one of the earliest dramatic tragedies in English that retains a vivid medieval spirit. In the tragedy the main theme is that of succession, “a fraught issue in the early years of Elizabeth I’s reign”,[259] because of the lack of a clearly structured plan for the political administration of England. The possible danger was the rise of civil unrest, and the lack of a successor to the kingdom. This play “was performed at the Inner Temple (one of London’s law schools) and subsequently acted before the queen”. With its “violent plots, resounding rhetorical speeches, and ghosts thirsting for blood”,[260] a warning to Elizabeth concerning the problems that can occur without precise arrangements for a successor is clearly displayed. These gloomy visions triggered the development of a subgenre called revenge tragedy, in which an outraged protagonist “plots and executes revenge, destroying himself (or herself) in the process”.[261] Among the plays written in this period, an example of this new literary genre is the revenge tragedy of John Webster.

Webster included a ‘Machiavellian’ character in his play *The White Devil* (1612), Francisco I de’ Medici, based on an Italian historical figure. De’ Medici makes unethical decisions, which are seen as “the rare tricks of a Machivillian” (5.3.190). This spelling leads to the common misunderstanding of Machiavelli’s thought: in early modern English culture, he was considered as an enemy (‘villain’) of the good principles of morality and religion. Vittoria, the main character of Webster’s play, also shows behaviours that contain “shifting and conflicting figurations”,[262] and that allude to the misrepresented perception of the Italian philosopher, showing that “the real Machiavelli’s work . . . was misunderstood by the English”.[263]

In Elizabethan playhouses Shakespeare’s Italian plays often portrayed women who possessed positive and highly esteemed characteristics for that period such as honour, courage, devotion, wit, and intelligence. During the following period, when James VI of Scotland became James I of England (1603) and the English and Scottish

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[259] Hackett, p. 37.
[260] Greenblatt and Logan, p. 507.
[261] Ibid., p. 507.
[262] *The White Devil*, ed. by Lara Bovilsky, New Mermaids (London, New York: Methuen Drama, 2021), p. xxvi.
[263] Levith, p. 8.

crowns were unified,[264] literature and plays reflected the political change. By 1612, the court of James I gained a reputation of a place that fostered undesirable activities "and the king himself was renowned for his extravagance". Court parties were characterised by "lack of good order, discretion, and sobriety",[265] and the court environment was criticised and labelled as a place of "malice, pride, whoredom, swearing and rejoicing in the fall of others".[266] Women in particular, when they showed corrupt attitudes or unruliness towards courtiers, moving away from the type of woman that had been characterised by humanism, were marked and accused by society, and then marginalised. Popular belief and stereotypes of rebellious women spread, also reinforced by many witch trials. James himself, before he became king of England, published a treatise on the subject titled *Daemonologie* (1597). In this book the methods to recognise witchcraft were many and varied, including the practice of the swimming test illustrated in Fig. n° 5.[267] In the figure a woman is tied with a rope and dunked in water: if she sank, she was considered innocent, if she floated upon the water, it was an indication of witchcraft. The practice of the swimming test had "no status in law and was widely seen as sacrilegious",[268] nevertheless it was an approved method during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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[264] Stewart, p. 135.

[265] Purcell, p. 100.

[266] Julia Briggs, *This Stage-Play World: Texts and Contexts, 1580-1625*, Second Edition, Second Edition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 237.

[267] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, Very short introductions, 2010, p. 53.

[268] Gaskill, p. 54.

5. An English witch is subjected to the water ordeal, 1613

In Webster's play, which will now be under investigation, the moral vices of the characters are subtly linked to the vices of James I's court. What appears in the play is Webster's fascination with "the moral and fiscal corruption of the court".[269] A feeling of dissatisfaction of the university-educated men's class also emerges from the lack of social advancement which humanism should assure. Vittoria in *The White Devil* is a woman seen as an adulteress who is brought before a court of law. The Italian woman is a complex and contradictory character, an anti-heroine who would have elicited mixed reactions from the audience. The title of the play *The White Devil* is followed by a subtitle: *The Tragedy of Paulo Giordano Ursini, Duke of Brachiano, With The Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona the famous Venetian Curtesan*. The play recounts a tragedy that

[269] Jane Kingsley-Smith, 'Introduction', in *The Duchess of Malfi, The White Devil, The Broken Heart and 'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, by John Webster and John Ford, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Group, 2014), p. 17.

really occurred in Italy, and the term 'white devil' most likely refers to the lady Vittoria Accoramboni, a famous courtesan. During that period, 'white devil' was addressed to a person who apparently seemed innocent but was in fact found guilty of a crime. However, in the play, the guilt of Brachiano, her lover, is also evident. Vittoria is the one and only character mentioned in the title who clearly fits this description, as her perceived nature is the one of an evil temptress. Throughout the play, the lady is repeatedly compared to a 'devil'. In Vittoria we see the traits of deceitful, intriguing and exceptionally charming women, who, given their supposed association with the devil, at that time could be judged – and punished – as witches.

One of the most sensational events that for many contemporary critics creates a parallel between the dramatic presentation of Vittoria's trial and those of other aristocratic women happened at the time of the court of James I: the Countess Frances Howard, who was married and later divorced from the Count of Essex, and the king's counsellor Sir Robert Carr began an affair that caused a great scandal. The controversial situation escalated because of a series of murders of and death sentences to the people involved. Public opinion judged the episode as an example of blatant abuse of power and grave injustice.[270] Alastair Bellany briefly reports the strong reactions of the crowd and the gruesome aspects that resulted from the trials that followed:

> The crowds who packed the murder trials and gathered to witness the executions of the condemned heard fantastic stories of lust, betrayal, and murder; of ambitious men and ungoverned women; of witchcraft and poison; of pride and dissimulation; of popery, treason, and political assassination.[271]

Of course, it would have been impossible for Webster to refer directly to the above case of infidelity and political revenge at the court of James I. In *The White Devil,* Webster instead created an intriguing and articulated tale based on a real-life Italian scandal, steeped in sexual corruption, court intrigues and revenge. It is set in an Italian ducal court, and the action takes place between the cities of Rome and Padua. One of the protagonists of the story is Vittoria Accoramboni, described in contemporaneous accounts as a young

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[270] Purcell, p. 100.

