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"I LOVED WELL TO SEE PLAYS": WOMEN ON AND OFF STAGE IN SIXTEENTH- AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND, ITALY, AND SPAIN

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Introduction

There is no doubt that, since the end of the nineteenth century, the Renaissance has become one of the most explored subjects and historical periods, and that, more recently, the Internet has been offering so many specialised details on the topic that it is almost impossible to research it in a comprehensive and systematic way. As a consequence, one of the methods to deal with it is to narrow down the scope of the investigation and to concentrate on aspects that have been generally ignored, as well as to refer to critical works that have been calling into question traditional ways of approaching the subject. Such is the method that has been privileged in the present work.

This work investigates women's role as patron-spectators in the theatre of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, Italy, and Spain. The aim of such an excursion into the little researched theme of early modern women's theatregoing is to prove that, even though women, according to traditional periodization, cannot be said to have had a Renaissance, the theatrical event, be it the popular phenomenon that took place in the English and the Spanish public playhouses, or the exclusive happening patronised by the Italian aristocrats, allowed women to temporarily shake off the cultural and social shackles imposed on their sex. It was found that by letting them infringe their homeboundness in order to attend the theatre, and watch the enactment of plays that some feared might change their worldview and encourage them to re-act, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama gave women the opportunity to experience autonomy, agency, and empowerment.

Chapter 1 starts with an overview of the Renaissance from a perspective that is both chronological and geographical, and proceeds by taking into account one of the most

distinguishing features of the period, that is, imitation – of the past, as far as the temporal axis is concerned; of Italy with respect to the spatial level. Examples taken from the theatre of Renaissance Italy, England, and Spain are provided in order to show how imitation worked from both perspectives.

After a concise exploration of elements regarding Renaissance history, geography, politics and society, Chapter 1 continues with a theoretical section devoted to theatre semiotics and to investigating the role of the actor and the spectator within the pragmatic situation of the performance. This is done in light of the fact that a play is made up of words that are to be spoken and heard, and of the fact that what makes the theatrical event possible are indeed the moments of its production and reception. In particular, attention is directed to the actor's body and to the spectator's function as both dramatic object and dramatic subject.

The second part of Chapter 1 tries to delineate, in a comparative way, the theatrical traditions of England, Italy, and Spain through, first, a study of the material motivations that led to the construction of the first commercial playhouses in the second half of the sixteenth century, and, second, by means of some socio-cultural and historical considerations of the conditions of actors and spectators in the three countries.

At the outset of Chapter 2 the term 'Renaissance' is resumed and compared to the now more widely used expression 'early modern' in the attempt to see how traditional periodization and the very idea of Renaissance have undergone a process of reevaluation in the last decades. Awareness that the period at hand was dominated by the male subject, and that women were excluded from the picture, has prompted scholars in the field of women's history to a gender-inflected rethinking of the Reniassance based on the unearthing of women's hidden histories. One of such histories

saw early modern women leave their homes to attend dramatic performances at the public or the private theatres, and defy, in so doing, the conventions of the society they lived in. Probing different sources that bear witness to women's presence at the theatre – the anti-theatrical polemic; women's ego documents; various plays' prologues and epilogues – Chapter 2 offers a gender-based study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theatre audience aimed at demonstrating how women's participation as spectators in the performances of plays allowed them to enjoy a space of freedom.

The analysis of three plays that Chapter 3 presents – William Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; Alessandro Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro*; Guillén de Castro's *La fuerza de la costumbre* – is meant to show a woman's character gradual shift from a situation in which she acts as an object of exchange between men, to a situation where that position is called into question by the expression of a non-normative desire, to, finally, the representation of a subjectivity that deconstructs all the conventions and convictions concerning women.

1. Theatre and drama in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, Italy, and Spain: history, context, and theory

1.1. The Renaissance across time and space

In the vast universe of critical production, there are subjects and historical periods which have generated, more than others, interest and debate among the scholars. One of them is, without doubt, the Renaissance. Since the appearance, in 1860, of Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, there has been a rapid escalation in the publication of works exploring every facet of it, challenging traditional approaches, and bringing to the fore what had been previously neglected. In more recent years, websites and online articles have multiplied the possibilities of retrieving any kind of specialised material on the subject. It seems indeed, to paraphrase a famous line by Hamlet, that there are more things on the Internet dedicated to the Renaissance than are dreamt of in anyone's philosophy.

A question arises when one has to deal with such an amount of information: how much easier is it to research a subject whose supplies of yet to be investigated facts have been largely exhausted, than is it to approach a less studied one? In this respect, it is quite comforting to find out that even scholars who have consecrated their academic life to the Renaissance have experienced a sense of impotence when thinking about the myriad bibliographical resources at their disposal. In recognising the difficulty of scrutinising all of them, Danis Hay admits: "Undoubtedly this has led to the subject as a whole being regarded as, in a practical way, unmanageable"[1].

It follows that analyses that draw on the field of Renaissance studies are bound to be partial. However, the risk of collecting only scattered bits of information should not

[1] Danis Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in Its Historical Background*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1961, p. 6.

prevent us from exploring such a rich area, and from conducting our study at the crucial levels of Renaissance history, geography, and society. These are levels, to be sure, which cannot be disregarded if aspects of a cultural practice like the theatre, along with a close reading of its texts, are at the centre of our investigation, particularly so in light of the fleeting nature of the stage spectacle, and especially of stage spectacles from the past, which require, in order to be recreated and understood, an awareness of the broader context surrounding them. By the same token, we should take the theatre and its plays as witnesses that speak of the time to which they belong. In point of fact, when we look at the history of Europe, as Marco De Marinis has pointed out, we cannot but notice how the theatre has often influenced and modified the very cultural codes from which it originated, functioning thus, in the words of Jurij Lotman, as a "secondary modelling system"[2]. The relationship between theatre and society, in short, should be thought of as a dialectical one, with each side contributing to illuminate the other.

Every cultural production is the offspring of an age whose characteristics distinguish it from what comes before and what follows next. Setting limits that chronologically define an age is a common way to start writing about it and its artefacts. It is important to remember, however, that such a way of sectioning the incessant flowing of time is just a convention. History does not stop, nor are points on timelines as disconnected as they appear. On the contrary, the timeline itself should be imagined as an infinite succession of dots, each corresponding to a historical event, that are so close to each other as to melt into invisibility.

But framing time is also a convenient necessity that bestows order and clarity upon history. As Guido Ruggiero observes: "labels of historical periods suffer the same

[2] Marco De Marinis, *Capire il teatro: lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, La Casa Usher, Firenze, 1988, p. 86.

limitations as any broad generalization. [...] In fact, one might consider throwing out periodization entirely, but broad generalizations [...] certainly can help in grasping large masses of information"[3]. Making use of the traditional partition of history is therefore acceptable as long as one is aware that no actual fence separates two moments in time. Two of such moments are the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Two are the facts on which historians tend to agree: in a chronological sense, that the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance by the middle of the fourteenth century, and that the Renaissance spanned the fifteenth, the sixteenth, and the seventeenth centuries; in geographical terms, that the Renaissance originated in Italy and subsequently reached the rest of Europe[4].

Being an essentially Italian phenomenon, the Renaissance is chronologically more composite in Italy than it is in other European countries. It is generally divided into the fifteenth-century cultural movement known as Humanism, characterised by the glorification of classical studies and a new approach to classical texts led by philology, and the Renaissance as we came to know it, the great, unprecedented age of artistic and literary flowering, basically coinciding with the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Many are the epochal changes that took place during the Renaissance and that contributed to render it a unique time in history. To name just the most important: secularization and the spreading of the scientific methods of research; the changing

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[3] Guido Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2002, p. 4.

[4] See Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in Its Historical Background*, p. 1: "To start with, I accept as a fact that there was a Renaissance in the period between [...] about 1350 and about 1700. I accept that this Renaissance occurred first in Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and that it later affected to a greater or lesser degree the rest of Europe". See Eugenio Garin (a cura di), *L'uomo del Rinascimento*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1988, p. 1: "[...] il Rinascimento, collocato all'incirca fra la metà del Trecento e la fine del Cinquecento, [...] ebbe le sue origini nelle città-stato italiane, da cui si diffuse quindi in Europa. [...] la diffusione di idee e tematiche proprie del Rinascimento italiano fuori d'Italia sarebbe venuta operando ancora a lungo [...] oltre i consueti limiti cronologici, durante tutto il Seicento".

geography of the world; Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. They all marked the dawn of a new era in such unmistakable way that "the Renaissance has been treated as ushering in the modern world"[5]. Interestingly, the idea of modernity that we associate with the Renaissance, and which gained currency since the publication of Burckhardt's work, was already in vogue at the time. But whereas 'modern' is synonymous with 'new' for us, during the Renaissance 'modern' was rather the attempt to bring the good old days alive again. Classical literature, philosophy, art, and politics were deemed so unparalleled that the highest and worthiest thing at which Renaissance culture could and should aim was their rebirth, the very term from which the term Renaissance derives. Ruggiero notes: "intellectuals from the fourteenth century on dreamed that they were giving birth anew to the glories of ancient civilization, even if they tended to call the age in which they lived, when they called it anything at all, 'modern'"[6].

The best way to pay tribute to the world of the classics, and to recreate its perfection, was through imitation of its outputs. Studies of the Renaissance, from textbooks to scholarly works, treat imitation as one of the period's most distinguishing features. It moved along the two axes of space and time, which are essential in a discussion where both Renaissance history and the European context in which the Renaissance occurred are to be taken into account.

With respect to the temporal axis, imitation was directed toward the past in that only the ancients, it was believed, had realised the greatest accomplishments in every sphere of human intellectual production.

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[5] Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in Its Historical Background*, p. 13.
[6] Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, p. 1.

As to the spatial axis, the situation was one in which most European countries were imitators of the cultural excellence that only Italy had been able to achieve. Spain, for example, benefited a lot from the artistic excitement that characterised Renaissance Europe and that had Italy as its cradle. Spanish historian Antonio Domínguez Ortiz remarks: "Spain was never more united with the rest of Europe than it was in those days [...]. There was a constant interchange of men and ideas, which acquired a particular intensity where Italy was concerned, for Italy was always a very active focus of cultural life"[7]. Renaissance European theatre offers the possibility to see how imitation worked from the perspective of both time and space.

In fifteenth-century Italy, the philological attention with which humanists used to read the texts inherited from the classical period influenced the performance of plays written by the classical authors, particularly by Plautus and Terence. Respect for the original text prompted the staging of comedies in the language in which they were written, that is Latin, which means that the representations were primarily intended for an educated audience. The principle of imitation that operated at the temporal level was applied to the drama of the ensuing phase, when classical comedies were translated into the Italian vernacular and performed at court for a more mixed audience.

Afterwards, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, there appeared a number of plays which, despite recovering the structure and the themes of most Roman plays, were largely original. Louise George Clubb points out that "although the playwrights customarily boasted in their prologues of debts to Plautus, Terence, and Boccaccio, the pieces they borrowed were reassembled to create a total different from the sum of its

[7] Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *The Golden Age of Spain 1516-1659*, Basic Books Inc. Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 230.

parts. In the process, they systematically outcomplicated the ancients"[8]. An example of this is provided by one of the most famous and celebrated sixteenth-century Italian comedies, *La Calandria* by Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi of Bibbiena (1470-1520), first performed at the Court of Urbino in 1513. In the *Prologo*[9] to the play written by Baldassarre Castiglione, spectators are told that they are going to attend a new comedy ("Voi sarete oggi spettatori d'una nova commedia"), that such comedy is modern and not old ("moderna, non antiqua"), and that it is written in vernacular, not in Latin ("vulgare, non latina"). To those who may accuse the author of having stolen from Plautus – who is thus recognised as the play's source ("se sia chi dirà lo autore essere gran ladro di Plauto") –, Bibbiena replies that he has not ("lo autore giura [...] che non gli ha furato questo"), and that he would rather be compared to the Latin dramatist ("e vuole stare a paragone").

La Calandria is worthy of notice because it features all the aspects outlined by Clubb in the quotation above: it is indebted to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* for the character of old fool Calandro; it borrows from Plautus' *Menaechmi* as far as its plot is concerned – basically a comedy of errors and mistaken identity due to the presence of two male twins –; it outcomplicates such plot by making the twins, this time one male, the other female, disguise as the opposite sex[10].

As with other areas of cultural activity, all that emerged in Italy in terms of dramatic trends soon spread across Europe, becoming exceedingly popular. Italy was at the heart of a centrifugal force that caused its literature to travel beyond its geographical confines. As summed up by Walter Cohen: "Neoclassical vernacular drama [...] dominated the

[8] Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 1989, p. 53.
[9] Bibbiena, *La Calandria*, Paolo Fossati (a cura di), Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino, 1967, pp. 15-16.
[10] For a compelling reading of *La Calandria* based on the twins' transvestism and its consequences, see Giulio Ferroni, *Il testo e la scena: saggi sul teatro del Cinquecento*, Bulzoni Editore, Roma, 1980.

peninsula during the sixteenth century, and went on to influence theatrical developments almost everywhere else on the continent. For this reason Italy may seem a norm from which other nations in varying degrees diverged"[11].

Imitation of theatrical models taking place at the spatial level is well epitomised by *Gl'Ingannati*, a comedy written by members of the *Accademia degli Intronati* and staged in 1531 in Siena. Countless are the similarities between this play and William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, most notably the plotline of the transvestite heroine who serves as a go-between in her beloved master's courtship of another woman. Unequivocal is also derivation from *Gl'Ingannati* of Lope de Rueda's comedy *Los engañados*[12].

But imitation of Italian sources also involved the transformation of novellas into plays, a practice that can be thought of as a kind of translation from the narration to the dramatization of stories composed by such Italian story tellers as Boccaccio and Matteo Bandello, from both of whom Shakespeare took much material for his theatre.

One way to understand the Renaissance manipulation of literary products coming from other ages and other countries is by taking into consideration the rhetorical notion of *inventio*, which, far from denoting inventiveness and creativity as the word invention does, prescribed the reworking of already existing texts[13]. In this sense, not so much conceptual space separates classical *inventio* from the more modern theory of intertextuality, in that both imply vital contact and influence among literary works. The

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[11] Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London, 1985, p. 98.

[12] Extensive analysis of *Gl'Ingannati*, together with much information on it, can be found in Laura Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto-Buffalo-London, 2009.

[13] On rhetoric and the changes that it underwent at the end of the 18th century, see David E. Wellbery, "The Transformation of Rhetoric", in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism,* vol. V: *Romanticism,* Marshall Brown (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

complex combination of quotations – both implicit and explicit –, of references – both voluntary and involuntary –, of borrowings, exchanges, analogies, parallelisms, that characterises intertextuality, becomes particularly useful when it comes to the recovery of past performances. In this case, the intertextual relationship that the stage spectacles establish with both contemporary and earlier texts works as proof of their being a blending of old and new elements, of tradition and innovation[14].

In travelling across time and space, and in cutting across literary genres, texts were unlikely to remain unaltered. Their assimilation into an epoch and a national context different from the ones from which they departed necessarily meant change and a certain amount of novelty. Peter Burke suggests that "as they moved from region to region, ideas, forms and practices many of which had been 'made in Italy' were adapted [...] to local traditions. In that sense they were culturally 'translated'"[15].

1.2. Politics and the drama

What connection can there be between imitation of Italian culture and literature by most European countries, and their political and social situation, including Italy's? In other words, how did Italy manage to have such a great cultural influence on Renaissance Europe without even being a country with a political and geographical unity? There is no single answer to this question. There are instead a series of reflections by historians and critics alike on the consequences that Italy's internal division had on both its politics and the development of its theatre, and on how the former affected the latter.

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[14] See Marco De Marinis, *Semiotica del teatro: l'analisi testuale dello spettacolo*, Bompiani, Milano, 1982, p. 12.

[15] Peter Burke, "The Historical Geography of the Renaissance", in Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, p. 97.

Cohen has discussed the socio-political condition whereby a strongly aristocratic society eventually develops into an absolutist monarchy, whereas the emergence of a city-state signals the presence of a not so powerful nobility. The first case is exemplified by the events which took place in England and Spain at the end of fifteenth century, with the accession of Henry VII to the English throne on the one hand, and the marriage of Isabella I of Castile to Ferdinand II of Aragon on the other.

The second case typifies the formation of *signorie* in many towns in the north and the centre of Italy, "a series of petty local microabsolutisms"[16] which, besides delaying the birth of the Italian nation state, made themselves prey to the imperialism of bigger and stronger nations like Spain. To this it should be added the authoritative position of the Catholic church which played no less a decisive role in keeping the Italian territory fragmented, therefore vulnerable. Such a plight had obvious social and civic repercussions that Gene Brucker summarises as follows: "The two dominant powers in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy were the Spanish monarchy and the Roman papacy. [...] They were united in their commitment to repress political and religious dissent, and to monitor and regulate the lives of their subjects"[17]. Literature, and especially the drama, were not exempt from such a general climate of censure, which is why, according to Burckhardt, "the most developed people in Europe"[18] were unable to beget a Shakespeare of their own. He believes that the inquisitive attitude of the Spanish and of the Church in the aftermath of the Council of Trent was responsible for "[withering] the best flowers of the Italian spirit"[19]. In fact, he maintains, not even

[16] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain*, p. 83.
[17] Gene Brucker, "The Italian Renaissance", in Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, p. 34.
[18] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Volume II, Harper & Row, New York, 1958, p. 314.
[19] Ibid., p. 312.

Shakespeare could have achieved what he did if he had been forced to write under the same restraining circumstances. This is not to say that Italy was unprovided with great writers capable of writing great plays. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533), Torquato Tasso (1544-1595), namely Italy's most renown Renaissance authors, were versed in the dramatic genre but were not professional playwrights, and although they did write plays that have become canonical texts, others are the works and the literary genres thanks to which they have stood the test of time. Furthermore, the political situation described above meant that in Italy different court theatres substituted for a national theatre located in the country's capital, so that unlike England's and Spain's acknowledged dramatists who were active in London and Madrid, "the Italian neoclassical theater of the sixteenth century was largely an amateur, elite, occasional, regional affair"[20]. This has prompted Cohen to conclude that "in Italy, the failure to produce a national drama resulted not from the lack of a genius but from the lack of a nation"[21].

If it is true that the existence of *signorie* was politically detrimental to Italy's national stability, the country's cultural advancement owed much to the *signori*'s love of arts and protection of artists and intellectuals.

In England, a similar system of patronage extended to the theatre, where the actors' companies that lived under the aegis of a lord, or even the monarch, were not only granted prestige but also the opportunity to elude control from the city's jurisdiction.

Patronage reveals the influence of the aristocracy on the theatrical industry which, as the very term industry suggests, was also a bourgeois phenomenon with considerable economic interests at stake, as we shall see. Cohen, who looks at things through the lens

[20] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain*, p. 98.
[21] Ibid., p. 104.

of Marxism, defines the institution of theatre as a "socially composite organization"[22]. He does not forget to mention the popular side of the early modern theatrical enterprise, arguably the most important when it comes to the two essential elements of any theatrical event, namely actors and spectators.

1.3. Communication at the theatre

In dealing with play texts, it is important to bear in mind that they are made of words which are supposed to be spoken by an actor and to be heard by an audience. By ignoring this most lively side of the drama, and by showing exclusive interest in the linguistic and psychological interpretation of the characters' written lines, we engage in an anomalous activity in that we disregard the most crucial component of a play: its performance. Thus, one of the advantages of using theatre semiotics as a theoretical framework is to turn our attention to the *mise en scène*, "to make us more aware of *how* drama and theatre *are made*"[23], and of how they function in the pragmatic situation of the representation. At the same time, the emphasis that semiotics lays on both the actor's body and the spectators' role will allow us to move beyond, and to take into consideration more pertinent questions concerning gender and desire. In other words, the semiotics of theatre is going to be employed "as a *methodology*: as a way of working, of approaching theatre in order to open up new practices and possibilities of 'seeing'"[24].

In thinking about a definition of what the theatre is, a definition that divests it of everything that is unnecessary so that the essential elements can emerge, it is almost

[22] Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain*, p. 151.
[23] Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System*, Routledge, London-New York, 1991, p. 5.
[24] Ibid., p. 1.

inevitable to refer to the opening lines of Peter Brook's classic work *The Empty Space*: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged"[25]. To put it another way, a theatrical performance can basically take place anywhere, provided that there is an actor who ostends him/herself to the gaze of a group of people through the movements of his/her body. As Jerzy Grotowski makes clear, not even the stage as we know it, namely a physically prominent area where the representation occurs, nor the script of the play are indispensable, let alone those features that we conventionally associate with the art of the drama, that is, make-up, costume, scenography, lighting, sound effects, but without which the performance is not at all compromised[26]. The result is a theatre which necessitates, in order to survive, nothing more than an actor and a spectator. Grotowski concludes: "We can thus define the theatre as 'what takes place between spectator and actor'. All the other things are supplementary – perhaps necessary, but nevertheless supplementary"[27].

The art of the drama transcends also such varying aspects as the performers' acting styles or the audience's arrangement within the theatrical space, to be centred instead on the actor-spectator relationship, which is in fact the only element that stays the same over time and across cultures. As De Marinis points out, the stage spectacle is not endowed with a life of its own. It is not an autonomous entity independent of the other components that make up the theatrical event. On the contrary, the spectacle makes sense, becomes intelligible, it even starts to exist as an aesthetic and semiotic experience when it starts to be considered in relation to the moments of its production and its

[25] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Penguin Books, 1968, p. 11.
[26] Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Eugenio Barba (ed.), Routledge, New York, 2002 [1968], p. 19.
[27] Ibid., pp. 32-33.

reception. We can be so radical as to affirm that, from a semiotic point of view, it is not so much the spectacle that makes the theatrical event possible, as the interplay between actors and spectators[28]. It is for this reason that the written text has to be contextualised and situated within the concrete setting of the representation, for it is precisely by drawing upon the transmittal and the receiving of messages that it can fully realise its dramatic potential. In this light, it is possible to attempt a second definition of what the theatre is, and to say, in the words of Keir Elam, that "'theatre' is taken to refer to the complex of phenomena associated with the performance-audience transaction: that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself"[29].

It would be wrong, however, to assume that in the theatre meaning pertains exclusively to the spoken word. As a matter of fact, both actors and spectators exchange a great deal of information by resorting also to non-verbal signs. The primary carrier of meanings in this respect is the actor's body, which is indeed responsible for turning the written page into a stage action. As Grotowski reminds us: "the text per se is not theatre, [...] it becomes theatre only through the actors' use of it"[30]. Taking into account what De Marinis calls the "level zero of the theatrical communication"[31], we should bear in mind that the actor's principal task is to catch the audience's attention prior to even speaking the speech, and to do so by means of capitalising on his/her own presence on the stage. In a text dating back to 1615, the poet and essayist Thomas Overbury hints at such an ability on the part of the actor: "Whatsoever is commendable in the grave orator" we read, "is most exquisitely perfect in him; for by a full and significant action

[28] De Marinis, *Capire il teatro: lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, p. 24.
[29] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Routledge, London-New York, 2002 [1980], p. 2.
[30] Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 21.
[31] See De Marinis, *Capire il teatro: Lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, p. 108.

of body he charms our attention"[32]. The spectator is thus compelled first of all to watch the actor, and then to make sense of what happens on stage. The level zero generally intersects with the higher levels of the actor's verbal expression and the audience's interpretation of it, which is why it often passes unnoticed.

By stressing the importance of the actor's body, theatre semiotics clearly becomes instrumental in fostering an inquiry into the early modern theatre founded on gender and desire, whose very existence, as stated by Valerie Traub, is subordinate to the existence of one's body: "neither gender nor sexuality can be thought of separately from the body" she notes, "for the body provides the basis for assumptions of gender difference as well as the potential for erotic pleasure"[33].

The act of communicating through the use of the non-verbal language is carried out by the audience as well. The level zero of the theatrical communication can be extended to the spectators, whose mere being there attending the representation is just what it takes to make it start. In point of fact, "of all [...] audience signals, the most significant is its simple presence, which constitutes the one invariable condition of the performance"[34].

The audience's specific way of sending messages can be explained by making reference to one of the six functions of language described by Roman Jakobson. The phatic function includes conventional expressions used by people in order "to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, [...] to attract the attention of the

[32] Cited in Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre, 1530-1660*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 181.
[33] Valerie Traub, "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare", in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, Margreta de Grazia, Stanley Wells (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 129.
[34] Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, p. 86.

interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention"[35]. Throughout the course of the representation, spectators draw upon a series of culture-bound, phatic signals which are useful in determining their involvement in the theatrical event. Applause, boos, laughter, chatter, silence, are generally regarded as indicators of approval, disapproval, active participation, lack of attention, boredom, etc., as well as a means of self-assessment for the actors[36]. When we consider the materialistic side of this, we find that all kinds of reaction to the performance are partly determined by the spectators' investment of a certain amount of money in theatregoing, which is why they demand that their expectations be, to a certain extent, fulfilled[37]. As Muriel Bradbrook observes in her study of the actor in Shakespeare's time: "the players established themselves as purveyors of a commodity for which the general public was prepared regularly to put down its cash"[38], a fact that has been interpreted as a form of patronage offered by the paying audience that arose from the new commercial theatres which appeared in England and Spain in the second half of the sixteenth century. Among the various groups of spectators that attended the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries playhouses, the Spanish male, lower-class spectators, known as *mosqueteros*, were probably the most annoying ones. Indeed, so severe and unfair were their judgements and responses, that for dramatists and actors alike they represented a nightmare[39]. Women were no less harsh than their male counterparts, as testified by their use of objects – from the food that they threw at the actors, to noisy instruments – to express

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[35] Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics", in Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland (eds.), *The Discourse Reader*, Routledge, London-New York, 1999, p. 37.
[36] See De Marinis, *Semiotica del teatro: l'analisi testuale dello spettacolo*, pp. 159-160.
[37] See Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, pp. 85-86.
[38] Muriel C. Bradbrook, *The Rise of the Common Player: A Study of Actor and Society in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-London-New York-Melbourne, 1962, pp. 39-40.
[39] See Hugo Albert Rennert, *The Spanish Stage in the Time of Lope de Vega*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1963 [1909], p. 117.

their opinion on the quality of the play and of its staging. Hugo Rennert observes that women "pelted the actors with fruit, orange-peels, *pepinos* (cucumbers), or anything they found at hand, to show their disapproval, and generally came provided with rattles, whistles, or keys, which they used unsparingly"[40].

The fundamental role that the audience plays in making the theatrical communication possible is linked to the ways in which the theatre functions in comparison with other world-creating forms of art. The drama, which is based on the principle of *mimesis*, or imitation, differs from *diegesis*, meaning narration, for aspects that concern, for example, the author's or narrator's position with respect to the presentation and the unfolding of characters and events[41], as well as the actual, physical presence, within the playhouse, of the vey persons for whom a story has been created in the first place. As Cesare Segre points out, compared with other secondary modelling systems, the theatre is unique because it makes the receiver an integral part of its own system, despite the ideal line that separates the stage from the auditorium[42]. As a matter of fact, no other form of art depends as much as the drama on its consumers in order to be able to reach a conclusion, as it were. A novelist may not necessarily take into account his/her readers in the process of writing, and indeed may perform an isolated act of creation. Things are quite different in the theatre, where, Brook notes, "the last lonely look at the completed object is not possible – until an audience is present the object is not complete. No author, no director [...] would want a private performance, just for himself. No megalomaniac actor would want to play for himself, for his mirror"[43].

[40] Rennert, *The Spanish Stage in the Time of Lope de Vega*, p. 119.
[41] The author/narrator is absent in the theatre, where objects and individuals are immediately displayed on the stage and do not need to be described.
[42] Cesare Segre, *Teatro e romanzo*, Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino, 1984, p. 9.
[43] Brook, *The Empty Space*, p. 142.

The interplay between production and reception that is at the very base of theatre communication is a composite stratification of different levels of which it would be worth considering at least the one concerning the audience's cognitive and emotional reactions to the spectacle. As the third of the five macro-levels identified by De Marinis in his attempt to delineate a semiotics of theatrical reception[44], it includes the impact that the represented action has on the spectator's beliefs and emotions, together with the changes that it produces in his/her worldview and conduct. In fact, a performance can be so powerful as to reinforce, modify, or call into question what the spectator knows and feels[45]. This is due to a set of communicative and manipulative strategies exploited by the people that are behind a play and its enactment on the stage. Indeed, the dramatist, the director, the set designer, the actors, are interested not only in conveying simple, neutral information that may add to the spectator's knowledge of things, but also in affecting such knowledge even to the point of persuading the spectator to take action in actual life[46]. The spectator, in other words, becomes the "dramatic object", as De Marinis would say[47], or the target, of a complex web of values and ideas that inform the play and that are translated onto the scene by the interpretative work of both the actors and the director. This, however, represents only one side of how the production/reception dialectic in the theatre operates and must be understood. The other side involves a complete overturn of the supposed passivity of the spectator, and is consequently at odds, and yet closely connected with, the state of affairs that has been just illustrated. We are dealing, indeed, with a two-faced situation that will turn out to

[44] For a detailed description of each of the five macro-levels, see Marco De Marinis, *L'esperienza dello spettatore. Fondamenti per una semiotica della ricezione teatrale*, in «Documenti di Lavoro», Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e di Linguistica, Università di Urbino, 1984.
[45] Ibid., p. 13.
[46] De Marinis, *Capire il teatro: Lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, pp. 92-93.
[47] Ibid., p. 26.

be significant when both the performance of desire on the early modern stage and the (female) spectators' response to it will be taken into account and discussed.

The spectator is far from situating him/herself into the background at the theatrical event, of which s/he is, to all intents and purposes, a co-producer "engaged in a project of creative collaboration, with the dramatist and actor, in the interest of a more complete realisation of the performance"[48]. As stated before, the completeness of the dramatic action rests entirely on the spectators, who work as evidence, as it were, of the success or failure of the manipulative forces set in motion by the representation: "It is the spectator who must make sense of the performance for himself" writes Elam; "the final responsibility for the meaning and coherence of what he constructs is his"[49]. Theatrical reception owes its inherently active nature precisely to this effective construction of meaning on the part of the spectator. It is clear, therefore, why the "dramatic object" is also, at the very same time, a "dramatic subject"[50], who performs, in his/her own turn, a series of actions corresponding to De Marinis' abovementioned five macro-levels: perception, interpretation, reactions, evaluation, memorization. In this respect, it should be noted that the reasons why people go to the theatre, their attitudes towards the play, their expectations, all have a bearing on the way they make sense of what is acted out on the stage. Equally determinant, in this sense, are the life events, education, and general knowledge of each individual spectator.

As far as the terms 'audience' and 'spectator' are concerned, there is a crucial distinction to be made and to be taken into consideration, which concerns the semantic and conceptual difference underlying the two of them. In fact, whereas 'audience', as

[48] Aston and Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System*, p. 160.
[49] Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, p. 85.
[50] De Marinis' notions of "dramatic object" and "dramatic subject" derive from Greimas' notions of "sujet patient" and "sujet agent". See De Marinis, *Capire il teatro: Lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, p. 26.

De Marinis explains, indicates a rather abstract sociological entity, 'spectator' is a more complex and concrete anthropological notion that encompasses socio-economic, psychological, cultural, and even biological factors[51]. With respect to the aims of this investigation, 'spectator' is the notion that counts the most, specifically in light of the significance that it ascribes to such a strictly personal variable as gender: "levels of interpretation must vary between individual spectators" observe Aston and Savona; and continue: "Just as Barthes identified the 'non-innocent' reader [...], so theatre is attended by the 'non-innocent' spectator whose world view, cultural understanding or placement, class and gender condition and shape his/her response"[52].

From a more historical and etymological perspective, it is interesting to notice that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, use of the term audience eventually prevailed over that of spectator also in light of the absence, in the English language, of "an adequate word for the feast of the senses which playgoing ought to provide"[53]. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find a word in English capable of conveying the simultaneous involvement of both eyes and ears that attendance at the theatre requires. 'Audience', coming from the Latin *audire*, is the collective term used to indicate "the action of hearing; attention to what is spoken"[54]. 'Spectator', on the other hand, deriving from the Latin verbs *specere* and *spectare*, is "one who is present at, and has a view or sight of, anything in the nature of a show or spectacle"[55]. Both fail to characterise the theatrical performance as an event touching more than one sense at the same time.

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[51] De Marinis, *Capire il teatro: Lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, p. 92.
[52] Aston and Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System*, p. 120.
[53] Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 85.
[54] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, Volume I, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 779.
[55] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume XVI, p. 166.

That hearing was deemed more important at the playhouse than seeing is also attested in some documents of the time. In a petition submitted to the Privy Council on 28 July 1597, the Court of Common Council reports that "in the time of sickness it is found by experience that many, having sores, [...] take occasion hereby [...] to recreate themselves by hearing a play"[56]. Reference to the 'ears' of those who are present at the public representations can be found in a description of the qualities of an excellent actor: "sit in a full theatre and you will think you see so many lines drawn from the circumference of so many ears, whiles the actor is the centre"[57]. 'The ones who listen' is also the expression used by the Italian novelist and dramatist Giraldi Cinthio when he writes about moving the affections of the audience, which is the actor's task: "Che, se l'histrione non rappresenta con la sua attione quelle passioni che sono da essere impresse negli animi di quelli che ascoltano, rimangono gli affetti freddi et senza efficacia"[58] ("if the actor does not represent with his action those passions that are to be impressed into the souls of the ones who listen, the affections are bound to remain cold and ineffectual"[59]).

Aversion to scenic effects that might appeal only to the spectators' eyes testifies to the English dramatists' own wish that the sounds of their compositions be more appreciated and enjoyed than an elaborate pageant. Ben Jonson's case is exemplary in this respect: "Every time Jonson called his audience 'spectators'" Andrew Gurr tells us, "he was covertly sneering at the debased preference for stage spectacle rather than the poetic 'soul' of the play, which he claimed they could only find by listening to his

[56] Cited in Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 100.
[57] Ibid., p. 181.
[58] Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinthio, *Discorsi intorno al comporre*, Susanna Villari (a cura di), Centro interdipartimentale di studi umanistici, Messina, 2002, p. 307.
[59] Translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

words"[60]. Words were, after all, the privileged means whereby English and Spanish playwrights, through the medium of the actor's voice and gestures, were able to reach a considerable number of people brought together into a building that they could access only if they could bear the entrance cost.

1.4. The sixteenth-century playhouse in England, Spain, and Italy

Looking at the actor and the audience through the lens of semiotics has been the first theoretical step along the path that will gradually lead to the investigation of gender and desire in the early modern theatre and comedy in England, Italy, and Spain. The second step will consist of a socio-cultural and historical study of the conditions of actors and spectators in the three countries, in the attempt of delineating a comparative overview of the history of their respective theatrical traditions based on both analogies and differences. Such a focus on players and spectators necessitates some preliminary considerations of the place which contained both of them. Attention will be directed, in particular, to the pragmatic, material motivations that gave rise to the commercial playhouses especially in England and Spain, where the association of the theatre with elements both cultural and popular tends to conceal a more practical concern with the economic implications and advantages of the construction of permanent buildings for the representations. As Jean Howard suggests, "if one wishes to speak of the ideological consequences of the theater, one needs to attend to more than just theatrical representations *qua* representations, but also to the material practices and conventions of the stage and of theatregoing"[61].

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[60] Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 85.
[61] Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, Routledge, London-New York, 1994, p. 83.

The situation which came out of the construction of the first theatres in England and Spain in the second half of the sixteenth century was far removed from the one that had characterised the early stages of the English and the Spanish drama. No more dependent on the benevolence of the Church or the financial support of a lord, spectacles started to be regarded more and more as a commodity to be offered to a new class of patrons that asked and paid for them. The state of affairs described by José María Díez Borque with reference to Spain applies to England as well: "por primera vez," he observes, "la producción literaria se somete a un mecanismo económico que se asienta en la oferta y la demanda, apoyada en la aceptación del producto por parte de un público, que tiene poder decisonario en cuanto que su dinero es la base de todo el sistema"[62] ("for the first time, literary production submits to an economic mechanism that settles on supply and demand and that depends on the acceptance of the product by an audience that holds decision-making power in that its money represents the base of the whole system"). Interestingly, this situation prompted a significant change in the space where performances were put on. A new type of edifice specifically dedicated to the staging of the plays before a socially heterogeneous group of male and female customers substituted for the unbarred, therefore free of charge, marketplace, as well as for the more exclusive environment of the aristocratic palace. In London, the main inconvenience of playing in a "mansion house, yard, garden, orchard or other whatsoever place or places within the [...] City or the Liberties thereof"[63] before 1576, that is to say, before the appearance of James Burbage's Theatre, was that the many

[62] José María Díez Borque, *Sociedad y Teatro en la España de Lope de Vega*, Antoni Bosch, editor, Barcelona, 1978, p. 91. In relation to the similarities that characterised the development of the theatre in England and Spain, Borque had already specified that in both countries "coinciden, más o menos, las formas de construcción de teatros y el proceso para llegar a ello" ("the construction of the theatres and the process to get to it are more or less the same"). (Ibid., p. 6)

[63] Such a list of places where the performances were likely to occur is contained within a 1564 document that forbade them. The document is cited in Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 54.

sites where the representations took place, together with the persons who commissioned and those who enjoyed them, were, respectively, too temporary and too elusive for the players to aspire to any form of salary. A compensation for their efforts was guaranteed in the case of spectacles being presented in the inn-yards of the city, where it was the owner who was in charge of gathering the spectators' money, or in the nobles' residences, where the show was at the expense of the host. Things got more complicated when players put on their shows in the city square. The impossibility of being paid in an orderly and regular manner due to a crowd that could not be kept within any physical bounds required the performers to devise alternative payment methods, like, for example, the taking of a hat around[64], or the momentary interruption of the plot in order to compel the spectators to pay if they wanted it to resume[65].

It seems clear, therefore, that the construction of the first playhouses and, as a consequence, the foundation of the theatre as an economic enterprise are to be seen in part as the players' response to problems that were both financial and logistical. It is worthy of note, furthermore, that Burbage's Theatre, as Cesare Molinari has pointed out, was the first building erected with the exclusive purpose of hosting dramatic performances in early modern Europe[66]. To grasp the importance of this, one need only think of Italy's leading role in laying down the foundations of Renaissance European theatre. It was in Italy that the dramatic text was raised to the status of literature and was staged to entertain an aristocratic or academic audience. It was in Italy that the first company of professional *comici* was born in 1545[67]; and it was in Italy that the building

[64] See Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 11.
[65] See Richard Hosley, "The Playhouses and the Stage", in *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, Kenneth Muir, S. Schoenbaum (eds.), Cambridge University Press, London, 1971, p. 15.
[66] See Cesare Molinari, *Storia del teatro*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 1996, p. 149.
[67] See Roberto Alonge, Guido Davico Bonino (a cura di), *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo: la nascita del teatro moderno Cinquecento-Seicento*, Vol. 1, Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino, 2000, p. 87.

of a structure for the enactment of plays was first theorised due to a thorough study of Vitruvius' – the great Roman architect – *De Architectura*. Accordingly, the fact that the *Teatro Olimpico* of Vicenza – the first theatre built in Italy – dates back to the end of the sixteenth century adds value to Burbage's pioneering undertaking, demonstrating his pragmatism and entrepreneurial skills. Imitation of either Italy or the ancient world was not at the heart of his enterprise, as "the surviving documents [...] eclipse all evidence of any desire [...] to copy, or even experiment with, Italianate attempts to reconstruct the theatres of classical antiquity"[68]. In fact, the origins – in terms of "dimensions, shapes and internal arrangements"[69] – of the typical Elizabethan playhouse must be sought in England itself.

That which appears, according to present moral standards, as an execrable practice – animal fighting – was a most favoured pastime of the popular crowds in sixteenth century England, and one that could also count on a specialised place – the animal-baiting house – to be enjoyed. It is not difficult to recognise in the "round wooden amphitheatres consisting of (probably) two galleries superimposed one above the other and defining a circular 'pit'"[70] the predecessor of the 1576 Theatre and, later on, of the Globe (1599-1613). But originally plays were also performed, as has already been said, in the inn-yards of the city of London, each inn "[consisting] of a group of adjoining buildings arranged usually in a rectangular plan so as to define an enclosed 'yard'"[71]. In this respect, the resemblance between a typical London inn-yard and a Spanish *corral* is quite unmistakable.

[68] Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 11.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Hosley, "The Playhouses and the Stage", p. 16.
[71] Idid., p. 17.

Corral was the rectangular area formed by a series of private houses, one of which was employed as the back of the stage, known as *tablado*. The so-called *espectadores de pie* – corresponding to the English groundlings – paid a small amount of money – "roughly equivalent to the penny fees in London at the time"[72] – to stand in the open-air *patio* in front of the stage, whereas women, who made use of a different entrance to access the yard, attended performances from a specific section named *cazuela*. More affluent spectators could either sit on the *gradas*, or stairs, which were to be found on both sides of the *patio*, or watch the representation from the windows of the chambers – *aposentos* – that overlooked the yard, where men and women were allowed to enjoy the spectacle together[73].

Comparing the English and the Spanish situations, Molinari notes that whereas the *corrales*, after a few changes, became the characteristic public playhouses in Spain, the companies of players that were active in London were gradually forced by the law to abandon the inn-yards and the baiting-houses, which nonetheless provided the prototype for the Elizabethan playhouse[74]. What is more, the condemnation of theatrical activities that in England came from the ecclesiastical authorities was unknown in Spain, where, on the contrary, and quite interestingly, the development of the theatre resulted from a special combination of religious, charitable, and economic factors. As Borque remarks: "la responsabilidad del establecimiento de unos lugares fijos para la representación, se debe a las necesidades económicas de Cofradías que tenían a su cargo hospicios y

[72] John J. Allen, *The Reconstruction of a Spanish Golden Age Playhouse: El Corral del Príncipe 1583-1744*, University Presses of Florida, Gainesville, 1983, p. 6.
[73] For a description of the Spanish *corral* see Rennert, *The Spanish Stage in the Time of Lope de Vega*, p. 28; Franco Meregalli (a cura di), *Storia della civiltà letteraria spagnola*, Vol. 1: Dalle origini al Seicento, UTET, Torino, 1990, pp. 411-412.
[74] See Molinari, *Storia del teatro*, p. 149.

hospitales" [75] ("the responsibility for the establishment of some permanent places for the representation is due to the economic needs of Brotherhoods that were in charge of nursing homes and hospitals"). In other words, seizing the financial opportunities offered by the public staging of plays for a paying audience, two philanthropic brotherhoods – the *Cofradía de la Sagrada Pasión*, founded in 1565, and the *Cofradía de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad*, founded in 1567[76], both in Madrid – started working in partnership with the companies of players. The practice that the *Cofradías* established by 1568, with the permission of the civic authorities, was thus of renting some *corrales* in Madrid, and of using the profits obtained from the representations to help the poor[77]. It goes without saying that any moralistic objection to the theatre, or attempt to interrupt the performance of plays, represented a possible loss of income for the *cofrades*, which is why "it was important [...] that the theatres not be closed [...] and that the number of days on which performances were permitted be increased"[78].