[271] Alastair Bellany, 'The Court', in *Thomas Middleton in Context*, ed. by Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 121.

woman who was “vivace e un po’ vana, ma disinvolta e sorridente e nobilmente arguta”.[272]

Vittoria was the wife of Francesco Peretti – the nephew of a cardinal. She became the object of Paolo Giordano Orsini’s fascination, who was the Duke of Brachiano. Because of these feelings, he even commissioned the murder of her husband. Vittoria, who became an adulteress, was later murdered. At the time the affair caused a great scandal, both for the brutality of the crime and for the many political and religious people involved. The whole account with the final murder of Vittoria became an important material for numerous documents and newsletters. One of the most detailed reports is summarised below.

3.2 The Sources of *The White Devil*

The accounts of the life and death of Vittoria Accoramboni (1557-85) are contained “in a newsletter published by the Fugger banking house of Germany”.[273] Gunnar Boklund conducted a comprehensive survey of her, and he came to the conclusion that Webster probably did not possess that very document as a source, rather he consulted a translation of it. Then he probably took elements from this lost record for the draft of his play, and he enriched his dramatic plot with several inventions. The playwright presented Vittoria’s ‘dream’ in Act 1 Scene 2 to induce Brachiano to commit the murder of Vittoria’s husband Camillo. Webster conceived the dialogues and the structure of Vittoria’s trial, he added the woman’s following confinement in the ‘house of convertites’, and the arrival of ghosts: these are tragic elements that transformed the historical record into a revenge tragedy.

The account from the Fugger’s newsletter reports a much more straightforward story of Vittoria. Paolo Giordano Orsini, Duke of Bracciano, “scion of one of the noblest Roman families had for wife the sister of the new reigning Grand Duke of Florence”,[274]

[272] Chiara Marin, ‘Palazzo Cavalli. Una Dolce Vita?’, 2019 <https://mostre.cab.unipd.it/palazzocavalli/it/31/una-dolce-vita> [accessed 26 May 2024].
[273] Purcell, pp. 93-4.
[274] *The Fugger News-Letters*, ed. by Victor Von Klarwill, trans. by Pauline De Chary, Second Series (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1926).

Isabella. For Paolo Giordano the marriage was characterised by unsatisfying sexual intercourse, despite the birth of his son Giovanni. As a consequence, the duke no longer felt the obligation to keep his marriage vows and he turned his attentions to the wife of the Cardinal's nephew, Vittoria Accaramboni. At first, it seemed that Vittoria refused the duke's attentions and for this reason Paolo Giordano brutally murdered her husband. The duke expressed another time his intentions to Vittoria, and she refused him again, because she did not want to compromise her status; he was still married. Then, Paolo Giordano ordered the murder of his wife. A third time he turned to Vittoria, and this time the woman accepted his wooing and submitted to him with the condition that he would marry her. The duke accepted.

The Cardinal, the later Pope Sixtus, was grieving over the violent death of his nephew and wanted to punish the perpetrators. Once he became Pope, he met Paolo Giordano, who wanted to make peace and begged for his blessings. The Pope forgave him, but he commanded him to leave Rome: "do not come again, however, of that we warn you".[275] The duke with his wife quickly moved to Padua, that was under Venetian administration. Just two months later he died at Salo. The sudden death raised suspicions, even more because Vittoria received a large estate. The Grand Duke of Florence, who was not pleased with Giordano's will, took charge of the abandoned young Giovanni and requested the widow to disregard the will and to stay in a convent or to remain a widow.

Vittoria did not accept the Grand Duke's impositions and wished to comply with the will. On the night of 22nd December 1585, "fifty well-armed men entered and cruelly shot the brother of the Signora Accaramboni" and then "they stabbed her where they found her at prayer".[276] Among the assassins was Ludovico Orsini, cousin of Paolo Giordano. The group of assassins barricaded themselves inside the house. The news spread and the government sent one of its Senators to Padua with right to destroy the house of Orsini and to take the murderers. Orsini "surrendered himself with a dagger in his hand, and his house was fired upon from several large cannon".[277] All the murderers were arrested. It followed that the Government of Venice decreed their fate: Ludovico

[275] Von Klarwill.
[276] Von Klarwill.
[277] Von Klarwill.

was strangled, while his accomplices were hanged and dismembered. In the end, what is clear from the records is that Vittoria was not guilty of the murder of her first husband.

3.3 From Historical Sources to Drama

The White Devil opens in Rome. Paolo Giordano Orsini, Duke of Brachiano, who is married to Isabella, falls in love with the Venetian lady Vittoria. She pursues an illicit affair with Brachiano. Then, with tricks and the apparent complicity of Flamineo, Vittoria's immoral brother, the two manage to have Isabella poisoned and Camillo, who is Vittoria's husband, murdered. At this point, Cardinal Monticelso (later chosen as Pope) who is Camillo's uncle, is called in to shed light on the crimes. Vittoria faces an arraignment because they accuse her of adultery and murder. Monticelso is her judge, and he sentences Vittoria to a house for penitent prostitutes. Isabella's brother, Duke Francisco (de Medici) of Florence, orders the poisoning of Brachiano. Then the murder of Flaminio follows, who previously murdered Marcello – brother to Vittoria and Flamineo and attendant of Francisco. Finally, the Duke of Florence orders the murder of Vittoria and Flaminio.