It is worth pointing out, furthermore, that, although nothing of the kind happened in England, the possibility of transferring money from theatrical activities to the assistance of those in need was not at all overlooked in London. An Act of Common Council of 1574 decreed that every person in possession of a licence to have plays staged in his house or yard "shall [...] pay or cause to be paid to the use of the poor in hospitals of the City, or of the poor of the City visited with sickness [...] such sums and payments [...] as between the Lord Mayor and Aldermen [...] and such person [...] shall be agreed"[79]. Sometimes this form of charity was seen as the only solution to the "abuse of Stage

[75] Borque, *Sociedad y Teatro en la España de Lope de Vega*, p. 3.
[76] See Rennert, *The Spanish Stage in the Time of Lope de Vega*, pp. 26-27.
[77] See Allen, *The Reconstruction of a Spanish Golden Age Playhouse: El Corral del Príncipe 1583-1744*, p. 4.
[78] Maria M. Delgado, David T. Gies (eds.), *A History of Theatre in Spain*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, p. 59.
[79] The Act is cited in Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 75.

Plays": "It is a woeful sight to see two hundred proud players get in their silks, where five hundred poor people starve in the streets. But if needs this mischief must be tolerated, [...] let every Stage in London pay a weekly pension to the poor"[80].

The same attempt to justify the public staging of plays by presenting it as a charitable exercise spread across Italy as well. Romana Zacchi notes that the obligation to allocate to the city's philanthropic organisations a large sum coming from theatrical representations was introduced in Naples by the end of the sixteenth century[81].

The Spanish *cofradías*' endorsement of spectacles is to be identified as "la fase previa al nacimiento del lugar teatral autónomo"[82] ("the phase prior to the appearance of the theatre as an autonomous place"), a phase that lasted ten years and that culminated in the construction of the *Corral de la Cruz* in 1579, and the *Corral del Príncipe* in 1582[83]. So crucial was their role in launching the Golden Age of the Spanish theatre that "their glory, in the annals of the modern drama, is surpassed only by the *Globe* and *Blackfriars* in London"[84].

From a comparative standpoint, of particular interest are the practical circumstances that characterised the building of the *Corral de la Cruz* and the Globe. Both were pieced together from the material used formerly for other structures: the timbers of the Theatre in the case of the Globe, which was erected south of the city of London by Shakespeare's company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, in 1599; and "los asientos, tablados, y pertrechos" (seats, boards, and tools) of the *corral* of Cristobal de la Puente

[80] Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 90.
[81] Romana Zacchi (a cura di), *La scena contestata: Antologia da un campo di battaglia transnazionale*, Liguori Editore, Napoli, 2006, p. 5: "a Napoli, sin dal finire del XVI secolo, era stato introdotto – sulla scia di quanto accadeva a Madrid – l'obbligo di destinare una cospicua percentuale degli utili ricavati dagli spettacoli pubblici a istituzioni filantropiche. Si era così trovata una giustificazione morale all'esercizio della scena."
[82] Borque, *Sociedad y Teatro en la España de Lope de Vega*, p. 4.
[83] See Rennert, *The Spanish Stage in the Time of Lope de Vega*, p. 33.
[84] Ibid., p. 36.

in the case of the *Corral de la Cruz*[85]. That even the structure of the theatres was not fixed but liable to be conveyed from place to place demonstrates that the early modern theatre was an exceptionally mobile, dynamic phenomenon. In relation to the issues of gender and desire, one of the aims of this work is to see if, how, and to what extent such dynamism affected the composition of the audience that attended the representations, and influenced, at the same time, the writing of the plays that were put on.

Mobility was also an attribute of the Italian sites where the performances took place, a different kind of mobility, in truth, implying temporariness more than dynamism. It was observed above that although Italy can be considered as the founder of Renaissance European theatre in many respects, the construction of a permanent edifice for the staging of plays was not one of its first achievements. Before the establishment of the *Teatro Olimpico* of Vicenza (1585) and the *Teatro Olimpico* of Sabbioneta (1588)[86], spectacles were set up either in the locations provided by the scholarly and exclusive *Accademie*, or in the splendid halls and gardens of the princely courts. Once the spectacle was over, the stage, the scenery, and all their properties were dismantled, never acquiring, in this manner, a mark of stability[87]. Moreover, Italy could not yet count on a national capital like London or Madrid, which means that there were as many theatrical experiences as there were courts. The phenomenon, in short, was both temporary and scattered[88].

[85] Rennert, *The Spanish Stage in the Time of Lope de Vega*, pp. 33-34.
[86] See Alonge, Bonino (a cura di), *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo: la nascita del teatro moderno Cinquecento-Seicento*, p. 10.
[87] See Giovanni Attolini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Rinascimento*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 1988, p. 64.
[88] See "Politics and the drama" above.

1.5. The actor's life and profession

The preceding section was dedicated to investigating the origins of the Renaissance playhouse in that it represented some sort of box that held both actors and spectators, who, after having been considered from a semiotic perspective, are now going to be viewed as socio-cultural and historical entities.

One of the things observed in the previous section was that the theatres were constructed also to deal with economic and logistical inconveniences affecting the players professionally. Drawing upon the line of research that in the last thirty years or so has focused on the material forces that caused the development of the early modern theatre, the above interest in the playhouse – in both its structure and practical concerns – was aimed at examining it as a document that is as informative and relevant as the written text. In examining this document, one cannot but become aware of the actors' difficult life conditions, which entailed not only a certain apprehension about money and profit, but also a constant fight against social prejudices and moral accusations derived from being regarded as part of a transgressive microcosm within the larger macrocosm made up of ordinary men and women[89]. Actors belonged to a category that was despised and condemned, and always included, as Franco Marenco reminds us, in the list of the worst threats to society[90].

Before settling in London and Madrid where they finally had the chance to perform routinely for a regular audience, stage-players were compelled to roam around their country in search of new spaces where to put their shows on. In a time afflicted by recurring epidemics, roaming was even seen as a lucky contingency, "for players cannot

[89] Alonge, Bonino (a cura di), *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo: la nascita del teatro moderno Cinquecento-Seicento*, pp. XX-XXI.
[90] Ibid., pp. 335-336.

tarry where the plague reigns; and therefore they be seldom infected"[91]. But being always on the move and, what is more, devoid of a predetermined position within a world that the early moderns used to picture as an extremely ordered place, was equivalent to committing a crime. As a consequence, since the middle ages many acts had been passed to condemn and punish the crime for which actors, like vagabonds, were to be blamed. Among the reasons that spurred the foundation of the permanent theatres was thus an urge to turn that accusation aside. As Bradbrook sums up with respect to the English situation, "having no place in the scheme of things, [the player] had no place in society. The establishment of two playhouses, the Theatre and the Curtain [...] was a turning-point in that struggle; [...] they were the outward and visible sign of the common players' right"[92]. In fact, the building of purpose-built theatres that put an end to the players' vagrancy was only one of the possibilities they had to escape charges of homelessness and to be considered as rightful members of society. According to the law, they required most of all to seek the protection of a nobleman:

> It is now published, declared and set forth by the Authority of this present Parliament, that all and every such person & persons ... using subtle, crafty or unlawful Games or Plays [...]; and all [...] Common Players in Enterludes, & Minstrels, not belonging to any Baron of this Realm or towards any other honourable Personage of greater Degree [...] shall be taken, adjudged and deemed Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars[93].

Not only did patronage and the construction of permanent playhouses endow the actors with stability and legitimacy, they also made their occupation a profession to all

[91] Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 180.
[92] Bradbrook, *The Rise of the Common Player: A Study of Actor and Society in Shakespeare's England*, p. 40.
[93] The Act, dating back to 1572, is cited in Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 62.

intents and purposes, prompting them to organise themselves into companies. With regard to Spain, for example, "la creación de un lugar fijo para la representación [...] implica [...] el nacimiento y desarollo del actor como profesional de la representación y su agrupación en entitades autónomas"[94] ("the construction of a permanent place for the representation [...] implies [...] the appearance and development of the actor as a professional and as an associate of autonomous entities").

Since they were trained to act from an early age, and because "the exercise of playing" was their only way of earning a living for themselves and for their families, English players had sometimes to remind the authorities of their need to perform, as comes out of a 1581 petition to the Privy Council drawn up to plead for the reestablishment of their activity after a period of suspension due to fear of contagion:

> Whereas certain companies of players heretofore using their common exercise of playing within and about the City of London have of late in respect of the general infection within the City been restrained by their Lordships commandment from playing, the said players this day exhibited a petition unto their Lordships, humbly desiring that as well in respect of their poor estates, having no other means to sustain them, their wives and children but their exercise of playing, and were only brought up from their youth in the practice of music and playing, as for that the sickness within the City was well slaked [...] so as no danger of infection could follow by the assemblies of people at their plays, it would please their Lordships therefore to grant them license to use their said exercise of playing [here]tofore they had done[95].

The main problem with the "exercise of playing" was that "their Lordships" did not see it as a proper job, but rather as a trick designed by a lazy group of people in order to

[94] Borque, *Sociedad y Teatro en la España de Lope de Vega*, p. 29.
[95] Cited in Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 82.

make the most of, and make money from, their indolent disposition. It follows that "to demand rewards for this idle way of living was to be guilty of a kind of dishonesty [...]; so players were freely compared both with thieves and with whores"[96].

The harshest attacks against the business of performing on stage came from the anti-theatrical puritans. The most severe of them was probably William Prynne, who gave voice to his contempt for actors in a long treatise entitled *Histriomastix, the Players' Scourge* (1632): "I say it is altogether unlawful for any to act plays for gain or profit's sake, or to make a trade or living of it [...] because the profession of a player is no lawful warrantable trade of life, but a most infamous, lewd, ungodly profession"[97]. Many were the sins and vices imputed to the actors. Prynne mentioned lasciviousness, effeminacy, impudency, lust, whoredom, adultery, vanity, theft, hypocrisy. What is more, actors were deemed the most deceitful of all people in that a simple change of clothes let them cross the boundaries between such categories as gender, class, and race. The very principle that makes the dramatic action possible, mimesis, meaning imitation of the real world, was thought responsible for causing a player's loss of his own identity and his simultaneous acquirement of the characteristics, especially the evil ones, of his dramatic persona. As Borque notes: "Un ejemplo indirecto de la estima social y moral de los actores, nace de la confusión vida-teatro, quel lleva a no distinguir, fuera de escena, entre actor y personaje, considerando el primero de acuerdo con los patrones valorativos del personaje"[98] ("An indirect example of the social and moral admiration for the actors comes from confusing life with theatre, whereby one does not distinguish between actor and character offstage, but rather thinks that the former may approve of

[96] Bradbrook, *The Rise of the Common Player: A Study of Actor and Society in Shakespeare's England*, p. 47.
[97] Cited in Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 187.
[98] Borque, *Sociedad y Teatro en la España de Lope de Vega*, p. 85.

the character's values"). At any rate, if the players' profession and lifestyle attracted much criticism from the city's administration and the puritanical section of society, actors could nonetheless count on "la recompensa del aplauso" [99] ("the applause reward") granted by the majority of the population. The great age of Renaissance theatre is generally associated with the names of the most well-known dramatists of the time, but it would be fair to recognise the merits of the most acclaimed actors as well, the more so in light of the insults and the obstacles that they had to confront. In this respect, patronage was vital for the players because, when it came from the aristocracy, it allowed them to elude infamous slurs and the restrictions of the laws, whereas patronage provided by the paying audience represented their principal source of economic sustenance.

As with the origin of the Renaissance playhouse, things concerning the actors' profession were different in Italy. The constitution of the first acting company in 1545 did not put an end to the preceding phase, which lasted through the sixteenth century, and which was characterised by an amateur understanding of the players' activity. Those who performed in the comedies staged at court were courtiers who did it for their own pleasure and for that of their fellows, including the prince, which means that the very persons that commissioned the spectacles coincided with its receivers. Acting was something which rested entirely with the patron's will, as attested by a letter sent by the governor of Castelnuovo Garfagnana to Alfonso II d'Este, duke of Ferrara, in 1584. The governor wrote that the man, together with the three boys who were to play the part of nymphs, whom the duke was in search of for the representation of the *Pastor Fido* by Giovan Battista Guarini had been found and were ready to leave for Ferrara at any

[99] Borque, *Sociedad y Teatro en la España de Lope de Vega*, pp. 88-89.

moment and every time the duke would have sent for them: "Et ho detto sì ad esso come ai fanciulli, che stiano in pronto per venirsene a Ferrara se saranno richiesti, sì come faranno tutta volta che sua Altezza si compiacerà di comandare che venghino"[100]. The letter is evidence that in the aristocratic milieu, at the end of the sixteenth century, playing was still conceived of as an affair between a master – the *signore* – and his servant – the unpaid actor. However, when it was a professional actor (Predolino), member of the *Confidenti* company, to be requested at court, the outcome was not the same. The refusal that in that case the duke received from the owner of the playhouse in which the company used to play indicated a different view of the theatre and of its internal relationships:

> Mi ritrovo haver fatto alli comici *Confidenti* una spesa di molta importanza per il recitare delle commedie, con patti e condizioni [...]. Et già sono passati giorni che già si è principiato a recitare, per la quale occasione si ha scosso, per caparra di molti palchi, circa ducati 1000 da diversi Nobili di questa città. Ora mo' mi è stato riferito [...] che Vostra Serenissima Altezza vole Pedrolino al suo servicio non sapendo forse le obligationi che egli ha con esso meco per li accordi fatti[101].

What is of interest here is that the owner's reference to his investment in the company, to the contracts signed, and to the players' commitment, delineates a more modern man than the duke, in fact a manager in possession of the same pragmatism and material attitudes as his English and Spanish counterparts. The nobles' deposit of 1000 ducats for seats in the galleries hints at the interdependence, in the early modern age as well as today, of a theatregoer's social standing and his/her place in the playhouse. Either enclosed by the walls of the theatre, or shut out of the city's walls, as was the case with

[100] The letter is cited in Ludovico Zorzi, Giuliano Innamorati, Siro Ferrone, *Il teatro del Cinquecento: i luoghi, i testi e gli attori*, Sansoni Editore, Firenze, 1982, p. 59.
[101] Zorzi, Innamorati, Ferrone, *Il teatro del Cinquecento: i luoghi, i testi e gli attori*, p. 60.

the Globe and other London playhouses, theatrical space was highly connoted and meaningful at the time. In England it was also variable in terms of its internal organisation, as it entailed a different audience disposition whether a public or a private theatre was concerned.

1.6. The spectator's place and role

On the topic of theatrical reception it has already been said that a spectator's response to the performance of a play is determined by a series of characteristics that include his/her education, the main events of his/her life, the specific angle from which s/he looks at the world[102]. The art of the theatre relies heavily on whom the recipients are, on their attitudes and beliefs, but it is also related, in a more immediate manner, to the very moment in which the reception takes place. To put it another way, one's theatrical experience is affected by aspects which pertain to the practical implications of attending the representation as well as to his/her identity, and which regard, for instance, "the physical condition of the playgoer's feet or stomach, or the hat worn by the playgoer in front"[103]. Not to mention the acoustics of the Renaissance playhouses, comprising as much the stage characters' words and deeds, as the audience's verbal, and sometimes physical, reactions to the action performed. A notable case in point was the uproar caused by the aforesaid Spanish lower-class *mosqueteros* and by the women who were packed in the *cazuela*[104]. Nor was chaos a prerogative of the popular crowd, for even the gallants who used to attend London private theatres, and to watch the spectacles directly from the stage, were far from being quiet, with much displeasure of the playwrights who

[102] See page 23 above.
[103] Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 81.
[104] See page 30 above.

often complained "first, that [the gallants'] rich attire and ostentatious mannerisms distracted attention from the play; secondly, that they regarded themselves as supreme arbiters of taste and behaved so disdainfully and hypercritically in the theater that they sometimes ruined the performance"[105].

If one is interested in considering the audience from a materialist point of view, s/he cannot but take into account the distinction between public and private theatres in Elizabethan London, for it is a distinction that had to do, among other things, with the spectators' resources and social class. Other differences between the two types of theatre, of which the Globe and the Blackfriars are conventionally taken as specimens, concerned the dichotomy outdoor/indoor, the dimensions of their respective halls, hence the number of spectators each type could receive – about 3000 the Globe and 700 the Blackfriars –, and the shape of their structures – public amphitheatres were polygonal, whereas private playhouses were rectangular[106]. They differed, most of all, in relation to the neighbourhoods where they were built, and, accordingly, to the status of their customary audience. As William Armstrong makes clear:

> The geography of the private theaters is of some significance, since their situation had an important bearing upon the types of spectator whom they attracted. Whereas the public theaters stood at various points on the periphery of London, the private theaters enjoyed the benefits of relatively central situations[107].

[105] William A. Armstrong, "The Audience of the Elizabethan Private Theaters", in *The Seventeenth-Century Stage*, Gerald Eades Bentley (ed.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 1968, p. 226.
[106] See Hosley, "The Playhouses and the Stage", p. 20.
[107] Armstrong, "The Audience of the Elizabethan Private Theaters", p. 215.

In summary, partly because of their location, partly because their entrance price was not within everyone's reach, partly because they staged more sophisticated plays, London private theatres appealed mainly to gentlemen and gentlewomen, to gallants, courtiers, and students from the Inns of Court. Not that the multitude could not form part of a private theatre audience. As a matter of fact, the social class distribution in both types of playhouse was diversified, and a clear-cut categorisation would be inaccurate as well as impossible. Those who, in the documents and letters of the time, were described as "the worst sort of such evil and disordered people"[108], namely "vagrant persons, master-less men, thieves, horse stealers, whoremongers, cozeners, coney-catchers, contrivers of treason, and other idle and dangerous persons"[109], and who patronised the public theatres in particular, did not seem to have turned their nose up at the elitist atmosphere of the private theatres. By the same token, the aristocratic members of the Elizabethan society could take delight in the production of a peripheral public playhouse. In fact, the only clue one could have to a spectator's status and means was by seeing where s/he stood:

> Where at the Globe and the other amphitheatres the people closest to the stage were the poorest, paying a minimal penny for the privilege of standing on their feet next to the stage platform to view the players, at the Blackfriars and the other hall playhouses the wealthier a patron was the closer he or she could come to the action, and the cheapest places were put at the rear[110].

[108] Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 99.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 5.

The internal arrangement of a Spanish *corral*, and the spectators' distribution within it, have been discussed above[111], and clearly represent an aspect whereby the English and the Spanish theatrical experiences can be once again equated. The social heterogeneity of the Spanish spectators reinforces the resemblance: "the audience of the corrales [...] were far from being entirely plebeian," observes Shergold, "for there was nothing socially degrading in hiring an 'aposento' to see the play, and there is plenty of evidence [...] that these rooms, or boxes, were rented by some of the noblest families in Spain"[112].

As to Italy, the same array of social strata found in the English and the Spanish playhouses must be sought in the Middle Ages, when churches and town squares, where the representations were usually put on, summoned a more diversified audience than that admitted to the Renaissance courts and *Accademie*[113].

In all the theatrical contexts under scrutiny, what turns out to be a key concept with reference to the audience is 'selection'. In England and Spain it rested with economic factors in that, as outlined before, playhouses were accessible only to those who could bear the entrance cost, although the variety of admission fees let also people of low rank have access to them. In Italy, on the contrary, selection was either achieved by means of granting only the nobles and the courtiers the privilege of seeing the performance in company of the prince, or it was effected by staging the performances only for the learned ones, as was the case with the spectacles put on by and in the *Accademie*. We are dealing, in short, with two different ways of patronising the theatre: a modern way, founded on the spectators' will to invest in their own diversion, gaining thus the right to

[111] See page 29-30 above.
[112] N. D. Shergold, *A History of the Spanish Stage: From Medieval Times Until the End of the Seventeenth Century*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, p. 534.
[113] Alonge, Bonino (a cura di), *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo: la nascita del teatro moderno Cinquecento-Seicento*, p. 7.

issue their opinion, which could also be unfavourable, on what they were offered[114]; and an old-fashioned way, a quasi-feudal mode of producing and making use of a cultural product.

[114] As Roberta Mullini and Romana Zacchi remind us in *Introduzione allo studio del teatro inglese* (Liguori Editore, Napoli, 2003, p. 127), "occorre [...] tenere a mente che il pubblico è il primo giudice delle rappresentazioni e che, in quanto tale, gode di un immenso potere nel decretare il successo o il fallimento degli spettacoli, tant'è vero che il primo giorno di recita veniva chiamato «trial», a testimonianza del potere detenuto dal 'tribunale del pubblico', e che di drammi di successo come quelli di Shakespeare Heminges e Condell, i curatori dell'edizione in folio del 1623, scrivevano che «these Playes haue had their triall alreadie»".

2. Women, desire, anxiety: the historical and the theatrical debates

2.1. Problems of terminology and periodization

So far the terms 'Renaissance' and 'early modern' have been used indistinctly and interchangeably to characterise several aspects of the history, society, and culture – in particular the theatre and the drama – of sixteenth-century Europe. It must be emphasised, however, that 'Renaissance' and 'early modern' convey two different ways of understanding the particularities of the period at hand. As a matter of fact, whereas 'Renaissance', as has already been said[115], makes explicit reference to the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century revival of classicism, and therefore looks to the past, the expression 'early modern' is clearly and directly related to the idea of modernity to which the very discoveries and achievements of the time contributed to give birth. As critics have noted:

> if the period did see the "rebirth" [...] of certain aspects of ancient civilization in the realms of art, literature, law, historiography, and political theory, it also saw the emergence of social structures previously unknown on the stage of world history. The changes that occurred in the Renaissance, indeed, link that period more closely to our own than to the Middle Ages or to the classical era [...], as historians in the last thirty years have suggested by referring to the Renaissance as the "early modern period." The new name, which poses its own set of problems for theories of periodization, generally does not replace the old one but supplements it, calling attention to features of the period that Renaissance writers could not see as clearly as we can[116].

[115] See page 8 above.

[116] Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, Nancy J. Vickers (eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 1986, p. xvii.

It should be noted, moreover, that the word 'Renaissance' is commonly associated with certain specific geographical coordinates and with a cultural sphere that set limits to its use. As Elam has pointed out, given that the term 'Renaissance' was introduced by Burckhardt in the nineteenth century with regard to sixteenth-century Italy and its works of art, it fails to describe properly the contemporary English – and, we may add, Spanish – situation, which indeed had little to do, both chronologically and aesthetically, with Leonardo's and Michelangelo's Italy. This is why the more neutral and less rhetorical expression 'early modern' has gained currency, even though it is taken to indicate a different and longer time span[117] – "those 250 or so years between 1450 and 1700"[118]. More importantly, the spread and extensive use of 'early modern' is linked to the way in which traditional periodization has been questioned in the last few decades, and the very idea of Renaissance reevaluated through the unearthing of the histories of the excluded. In other words, "the phrase points to an ambitious, energetic, fruitful effort to resee the Renaissance and to see it wholly. This attempt involves both dispelling old illusions, no matter how glamorous they might be, and spelling out new perceptions"[119]. This can be done, for example, by recognising that the Renaissance has traditionally been constructed as a period in the history of humanity dominated by the male subject. The "all-sided man"[120] invented by Burckhardt, the well-versed artist who possessed the best creative and human qualities, has indeed become a commonplace of nearly every discourse on the Renaissance, so much so that he is now regarded as characteristic of the age as the notion of rebirth. In this respect, Eugenio Garin reminds us that the

[117] See Lilla Maria Crisafulli, Keir Elam (a cura di), *Manuale di letteratura e cultura inglese*, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2009, p. 21.
[118] Ferguson, Quilligan, Vickers (eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, p. vii.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Volume I, p. 147.

cultural awakening that took place at that time entailed not only a return to an old system of both Greek and Roman values, but also a renewed attention to men's stories and even to men's bodies, immortalised by painters and sculptors in their unequalled works. Praised by the philosophers to the extent of being seen as a true miracle ("magnum miraculum est homo"[121]), and placed at the centre of the universe, man reached such a level of perfection in the Renaissance worldview as to make Hamlet exclaim:

> [...] What piece of work is a man,
> how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form
> and moving how express and admirable, in action how
> like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the
> beauty of the world, the paragon of animals [...]
>
> (2.2.305-309)[122]

What is particularly important to observe here is that the great figures that we have been led to view as representative of the sixteenth century, namely captains, princes, cardinals, courtiers, architects, artists and so on[123], were, for the most part, men. A far less prestigious standing has been usually granted to women. Garin himself, after referring very succinctly to some learned women of the Italian Renaissance ("le dottissime Nogarola e Cassandra Fedele, o Alessandra Scala [...], o Battista Montefeltro"[124]), focuses on a few Italian courtesans and prostitutes ("Tullia d'Aragona, prostituta figlia di prostituta [...], e Veronica Franco con le sue lettere e le sue rime, che

[121] Garin (a cura di), *L'uomo del Rinascimento*, p. 2.
[122] All quotations from Shakespeare's plays, unless otherwise indicated, are from Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan (eds.), *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, Thomas Nelson, Walton-on-Thames, 1998.
[123] See Garin (a cura di), *L'uomo del Rinascimento*, p. 8.
[124] Ibid., p. 7.

si «concedeva» a Venezia a S. Maria Formosa, mediatrice sua madre, «scudi 2»"[125]), who, at any rate, seem to be unworthy of the same consideration as the male personalities mentioned before. A critique of this state of affairs comes from within Garin's book itself. In a chapter entitled "La donna del Rinascimento" ("The Renaissance Woman"), Margaret King argues that in the Renaissance a man could count on a number of recognizable roles with which to be identified: he could be a prince or a warrior, an artist or a humanist, a merchant or a member of the clergy, a wise man or an adventurer. A woman, on the contrary, was almost faceless, the range of available identities being limited for her to those, conventional, of mother or daughter or widow, virgin or prostitute, saint or witch, Mary, Eve or Amazon. These identities, which were chosen by men on the basis of her biological sex, suffocated any other personality to which she might aspire. According to King, throughout the Renaissance women fought to express their other and truer selves, but their fight was doomed to failure, for the age ended with the stabilization of the traditional gender roles and a general worsening of women's condition[126]. She comes therefore to the conclusion that women's Renaissance, meaning a time when they can experience complete freedom, will occur some centuries after men's Renaissance[127]. King gives thus her own answer to a question which, since it has been posed, has provoked a fruitful discussion, and opened up new and compelling ways of looking at what we have come to consider as a glorious era.

[125] Garin (a cura di), *L'uomo del Rinascimento*, p.7.
[126] Ibid., p. 273.
[127] Ibid., p. 327.

2.2. "Did Women Have a Renaissance?": the gender-inflected reading of history

"A simple question" is a recurrent description when it comes to critics' and historians' explaining, answering and then commenting upon the very successful title of Joan Kelly's 1977 essay "Did Women Have a Renaissance?". A simple question indeed, but so powerful as to expose Renaissance's hidden side, that which had excluded women from the picture, and, in so doing, to cast doubt upon the period's assumed greatness and, more generally, upon the traditional partition of history. Kelly's thought-provoking question and argument did not represent, however, an isolated or pioneering attempt to escape the confinement of a single perspective on history, but were rather the outcome of the fight for the emancipation of women that had seen, among other things, the appearance of the discipline of women's history. Thanks to it, it became clear that history was tainted by a massive bias in that only a very restricted circle of women had had the privilege of making it and being remembered as full historical subjects. Moreover, not taking into account women in the writing of history indicated that half humankind had been unjustly ignored. As Olwen Hufton observes:

> The history of women as a field of enquiry emerged in the late sixties as an offshoot of the women's movement and the demands for civil rights. The conspicuous absence of women from the historical record, unless they belonged to a few small categories – queens, consorts, famous mistresses of yet more famous men, courtesans or saints – meant that history was unbalanced. Their absence was also seen in the sixties as pointing either to a grave sin of omission or to a flagrant suppression of the evidence, and hence to a distortion of the record by the historians of former times. Whether the

> omission was unconscious or deliberate, the result was the same: women, with a few notable exceptions, had been denied a history[128].

What followed next was a resolute endeavour to correct the injustice suffered by women, and to prove that, besides having had an important impact on them, the course of history had in turn been changed by women's intervention in it. The result was that the more things were seen from a different angle, the more meaningless traditional periodization appeared. Hufton continues:

> Remedying this omission became an essential part of feminist historiography in the 1970s. Attempts were made to restore women to the historical record by focusing on their roles and experiences and by examining the effects of significant historical events [...] upon their lives. This spirit of enquiry was both vital and very productive. It inspired historians who were already working in the field of social history to re-examine their sources and to question the chronological framework upon which history was constructed[129].

We have always been taught that periods and events such as classical Greece, the Renaissance, and the French Revolution [130] acted irreversibly on the future of humankind, changing it for the better. But what happens to our evaluation of those same periods and events when we realise that they benefited men more than they benefited women? The revolution brought about by the discipline of women's history consisted in making women's condition the benchmark against which the significance of any period or event had to be determined and valued. Once this way of looking at things became a well-established practice, it was easy to discern the flaws and weaknesses of the

[128] Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe*, Vol. 1: 1500-1800, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1995, pp. 1-2.
[129] Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe*, p. 2.
[130] See Joan Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 1984, p. 3.

historical record. The method put forth and used by historians like Kelly to fix them was then "to look at ages or movements of great social change in terms of their liberation or repression of woman's potential, their import for the advancement of her humanity as well as 'his'"[131]. When this method is applied systematically to the study of history,

> what emerges is a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women precisely in those periods of so-called progressive change. [...] if we apply Fourier's famous dictum – that the emancipation of women is an index of the general emancipation of an age – our notions of so-called progressive developments [...] undergo a startling re-evaluation[132].

The recognition that the Renaissance did little to improve women's plight, and to free them "from natural, social, or ideological constraints"[133], convinced Kelly to give a negative answer to her own question, and thus to affirm that "there was no renaissance for women – at least, not during the Renaissance"[134].

Kelly's question prompted an important and extensive reflection on the part of many scholars trying to prove, through their researches, to what extent women were actually excluded from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cultural, political, and economic advancement. It seems to be of little consequence whether they came or not to the same negative conclusion as Kelly's. A point of interest to the present discussion is rather represented by the gender perspective with which Kelly's question invited to approach the issue of Renaissance treatment of women and men. As a matter of fact, "the spectrum of responses that the query generated does [...] illuminate the imperative need for historians to examine the possibility that historical processes and their implications

[131] Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, p. 2.
[132] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[133] Ibid., p. 19.
[134] Ibid.

were different for women than men"[135]. Researchers may have agreed or disagreed with Kelly's verdict, or attempted to mitigate it by showing that Renaissance women had surely experienced different situations depending on their social class[136]. This notwithstanding, "it cannot be claimed that women entered the seventeenth century more men's 'equals' than they had been in the thirteenth or fourteenth"[137]. For example, on the subject of education, there is no denying that highborn women used to receive the same instruction as the male members of their families, and that they contributed to the circulation of culture and ideas by either writing themselves, and/or by offering their protection to Renaissance artists and writers. On the whole, however, "the seemingly universal idea of *humanitas* the new learning fostered, the notion of education cultivating the human in man, was not meant for 'man' male and female"[138].

Going down the social scale, we discover that women were either not instructed at all, or were carefully prevented from learning to write. The prejudice behind this peculiar restriction came, on the one hand, from men's conviction that women had nothing relevant to say, and, on the other hand, from fear that they might actually say something that could change the status quo[139]. Conversely, the fact that a woman was able to read engendered no particular kind of apprehension, given that "reading would allow her to discover classical and Christian examples of proper female behaviour in the work of great male authors"[140].

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[135] Teresa E. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (eds.), *A Companion to Gender History*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 2004, p. 343.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy , 1400-1650*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2008, p. xv.
[138] Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, p. 70.
[139] See Elissa B. Weaver, "Gender", in Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, p. 197.
[140] Weaver, "Gender", p. 197.

With respect to the question of writing and, more generally, to the issue of gender relations in the early modern period, the following comparison which opposes Burckhardt's inaccurate beliefs to a first-hand account of the disadvantaged circumstances confronted by women at the time reflects a typically feminist strategy for dealing with and for understanding history:

> In his famous study *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), Jacob Burckhardt wrote that "to understand the higher forms of social intercourse in this period, we must keep before our minds the fact that women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men". [...] the argument [...] would doubtless have astonished Renaissance women whatever their social class. Even those privileged enough to participate in those "higher forms of social intercourse" [...] would have been less likely to agree with [Burckhardt] than with the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti, whose treatise *La Semplicità Ingannata o la Tirannia Paterna* (Simplicity Deceived or Paternal Tyranny, 1654) describes the enormous obstacles women encountered whenever they attempted to engage in the quintessential humanist task of giving ideas public expression through writing[141].

Burckhardt's assertion collides also with the evidence given by an Italian noblewoman, this time in relation to women's lack of autonomy and consequent dependence on men's will. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that one way to be acquainted with women's own version of their stories is to have recourse to those pieces of writing which record their own point of view, and which have been termed, for this reason, "ego documents", namely, "autobiographies and other personal testimonies (memoirs, letters, diaries, lawsuits and so on), some written by women and others

[141] Ferguson, Quilligan, Vickers (eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, p. xv.

embodying female voices, [...] exploited to discern the impact of cultural constraints on the lives of individual women"[142]. The ego document in question is a letter sent by Nannina de' Medici to her mother asking for the intervention of her younger brother, Lorenzo the Magnificent, in a familial matter[143]. The dismissal of her sons' tutor decided upon by her husband Bernardo Rucellai, and her own helplessness in preventing it, are the cause of Nannina's expressed displeasure ("Avisomi chome Bernardo a dato licentia al maestro, che n'o grande dispiacere"), as well as an occasion for a sad meditation on the inconvenience and misfortune resulting from having been born a woman. With evident clarity of mind, she laments: "non si vole nascere femina chi vuole fare a suo modo" ("whoever wishes to have control of his life should take care not to be born a woman"). Unquestionably, Nannina's words are to be taken as further proof that "humanism, which did much to enhance the dignity of man, was long in liberating the 'man foeminine' from her subordinate status"[144].

In conclusion it can be said that, although the relationship between women and the Renaissance is a complex one, for, as we shall see, the theatre and the drama allowed them a certain space of freedom, Kelly's belief that women did not have a Renaissance can hardly be dismissed. In addition to the problems of education and subjection to male authority discussed above, there is also the issue of women's absence from public life, including both the occupational world and the world of politics. As summed up by Virginia Cox, who also traces the origin of such a state of affairs:

> Where their legal status was concerned, certainly, women remained firmly subordinate to men, and their position within the family was generally one of

[142] Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe*, p. 4.
[143] The letter can be found online at https://www.lisakaborycha.com/lucrezia-nannina-de-medici/.
[144] Ian MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, p. 92.

> subservience. Women had fewer choices than men in most areas of their life, and those choice did not substantially increase in this period. The professions remained closed to them [...]; with a few notable exceptions, they were excluded from political life, and their educational opportunities were – again, with some exceptions – far inferior to those of their brothers. Further, the Aristotelian notions of gender difference dominant within law, medicine, theology, and natural philosophy served to reinforce and perpetuate this social inferiority, justifying women's subordinate status as the reflection of a hierarchy hard-wired into the divine order of creation[145].

2.3. Notes on the writing of "her-story"

> Orsino: And what's her history?
> Viola: A blank, my lord [...]
>
> (*Twelfth Night*, 2.4.110-111)

There are at least two main reasons why scholars in the field of women's history take exception to the way in which time has been traditionally sectioned.

The first reason, as indicated previously, has to do with a sort of double standard deep-rooted in history, whereby "the periods in which basic changes occur in society and which historians have commonly regarded as turning points for all historical development, are not necessarily the same for men as for women"[146].

The second reason concerns what history is about, and the types of fact singled out to write it. Indeed, since these facts pertain mostly to the spheres of government, law, and war, it is evident that the need to reappraise the partition of history through a gendered

[145] Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400-1650*, p. xiii.
[146] Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1/2, Autumn 1975, p. 10.

lens comes from acknowledging that those spheres are male-dominated. In the words of Gerda Lerner:

> the traditional time frame in history has been derived from political history. Women have been the one group in history longest excluded from political power as they have, by and large, been excluded from military decision making. [...] the history of women demands different periodization than does political history[147].

Therefore, if politics and war, and the men who made both, are found at the heart of history as we know it, whereas women are made to occupy a peripheral space, there seems to be no other way to take them into account than "to decenter the map of knowledge"[148], and to move towards that periphery. In addition to this, it is likewise important to apply a particular method when trying "to restore women to history and to restore our history to women"[149], consisting in locating ourselves in a decentred position and in adopting a decentred point of view. As a matter of fact, "as Renaissance artists themselves suggested in experiments with perspectival puzzles [...], some objects [...] cannot be rightly perceived at all unless the viewer adopts an oblique rather than frontal perspective of the picture"[150].

The task to restore women to history comprises not only the effort to disclose their hidden stories, but also a commitment to turn the very dynamics of gender into a tool for approaching history in a more equitable and inclusive manner, in the belief that

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[147] Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges", p. 10.
[148] Ferguson, Quilligan, Vickers, (eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, p. xxii.
[149] Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, p. 1.
[150] Ferguson, Quilligan, Vickers, (eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, p. xxii.

"women's history is a way to renew the history of both sexes, to give us a new understanding of the possibilities of the past"[151].

There are, however, some risks in trying to bring women to the forefront of historical investigation. For example, the proliferation of specialised material which both corrects the bias and fills the gap created by traditional periodization does not always add value to the study of women's lives but, on the contrary, can even persuade someone to reject it as too sectorial. As Joan Scott remarks:

> By uncovering new information about women, historians assumed they would right the balance of long years of neglect. [...] New facts might document the existence of women in the past, but they did not necessarily change the importance (or lack of it) attributed to women's activities. Indeed, the separate treatment of women could serve to confirm their marginal and particularized relationship to those (male) subjects already established as dominant and universal[152].

By the same token, directing one's attention to the detail represented by the life events of a few distinguished women – those who either were of noble birth or managed to do something out of the ordinary – is not enough to make him/her see the big picture, that is, a past world inhabited and transformed by all sorts of women, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural level. About this specific risk, Lerner writes:

> The first level at which historians, trained in traditional history, approach women's history is by writing the histories of "women worthies" or "compensatory history." Who are the women missing from history? Who are the women of achievement and what did they achieve? The resulting history

[151] Juliet Gardiner (ed.), *What is History Today...?*, Macmillan, London, 1988, p. 87.
[152] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, p. 3.

> of "notable women" does not tell us much about those activities in which most women engaged, nor does it tell us about the significance of women's activities to society as a whole. The history of notable women is the history of exceptional, even deviant women, and does not describe the experience and history of the mass of women[153].

Opposite to the inadequate practice of treating women in a separate way, there is the practice of embedding them into history by adhering to the parameters of a model that, in the main, has not taken into consideration the differences between women and men. In so doing, periodization avoids being problematised as it should be. This practice is best illustrated by Merry Wiesner:

> We began to investigate the lives of women in the past, first fitting them into the categories with which we were already comfortable – nations, historical periods, social classes, religious allegiance – and then realizing that this approach, sarcastically labelled "add women and stir," was unsatisfying. Focusing on women often disrupted the familiar categories, forcing us to rethink the way that history was organized and structured[154].

It is reasonable to wonder, once the risks and the unsatisfactory practices have been brought to light, what can be done to insure that women are assigned the place that they deserve in history without either being regarded as a distinguished group, or being assimilated into an undifferentiated, but unambiguous as to the gender that prevails in it, *man*kind.

For a very long time, women have failed to be recognised as full actors in control of their own lives and capable to decide for themselves. In order to fix this situation,

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[153] Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges", p. 5.
[154] Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*, 2nd Edition, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden-Oxford-Chichester, 2011, p. 1.

historians have been called upon to attest that women have also shaped history through their actions, although rarely have they been given credit for their endeavours. Bringing up the notions of "her-story" and of women's agency, Scott notes:

> One approach [...] to the problem of constituting women as historical subjects was to gather information about them and write "her-story". As the play on the word "history" implied, the point was to give value to an experience that had been ignored (hence devalued) and to insist on female agency in the making of history[155].

Most assuredly, a great deal of information about women's experiences and agency is recoverable from women's ego documents, which, as has already been said, embody female voices and thus offer invaluable material to base "her-story" on. By reading "women's letters, diaries, autobiographies, and oral history sources"[156], we get a unique chance to read a different story, one that did not necessitate a man's pen and viewpoint to be both written down and passed on. As claimed by Lerner: "This shift from male-oriented to female-oriented consciousness is most important and leads to challenging new interpretations"[157].

2.4. Theatregoing as a protofeminist experience: the case of Lady Anne Halkett

The *Autobiography of Anne, Lady Halkett* dates back to 1677-1678 and reconstructs the years from 1644 to 1656 in the life of this English gentlewoman[158]. Anne (1623-1699)

[155] Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 18.
[156] Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges", p. 10.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Information about Lady Anne Halkett is available online at https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/autobiography-of-lady-anne-halkett, and at http://www.projectcontinua.org/anne-halkett/

was the daughter of Thomas Murray, "tutor to the late King of blesed memory"[159], namely, Charles I, by whom Murray had been appointed Provost of Eton College "for a recompense to my father's care in discharging his duty"[160], and of Jane Drummond, "Governese to the Duke of Glocester and the Princese Elizabeth"[161], namely, to two of Charles I's children. After Murray's death, Jane "spared noe expence in educating all her children in the most suitable way to improve them"[162], paying masters to teach Anne and her sister to write (Anne was also the author of religious writings and other devotional meditations[163]), together with several other things.

At the beginning of the *Autobiography* we see Lady Anne recall the years before 1644, and let the readers draw a picture of her younger self that conformed with what we know was expected from early modern women in terms of morals and conduct. A picture, that is, of a chaste and obedient girl who, in the absence of her dead father, had nonetheless to submit to the authority of her mother:

> till the year 1644 I may truly say all my converse was so inocentt that my owne hart cannott challenge mee with any imodesty, either in thought or behavier, or an act of disobedience to my mother, to whom I was so observant that as long as shee lived I doe nott remember that I made a visitt to y^e^ neerest neibour or wentt anywhere withoutt her liberty[164].