In the secondary dynamics of the plot, other provocative and spectacular set pieces intertwine with the main plot. In Act 2 and part of Act 3 Webster plays with the theme of revenge. Francisco, together with Monticelso and Count Lodovico, plots against Brachiano. In these scenes, a succession of evil actions shows a strong desire for revenge. Violent language and verbal fights between the characters trigger bloody events. There are alternating situations of advantage and disadvantage for the characters. On the one hand, Brachiano achieves the murder of Isabella and Camillo, on the other hand, Francisco achieves Vittoria's conviction. The appearances of the ghosts of the dead characters, the madness of Vittoria's mother, and the strong feeling of misogyny are typical elements of revenge tragedies. In conclusion, in the play the revenge motif is justified by the necessary protection of family honour, but at the same time it is enforced by a punitive justice.

3.4 The Response to Adultery in Renaissance Italy and Its Educational Message

Despite the setting of Vittoria's trial in Rome, Webster's choice to make Vittoria a woman from Venice allowed him to shed light on a place often presented by early modern English playwrights as a theatre for complex themes. In fact, while the real Vittoria Accoramboni, the historical figure, was born in Gubbio, in the trial scene of the play the cardinal clearly specifies that Vittoria's birthplace was Venice (3.2.234-5)[278]. Webster may have been aware that Venice was known for its balanced administration of justice, but it was also a place where its "beautiful women were sometimes wives of questionable virtue, or courtesans of true heart".[279]

In Contarini's *Commonwealth and Government of Venice* translated by Lewis Lewkenor in 1599, Venice was described as a city with an ideal government. The ruler was "wholly subject to the laws [and] deferred to the decision-making powers of both Senate and Council".[280] This model was praised by those Englishmen who were against the growing absolutism of King James I. In Italy the criminal law and its consequent penalties were defined in the *Promissio Maleficorum* (1232), a short and basic medieval code that constituted the standard reference for the courts of justice throughout the Renaissance. The text began with a declaration written in the early thirteenth century by the chief executive officer of the state, Doge Jacopo Tiepolo: "Since we hold that justice requires our unceasing vigil and concern in order to correct excess and punish crime",[281] a moral and symbolic dimension of law is fundamental, but also the recognition of the limits of its use for criminal matters. Venice was a place of freedoms for a person who lived there in many ways. The Venetian population comprised noble and rich families integrated with foreigners of different cultures and customs. However, freedom led to licentious and transgressive attitudes too: Venice was well known for its courtesans and Coryat during his travels explained that the word *courtesan* "is derived from the Italian

[278] John Webster, *The White Devil*, New Mermaids (Methuen Drama, 2021), p. 71.
[279] Levith, p. 15.
[280] Frazer and Hansen, p. 162.
[281] Guido Ruggiero, 'Law and Punishment in Early Renaissance Venice', *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 69.2 (1978) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1142398>, p. 244.

word cortesia that signifieth courtesie. Because these kinde of women are said to receive courtesies of their favourites".[282]

In the documents examined by Joanne Ferraro in her recent *Nefarious Crimes, Contested Justice: Illicit Sex and Infanticide in the Republic of Venice, 1557–1789*, it came out that the punishments inflicted on women accused of sexual crimes had often the following reasons: infanticide, spontaneous attempts of abortion, sexual relations with religious people and other immoral acts of various nature. During the Early Renaissance, according to Guido Ruggiero in *I Confini dell'Eros* (1988), adultery was very frequent in Italy, especially among the lower classes.[283] City life facilitated a wide range of contacts between people of the same social level. From the records of the period, although it seems that the lower-class environment was where these licentious affairs mostly occurred, also among the higher classes some cases were found. For women of the nobility, however, adultery was less frequent: first, their illicit relationships with lower-class men were sporadic and uncommon; second, the affair with a 'wooer' was unlikely to last long. According to Ruggiero, Venetian aristocratic women were rarely prosecuted for adultery. In several cases, the judgement was based on the supposed desires of the wife in question. In *I Confini dell'Eros* it is reported that when the crime of adultery was considered as illicit love, linked to a passing passion, the legislative council maintained a good disposition to consider the marriage reconstituted.[284]

This is evident in the case of Agnesina, dated 1456. The woman was the wife of a builder, Bernardo. She had an illicit lover, Angelo Vignati, who reciprocated her feelings, and the two ran away together. For the examination of the case, the duration of the feelings was important, because the love considered a 'folle passione' – wild passion – was expected to have limited life. Therefore, the mad lovers would probably soon return to their respective families, as was their duty. In the end, Agnesina was punished with a sentence of six months in prison and the restitution of her dowry. This specific case shows that the council considered this passion transitory, even if the episode ruined the marriage. The two parties were often asked to reach an agreement that overlooked the damage

[282] Coryat, p. 402.
[283] Guido Ruggiero, *I confini dell'eros. Crimini sessuali e sessualità nella Venezia del Rinascimento* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1988), p. 99.
[284] Ibid., p. 110.

caused by love, and consider the marriage reconstituted. A logic consequence may be that the request for the reunion of a married couple, despite their moral damage, demonstrated a particular concern for women. In other words, it seemed a protection of both women's private sphere and the family welfare.[285] But most important, it showed a particular concern for the moral education of women, to ensure that their behaviour would not endanger the family's honour and the stability of the marriage.

Another case reports that in 1444 the wife of a goldsmith was sentenced to prison for four months with the loss of her dowry. As an alternative solution, the court offered her to be released and to return to her husband only if the man would accept her back and would agree to treat her with kindness. From this situation it is evident the concern for the woman's health, even if her decisions had little consideration compared to her husband's. Care for a wife's desire seemed to be one of the central points of Venice's legislative councils, when she was disposed to reunite with her husband: the case followed a course that also included the request by the council for kind behaviour from her husband. The court, with the purpose of preserving the marriage and supporting the reunion of the couple, heavily intervened in private matters. Proposals were made and resolutions demanded for the conflict between a husband and a wife. Women in particular were required to observe the correct norms of social behaviour, underlining not only the legislative, but also the educational function of adultery trials.