The girl's anxiety to safeguard her reputation became particularly intense when theatregoing was involved:

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[159] John Gough Nichols (ed.), *The Autobiography of Anne Lady Halkett*, Printed for the Camden Society, Westminster, 1875, p. 1.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid., p. 2.
[162] Ibid.
[163] See the "Introduction" to Nichols (ed.), *The Autobiography of Anne Lady Halkett*.
[164] Nichols (ed.), *The Autobiography of Anne Lady Halkett*, p. 3.

> And so scrupulous I was of giving any occation to speake of mee, as I know they did of others, that though I loved well to see plays [...], yet I cannott remember 3 times that ever I wentt with any man besides my brothers; and if I did, my sisters or others better than my selfe was with mee[165].

So far, to rest upon the excerpts quoted, there is no reason for the readers to doubt Anne's adherence to the gender assumptions of her time. Readers are taken by surprise, however, when she unexpectedly proves to be a strong-minded woman at odds with the value system she was supposed to abide by. The fact that she "loved well to see plays" is momentous in and of itself, because it is proof that early modern women left their homes to attend dramatic performances at the public or the private theatres. That going to the theatre also turned into an occasion for a young Lady Anne to defy the conventions of the society she lived in, and to show such outstanding qualities as initiative, independence, agency, pride, and a protofeminist attitude, is quite remarkable, and strikes us as an unusual combination of astonishing elements:

> And I was the first that proposed and practised itt, for 3 or 4 of us going together withoutt any man, and everyone paying for themselves by giving the mony to the footman who waited on us, and he gave itt in the play-howse. And this I did first upon hearing some gentlemen telling what ladys they have waited on to plays, and how much itt had cost them; upon which I resolved none should say the same of me[166].

Lady Anne's resoluteness was instigated by her overhearing a group of men talking about some women in an unflattering way, an incident which introduces into the discourse on the complex relationship between women and history carried out so far the

[165] Nichols (ed.), *The Autobiography of Anne Lady Halkett*, p. 3.
[166] Ibid.

issue of men's control over the writing of history, and over the representation of the female subject in his-story. In this respect, using gender as a category of historical analysis[167] also means "[considering] the gender of our witnesses, keeping in mind that the documents we have were for the most part written by men, who almost always saw the world in their own image and women as Other"[168]. And if one wonders about the opposite situation, the one, that is, in which it is man, not woman, who is constructed as the Other, s/he may be satisfied with the scenario envisioned by Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath in her Prologue:

> By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,
> [...]
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
> Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (693-696)[169]

2.5. The consequences of women's theatregoing

Stephen Gosson, author of *The School of Abuse* (1579), one of the most famous English works against the theatre that were written between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, would have probably felt disconcerted in reading Lady Anne's *Autobiography*, and in finding out about her unconventional conduct in the episode of the theatre reported above.

By the same token, there is good reason to suppose that Lady Anne did not read Gosson's text, or, if she did, she presumably preferred to overlook his admonitions. This is clear from the fact that, in his plea *To the Gentlewomen, Citizens of London,*

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[167] See Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*.
[168] Elissa B. Weaver, "Gender", in *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, Ruggiero (ed.), p. 189.
[169] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue & Tale from the Canterbury Tales*, James Winny (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.

flourishing dayes, with regarde of credite, Gosson did not make allowances for women who went to the theatre attended by their (male) friends, let alone for those women whose only chaperone was the footman:

> It is not [...] your sober countenance that defendeth your credite; nor your freindes which accompany your person that excuse your folly; nor your modesty at home that covereth your lightnesse, if you present your selves in open Theaters[170].

Not to mention the immorality of paying for a theatrical representation. As stated by another English polemicist, Phillip Stubbes, in the *Anatomy of the Abuses* (1583): "To giue money to Players is a greeuous sin"[171], a sin which Lady Anne committed.

In the section dedicated to the sixteenth-century playhouse, the English and the Spanish theatres have been characterised as economic enterprises[172], and the spectacles as "commodities which the public paid money to see and over which, consequently, they exercised a certain degree of control"[173]. Accordingly, Lady Anne's act of going to the theatre with other three or four women, "and everyone paying for themselves", needs to be seen not so much as a sin, but as direct evidence that "while women were not represented at the production end of this industry, they certainly were at the consumption end, and so probably had some effect upon its product"[174]. Indeed, there is no denying that when gender studies are applied to the investigation of the sixteenth- and the seventeenth-century English theatre, "what is primarily remembered" – Susan

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[170] Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse, Containing a Pleasant Invective against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters, &c.*, Reprinted for The Shakespeare Society, London, 1841, p. 48.
[171] Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, Part I, Frederick J. Furnivall (ed.), Published for The New Shakespeare Society, London, 1877-9, p. 142.
[172] See page 26ff above.
[173] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, p. 5.
[174] Richard Levin, "Women in the Renaissance Theatre Audience", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer 1989, p. 174.

Bassnett reminds us – "is the prohibition of women from the London stages"[175]. In point of fact, women were not only prohibited from working as actresses, but also, as Kathleen McLuskie has observed, as shareholders, writers, and stage hands[176]. Yet, it was exactly in their role as patrons-spectators willing to spend money to support the art of the theatre that women contributed to the emergence of the commercial playhouses, whose construction, it has already been stressed, was primarily motivated by the economic advantages that derived from letting in only those who could bear the entrance cost. As Richard Levin has rightly pointed out,

> if the plays are to be viewed as products of an industry (which they obviously were, among other things), then McLuskie has omitted the crucial group of people who would have the greatest influence in determining the nature of those products – the customers. For the enterprise could make a profit only if its plays satisfied the needs not of shareholders, actors, writers, or stagehands but of the audience. [...] And among those paying guests in the audiences there were women[177].

Under no circumstances, therefore, can the English theatre be regarded as a no woman's land, for although women were not allowed to walk the space of the stage, there was no rule or law that forbade them to stand or sit in front of it.

Once women's physical position within the playhouse has been clarified, and the material significance of their attendance ascertained, it remains to consider the ideological implications of female theatregoing in England at the time.

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[175] Susan Bassnett, "Struggling with the Past: Women's Theatre in Search of a History", *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 5, Issue 18, May 1989, p. 107.
[176] See Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: feminist criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*", in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield (eds.), Manchester University Press, Manchester-New York, 1985, p. 92.
[177] Levin, "Women in the Renaissance Theatre Audience", p. 165.

The first implication had to do with the kind of opportunity the theatre offered to women in an otherwise patriarchal society, and the unconstrained atmosphere they were licensed to enjoy there.

The second implication concerned the essential part that women played in decreeing the fortune of a performance, hence, their function as arbiters of taste. Both implications have been illustrated by Stephen Orgel:

> even where the stage was a male preserve, as it certainly was in the commercial theatrical companies of Renaissance England, the theatre was not. The theatre was a place of unusual freedom for women in the period; foreign visitors comment on the fact that English women go to the theatre unescorted and unmasked, and a large proportion of the audience consisted of women. The puzzle here would be why a culture that so severely regulated the lives of women in every other sphere suspended its restrictions in the case of theatre. The fact of the large female audience must have had important consequences for the development of English popular drama. It meant that the success of any play was significantly dependent on the receptiveness of women; and this in turn means that theatrical representations [...] also depended for their success to a significant degree on the receptiveness of women[178].

If foreign visitors limited themselves to commenting on women's going to the theatre unescorted and unmasked, those who attacked the theatre, especially in England and Spain, gave voice to all their contempt for, and apprehension of, such a habit, denouncing it vehemently. Their bringing up women in their condemnation does confirm further that women used to frequent the playhouses, whereas their concern and

[178] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 10-11.

fixation with the repercussions of the performance on women's morality reveals "what kind of freedom the social dimension of theatre represented for Renaissance women"[179].

As to the receptiveness of women, there is much in the plays' prologues and epilogues that attests to the weight of their judgement. In addition to this, prologues and epilogues constitute the third type of contemporary commentary on women's presence at the theatre (the other two being the ego documents and the anti-theatrical polemic), and as such they will be discussed later.

2.6. Women at "Venus palace": the eroticism of the playhouse and the anti-theatrical polemic

If we look at the history of the theatre in Europe, we cannot but notice how the drama has always been the target of the disapproval, the attacks, and the censure of the political and religious power, which, aware of the capacity of the dramatic action to act upon reality and to change it, has tried to control it through the instruments of the law and the pulpit. According to Zacchi, the centuries-old controversy about the legitimacy of the theatre necessarily entailed a degree of liveliness and creativity unmatched by all other literary genres; in fact, hardly had a novel or a poem ever given rise to a dispute as much animated as a play and its staging[180]. Among the reasons for this is the theatre's ability to touch all the senses at one time, and to stimulate a response on the part of the spectator generally connected with the sphere of his/her sexuality. Orgel remarks that "the association of theatre with sex is absolutely pervasive in these polemics"[181], so pervasive indeed that it often prompted the state's authorities to intervene in order to regulate the situation, and to forestall any kind of illicit behaviour. For example, in July

[179] Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*, p. 77.
[180] See Zacchi (a cura di), *La scena contestata: Antologia da un campo di battaglia transnazionale*, p. 2.
[181] Orgel, *Impersonations: The performance of gender in Shakespeare's England*, p. 26.

1597, the Court of Common Council wrote to the Privy Council "asking that plays in and about London be forbidden instantly and forever"[182] because "they are a special cause of corrupting their youth, containing nothing but unchaste matters, lascivious devices, [...] and other lewd and ungodly practices"[183].

Similarly, with a deliberation of the Council of Ten dating back to 1529, the Republic of Venice interdicted the representation of comedies and tragedies on the grounds that they were a stimulus for the actual performance of obscene acts, and a menace to public decency: "prohibito [...] el recitar et rapresentar dele comedie et tragedie [...] havendosi cognossito in ogni tempo quello esser grandissimo incentivo de lascivia et detestabile corruptela de i boni costumi"[184].

The same worry was uttered by John Northbrooke in *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes* (1577). By recurring to a more moralistic and puritanical language, Northbrooke made two fictional characters, Age and Youth, state his beliefs and reproach:

> *Youth*. Doe you speake against those places also, whiche are made vppe and builded for such playes and enterludes, as the *Theatre* and *Curtaine* is, and other such lyke places besides?
> *Age*. Yea, truly; for I am persuaded that Satan hath not a more speedie way, and fitter schoole to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthie lustes of wicked whoredom, than those places, and playes, and theatres are; and therefore necessarie that those places, and

[182] Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, p. 99.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Cited in Zacchi (a cura di), *La scena contestata: Antologia da un campo di battaglia transnazionale*, p. 8.

> players, shoulde be forbidden, and dissolued, and put downe by authoritie, as the brothell houses and stewes are[185].

It should be noted here that Northbrooke's tract was published one year after Burbage's construction of the Theatre[186], so that there is good reason to suppose that the moralist was urged to write his invective by what he saw was happening there: men and women assembled in one single space, breathing the same lecherous air as if they were in a bawdyhouse. Interestingly, the image of the theatre as a school where people were summoned every day only to be taught libidinous things reappears later in the words of Age:

> You may see dayly what multitudes are gathered togither at those playes, of all sorts, to the greate displeasure of Almightie God, and daunger of their soules, &c; for they learne nothing thereby, but that which is fleshye and carnall[187].

The association of theatre with sex was maintained by the Spanish polemicists as well. In *Primera parte de las excelencias de la virtud de la Castidad* (*First part of the excellences of the virtue of Chastity*, 1601), Friar José de Jesús María spoke about the nature of the representations. He affirmed:

> no hay cosas más ajena de las representaciones de estos tiempos que la honestidad y decencia, ni más propia de ellas que la deshonestidad y torpeza.

[185] John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, Reprinted for The Shakespeare Society, London, 1843, pp. 85-86.
[186] See page 27ff above.
[187] Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, pp. 88-89.

> [...] Las comedias que se usan son indecentísimas y grandemente perjudiciales á todo género de gentes[188].
>
> (nothing is more alien to the representations of these times than honesty and decency, nor more characteristic of them than dishonesty and turpitude. [...] The comedies that are in vogue are very indecent and extremely detrimental to all sorts of people.)

In light of the licentiousness that was attributed to the theatre, it does not come as a surprise that, in a culture that laid emphasis on female chastity and honour, women's participation as spectators in the public performances of plays used to engender much anxiety and fear. Northbrooke, whose spokesperson in his *Treatise* is Age, believed that the ban on attendance at the stage spectacles had to be extended to everyone, but particularly to women and maids, who, he thought, could more easily fall prey to the pleasures of love:

> *Youth*. I perceyue by your communication, that none ought to haunt and frequente those theatres and places where enterludes are, and especially women and maydes.
> *Age*. You haue collected the meaning of my sayings [...] truly. [...] no wiues or maydens [...] will be founde and seene at common playes, dauncings, and other great resorte of people; for these playes be the instruments, and armour of Venus and Cupide[189].

The accusation that the drama, more than any other cultural practice, could endanger the integrity of women, regardless of their marital status, was also shared by Anthony

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[188] Cited in Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, Est. Tip. de la "Rev. de archivos, bibl. y museos", Madrid, 1904, p. 370.
[189] Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, pp. 88-89.

Munday, author of *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters* (1580). It was comedy, in particular, with its features and devices, that he held responsible for having the worst influence over women. He claimed:

> Credite me, there can be found out no stronger engine to batter the honestie as wel of wedded wiues, as the chastitie of vnmarried maides and widowes, than are the hearing of common plaies. There wanton wiues fables, and pastorical songes of love, which they vse in their comical discourses [...] turne al chastitie vpside downe, [...] insomuch that it is a miracle, if there be found anie either woman, or maide, which with these spectacles of strange lust, is not oftentimes inflamed even vnto furie[190].

The most lively aspect of Munday's critique resides in the fact that he supported his argument by referring to real women who had actually regretted going to the theatre because, they had admitted, it had effected the loss of their probity:

> Some citizens wiues [...] have even on their death beds with teares confessed, that they haue receiued at those spectacles such filthie infections, as haue turned their minds from chast cogitations, and made them of honest women light huswiues; by them they haue dishonoured the vessels of holiness; and borught [...] their soules to the state of euerlasting damnation[191].

Munday's allegations were backed up by first-hand evidence, both ocular and aural:

> The Theater I found to be an appointed place of Bauderie, mine owne eares haue heard honest women allured with abhominable speeches. Sometime I haue seene two knaues at once importunate vpon one light huswife[192].

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[190] Anthony Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York-London, 1973, pp. 99-100.
[191] Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, pp. 53-54.
[192] Ibid., p. 56.

An analogous interest in searching for facts upon which to base his conjectures, and to demonstrate that all which happened in the playhouse, on and off stage, put the virtue of women at risk, is found in Stubbes:

> Do [playes] not induce whordom & unclennes? Nay, are they not rather plaine deuourers of maydenly virginitie and chastitie? For proofe whereof, but marke the flocking and running to Theaters & curtens, daylie and hourely, night and daye, tyme and tyde, to see Playes and Enterludes; where such wanton gestures, such bawdie speeches, [...] such kissing [...] Suche winckinge and glancinge of wanton eyes, and the like, is used[193].

From a comparative standpoint, Spanish female theatregoers constituted no less the object of the apprehensive discourses of the Spanish (male) preachers, who were as worried as their English counterparts that comedies did not benefit women's rectitude at all. Here's what Luis Crespí de Borja, a member of the Spanish clergy, wrote in 1649:

> las materias son de ordinario de amores lascivos, de bailes y cantares provocativos, y que se puede decir [...] que todo lo que en ellas [comedias] se hace representa torpeza y deshonestidad [...]. En éstas llegan á besar los hombres á las mujeres, van revolcándose abrazados por el teatro, se cantan cosas con cifras lascivas, [...] no sin detrimento grande de algunas doncellas que las oyen y sin ofensión de los oídos castos[194].
>
> (the subjects are usually lascivious loves, titillating dances and songs, so much so that it can be said [...] that everything happening in them [in the comedies] represents turpitude and dishonesty [...]. In them, men come to kiss women, they

[193] Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, p. 144.
[194] Cited in Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 193.

roll around hugging each other, they sing lascivious things, [...] to the detriment of the maids and of the chaste ears that hear them.)

Women represented a major concern for the English and the Spanish anti-theatrical moralizers not only because the dynamics of the playhouse and the drama proved to be unfit for the preservation of women's good name, but also because their very presence at a place so much charged with eroticism as to be called "*Venus* pallace"[195] was thought to compromise the relationship between the sexes: "behind the outrage of public modesty" notes Orgel, "is a real fear of women's sexuality, and more specifically, of its power to evoke men's sexuality"[196]. In this regard, Gosson described both the practical implications of men and women sharing the same space – "In our assemblies at playes in London you shall see suche heaving and shooving, such ytching and shouldering to sytte by women"[197] – and its more serious consequences – "lusty bloods at the shewe of faire women give a wantone sigh or a wicked wishe. [...] Looking eies have lyking hartes; lyking hartes may burne in lust. [...] though you go to the Theaters to see sport, Cupid may catche you ere you departe"[198]. Likewise, Friar José de Jesús María wondered what kind of sensual poison women playgoers were able to inject into those who watched them closely – "¿qué espiritu de ponzoña sensual arrojarán estas mujercillas desdichadas que andan en las comedias, en los que tan de hito en hito las está mirando [?]"[199] – and, in addition, wondered what effects this could have upon every honest spectator, whose good thinking could be turned into sensual imagination, whose affections could go from chaste to lascivious, whose honesty could become a

[195] Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, p. 143.
[196] Orgel, *Impersonations: The performance of gender in Shakespeare's England*, p. 49.
[197] Gosson, *The School of Abuse, Containing a Pleasant Invective against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters, &c.*, p. 25.
[198] Ibid., pp. 48-49.
[199] Cited in Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 368.

flame of dishonesty: "qué efectos puede hacer el vapor de la sangre deshonestisima [...], sino mudar en [las personas honestas] los buenos pensamientos en imaginaciones sensuales, los afectos castos en lascivos y la templanza de la honestidad en fuego de torpeza?"[200].

The issue of theatrical reception, involving the impact that the action represented on the stage has on the spectator's beliefs and emotions, and the changes that it produces in his/her worldview and conduct, has already been discussed from the theoretical point of view offered by semiotics. As has been said, the purpose of a play enacted on the stage is not only to convey simple, neutral information, but also to persuade the spectator to take action in actual life[201]. As Thomas Heywood pointed out in *An Apology for Actors* (1612): "so bewitching a thing is lively and well-spirited action, that it hath power to new-mold the harts of the spectators, and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt"[202].

The anti-theatrical polemicists we are dealing with were very far from having the same high opinion of the power of theatrical action as Heywood's. On the contrary, their belief in the corrupting nature of the drama was reflected in their view that any man and woman who left the playhouse after a performance was hardly the same person who had entered it: "[...] los corazones de las mugeres con qué limpieza tornarán á sus casas?"[203]("[...] with what kind of honesty will women's hearts come back home?"); "I

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[200] Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 368.

[201] See page 22 above.

[202] Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors*, Reprinted for The Shakespeare Society, London, 1841, p. 21.

[203] Juan de Pineda, *Agricultura christiana*, [1589], cited in Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 504. For fear that darkness might encourage sexual harassment and the performance of sinful acts, in the *corrales* the spectacles started at two o'clock in the afternoon and ended before sunset. See Borque, *Sociedad y Teatro en la España de Lope de Vega*, p. 171: "La representación comenzaba a las dos de la tarde, de octubre a abril, para terminar antes de la

dare boldlye say, that fewe men or women come from playes [...] with safe and chaste minds"[204]; "in that representation of whoredome, al the people in mind plaie the whores. And such as happilie came chaste vnto showes, returne adulterers from plaies"[205]; "Then, these goodly pageants being done, euery mate sorts to his mate, euery one bringes another homeward [...], and in their secret conclaues (couertly) they play *the Sodomites*, or worse. And these be the fruits of Playes and Enterluds for the most part"[206].

It was observed above, when the structure of a typical Spanish *corral* was described, that Spanish female spectators made use of a different entrance to access the yard, and that they attended the representations from a specific section named *cazuela*[207]. Now that many of the causes of anxiety connected with the theatre have been brought to light, it is not difficult to understand the reasons why the separation of the sexes in the *corrales* was so much cared about as to be sanctioned by the law. A 1615 order, for example, decreed that men and women ought to be kept apart both inside the playhouse and at the building entrance and exit, in order to prevent any illicit act: "que los hombres y mugeres estén partados, así en los asientos, como en las entradas y salidas, para que no hagan cosas deshonestas"[208]. A 1641 order reinforced the restriction by placing one of the two security officers – the so-called *alguaciles de comedias*[209] – at

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puesta del sol. [...] De este modo se evitaba el representar con antorchas [...] y, sobre todo, el que hubiera oscurecido cuando las mujeres salían de la *cazuela* para dirigirse a su casa".

[204] Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, p. 91.

[205] Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, pp. 3-4.

[206] Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, p. 144-145.

[207] See page 30 above.

[208] Cited in Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 627.

[209] Borque, *Sociedad y Teatro en la España de Lope de Vega*, p. 22: "Los alguaciles de comedias constituían la policía de los teatros y sus funciones [...] atañen a problemas de orden público."

the men's doors, the other at the women's door, in order to discourage men from getting in the *cazuela*, and from waiting for women to get out once the performance was over:

> Que los alguaciles de las comedias asistan desde que se abran los corrales, y se empiece á cobrar hasta que se cierren, el uno asistiendo á las puertas de los hombres [...], y el otro á la puerta de las mugeres, no dejando que esté á ella hombre ninguno, ni entre en la parte donde estén las mugeres. [...] y acabada [la comedia], asistan á que no pare hombre ninguno á la salida de las mugeres[210].

It is worth underlining that this specifically Spanish way of policing the crowd on the basis of gender gave rise to contrasting attitudes among the moralists. Fray Marco Antonio de Camos, author of a treatise entitled *Microcosmia* (1592), was in favour of the gender-based division – "me parece seria muy justo que los hombres estuviesen separados de las mujeres y que entrasen por puertas diferentes"[211] ("it seems fair to me that men should be separated from women and that they should enter using a different door") – because, he maintained, if such division was to be found even in the churches in Rome, where nothing indecent was expected to happen – "Que si [...] en Roma en muchos templos se tiran cortinas para hacer division de los hombres á las mugeres, de manera que no estén á las vistas los unos de los otros, siendo que en aquel sacrosanto lugar no se ha de presumir cosa mala"[212] –, how much necessary the division was in a place attended for the most part by dissolute youth, and where the chances to misbehave were plentiful – "¡cuánto más se debe hacer donde los que concurren son la más parte gente moza, libre y disoluta y los ocasiones del pecar tantas!"[213].

[210] Cited in Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 633.
[211] Ibid., p. 130.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.

Not so favourable to the separation of women from men was Crespí de Borja, who called attention to some of the causes of men's bad behaviour which the separation did not help to overcome. In particular, he criticised the habit of getting to the *corral* at least one hour before the beginning of the representation to court women and gesture toward them: "¿Qué es el estarse desde la una hasta que se comienza la comedia, galanteando la gente moza y haciendo señas á las mujeres desde los balcones?"[214]. Similarly, he pointed out how the seats reserved for women were instrumental in attracting more people – "¿Qué son los patios para mujeres con que se atrae la gente?" [215]; finally, he condemned all those curious and lascivious people who used to form a sort of human wall at women's exit door to better tease them: "¿Qué es el insolente modo de reconocerlas al salir de la comedia, haciéndose dos murallas la gente curiosa, ó, por mejor decir, lasciva, que con palabras y con acciones provocan á cuantas salen?"[216]. He wondered, in conclusion, whether the separation was really helpful in stopping worst things from happening, or was rather the cause of an increase in sensuality: "¿Esto es evitar mayores males ó un continuo fomento de la sensualidad?"[217].

2.7. Objects/subjects of desire

If we re-examine the causes of bad behaviour identified by Crespí de Borja, we realise that women appear as the inactive objects of the courtship, the attentions, the teasing of men, who emerge as more dynamic individuals. In this respect, it is important not to forget that the anti-theatrical writers were men, and that, as such, were imbued with the prejudices of a society that saw women as yielding creatures. A change of perspective,

[214] Cited in Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 194.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.

however, one that looks at things through the eyes of the female portion of the audience, may reveal something new. As Howard has wondered and suggested: "what if one reads the situation less within the horizons of masculinist ideology and asks whether women might have been empowered, and not simply victimized, by their novel position within the theater?"[218]. It is precisely from this novel position that a different perspective can originate.

In the previous section we have considered three main sources of anxiety connected with women's role as spectators: first, the association of theatre with sex; second, the conviction that theatre put women's virtue at risk; third, the fear that women's sexuality could evoke men's sexuality. No wonder that Northbrooke claimed: "great reason it is that women (especiallye) shoulde absent themselues from such playes"[219]. Women's absence from plays was indeed much sought for in a conservative and rigid society, in that the public theatre "opened space for female behaviour which men found genuinely threatening to their construction of proper womanhood"[220]. In fact, it was not only this male-made construction of womanhood to be threatened by women's attendance at the playhouse, but also the relations of power between the sexes, which were secured, among other things, by women's confinement to the home: "the very practice of playgoing" notes Howard, "put women in positions potentially unsettling to patriarchal control. To be part of urban public life as spectator, consumer, and judge moved the gentlewoman citizen outside of that domestic enclosure to which Gosson would return her"[221]. A woman's act of leaving her home "put her 'into circulation' in the public

[218] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, p. 78.
[219] Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, p. 95.
[220] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, p. 92.
[221] Ibid., p. 91.

world"[222], where she managed, on the one hand, to escape the gaze of those who were entitled to look at her – father or husband –, and, on the other hand, to become herself a sight to see in a place where people were supposed to see the enactment of a play on the stage. In this regard, Howard's assertion that "the female spectator passes [...] from eye to eye, her value as the exclusive possession of one man cheapened [...] by the gaze of many eyes"[223] is validated by at least two sources from the period in question.

The first is Northbrooke's *Treatise*, in which he asks: "what safegarde of charitie can there be, where the woman is desired with so many eyes, where so many faces looke upon hir, and againe she vppon so manye?"[224].

The second source is the prologue to the Italian comedy *Gl'Ingannati*[225], where we see the actor who recites it submit a paradox to the audience: no male spectator will be watching and hearing the performance unless he is blind ("l'Intronati hanno ordinato un modo che nissun di loro la potrà né vedere né udire, se già non son ciechi"[226]). And why is that? Because men will be totally engrossed by the women around them, who definitely constitute a much more appealing spectacle than what is represented on the stage ("Come volete voi [...] che costoro stieno a mirar scene o comedie, o sentino o vegghino cosa che noi facciamo o diciamo, essendoli voi dinanzi? Che più bel giuoco, che più bello spettaculo, che cosa più piacevole o più vaga si può veder di voi? Certo nissuna. Ora eccovi mòstro come gli uomini non vedranno, né udiranno questa comedia, se non son ciechi"[227]). It may be that the male spectators won't applaud the comedy, but

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[222] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, p. 77.
[223] Ibid., p. 78.
[224] Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, p. 89.
[225] See page 12 above.
[226] Accademici Intronati di Siena, *La Commedia degli Ingannati*, Florindo Cerreta (a cura di), Leo S. Olschki Editore, Firenze, 1980, p. 116.
[227] Ibid.

no doubt they will be grateful to the *Intronati* for giving them the chance to behold women's beauty for four hours ("Questi uomini, se non aranno piacere delle cose nostre, assai ci aranno da ringraziare, ché per quattr'ore almanco, gli daremo commodità di poter contemplare le vostre divine bellezze"[228]).

Now, back to the change of perspective announced before, and to the question whether "is it possible that in the theater women were licensed to look – and [...] to exercise autonomy"[229], the answer is contained within Northbrooke's accusation quoted above, which leaves no doubt as to the fact that women were looked at and desired, but were also in a position to look and desire in their own turn, for he goes on saying: "[The woman] must needes fire some, and hir selfe also fired againe, and she be not a stone; for what minde can be pure and whole among such a rabblement, and not spotted with any lust?"[230]. In this dialectic between looking and being looked, women "could become objects of desire, certainly, but also desiring subjects, stimulated to want what was on display at the theater"[231]. And what was on display at the theatre, as we shall see, were often narratives in which the female protagonist, defying common notions of feminine chastity, obedience, and passivity, took centre stage and pursued her own desires, often by means of disguising herself as a man.

2.8. Prologues, epilogues, and the search for women's favour

One thing that comes up from the anti-theatrical dispute which has been partially brought up in the preceding sections is that it was a specifically English and Spanish

[228] Accademici Intronati di Siena, *La Commedia degli Ingannati*, Cerreta (a cura di), p. 119.
[229] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, p. 79.
[230] Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, p. 89.
[231] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, p. 79.

phenomenon that seems to have interested Italy to a somewhat lesser extent. The reason for this is the nonprofessional character of the Italian theatre in the first half of the sixteenth century. Back then, plays were acted out at court by actors-courtiers to entertain their fellow courtiers and the *signore*[232]. As long as the theatre was perceived as a private, elitist, and free of charge experience, it did not provoke any particular reaction or quarrel. It was rather the constitution of the first company of professional players in 1545[233], and the transformation of the theatre into a public, popular, and commercial activity, that started a moral and religious controversy in Italy as well[234]. As a consequence, when it comes to the theatre practised in the Italian Renaissance courts and *Accademie*, the kind of coeval commentary useful to demonstrate the presence of women among the spectators must be sought elsewhere, not in the writings of some anti-theatrical preachers, but inside the theatre itself, in such dramatic devices as prologues and epilogues.

Two semiotic features are worth considering as a preliminary analysis of such devices. The first has to do with the material and metaphorical distance existing between performers and spectators, who belong to two different worlds – the dramatic and the theatrical, respectively – and who normally do not cross the ideal and physical line that separates them, but fulfil their roles as makers and observers of "an alternative and fictional reality"[235]. As rhetorical conventions – Elizabeth Burns explains – prologues and epilogues "relate to the establishment of the boundary between the fictive world presented through the stage actions and the world of social reality, from which

[232] See page 38ff above.
[233] See page 28 and page 38 above.
[234] See Zacchi (a cura di), *La scena contestata: Antologia da un campo di battaglia transnazionale*, p. 4.
[235] Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, p. 79.

both actors and audience come, to which they will return, and of which they possess knowledge in common"[236].

The second semiotic feature peculiar to prologues and epilogues concerns their midway position between theatrical production and reception, hence their ability "to function as interactive, liminal, boundary-breaking entities that negotiated charged thresholds between and among, variously, playwrights, actors, characters, audience"[237].

With respect to reception, it has already been observed that it has a twofold nature: on the one hand, the spectator is assumed to be the dramatic object, or the passive target, of the communicative and manipulative strategies employed by the dramatist, the director, and the actors; on the other hand, spectators are also dramatic subjects who actively construct the meaning of that which is represented on the stage[238]. Since they determine the fate of the performance, and because they invest money in it, spectators constitute the primary concern of those who belong to the production side of the theatrical event, and for whom prologues and epilogues are instrumental in winning the receivers' sympathy. In other words,

> as a commercial institution, the theatre participated in market relations that [...] established proto-contractual relations between what was offered on stages and what, before the show began, was paid for. It was on these grounds that prologues (and epilogues as well) asked for and negotiated terms of an unwritten, unspecified contract offering gratification and promising acceptance and satisfaction to be expressed, finally, through applause[239].

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[236] Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*, Longman, London, 1972, p. 40.
[237] Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann, *Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre: Performance and Liminality in Early Modern Drama*, Routledge, London-New York, 2004, p. 2.
[238] See page 23 above.
[239] Bruster and Weimann, *Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre: Performance and Liminality in Early Modern Drama*, p. 49.

Apart from the role that they played in the English and the Spanish theatres, where the relationship between production and reception revolved around specific economic interests, some prologues and epilogues to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama are relevant because they underpin a gender-based study of audience. There are instances in which women's weight as spectators make them deserving of more than a simple mention, as is the case with the prologue to *Gl'Ingannati* cited above. What we gather from it is not only an indication of women's participation in a theatrical occasion, but also a demonstration of how much valued their gratification was. In point of fact, it is not so much the unfavourable reviews which the comedy might receive that is of concern to the *Intronati*, as the reassurance that women will take delight in watching it, for their main interest has always been to give pleasure to their female spectators:

> So ben che non ci mancherà chi dica che questa è una insalata di mescolanza; a questi tali non voglio io rispondere perché, come ella si sia, gli basta ch'ella piaccia a voi sole [nobilissime donne], alle quali essi [Intronati] con ogni loro studio si sono ingegnati sempre di piacere principalmente[240].

A colloquial tone characterises the prologue to the 1528-1529 version of Ariosto's comedy *La Cassaria* (first performed in 1508). The author capitalises on women's vanity and longing for youth at the same time as he covertly praises the comedy's renewed and more beautiful rewrite:

> Oh se potesse a voi questo medesimo
> far, donne, ch'egli ha fatto alla sua fabula:
> farvi più che mai belle, e rinovandovi

[240] Accademici Intronati di Siena, *La Commedia degli Ingannati*, Cerreta (a cura di), p. 116.

tutte, nel fior di vostra età rimettervi![241]

Women are addressed directly also in the second prologue to *La Lena* (1528). Having added two new scenes to the comedy, which are now presented for the first time, Ariosto appeals to women to commend them:

> La Lena, in somma, ha la coda, e per farvila
> veder, un'altra volta uscirà in pubblico;
> di voi, donne, sicura, che laudarglila
> debbiate [...][242].

The same suspicion found in the prologue to *Gl'Ingannati*, that men in the audience might not be paying attention to the performance because they are much more attracted by women's beauty, recurs in the prologues to two more Italian comedies: in Ariosto's *I Studenti* – "Quei stiano attenti, a' quali le comedie / piaccion: a cui non piacciano, si partino; / o ver, mirando questi volti lucidi / di tante belle donne, stiano taciti"[243] – and in Bibbiena's prologue to *La Calandria*[244] ("questi gentiluomini sono tanto intenti a contemprare le bellezze di voi altre donne che poco o niente della commedia si cureranno"[245]).

A concern with women's modesty, and a commitment to render any licentious thing apt to be heard by female ears, is announced in the prologue to Machiavelli's *Clizia* (1537): "Dove se fia cosa alcuna non onesta, sarà in modo detta che queste donne potranno senza arrossire ascoltarla"[246].

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[241] Aldo Borlenghi (a cura di), *Commedie del Cinquecento*, Vol. I, Rizzoli Editore, Milano, 1959, pp. 981-2.
[242] Borlenghi (a cura di), *Commedie del Cinquecento*, Vol. I, p. 998.
[243] Ibid., p. 1004.
[244] See page 11 above.
[245] Bibbiena, *La Calandria*, pp. 20-21.
[246] Borlenghi (a cura di), *Commedie del Cinquecento*, Vol. I, p. 967.

The recognition that women attended the playhouse where his plays were put on, and that their opinion mattered, was kept by Shakespeare too. What is notable about the three epilogues in which he refers explicitly to the female members of his audience is his interest in the relation between the sexes. The characteristic *captatio benevolentiae* used by playwrights to gain the audience's favour seems to be founded, for Shakespeare, on men's going along with women. Indeed, from the three epilogues in question we infer that men's appreciation for the play is thought to be contingent upon women's appreciation, which is a way to acknowledge women's power to influence and to determine men's judgement. The following extracts are drawn from *Henry IV, Part 2* (1598), *As You Like It* (1599-1600), and *Henry VIII* (1613).

> [...] All the gentle women here have
> forgiven me: if the gentlemen will not, then the
> gentlemen do not agree with the gentlewomen, which
> was never seen before in such an assembly.
>
> (5.5.22-25)

> [...] My way is to conjure you, and I'll
> begin with the women. I charge you, O women, for the
> love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as
> please you. And I charge you, O men, for the love you
> bear to women – as I perceive by your simpering none
> of you hates them – that between you and the women
> the play may please.
>
> (5.4.206-212)

> All the expected good w're like to hear
> For this play at this time, is only in
> The merciful construction of good women,

For such a one we show'd 'em: if they smile,
And say 'twill do, I know within a while
All the best men are ours; for 'tis ill hap
If they hold, when their ladies bid 'em clap.

(5.4.8-14)

It is important to remember that prologues and epilogues were rhetorical devices with specific rules and conventions governing their use. Among such conventions was the deference accorded to women theatregoers, a stylised form of gallantry that did not reflect the way women were usually treated in the world outside the theatre. However, the aim of the above excursion into the little researched theme of early modern women's theatregoing was to prove that, even though women, according to traditional periodization, cannot be said to have had a Renaissance, the theatrical event, be it the popular phenomenon that took place in the English and the Spanish public playhouses, or the exclusive happening patronised by the Italian aristocrats, allowed women to temporarily shake off the cultural and social shackles imposed on their sex. By means of infringing their homeboundness in order to attend the theatre, and of watching the enactment of plays that some feared might change their worldview and encourage them to re-act, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama gave women the opportunity to experience autonomy, agency, and empowerment.

2.9. A "most filthie pastime": causes of opposition to the public stage

Where shall we goe?
To a playe at the Bull, or else to some other place.
Doo Comedies like you wel?
Yea sir, on holy dayes.

> They please me also wel, but the preachers wyll not allowe them.
> Wherefore, knowe you it:
> They say, they are not good[247].

Every civil society that pursues the maintenance of the public order is inclined to look at any large gathering of people in one single place with apprehension, for fear that turmoil and disarray may emanate from it. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe one of the places designated to accommodate a huge number of people was the public theatre. Besides increasing the chances to bicker and brawl, and in addition to the unique opportunity that they gave to convey subversive ideas, theatrical representations were dreaded and disapproved by both civic and religious authorities for three main reasons: because they encouraged promiscuity – also by virtue of the eroticism underlying what was enacted and said on the stage –; because they diverted the masses from the rites and duties of religion; because they required each spectator to pay for a ticket.

On the grounds that each of the abovementioned reasons constituted, to varying degrees, a menace to orderly urban life, the 1574 Act of Common Council[248] prohibited all public performances in the London theatres:

> Whereas heretofore sundry great disorders and inconveniences have been found to ensue to this City by the inordinate haunting of great multitudes of people, specially youth, to plays, enterludes, and shows, namely occasion of frays and quarrels, evil practices of incontinency in great Inns, having chambers and secret places adjoining to their open stages and galleries, inveighing and alluring of maids [...] to privy and unmet contracts, the publishing of unchaste, uncomely and unshamefast speeches and doings, withdrawing of the Queen's Majesty's

[247] John Florio, *First Fruites*, 1578, cited in Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 206.
[248] See page 31 above.

> subjects from divine service on Sundays and Holydays – at which times such plays were chiefly used, – unthrifty waste of the money of the poor and fond persons; [...] uttering of popular, busy and seditious matters; and many other corruptions of youth, [...] be it enacted by the Authority of this Common Council, that from henceforth no play, comedy, tragedy, enterlude nor public show shall be openly played or showed within the liberties of the City, wherein shall be uttered any words, examples or doings of any unchastity, sedition, nor suchlike unfit and uncomely matter, upon pain of imprisonment [...][249].

The maintenance of the public order was not the only issue that worried the authorities, for there was also the problem of the youth's regular attendance at the representations, and the risk of degeneracy that the theatre contributed to increase[250]. A problem – that of the youth's theatregoing – which appears to have crossed the European space if, in a 1581 deliberation of the Republic of Venice, concern for the youngest turned into an opportunity to regret the good old days when the performance of comedies was forbade by righteous men due to the licentiousness inherent in what was staged – in this respect, it is impossible not to notice the reference to the performance as the union of words and actions found also in the Act cited above ("the publishing of [...] speeches and doings"; "wherein shall be uttered any words, examples or doings"). According to the Republic's deliberation, the changing times are signalled by the reinstitution of the theatrical representations, of comedies in particular, which are attended by women, among others. Unmistakable is the civic intolerance towards the comic actors, and aversion to the permanent theatres:

> Sono stati sempre studiosissimi li maggiori nostri, huomini sapientissimi et religiosissimi, di levar tutte le occasioni et incentivi, che possano corromper li

[249] Cited in Wickham, Berry (eds.), *English Professional Theatre*, pp. 73-74.
[250] See The Court of Common Council's request to the Privy Council cited on p. 67 above.

boni costumi della gioventù, et però del 1508 a 29 di decembre prohibitero con questo Conseglio il recitar di comedie [...] perché in esse venivano fatti atti et dette parole lascive et inoneste.
Questa prohibitione per molto tempo è stata osservata con grandissima laude della Repubblica nostra, ma da alcuni anni in quà [...] vien data licentia di recitar comedie, alle quali concorrono huomini et donne, giovani et vecchi [...].
[...] in questa Città non solamente vien dato ordinario ricetto alli commedianti, ma che li sia stato fabricato più d'un loco per recitar le loro inonestissime comedie[251].

("Our senior citizens, men of much wisdom and religion, have always been so very well-advised to remove all the occasions and incentives that could corrupt the youth's morals. On the 29th of December 1508, they prohibited, with this Council, the performance of comedies [...] because of the doings and the lascivious and dishonest words that were uttered in them.
For a very long time such prohibition has been observed with much praise of our Republic, but for some years now it has been given license to perform comedies that are attended by men and women, young and old people [...].
[...] not only are the comic actors received in this City, but more than one place has been built in order for them to enact their very dishonest comedies".)

That comedy was, more than other literary genres, a vehicle for licentious acts and words[252] was also acknowledged by Giraldi Cinthio who, aware of the almost inevitable association of comedy with lasciviousness, exhorted the playwrights to keep the latter under a cover of respectability. It is important to emphasise that Cinthio's main interest in making such a recommendation was the presence of young women among the

[251] Cited in Zacchi (a cura di), *La scena contestata: Antologia da un campo di battaglia transnazionale*, p. 10.
[252] On the intrinsically licentious character of the comic genre, Nino Borsellino and Roberto Mercuri affirm: "gli intenti etici dei commediografi [...] restano per lo più nel limbo delle buone intenzioni, sopraffatti quasi sempre da un'orgia di licenziosità, che è un aspetto connaturato al carattere edonistico della commedia". See *Il teatro del Cinquecento*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 1979, p. 12.

spectators. He wrote: "Et se talora vi verrà cosa da sé lasciva da essere condotta in scena comica, la coprirete così col velo delle parole honeste, ch'anco dalle polcelle potrà essere senza biasimo udita"[253] ("And if there is sometimes something lascivious to be put in a comedy, you will cover it with a veil of honest words that even the maids will be able to hear it with no sense of shame").