Before 1360, as Ruggiero wrote, the women who were accused of adultery were submitted to the coercive discipline of their family. It is probable that control of the guilty woman continued in her private life; however, within the subsequent court proceedings of sexual offences, women gained "una qualche posizione legale ed entro certi limiti anche un'informale protezione, purché fossero disposte a conformarsi al ruolo loro assegnato dalle norme sociali all'interno della famiglia".[286] Whether this was a real step forward it is difficult to ascertain, but it can definitely be considered a significant change in the social position of women. Certainly, the acknowledgment of the risk of ensuing

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[285] Ibid., pp. 110-11.
[286] Ruggiero, *I confini dell'eros. Crimini sessuali e sessualità nella Venezia del Rinascimento*, p. 110.

penalties induced women to maintain a correct behaviour. Thus, they were educated to assume their proper social role.

3.5 The Language of Misogyny in *The White Devil*

During the Jacobean period, many accusations of misconduct were addressed to women who did not conform to the ideal of womanhood. Consequently, women were forced to defend themselves in the English ecclesiastical courts. As is the way with Vittoria in *The White Devil*, the denunciations concerned the "'not-woman' in her many forms",[287] but also her sexual sphere. In many documents of the period, the term 'whore' referred to accusations of not being chaste. Lisa Jardine in *Reading Shakespeare Historically*, examines a number of court proceedings of the Jacobean period that showed several cases in which women, while defending themselves, claimed that "their reputations had been harmed by imputations of unchastity".[288] The most striking result to emerge from this survey is that "90 per cent of cases concerning a female plaintiff involved her sexual reputation".[289] These dramatic representations of women describe the manyfold female reactions to the prevailing sexist and patriarchal behaviour.

In Webster's tragedy, the discourses and soliloquies of cruel and revengeful characters such as Flamineo and Francisco occupy many lines. They deliver exclamations, jokes or remarks of a misogynistic nature, even addressing the audience directly. With respect to women, Webster gives the female characters less room to speak. It is also worth to remember that female roles on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage were still acted by young male actors. Webster's *The White Devil* is pervaded by misogynistic discourses that insinuate an inherent guilt of women who rebel against their social position. The misogynistic discourse occurs extensively in early modern tragedies; with its violent language, it constitutes a substantial part of Webster's play. The misogynistic expressions are often a sign of serious consequences for women and the other characters involved in them. In other words, misogyny is a tool used in performance to drive the plot

[287] Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Harvester Press, 1983), pp. 93-4.
[288] Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 25.
[289] Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically*, p. 26.

to sensational moments of violence. It serves also to separate the male and female sides, for the purpose to reinstate the natural order of things, as Dympna Callaghan has stated in *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (1989): "gender opposition is probably the most significant dynamic of Renaissance Tragedy […]. [The] gender categories produced both within and outside the dramatic text are precarious and problematic".[290] Callaghan has also noted that misogyny implies "a kind of naming that is at once euphemistic and metaphoric".[291] In symbolic terms, women are described with a list of terms that associate them with negative forces.

3.6 Painted Devils, the Trial Scene, and Words of Defence

This paragraph offers a commentary on the misogynistic words and messages that appear in the most significant scenes of *The White Devil*. The development and interaction between the characters of the misogynistic theme will be investigated, following the chronology of the play's events.

The beginning of *The White Devil* enters *in medias res*, directly into the middle of the story, with a dialogue between the enraged Count Lodovico and two of his followers, Antonelli and Gasparo. A banishment occurred, and the subject of the conversation concerns something that happened in the past to Lodovico, who appears to be at first glance the central character of the play. There is not a thorough explanation of the past events, and the audience must find out the details of this past issue. Count Lodovico, the character who dominates the first scene, laments that he has been exiled from Rome because he murdered some people in the city. Lodovico opens the tragedy uttering the word "Banished".[292] In the following lines he is sarcastic and cynical when he describes the goddess Fortuna as "a right whore" (1.1.4)[293]. This goddess, in classical philosophy, was represented by a woman who turned a wheel and made good or bad fortune. In other words, the goddess Fortuna was considered unstable and whimsical. Lodovico's curse against the female deity is the first of many examples of misogynistic language. Later in

[290] Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy*, p. 3.
[291] Ibid. p. 124.
[292] John Webster, *The White Devil*, New Mermaids (London, New York: Methuen Drama, 2021), p. 7.
[293] Webster, p. 7.

the scene, Lodovico tells the story of Vittoria and her scandalous relationship with Brachiano. The Count is concerned about the woman's social position in Rome, which is endangered because of this compromising situation:

> . . . But I wonder, then, some great men scape
>
> This banishment. There's Paulo Giordano Orsini,
>
> The Duke of Bracciano, now lives in Rome,
>
> And by close panderism seeks to prostitute
>
> The honour of Vittoria Corombona –
>
> Vittoria, she that might have got my pardon
>
> For one kiss to the Duke!
>
> (1.1.38-44)[294]

In this scene, the matter in question concerns the loss of Lodovico and Vittoria's moral integrity for two different reasons: the man is a murderer, and the woman is an adulteress. This can be seen in the forced exile of Lodovico, but, as Antonelli stated, he will not experience this punishment forever: "We shall find time, I doubt not, to repeal / Your banishment" (1.1.58-9).[295] As Callaghan accurately observed, "male characters suffer banishment at the level of institutions, but they are not execrated and exiled by state and family alike, as female characters are".[296] Vittoria's loss of morality on the grounds of her sexual behaviour alone, of her sexual transgression, will lead to the separation from her family and her sentence to a house for 'penitent whores'.

In Scene 2 Flamineo's and Brachiano's complicity is clearly acknowledged by their informal and confidential tone. In these lines, Flamineo's irritating satire of the female world is presented directly to the Jacobean audience, with its irregular and casual language that would have aligned with that of ordinary people of that period. In

[294] Webster, p. 9.
[295] Ibid., p. 10.
[296] Callaghan, p. 113.

Shakespeare and the Nature of Women, Dusinberre holds the view that Flamineo plays the medieval Vice, deflating "romance with gadfly satire".[297] Dusinberre has asserted that in the play "the love scenes between Brachiano and Vittoria are perpetually orchestrated by Flamineo's cynicism about women". Flamineo bitterly identifies female gender with lust:

> Bove merit? – we may now talk freely – 'bove merit? What is't you doubt? Her coyness? That's but the superficies of lust most women have. Yet why should ladies blush to hear that named which they do not fear to handle? Oh, they are politic. They know our desire is increased by the difficulty of enjoying, whereas satiety is a blunt, weary and drowsy passion. If the buttery-hatch at court stood continually open there would be nothing so passionate crowding, nor hot suit after the beverage.
>
> (1.2.17-25)[298]

Flamineo is the character who most of all connects the spectators with the events of the play. He takes on the role of an outsider who manipulates the other actors on stage. As Purcell pointed out, "there may be, for the audience, a morally ambiguous pleasure in watching this skilled and cynical manipulator at work".[299] Flamineo then encourages Vittoria:

> Come, sister, darkness hides your blush. Women are like curst dogs: civility keeps them tied all daytime, but they are let loose at midnight. Then they do most good or most mischief.
>
> (1.2.190-2)[300]

Flamineo frequently changes the addressee of his tirades, using asides and soliloquies. His acting aims to create intimacy with the audience, and he speaks with cynicism and moments of satire in which he appears as a fool and a malcontent. In this way, expressions of misogyny are often concealed by witty and humorous jokes that invite the audience's laughter. As a result, the public seems to belittle "the vicious nature of the misogynistic utterance", and, at the same time, guarantee its complicity in "derogatory statements about

[297] Dusinberre, p. 186.
[298] Webster, pp. 11-2.
[299] Purcell, p. 9.
[300] Webster, p. 21.

women".[301] In Flamineo's exclamation "Trust a woman? Never, never" (5.6.159),[302] the misogynistic words are almost neutralised, because they appear familiar and entertaining. The satirical quality used to present this theme ensures the fact that it is presented as a minor discourse in the tragedy; this allows it to be continuously reiterated.

Another aspect of misogyny in the representation of Vittoria is found in the acts of cursing and denouncing her adultery. As Callaghan has pointed out, "Execration[303] is a logical corollary of the construction of woman as excess in misogyny".[304] For instance, Cornelia, the mother of Vittoria and Flamineo, does not only condemn her daughter, but she also expresses a general warning to the female world:

> I will join with thee,
>
> To the most woeful end e'er mother kneeled:
>
> If thou dishonour thus thy husband's bed,
>
> Be thy life short as are the funeral tears
>
> In great men's –
>
> . . .
>
> Be thy act Judas-like: betray in kissing.
>
> Mayst thou be envied during his short breath,
>
> And pitied like a wretch after his death.
>
> (1.2.282-91)[305]

In this part, Cornelia curses her daughter. However, at the same time, she shows an ambiguous behaviour. She enters with her servant and prepares the scene adding objects

301 Callaghan, p. 125.
302 Webster, p. 164.
303 late 14c., "cursing, act of laying under a curse," from Latin execrationem (nominative execratio) "malediction, curse," noun of action from past-participle stem of execrari "to hate, curse," from ex "out" (see ex-) + sacrare "to devote to holiness or to destruction, consecrate," from sacer "sacred" (see sacred). From 1560s as "an uttered curse." See 'Etymonline - Online Etymology Dictionary' <https://www.etymonline.com/> [accessed 11 May 2024].
304 Callaghan, p. 115.
305 Webster, p. 26.

(a carpet and two cushions), which lead the audience to imagine the preparation for a sexual encounter between the two lovers. Through these manoeuvres, the woman seems to approve of her daughter's adultery, even though she expresses in words all her disapproval of Vittoria's immoral conduct and sexual transgression. Cornelia distrusts all those women who act with little reason, those who follow only their passions: "Woe to light hearts! They still forerun our fall" (1.2.260).[306] Cornelia fears the social inequality of the two lovers. In her heartfelt denunciation, the unfortunate custom of the period of marginalising and opposing women who sought relations with people from a different social class is also conveyed.

In the end of this scene, Flamineo replies to his mother's statement "What, because we are poor / Shall we be vicious?" (1.2.305-6)[307] by expressing a complaint about their inferior social position. He relates of his time spent as a student at the University of Padua, where he obtained his title after years of mending the professor's socks – here lies the humour of the scene –, and thereafter failed to achieve a successful position or wealth:

> . . . You brought me up
>
> At Padua, I confess, where, I protest,
>
> For want of means – the university judge me –
>
> I have been fain to heel my tutor's stockings
>
> At least seven years. Conspiring with a beard
>
> Made me a graduate; then to this Duke's service
>
> I visited the court, whence I returned
>
> More courteous, more lecherous by far,
>
> But not a suit the richer . . .
>
> (1.2.310-8)[308]

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[306] Webster, p. 24.
[307] Webster, p. 27.
[308] Ibid., p. 27.

Interestingly, Flamineo throws his grievance not at the rules of the social order, but at the female figure who raised him, his mother Cornelia. Flamineo's grievance against the world is clearly a complaint against social injustice. The aim is to verbally attack class differentiation and unfairness, but in the end his discourse concludes with a judgement on female immorality, which becomes a broader accusation that encompasses the issue of gender differentiation:

> I would the common'st courtesan in Rome
>
> Had been my mother rather than thyself.
>
> Nature is very pitiful to whores
>
> To give them but few children, yet those children
>
> Plurality of fathers; they are sure
>
> They shall not want . . .
>
> (1.2.324-30)[309]

In Act 2 Scene 1, Isabella, Brachiano's wife, represents in the play the female model of morality, a positive example of wifely behaviour. The woman, after her conflictual interaction with Brachiano, meets her brother Francisco together with other characters who initially act as listeners. Isabella, with words full of anger, utters violent offences at the absent Vittoria. Francisco promptly orders his sister to moderate her verbal fury and to calm her aggressive eloquence. He speaks to her, declaring that such an attitude is not appropriate to her role:

> Look upon other women, with what patience
>
> They suffer these slight wrongs, with what justice
>
> They study to requite them. Take that course.
>
> . . .