In another passage, Cinthio's invitation to the playwrights to respect decency came with the classical idea whereby comedy was generally thought to be populated with characters of low moral standing[254]: "Serva [...] la comedia una certa religione [...]. Et ciò m'estimo io che sia perché la scena comica è per lo più lasciva, et in essa intervengono ruffiani, meretrici, parasiti, et altre simili qualità di persone di lasciva et disonesta vita"[255] ("May comedy serve a certain religion [...]. And that, I reckon, is because comedy is lascivious for the most part, and there appear in it sycophants, whores, parasites, and other similar kinds of people who lead a lascivious and dishonest sort of life"). A similar consideration, and an analogous inventory of *personae* to which it was added a list of themes that made the comic genre a much detestable one, are found in Stubbes. Here the accusation is even more severe on account of the irreducible incompatibility between the theatre, abode of the goddess of love and temple of the tantalising Devil, and the Church:

> Of Comedies the matter and ground is loue, bawdrie, [...] whoredome, adulterie; the Persons, or agents, whores, queanes, bawdes, [...] Curtezans, lecherous old men, amorous yong men, with such like of infinit varietie. If, I say, there were nothing els but this, it were sufficient to withdraw a good Christian from the

[253] Cinthio, *Discorsi intorno al comporre*, p. 315.
[254] See Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Joe Sacks, Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company, Newburyport, MA, 2006, p. 21: "tragedy stands apart in relation to comedy, for the latter intends to imitate those who are worse, and the former better, than people are now".
[255] Cinthio, *Discorsi intorno al comporre*, p. 301.

> using of them; For so often as they goe to those howses where Players frequent, thei go to *Venus* pallace, & sathans synagogue, to worship deuils, & betray Christ Iesus[256].

To forsake one's Christian obligations like, for example, attending the Mass, was, as previously stated, one of the three causes of municipal and, most of all, puritanical opposition to the performances. In the dialogue between Age and Youth conceived by Northbrooke, the former asks the latter:

> What good (I pray you) hath your sleepe and ydle pastimes done to you, which hath hindered you from all good and godly exercises? No good at all, but rather great hurte, [...] by reason of your [...] ydle wanton pastimes, to satisfie the pleasures and desires of the fleshe, and therefore you neede repentance[257].

The same reproach was expressed by Munday, who lamented: "The temple is despised, to run vnto Theatres; the Church is emptied, the yeard is filled; wee leave the sacrament, to feede our adulterous eies with the impure, & whorish sight of most filthie pastime"[258]. This last comment is connected to the first of the three reasons why forbidding the representations of plays was regarded as a necessary measure, namely, the association of theatre with sex, whose pervasiveness in the anti-theatrical polemic has been highlighted by Orgel[259].

Not that the puritans did not have their good reasons to rail against the theatres, for, as remarked by Charles Forker, "it can hardly be denied that Renaissance drama [...] constitutes a body of plays as highly charged with eroticism and as profoundly

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[256] Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, p. 143.
[257] Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, p. 460.
[258] Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, p. 18.
[259] See page 66 above.

concerned with questions of sexuality as any in history"[260]. The moment one entered the playhouse, Gosson explained, s/he became Cupid's target. The god's temptations managed to reach, first of all, the spectator's intellect, and then to spread to the rest of his/her body. It is indeed the peculiarity of desire, Anna Clark points out, to operate according to a specific sequence: "While desire is often experienced through the body," she notes, "it is created and stimulated through the mind and the imagination, through cultural representations"[261]. At the theatre, Gosson went on arguing, it was sufficient to exercise one's hearing and sight in order for one's body to become vulnerable to Cupid's attack:

> The little god hovereth aboute you, and fanneth you with his wings to kindle fire: [...] Desire draweth his arrow to the head, [...] and Fancy bestireth him to shed his poyson through every vayne. If you doe but listen to the voyce of the fouler, or joyne lookes with an amorous gazer, you have already made your selves assaultable, and yeelded your cities to be sacked[262].

There is no doubt as to the fact that all of the things that troubled the puritans originated from the scene, from the actors' bodies' movements and from their immoral lines, both of which contributed to arouse the spectators. As suggested by Northbrooke:

> those filthie and vnhonest gestures and mouings of enterlude players, what other thing doe they teache than wanton pleasure and stirring of fleshly lusters,

[260] Charles R. Forker, "Sexuality and Eroticism on the Renaissance Stage", *South Central Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Winter 1990, p. 1.
[261] Anna Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality*, Routledge, New York-London, 2008, p. 3.
[262] Gosson, *The School of Abuse, Containing a Pleasant Invective against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters, &c.*, p. 49.

> vnlawfull appetites and desires, with their bawdie and filthie sayings and counterfeit doings?[263]

The last of the three causes of hostility to the theatre was represented by the foolish and condemnable practice of using one's own money to finance the stage spectacles. Such a practice was deplored by Northbrooke, who believed that theatregoing was able to teach, among a number of other vile things, how "to consume treasures prodigally"[264], and by Stubbes who, having been already quoted on the same topic[265], uttered a forthright condemnation of that type of patronage offered by the spectators: "that man who giueth money for the maintenance of them [plays and interludes] must needs incurre the damage of [...] eternall damnation, except they repent"[266].

2.10. The illicit theatre

In view of what has just been said, and on the basis of the sources cited (acts and books against the theatre), it can be argued that both the civil and the religious spheres of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society, especially in England, were unanimous in condemning the theatre for essentially the same reasons. This is indicative of the fact that, in early modern Europe, actions that were classified as illegal were also, at the very same time, perceived as sinful, and actions which, from a religious point of view, were identified as sinful were concurrently regarded as actions against the law. One proof of this is Northbrooke's word choice in the quotation above, where the audience's appetites and desires excited by the actors on the stage were defined as 'unlawful'. A

[263] Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes, with other Idle Pastimes*, p. 92.
[264] Ibid., p. 95.
[265] See page 63 above.
[266] Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, p. 145.

second proof is the presence, in an Act which listed a series of reasons why all public performances had to be prohibited, of such a strictly religious motivation as "[the] withdrawing of the Queen's Majesty's subjects from divine service on Sundays and Holydays"[267]. The almost invisible boundary between the unlawful and the sinful was due to their falling within the domain of the illicit, whose definition, as Ian Frederick Moulton observes, is neither simple nor obvious. As a matter of fact, if nowadays it is the state that determines what is illicit, which means that the scope of the illicit is restricted to the legislative realm, in the past, and particularly in the early modern age, religion joined the law in endowing the illicit of a more markedly moralistic connotation. In the words of Moulton:

> What constituted the "illicit" in early modern Europe is a complex question. Nonetheless, it is possible [...] to divide illicit activity into a number of distinct categories: (1) illicit sexual activity: prostitution, adultery, same-sex relations, anything, in fact, outside the bonds of lawful marriage; (2) unfair or corrupt ways of making money [...]; (3) inappropriate habits of consumption: excessive drinking or eating, the new vice of tobacco smoking.
>
> An illicit activity is one that is forbidden or unlawful. But forbidden by whom? [...] In modern society [...] illicit activity is illegal activity: actions that go against the laws of a given state. [...] The situation in the early modern period is somewhat more complex. State laws governing illicit activities were [...] erratically enforced. In comparison with contemporary society [...] a far larger role was played by the Church, and also by communal organisations [...]. Thus an activity could be illicit if it was illegal, if it was sinful, or if transgressed community norms[268].

[267] See page 86 above.

[268] Ian Frederick Moulton, "The Illicit Worlds of the Renaissance", in Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, p. 492.

Apart from the last of the three categories named by Moulton, both the first one, as we shall see, and the second one, as we have seen, were forms of illicit which the theatre was by no means foreign to.

Either synonymous with unlawful or with sinful, or coinciding with both, the illicit is generally marked, now, as then, by its dependence on one's body and by its origins in one's sexual instincts. And considering that to abandon oneself to the instincts means loosening the grip of reason, which ensures that one lives in accordance with socially accepted norms of decency, it follows that the illicit is potentially dangerous for any association of people. Moulton goes on to clarify that:

> Whatever form of authority they transgress, all illicit activities share certain common characteristics. First, they are pleasure-driven. Illicit acts are all designed to satisfy bodily lusts and desires. As such, they stand in opposition to the rational control of the passions which was believed crucial to orderly human society. Based as they are on a rejection of rational self-government, illicit acts threaten the basis of social order and human community; and thus even the most seemingly trivial of them can have great symbolic power[269].

There seems to be, in other words, a cause-and-effect relationship between physical pleasure and social disorder. In point of fact, if, as Clark reminds us, "sex seems dangerous because it crosses the borders of our bodies"[270], then, on account of the alleged correspondence between the human body and society – whereby the body is viewed as a microcosm that mirrors the social macrocosm[271]–, "sexual desire can also

[269] Moulton, "The Illicit Worlds of the Renaissance", p. 493.
[270] Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality*, p. 10.
[271] On the correspondence between the human body and society, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, London-New York, 1984 [1966], p. 116: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures".

be seen as transgressing and dissolving conventional boundaries of society, as a metaphor for all that is destabilizing and polluting"[272]. It is no coincidence, indeed, that, in the 1574 Act of Common Council, "disorders and inconveniences" in the City of London were imputed to the citizens' massive rush to "plays, enterludes, and shows", where the presence of secluded spots and rooms near the stage and the galleries encouraged "evil practices of Incontinency", a word whose meaning is worth looking at. Being rather obsolete, the *OED* refers to the definition of the term 'incontinence': "1. Want of continence or self-restraint; inability to contain or retain: a. With reference to the bodily appetites; esp. the sexual passion: Unchastity"[273]. In this regard, it is important to remember that the puritans' preferred strategy to denigrate the theatre was the devising of a discourse in which the playhouse was constructed and presented as a place of perdition and damnation: "donde tales espectáculos se hacen" warned Juan de Pineda, "hay mayor materia de pecar"[274] ("where such spectacles are put on there are more chances to sin"). Of the same mind was Munday: "Such thinges are committed at plaies and Theaters, as cannot be thought vpon, much lesse vttered without sinne"[275]. Therefore, far from being perceived as cultural and artistic events, spectacles used to attract a large quantity of people because, in keeping with a shared sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European morality, little difference was thought to exist between a public theatre and a whorehouse:

> According to contemporary accounts of spectators' activities in the popular theaters, performances took place in the midst of the theatrical equivalent to a bawdyhouse. The size of crowds in suburban theatres provided an anonymity

[272] Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality*, p. 10.
[273] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume VII, p. 820.
[274] Cited in Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 506.
[275] Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, p. 1.

> which translated playgoing into an unrivaled opportunity for the less-than-aesthetic pursuits of sexual flirtation, seduction, assignation, and common prostitution. [...] claims that playhouses were "the very markets of bawdry" were made so frequently as to guarantee that brothel and playhouse would be indissolubly linked in the cultural imagination, making the two virtually synonymous. [...] whether fulfilled or not, such a prospect swelled the ranks of the paying playgoers considerably, underwriting the financial stability of popular drama [...]. the audience was lured into the playhouse at least in part by the promise of illicit liaisons – an anticipation that [...] the popular playhouse at once encouraged and transformed, displaced and incorporated into the erotic power and energy of the theatre itself[276].

For the city's administrators, and for the clergy in particular, the intrinsically erotic character of what was acted out on the public stage, together with the close proximity of the men to the women who attended the representations, and the general atmosphere of freedom to which they were exposed, put at risk the founding institution of the state and of society at large, namely marriage. In other words, the public playhouse was supposed to increase the chances to be unfaithful. As Orgel put is: "[in antitheatrical tracts], the very institution of theatre is a threat to [...] the stability of the social hierarchy, as unescorted women and men without their wives socialize freely, and (it follows) flirt with each other and take each other off to bed"[277].

Drawing upon Traub's statement that "the public theater [...] promoted its own discourse of sex"[278], the aim now is to understand how the theatrical event, as the union of production and reception, managed to put into circulation a great amount of erotically

[276] Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1988, p. 145.
[277] Orgel, *Impersonations: The performance of gender in Shakespeare's England*, p. 26.
[278] Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2016, p. 110.

charged energy that "[moved] the flesh to lust and vnclennesse"[279]. Together with Traub we ask ourselves: "What kind of sexual knowledge is being produced and exchanged, not only among the characters [...], but also among the performers, and between them and the audience?"[280].

2.11. "Whereby a double offence is committed": the theatrical production and reception of desire

The presence in this work of a theoretical section devoted to the semiotics of theatre was justified by saying that one of the aspects at the centre of the semiotic investigation, that is to say, the production and reception of verbal and non-verbal messages on the part of both actors and spectators, would have served as a starting point for an analysis of gender and desire in the early modern age. The purpose of such an analysis was to shed new light on the theory and practice of theatre[281].

Now that the examination of gender has been carried through – which involved probing different sources that bear witness to women's attendance at the public representations in the period at hand –, it remains to be seen what role desire played in the dialectic between production and reception.

The thing that emerged in discussing theatrical reception was that it is composed of two complementary sides that would have been resumed once the performance of desire on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century stage, and the audience's reaction to it[282], would have been dealt with.

[279] Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, p. 142.
[280] Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, p. 109.
[281] See page 16 above.
[282] See page 23 above.

As has been said, with respect to the spectator, one side of reception defines him/her as a dramatic object influenced by the joint work of the dramatist, the director, and the actors. What is notable here is that the spectators' presumed passivity, of which the anti-theatrical writers were aware, did not relieve the same spectators of the polemicists' criticism. On the contrary, the spectators' mere looking at the obscenities of the scene was deemed sufficient for them to sink into a state that was as sinful as that of the persons who, by lending their bodies to the performance, made the obscenity possible. Munday specified that "al other euils pollute the doers onlie, not the beholders, or the hearers. [...] Onlie the filthines of plaies, and spectacles is such, as maketh both the actors & beholders giltie alike. For while they saie nought, but gladlie looke on, they al by sight and assent be actors"[283]. In fact, it was the actors whom the anti-theatricalists used to criticise more ferociously. They were picking on, in other words, the very essence of the theatre, which, to recall Brook's definition[284], consists of a person who watches another person move in an empty space identified as the stage. The immoral content of what the actors dramatised, and in which the audience took delight, contributed further to make the performance an even more reproachable experience:

> It is marvelous to consider how the gesturing of a plaier [...] is of force to moue, and prepare a man to that which is il. For such thinges be disclosed to the eie, and to the eare, as might a great deale better be kept close. Whereby a double offence is committed: first by those dissolute plaier, which without regard of honestie, are not ashamed to exhibite the filthiest matters they can deuise to the sight of men: secondly by the beholders, which vouchsafe to heare and behold such filthie things, to the great losse of themselves and the time[285].

[283] Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, p. 3.
[284] See page 17 above.
[285] Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, p. 95.

The other side of theatrical reception involves the spectator's shift from a condition of passivity to one of re-action that, according to the puritans – and in keeping with a principle of reversed mimesis whereby it is reality that imitates the fictional world and not the other way round –, entailed the imitation, on the part of the audience, of the things heard and seen during the representation. But since those things were anything but uplifting and deserving of imitation, the result was the elicitation of a perverse desire that was to lead to the performance of impure acts. All of this was well summarised by Pineda: "en las representaciones de deshonestidades [...] se oyen malas palabras y se ven deshonestos meneos, y [...] hombres y mugeres revueltos revuelven sus almas en muchos deseos malos, que con pocas palabras se encienden en peores obras"[286] ("[in] the representations of dishonest things [...] one hears bad words and sees dishonest groping, and [...] men and women mixed together stir their souls in many bad desires, so much so that with a few words they are provoked into committing the worst acts").

As further proof that a principle of reversed mimesis was thought to be underway, some anti-theatrical writers, in attempting to anticipate what could have happened once the spectacle was over, made use of the verb 'play': "these goodly pageants being done, euery mate sorts to his mate, euery one bringes another homeward [...], and in their secret conclaues (couertly) they play *the Sodomites*"[287]; "in that representation of whoredome, al the people in mind plaie the whores. And such as happilie came chaste vnto showes, returne adulterers from plaies. For they plaie the harlots"[288]. According to Laura Levine, "the dramatic metaphor is inextricable from the sexual act [...]. [...] the [passages involve] virtually the [...] assumption [...] that the spectator will go home and

[286] Cited in Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, p. 506.
[287] Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, p. 144-145.
[288] Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, pp. 3-4.

imitate the actor, will replicate the actions he has seen on the stage"[289]. In fact, the release of the erotic energy being gathered during the representation could either take place in one's conjugal bed or, more easily, out of it, encouraged by women whose very presence at the public theatre pointed to their questionable morality: "The growth of desire through the experience of theatre is a sinister progression" underlines Orgel; "the play excites the spectator, and sends him home to 'perform' himself; the result is sexual abandon with one's wife, or more often with any available woman (all women at the playhouse being considered available)"[290]. In the case of London, it was the particular location of the playhouses that played a significant role in the dynamic of elicitation of the spectators' desire and release of the erotic energy.

2.12. Gender and desire in the London Liberties

If it is true, as suggested by Brook's oft-quoted definition, that the theatre is an empty space that awaits to be filled by an actor and by at least one spectator in order to give rise to the performative practice as we know it, the position of this space in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London happened to be resonant with symbolic connotations. Indeed, at that time in London the "place of the stage was a marginal one, and in the world of early modern culture such marginality was in itself significant. It was a world where place, in all senses of the term, mattered"[291].

In dealing with the themes of gender and desire with specific reference to the English context, it is important to consider two general assumptions. The first, that "drama,

[289] Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 22.
[290] Orgel, *Impersonations: The performance of gender in Shakespeare's England*, p. 29. See also the 1574 Act of Common Council's condemnation of the plays' "alluring of maids to privy and unmet contracts", p. 86 above.
[291] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*, p. 9.

unlike poetry, is a territorial art. It is an art of space as well as words, and it requires a place of its own, in or around a community, in which to mount its telling fictions and its eloquent spectacles"[292].

The second assumption invites us to take into account the existence of a correlation between physical space and social space. As a matter of fact, a society's spatial organisation, with its architectural solutions and city planning, is not something fortuitous, but ensues from specific ideological and political choices[293].

Specific political reasons were indeed behind the construction of the London theatres far from the city centre and, consequently, from the headquarters of the legal and the monarchic institutions. On the one hand, there were principles of decorum that were to be implemented and observed; on the other hand, there was the objective impossibility of eliminating, once and for all, those diversions that acted also as an outlet for the citizens' impulses and urges. In the first case, it was lazar houses and scaffolds of execution that were kept at bay; in the second, gaming houses, taverns, bear-baiting arenas, marketplaces and brothels[294].

Highly significant from the perspective of the correlation between physical and social space, and in fact emblematic of the distance between the two, was the name given to the London quarter where there was the largest concentration of "cultural phenomena that could not be contained within the strict and proper bounds of the community"[295]: Liberties[296]. Steven Mullaney explains that the

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[292] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*, p. 7.
[293] See Attolini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Rinascimento*, p. 3.
[294] See Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*, p. 22.
[295] Ibid., p. vii.
[296] See the 1574 Act of Common Council quoted above: "[...] no play, comedy, tragedy, enterlude nor public show shall be openly played or showed within the liberties of the City".

> Liberties were free or "at liberty" from [...] obligation to the Crown, and only nominally under the jurisdiction of the lord mayor. While belonging to the City, they [...] comprised virtually ungoverned areas over which the city had authority but, paradoxically, no control. [...] Entering a Liberty [...] meant crossing over into an ambiguous territory that was at once internal and external to the city, neither contained by civic authority nor fully removed from it[297].

It is clear thus how the appearance of the theatres in a district that "stood in a certain sense outside the law"[298] fostered the teaching of the unlawful appetites and desires denounced by Northbrooke[299]. At the same time, since the city's control was virtually nonexistent, the evil practices of incontinence reported in the 1574 Act[300] found breeding ground for their accomplishment. As Mullaney puts it: "the margins of the city were places where forms of moral incontinence and pollution were granted license to exist beyond the bounds of a community they had, by their incontinence, already exceeded"[301].

Among the forms of incontinence which were granted license to exist, there was inevitably the sexual sort. Many original sources attest to the presence of brothels in neighbourhoods where there were also playhouses. Their proximity was such as to represent an irresistible temptation for "many an old gray-bearded Citizen, / [...] Who comming from the Curtaine sneaketh in / To some odde garden noted house of sinne"[302].

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[297] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*, p. 21.
[298] Ibid., p. 22.
[299] See page 92 above.
[300] See page 86 and page 95 above.
[301] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*, p. ix.
[302] Everard Guilpin, *Skialetheia*, Satyre Preludium, cited in Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 212.

Interestingly enough, it seems that the proximity was not only spatial, but also conceptual and moral[303] if, in deciding how to spend the day, the choice was between one of the two places and activities: "Speak gentlemen, what shall we do today? ... / Or shall we to the Globe to see a play? / Or visit Shoreditch for a bawdy house?"[304].

At times one could not even make it to the theatre: "[...] sometimes he comes not to the play, / But falls into a whore-house by the way"[305].

In light of what has been said, it goes without saying that women's presence in a theatre that stood on the margins of the city and of society offered more than one reason of apprehension. Indeed, women were thought to overstep not only the symbolic line between private sphere – traditionally regarded as their domain – and public sphere, but also the boundary that marked the end of the City's jurisdiction and the beginning of some sort of reign of perdition.

[303] See page 95-96 above.
[304] Samuel Rowlands, *The Letting of Humours Blood in the Head-Vaine*, Epigram 7, cited in Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 214.
[305] Sir John Davies, *Epigrammes 39*, 'In Fuscum', cited in Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 209.

3. From object to subject: the cases of Silvia, Lucrezia, and Hipólita

3.1. Recovering her-story in William Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

> After dinner read "Two Gentlemen of Verona" and some of the "Sonnets." That play disgusted me more than ever in the final scene, where Valentine, on Proteus mere begging pardon, when he has no longer any hope of gaining his ends, says: "All that was mine in Sylvia, I give thee!" Silvia standing by[306].