[309] Webster, p. 28.

Keep your vow

And take your chamber.

(2.1.239-68)[310]

Isabella in this scene embodies the disgraceful part of the jealous wife. She aims thereby to mislead her brother's suspects and, as Laura Tosi wrote in *La memoria del testo* (2001), "apparire unica responsabile della separazione (dove l'uso dell'eloquenza, pur stigmatizzato dall'universo maschile, è indispensabile per raggiungere lo scopo del sacrificio personale)".[311]

In Vittoria's courtroom scene (Act 3 Scene 2) which takes place in a courtroom in Rome, Cardinal Monticelso takes charge of the proceedings and becomes her main accuser. He invites the lawyers to stop, then he proceeds asserting that his language will be more straightforward. From this moment, Vittoria becomes "oggetto dello sguardo di avvocati, ambasciatori ed ecclesiastici",[312] and she is obliged to face the trial for adultery. More than her words, the ostentation of her body is in the limelight of the men of the accusation: the central position of her body is reminiscent of the "tentazione lussuriosa [...] a cui cede Brachiano, la seduzione della *whore*".[313] Monticelso verbally attacks the woman, and threatens her with a proof of her stupidity:

I shall be plainer with you, and paint out

Your follies in more natural red and white

Than that upon your cheek.

(3.2.51–3)[314]

In these first words pronounced by the Cardinal, Farah Karim-Cooper has noticed an intriguing reference to the anti-cosmetic rhetoric that moralists railed against painted

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[310] Webster, pp. 41-2.
[311] Laura Tosi, *La Memoria Del Testo. Un'analisi Macrotestuale Delle Tragedie Di John Webster*, Studi Di Letterature Moderne e Comparate (Pacini Editore, 2001), p. 95.
[312] Tosi, p. 95.
[313] Ibid.
[314] Webster, p. 61-2.

whores.[315] Later in this scene, Vittoria sharply replies to Monticelso that her beauty and her use of cosmetics are not reasons to make her a murderer. Her behaviour stands in opposition to the popular beliefs expressed in *A Treatise Against Paint[i]ng* (1616) by Thomas Tuke, known at the time. This religious minister maintained that "the Ceruse or white Lead, wherewith women use to paint themselves was, without doubt, brought in use by the divell, the capitall enemie of nature".[316]

In his depiction of the trial scene, with the figure of the Cardinal who interferes in the accusation speaking for the lawyers – although it should not concern him – Webster refers to the "contemporary attacks on English ecclesiastical courts that were levelled on two fronts".[317] Luke Wilson in his '*The White Devil* and the Law' (2006) has illustrated how the Puritans' criticism of that period concerned these courts, which proved to be "too lax on serious sins",[318] while common lawyers signalled that overlapping jurisdiction often occurred.

The Cardinal publicly associates Vittoria with brutal and merciless descriptions. He attempts to influence the perception of the court and the audience towards the corrupt woman. Monticelso uses a number of associations to demonstrate the vicious behaviour and the ambiguities of Vittoria, as the following scene shows:

> You see, my lords, what goodly fruit she seems,
>
> Yet like those apples travellers report
>
> To grow where Sodom and Gomorrah stood,
>
> I will but touch her and you straight shall see
>
> She'll fall to soot and ashes.

---

[315] Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 93.

[316] Thomas Tuke, *A Treatise Against Paint[i]Ng and Tinctvring of Men and Women* (London, 1616), Sig. B3v.

[317] Frazer and Hansen.

[318] Luke Wilson, 'The White Devil and the Law', in *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion*, ed. by Sullivan Garrett, Patrick Cheney, and Andrew Hadfield (Oxford University Press, 2006).

(3.2.63-7)[319]

As Karim-Cooper argued, “Vittoria is painted even as he proceeds to participate in a type of verbal painting when he accuses her of being a whore”. The moralistic speech of the Cardinal reaches a climax when he gives a definition of what a whore is, exposing horrid depictions:

> I’ll give their perfect character. They are first
>
> Sweetmeats which rot the eater; in man’s nostril
>
> Poisoned perfumes. They are coz’ning alchemy,
>
> Shipwrecks in calmest weather. What are whores?
>
> . . . What’s a whore?
>
> She’s like the guilty, counterfeited coin
>
> Which, whosoe’er first stamps it, brings in trouble
>
> All that receive it.
>
> (3.2.79–82, 98–101)[320]

In this dramatic stage picture, Monticelso describes the woman with a simile that is representative of early modern English culture: he compares a whore to a counterfeit coin. In this hard-hearted image, Webster presents women as objects of bargain, “but the whore is counterfeit bringing not wealth (sexual satisfaction) but trouble (disease)” to men.[321] Vittoria is forced to defend herself against the moralising accusations of the Cardinal:

> Instruct me, some good horse-leech to speak treason,
>
> For since you cannot take my life for deeds,
>
> Take it for words. O woman’s poor revenge,
>
> Which dwells but in the tongue! . . .

[319] Webster, p. 62.
[320] Ibid., pp. 63-4.
[321] Callaghan, p. 124.

(3.2.280-3)[322]

Her declaration seems to be tied to the preceding words of Monticelso that strike as a definitive condemnation of those women – including Vittoria – who do not behave according to social rules. The Cardinal reprimands her with these words:

> And look upon this creature was his wife.
>
> She comes not like a widow; she comes armed
>
> With scorn and impudence. Is this a mourning habit?
>
> (3.2.119-21)[323]

Vittoria is condemned by the cardinal with a penalty that forces her to be confined in a house of reformed prostitutes. The educational message manifest within the Cardinal's reproachful words does not only refer to the accusations of adultery and murder directed at the woman, which result in her being sentenced to confinement. Vittoria's irreverent and shameless words of defence, and her attitude during the trial, have now become too public to remain unnoticed, and they thus must also be condemned and reformed. Monticelso also emphasises that the public scandal deprives the woman of any kind of absolution:

> For you, Vittoria, your public fault,
>
> Joined to th'condition of the present time,
>
> Takes from you all the fruits of noble pity.
>
> Such a corrupted trial have you made,
>
> Both of your life and beauty, and been styled
>
> No less in ominous fate than blazing stars
>
> To princes. Here's your sentence: you are confined
>
> Unto a house of convertites . . .

---

[322] Webster, p. 74.
[323] Webster, p. 65.

(3.2.256-63)[324]

The educational admonition of these lines is evident: the women who adopt a licentious attitude and engage in an authoritative and rhetorical language are ill-favoured and hardly win understanding and mercy before a court. Vittoria's continuous attempts to defend herself against the accusations worsen her public position.

Her words, simply because she is a woman, are in vain. Ironically, her own eloquence and wisdom condemn her. Vittoria uses a skilful and biting language for her defence, but her elaborate dialectic only reinforces the correspondence with her depravity because of both her sexual behaviour and excessive loquaciousness, which were found unacceptable at that time. Her legitimate words of indignation clash with the misogynistic education of the cardinal and the men around her. The result is the annihilation of her person, as she is educated in the obligation of silence.

As Dusinberre asserted, "the drama shows women defending themselves in court while conscious that men condemn them for masculine presumption in so doing".[325] This awareness is clearly voiced by Vittoria during her trial:

Humbly thus,

Thus low, to the most worthy and respected

Lieger ambassadors, my modesty

And womanhood I tender; but withal

So entangled in a cursèd accusation

That my defence, of force, like Perseus,

Must personate masculine virtue to the point.

(3.2.129-35)[326]

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[324] Webster, pp. 72-3.
[325] Dusinberre, 219.
[326] Webster, p. 66.

To create this revenge tragedy, Webster narrated a muddled story with a tangled plot of cruelty and lust in the setting of an Italian court described with a sharp satire. As mentioned above, while Webster was writing *The White Devil*, he changed an important detail of the true story: he placed Vittoria's hometown in Venice. The choice of Venice confirms the perception of the period: the Italian republican city was often seen as the centre of pleasure and the place of sensual excess. A notable example of this stereotype are Roger Ascham's descriptions in his *The Schoolmaster*: "I thank God my abode there was but nine days. And yet I saw in that little time, in one city, more liberty to sin than I ever heard tell of in our noble city of London in nine years".[327] Vittoria's hometown in Venice also indicates that the city was in conflict with the ecclesiastical authority in Rome. Therefore, showing a condemnation of an eloquent woman is significant and the attributes that Webster ascribed to Vittoria join to produce a convincing tragic heroine. The real story from which Webster extracted elements to write his play, however, proved to be quite different.

In Act 4 Scene 2 Brachiano and Flamineo consider the city of Rome "ingrateful", worthy of being called "Barbary" (4.2.200).[328] This definition refers to a place considered uncivilized, especially non-Christian: "after 1600, often referring to Arab and/or Muslim countries in North Africa", as Bovilsky commented.[329] In this scene, Brachiano is planning his departure for Padua, and Flamineo agrees with him, considering the moment to be favourable for leaving, because the Pope has just died, all the cardinals entered a conclave for the new election, and the whole city is in great confusion. In the end, Brachiano manages to return to his palace in Padua with Vittoria.

Act 5 Scene 6 opens in Vittoria's quarters in Brachiano's palace. Three mysterious characters disguised with masks enter the building. They are Francisco disguised as Mulinassar, and Lodovico and Gasparo disguised as churchmen. The three – namely the revengers of the play – seek to avenge Isabella's death. They achieve to poison Brachiano, and then to murder Vittoria, Flamineo and the servant Zanche. It is not clearly described how the three victims die. Probably, they are struck by the revengers' swords by order of

[327] Ascham, *The Scholemaster; Written between 1563-8. Posthumously Published. First Ed., 1570; Collated with the 2d Ed, 1572. Edited by Edward Arber*.
[328] Webster, p. 103.
[329] *The White Devil*, ed. by Lara Bovilsky, New Mermaids (Methuen Drama, 2021), p. 103n.

Lodovico "with a joint motion" (5.6.230).[330] In this final scene, Vittoria is murdered not only in order to bring justice to Isabella, but also because she is considered a prostitute, as Lodovico's terrible words of accusation indicate:

> LODOVICO [To VITTORIA] O thou glorious strumpet,
>
> Could I divide thy breath from this pure air
>
> When't leaves thy body, I would suck it up
>
> And breath't upon some dunghill.
>
> (5.6.205-8)[331]

Vittoria, at the moment of death, declares that her "greatest sin" is her "blood".[332] It seems that, through her death, the blood could expiate her crime. This appears to express repentance for her sexual desire, but Vittoria's lines still are ambiguous: as Purcell noted, the term 'blood' could symbolise 'temper' or even 'family', and both meanings would seem appropriate.[333] The lady shows repentance, but also, together with Flamineo, challenges her murderers and scorns them as cowards.

On the other hand, a misogynistic tone in Flamineo's words appears when he says: "Know many glorious women that are famed / For masculine virtue have been vicious" (5.6.242-3).[334] Vittoria's brother ends his speech with a remark about the fate of those women who engaged in licentious behaviours:

> Only a happier silence did betide them.
>
> She hath no faults who hath the art to hide them.
>
> (5.6.244-5)

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[330] Webster, p. 168.
[331] Ibid., p.167.
[332] Ibid., p. 169.
[333] Purcell, p. 82.
[334] Webster, p. 169.

Apart from the brother's rediscovered admiration for his sister, Flamineo suggests to women the importance of keeping their actions private, without overly expressing their passions.

Conclusion

The present MA dissertation set out to investigate the educational messages about female transgression addressed to women in early modern English culture and in Renaissance Italy. It has explored the ways in which the two Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Webster's *The White Devil*, helped to develop this theme.

As M. C. Bradbook stated, drama is "the poetry of the city".[335] Shakespeare's theatre was popular in a context in which the issue of women's social role in English society was very much in question and there was a lively debate concerning their attitudes. As Dusinberre wrote, "Shakespeare took the best of the Puritan spirit – its freshness, its rethinking of old authorities, its passionate moral intensity –[336] and, in his *The Taming of the Shrew*, he exhibited the social and spiritual concerns of his period. Indeed, it seems that Shakespeare did not seek to appear as a defender of women. Through his characters, he shows an ambiguous position regarding the condition of the female gender: as Virginia Woolf asserted, "it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women".[337] The play's dialogues instil in the minds of the spectators an awareness and concern of women's freedom that could potentially develop social debates. Furthermore, Shakespeare offers a broad and varied portrayal of human nature, whereby it can be observed in every woman and man "an infinite variety of union between opposing impulses"[338]. Shakespeare writes for an audience that rejects literary positions that consider women in a binary manner as either 'goddesses' or 'devils'; these ideas belong to an aristocratic tradition that appears distant in the Bard's plays. Although Shakespeare worked in a society influenced by the puritanism of the period, he does not seem to be overly influenced by it. In fact, his thinking concerning women reflects his proximity to the middle class, "in a period when antagonism between the court and the city is marked".[339]

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[335] M. C. Bradbook, *English Dramatic Form*, 1965, p. 41.
[336] Dusinberre, p. 307.
[337] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1945, p. 97.
[338] Dusinberre, p. 308.
[339] Ibid., p. 7.

This fact could explain why he achieved a good measure of attention and why his representations of female characters achieved success. Shakespeare has the merit of not separating male and female human nature. He seems to regard men and women as equal beings, in a social context that advocated inequality and demanded the subjugation of women to men. Both Shakespeare and Webster offered to the public figures of strong-willed women, confident in their attitude and possessive of their men.

Webster's *The White Devil*, the second play under analysis, belongs to the revenge tragedies. The work presents the tragic story of a woman who is considered an adulteress and murderer. The woman is condemned and imprisoned in a house of penitent prostitutes and is eventually murdered. It must be noted that during the early years of James I's sovereignty, several comedies included a discreet number of prostitutes, bawds and ruffians,[340] but also authoritative characters who enacted their corruption and operated in shady situations. In *The White Devil*, the focus on women-in-court scenes and on the theme of the ruin or death of a rival is evident. In Webster's work we find the typical themes of tragic and dramatic situations: adultery, murder, deception, dishonesty, treason and revenge. The characters are part of a social context of people in authority who led lives with a questionable moral. Vittoria, the protagonist of *The White Devil*, shows a determination to defend her status and preserve her moral integrity. During the trial scene, Vittoria bravely defends herself using a provocative language. She is opposed in a despotic manner by a lawyer and the Cardinal Monticelso. At the end of her court case, she is accused of adultery and murder and blamed for displaying a moral ambiguity. However, Webster throughout the play manages to convey a sense of empathy and understanding for this fallen woman, transforming her from a corrupt character into a kind of heroine. In early modern England, the widespread idea that excessive eloquence in women was to be condemned and reformed is thus mitigated by Vittoria's courage and determination to lead her own defence.

The female figures in Shakespeare's and Webster's plays show an articulate and complex view of woman. In their personalities we find the qualities and contradictions of

[340] Dusinberre, p. 193.

round female characters; as Woodbridge asserted, "Shakespeare and Webster […] told the world they were fine women, and heroes".[341]

The paragraph 'Other Sources and Educational Aspects of *The Taming of the Shrew*' has shown the example of the cowl staff riding in England: the woman who was too rebellious towards her husband, was the object of punishment and humiliation by the entire community. From a legal point of view, however, during the early modern period the condemnation for adultery included the charge of discrediting the moral integrity of the family. In many legal judgements, the condemnation of women is more visible, with less consideration for the illegal behaviours of men. In the Italian Renaissance context, and particularly in the Venetian Republic, court documents with different sentences have been presented. They show that the final verdicts tended to favour family reunification. According to Guido Ruggieri's analysis of past documents in *I confini dell'eros*, adultery was often driven by a passion that proved to be fleeting. Therefore, the extramarital affair was regarded as momentary, insignificant and erratic. In the Italian courts, in order to protect marriage and thus maintain a state of social commitment, often the woman's condemnation did not happen; she was asked either to be educated and reformed, namely to accept the commitment to respect and care that her husband promised to her, or to pay a small fee to obtain absolution. The examined court sentences seem to indicate a small revolution and a change in the judgement towards women. There seems to be a greater understanding and consideration for the disrespectful attitudes to social rules that women adopted.

In conclusion, the two plays presented in this work narrate of women who are 'transgressive' and revolutionary in their own way: they are out of the ordinary and they do not respect the norms of the time. Katherina with her intrusive and overly present way of speaking and behaving could be seen as condemnable by the audience of the time; however, in her last monologue she redeems herself and she advises the other women in the scene. In other words, she appears to return to the required standards of behaviour expected by the early modern society. Equally effective is Vittoria in her words of defence, which suggest the importance of using language as a weapon against groundless defamations. And yet Vittoria is ultimately punished and condemned, not only for her

[341] Woodbridge, p. 260.

adultery, but also for the transgressive words that she uses to defend herself during trial. Katherina and Vittoria are, ultimately, two different models of women, who are however both revolutionary and conservative in the ambiguous educational message they convey.

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