Between 1588 and 1595[307] Shakespeare wrote *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the comedy that many regard as his first play[308]. Unquestionably less analysed and less commented upon than Shakespeare's other works, when the comedy has elicited the critics' interest, it was its shortcomings that they underlined – denoting Shakespeare's immaturity as a playwright –, together with the rudimentary presence of devices and situations that he would have perfected in his later plays. More than anything, critics have tended to condemn the attempted rape of one of the two main female characters, Silvia, by one of the two gentlemen, Proteus, and the decision of the other gentleman, Valentine, to renounce Silvia, whom he loves, and to offer her to Proteus as a gift[309]. Margaret Maurer observes that

> The play's ending raises to a crucial level a pervasive uneasiness about the way the lovers treat one another. [...] The play enjoys a solidly minor status in the

[306] J. W. Cross (ed.), *George Eliot's Life as related in her Letters and Journals*, Volume I, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1885, pp. 273-274.
[307] See William C. Carroll (ed.), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London-New York, 2004, p. 128. All quotations from the play are from this edition.
[308] See Roger Warren, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, pp. 21, 27.
[309] See Michael Dobson, Stanley Wells (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, p. 498: "the play has frequently suffered from being read solely as an unsuccessful anticipation of the later comedies, particularly *Twelfth Night*, and discussions of *The Two Gentlemen* in its own right are still comparatively rare. [...] it has been often dismissed as apprentice work, and most commentators have found Valentine's attempt to give away Silvia to the man who has just tried to rape her profoundly objectionable".

> canon, editors query or emend its little faults as incidental lapses, and periodically a discussion appears presenting some ideological system to promote or denounce as the reason why Shakespeare has his characters behave the way they do[310].

The two reproachable acts, the rape and the gift, are indeed to be blamed for the uneasiness felt by Maurer, as well as for the assumed failure of the comedy. In point of fact, the rules of the genre, causing us to look for some specific characteristics in both the male and the female characters, make us sense some sort of fracture between what we hope to see in Proteus' and in Valentine's character and behaviour, and what they actually prove to be through their actions.

A different case is provided by the two heroines, Julia and Silvia, in whom we identify not only the features that the comic genre invites us to notice in its women, and especially in those created by Shakespeare, but also something else which, by gaining our involvement in their cases and compassion for their ordeals, manages to make them dearer to us than their male counterparts. These ultimately fail to live up to the value and the virtues of the women that the comedy, as a genre founded on the final union between the sexes, puts forth so that a marriage can take place. As Ruth Morse makes clear,

> Part of the difficulty arises precisely from our ability to recapture the conventions of romantic comedy; just because our expectations are fixed [...] we experience a confusion [...]. We expect young heroes to be gallant, however foolish; good-hearted, however extravagant; and superior to the common run in intelligence, looks, and sensitivity. They may undergo trials, but they must make no serious mistakes, and in the end their rewards are always sure. Parallel

[310] Margaret Maurer, "Figure, Place, and the End of 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona'", *Style*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1989, p. 405.

> conventions for romantic heroines are easily recognized: they are steadfast, sensible, and brave to the limits (and sometimes beyond) of their sex. In Shakespeare's comedies they often display better sense than their male opposites, though in the end their dependence upon these same youths is clear. In *Two Gentlemen* both Julia and Silvia correspond to our expectations [...]. The difficulty which arises for the audience is generally ascribed to some kind of imbalance, either between character and plot, or between the 'worth' of the women and that of the men[311].

It has to be remarked that the distance between our expectations and the reality of the characters' personality and behaviour is signalled, as far as Proteus is concerned, by the very name that Shakespeare, not by chance, gave him. As many commentators have pointed out, "by naming the lover 'Proteus,' Shakespeare evokes the image of the Classical being who could assume all shapes and no shape, who could become everything and nothing, and so encourages his viewer to wonder from the play's outset if this Proteus will lack integrity"[312]. In this respect, it is interesting to notice that even Valentine – whose name, reminiscent of the patron saint of lovers, suggests his good qualities – traces out, with his final act, the same distance between expectations and reality.

On the other hand, the two girls' names, not alluding to anything worthy of notice, do not have a significant bearing on their temperament and actions. Silvia and Julia's names, in other words, seem to bestow upon them a wider freedom of action and a rather unique personality. Interestingly, Morse attributes also to such onomastic contrast the incompatibility between the play's two couples of characters. She writes: "it is hard

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[311] Ruth Morse, "'Two Gentlemen' and the Cult of Friendship", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, Vol. 84, No. 2, 1983, p. 215.
[312] Maurice Hunt, "'The Two Gentlemen of Verona' and the Paradox of Salvation", *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 1982, p. 8.

to escape the feeling that the romantic heroes [...] risk becoming unworthy matches for the heroines. That the men carry 'idealtype' names while the women's names are specific may be a hint that they are different kinds of characters"[313].

The aim of the following analysis will be to demonstrate that *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* turns out to be flawed if the critics concentrate on the male characters and their questionable conduct, whereas the play prompts its own positive reevaluation once it is the two women who are brought to the forefront of the attention. A change of perspective will underlie the attempt to prove that the strength of the comedy is to be found in its heroines. Such a change is in line both with the task, announced in the theoretical first part, of recovering her-story also, as in this case, within a literary text, and with the recent critical tendency to put aside what has been the play's most scrutinised theme so far. As Maurice Hunt reminds us:

> Critics once were content to interpret *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona* in terms of the sixteenth-century debate between Love and Friendship [...]. Recently, however, other dramatic subjects in this early comedy have replaced the love and friendship focus, with the result that the work seems less a museum piece and a more vital creation in which Shakespeare's greatness appears in embryonic but discernible forms[314].

In the ensuing discussion the concept of mimesis will be central. Already taken into account in the section devoted to the actor's profession in relation to its connection with the theatre[315] – a connection that is about to be resumed –, it will be subsequently broadened by examining its association with desire. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* gives the opportunity to investigate both such links.

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[313] Morse, "'Two Gentlemen' and the Cult of Friendship", p. 216.
[314] Hunt, "'The Two Gentlemen of Verona' and the Paradox of Salvation", p. 5.
[315] See page 37 above.

3.1.1. "I made her weep a-good / For I did play a lamentable part": mimesis, actors, and the female spectatorship

Mimesis is essential for the theatre insofar as imitation is at the heart of the drama[316] and of an actor's capacity to play a role[317]. One of the ways to reflect upon the workings of the theatre is to see them in operation while a performance is underway. When something like this happens, we are in the presence of the so-called metatheatre, largely employed by Shakespeare and found also in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, curiously in the diegetic[318] form of a tale.

It all starts with Julia's decision to leave Verona and to join his beloved Proteus in Milan. The only person who is allowed to know about this plan is her waiting-woman Lucetta: "Counsel, Lucetta; gentle girl, assist me, / And e'en in kind love I do conjure thee, / Who art the table wherein all my thoughts / Are visibly charactered and engraved, / To lesson me and tell me some good mean / How with my honour I may undertake / A journey to my loving Proteus" (2.7.1-7). As in Shakespeare's later works, specifically in *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Cymbeline*, a female character's voyage is usually preceded by her disguising herself as a boy in order to better face the perils that a woman on her own might run into along the way. As Julia points out, the peril is often of a male kind:

Lucetta: But in what habit will you go along?
Julia: Not like a woman, for I would prevent
The loose encounters of lascivious men.
Gentle Lucetta, fit me with such weeds
As may beseem some well-reputed page.

[316] See page 21 above.
[317] See page 37 above.
[318] See page 21 above.

(2.7.39-43)

The irony contained in these words rests in the fact that the very man who will prove to be lascivious will be Proteus, with his demanding from Silvia that she reciprocate his unrestrained desire.

A woman's apprehension of going out in the world by herself is not restricted to the possibility of running into ill-intentioned men, but has also to do with her reputation, that is to say, with the preservation of her virtue and her compliance with the notion of womanhood promoted by society: "But tell me, wench, how will the world repute me / For undertaking so unstaid a journey? / I fear it will make me scandalized" admits Julia (2.7.59-61). Lucetta recommends the only thing that might prevent such a risk: "If you think so, then stay at home and go not" (2.7.62). But Julia's resoluteness is stronger than any fear: "Nay, that I will not" (2.7.63). Hence Lucetta, less interested than Julia in what people might think, does not hesitate to encourage her: "Then never dream on infamy, but go" (2.7.64).

Once in Milan, Julia, in the guise of a page named Sebastian, accommodates Proteus' "need of such a youth / That can with some discretion do [his] business" (4.4.62-63), namely, function as a go-between between him and Silvia, who has taken Julia's place in his heart.

Julia's first meeting with the woman who is supposed to be her rival turns into a beautiful and touching scene marked by the triumph of kindness, female bonding, and Silvia's emotional involvement in Julia's suffering. Above all, in the exchange between the two women, Shakespeare inserts the possibility of reflecting on the dramatic action tout court.

Silvia, eager to know something about the woman betrayed by Proteus – whom, it should be noted, she does not love back – asks: "How tall was she?" (4.4.155). Julia-as-Sebastian replies by recounting a dramatic performance:

Julia: About my stature; for at Pentecost,
When all our pageants of delight were played,
Our youth got me to play the woman's part,
And I was trimmed in Madam Julia's gown,
Which served me as fit, by all men's judgements,
As if the garment had been made for me;
Therefore I know she is about my height.
And at that time I made her weep a-good,
For I did play a lamentable part.
Madam, 'twas Ariadne, passioning
For Theseus' perjury and unjust flight,
Which I so lively acted with my tears
That my poor mistress, moved therewithal,
Wept bitterly; and would I might be dead
If I in thought felt not her very sorrow.

(4.4.156-170)

A narration, characterised by the use of the past, is embedded in the *hic et nunc* of the representation, which is, in its turn, the object of the very event being narrated. In a dizzy superimposition of different roles, or, in the words of Phyllis Rackin, "a *tour de force* of layered impersonation"[319], we have to imagine a boy actor playing the part of a woman, Julia, who plays the part of a boy, Sebastian, who reminisces about a spectacle in which he played the part of a woman, Ariadne, wearing the clothes of Julia, who –

[319] Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 81.

and this is the most astonishing thing – appears in the role of spectator, which is a fictional but further proof of the presence of women where performances were put on.

The play on cross references between Julia-as-Sebastian's memories and her present stage situation gets even more entangled when we realise that "Ariadne, passioning / For Theseus' perjury and unjust flight" is no one but Julia herself, betrayed and forsaken by Proteus.

The *mise en abyme* continues with Shakespeare's allusion to the ability of the actor – in this case Sebastian impersonating Ariadne – to identify himself so much so with the character that he provokes a spectator's total rupture – in this case Julia's –, a rapture capable, in its turn, of generating the actor's empathy.

The wheel turns full circle with Silvia, who, as recipient of Julia-as-Sebastian's tale, finds herself deeply touched by the picture portrayed: "I weep myself to think upon thy words" (4.4.173).

Back to the starting point, that is to say, to theatrical mimesis in the sense of imitation of the real world, it is worth quoting Hunt's comment on the part just analysed:

> Art is a creative mirror of reality, a great illusion reflecting the recurring truths of the human condition. In Julia's account, the actor's immersion in his part – his acting a role tearfully and realistically – causes him to feel a fictional sorrow. Moved by such lively art, the spectator weeps, driving the actor to greater passion and a more empathetic portrayal. The "very sorrow" that the actor finally feels "in thought" is both the fictional character's and the spectator's, which blend together during mimesis[320].

[320] Hunt, "'The Two Gentlemen of Verona' and the Paradox of Salvation", p. 15.

3.1.2. Women who promote the interests of women: Silvia and Julia

"Alas, poor lady, desolate and left!" (4.4.172) exclaims Silvia at the end of the 'performative' memory recalled by Julia-as-Sebastian. Silvia's compassion for Julia's predicament is undoubtedly sincere. Julia, who acts in incognito, cannot but perceive it, and concede that the very person who is supposed to represent her rival in the love triangle made up of Proteus-Julia-Silvia is a big-hearted woman who means well: "A virtuous gentlewoman, mild and beautiful. / I hope my master's suit will be but cold, / Since she respects my mistress' love so much" (4.4.178-180). "Respect" is the word that stands out, in that, if it visibly characterises the two women's short-lived encounter, it will be lacking, as we shall see, in the more solid relationship between the two friends Proteus and Valentine. As Diane Dreher rightly remarks: "While the men in this play betray their friends, the women are constant and true"[321].

It should come as no surprise that Julia-as-Sebastian gets ready for her first meeting with her alleged rival in spirits that are far from joyful and well-disposed. She acknowledges that what she has accepted to do for the love of Proteus is unusual as well as foolish – "How many women would do such a message?" (4.4.88) –; she describes herself as an "unhappy messenger" (4.4.97), even though, at the same time, she meditates on Proteus' naivety in entrusting the most inappropriate person in the world with Silvia's courtship: "Alas, poor Proteus, thou hast entertained / A fox to be the shepherd of thy lambs" (4.4.89-90). What Julia does not know is that the lamb in question (Silvia) is full of care for the fox, showing it by not missing a chance to criticise Proteus' inconstancy. Silvia's consigning of her own portrait to the page in order for him to give it to Proteus goes with the following words: "Go, give your master

[321] Diane E. Dreher, *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1986, p. 117.

this. Tell him from me, / One Julia, that his changing thoughts forget, / Would better fit his chamber than this shadow" (4.4.116-118).

Soon after, it is Proteus' falsehood and fault that Silvia brings to light. In receiving the ring that Julia gave him as a token of love – "Keep this remembrance for thy Julia's sake" (2.2.5) –, Silvia expresses her utter reproach: "The more shame for him that he sends it me, / For I have heard him say a thousand times / His Julia gave it him at his departure. / Though his false finger have profaned the ring, / Mine shall not do his Julia so much wrong" (4.4.131-135). Struck by Silvia's integrity, Julia-as-Sebastian cannot but voice her gratitude: "I thank you, madam, that you tender her" (4.4.138).

The same person who was ready to meet her rival as a fox meeting a lamb yields to the lamb's thoughtfulness. Talking to Silvia's portrait, Julia promises: "I'll use thee kindly for thy mistress' sake / That used me so" (4.4.200-201).

The relationship between Valentine and Proteus on the one hand, and that between Silvia and Julia on the other, offer, if transposed to the present day, an example of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms "homosocial desire", although there is a substantial difference between the two couples. Indeed, whereas Valentine and Proteus, both male individuals, are bound together by a homosocial fellowship that has nothing to do with homosexuality, and which, in fact, could also be homophobic, the bond between Silvia and Julia is equally homosocial but not necessarily homophobic. Since Silvia and Julia's affinity does not diverge much from the kind of affinity that can be found between women who love each others, there is good reason to suppose a contiguity "of aims, emotions, and valuations"[322] between gay women and heterosexual women, rather than between gay men and heterosexual men. Basically, Sedgwick invites us to consider the

[322] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, p. 2.

different implications of the term homosocial depending on whether it defines a female or a male relation:

> "Homosocial" [...] describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is [...] formed by analogy with "homosexual," and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from "homosexual." In fact, it is applied to such activities as "male bonding," which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia [...]. [...] the diacritical opposition between the "homosocial" and the "homosexual" seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women [...]. [...] it seems at this moment to make an obvious kind of sense to say that women in our society who love women, [...] or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities[323].

In other words, the difference that emerges from Sedgwick's reasoning is closely connected with gender. As she puts it: "The apparent simplicity – the unity – of the continuum between 'women loving women' and 'women promoting the interests of women," [...] would not be so striking if it were not in strong contrast to the arrangement among males"[324].

Once ascertained that Silvia and Julia belong to the category of women who promote the interests of other women, it will be interesting to know if Valentine and Proteus belong to the category of men who promote not only the interests of other men, but also their mutual interests. The answer is affirmative in Valentine's case, who might even be accused of being excessively attentive to his friend's interests, and definitely negative in the case of Proteus.

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[323] Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, pp. 1, 2, 3.
[324] Ibid., p. 3.

3.1.3. Mimesis and desire

> Thou dost love her, because thou knowst I love her
>
> (Shakespeare, Sonnet 42)

The Two Gentlemen of Verona opens with Proteus and Valentine bidding farewell to each other – Valentine is leaving for Milan – with the affection that we expect from two very close friends: "Cease to persuade, my loving Proteus" (1.1.1) starts off Valentine, who, begged to stay in Verona, does not let himself be persuaded, although he confesses how much he would like to enjoy Proteus' "company / To see the wonders of the world abroad" (1.1.5-6). Proteus' words are no less tender: "Wilt thou be gone? Sweet Valentine, adieu" (1.1.11).

Valentine's fondness for Proteus does not fade away once he arrives at Milan. In the presence of the Duke and of his daughter, Silvia, he speaks about a deeply-seated relationship that dates back to childhood – "I knew him as myself, for from our infancy / We have conversed and spent our hours together" (2.4.60-61) –; he praises Proteus by providing a portrait of a youth "complete in feature and in mind, / With all good grace to grace a gentleman" (2.4.71-72); and when he finds out that Proteus is in Milan, declares that there was nothing he wanted more: "Should I have wished a thing, it had been he" (2.4.80). Afterwards, he addresses Silvia with a line that foreshadows the formation of a love triangle: "Sweet lady, entertain him / To be my fellow-servant to your ladyship" (2.4.102-103).

As has been said, in the analysis of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* the concept of mimesis is central, particularly when one takes into account its association with desire. In this respect, a close reading of the text cannot disregard René Girard's reading of the

Valentine-Proteus relationship as a case study that shows the workings of mimetic desire.

Upon leaving the two friends alone, Silvia becomes the object of their discourse[325]: "Was this the idol that you worship so?" (2.4.142) asks Proteus. Valentine answers yes, trying, at the same time, to obtain from his friend a confirmation that his idolatry is well-grounded: "Even she; and is she not a heavenly saint?" (2.4.143). Proteus refuses to indulge him, and makes Silvia descend to earth: "No, but she is an earthly paragon" (2.4.144). Valentine then brings her back to the heavens – "Call her divine" (2.4.245) –, but Proteus does not give in: "I will not flatter her" (2.4.145). Hence, it is Valentine who is obliged to give in, but on one condition: "if not divine, / Yet let her be a principality, / Sovereign to all the creatures on the earth" (2.4.149-151). Proteus, who is still in love with Julia, cannot accept it – "Except my mistress" (2.4.152) –, and pressed again by Valentine – "Sweet, except not any" (2.4.152) – defends his right to be partial: "Have I not reason to prefer mine own?" (2.4.154). Valentine's next line reveals his strange eagerness to inflame Proteus' desire for Silvia: "And I will help thee to prefer her too" (2.4.155).

Proteus' confession as soon as he is left alone leaves no doubt as to the fact that a transformation has been taken place, of which Valentine is to be held responsible:

> Even as one heat another heat expels,
> Or as one nail by strength drives out another,
> So the remembrance of my former love
> Is by a newer object quite forgotten.
> Is it mine eye, or Valentine's praise,
> Her true perfection, or my false transgression

[325] See Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, p. 128.

That makes me reasonless to reason thus?

(2.4.189-195)

In fact, it was Proteus who asked his departing friend to share with him any things of beauty which he might have chanced upon along the way. "Object" is clearly the word that ideally conjoins the two moments: "Think on thy Proteus when thou haply seest / Some rare noteworthy object in thy travel. / Wish me partaker in thy happiness / When thou dost meet good hap" (1.1.12-15).

Given the swiftness with which Proteus forgets about the first object of his desire, namely Julia, we are led to believe, as suggested by Girard, that what Proteus feels for Silvia is love at first sight[326]. Actually, sight has little to do with what is going on, for in the eyes of Proteus both women appear equally beautiful: "[Silvia] is fair; and so is Julia that I love – / That I did love, for now my love is thawed" (2.4.196-197). The only difference between the two is that Silvia, not Julia, is loved by Valentine: "Proteus desires Silvia not because their brief encounter made a decisive impression on him, but because he is predisposed in favour of whatever Valentine desires"[327]. Proteus, in other words, shifts his attention towards Silvia by virtue of a principle of imitation, which is, after all, at the heart of any friendship: "This is *mimetic* or *mediated* desire. Valentine is its *model* or *mediator*; Proteus is its mediated subject, and Silvia is their common object"[328].

On closer examination though, we realise that the roles of model/mediator and mediated subject are not so clear-cut as it might seem. Girard also considers the possibility that "Valentine's appetite for the mimetic desire of Proteus is itself

[326] See René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford, 1991, p. 8.
[327] Ibid., p. 9.
[328] Ibid.

mimetic"[329], and that, consequently, Valentine finds himself playing the part of mediated subject after having appointed Proteus as model/mediator.

It was said that Valentine promotes Proteus' interests to the detriment of his own. That he works hard to make his friend feel for Silvia as he does is proof of that.

The question of interests that has emerged with Sedgwick reappears with Girard, who points out that "[Valentine] works so feverishly against his own interest that we wonder where his real desire lies"[330]. The answer is: in the possibility that Proteus may love Silvia, for only then can Valentine be sure that he is directing his desire towards the right person. In the words of Girard:

> Although Valentine's choice of Silvia is not mimetically determined in the sense that Proteus's is, his desire has a mimetic dimension that his excessive praise reveals. Valentine makes his desire more real than it is, in order to contaminate Proteus with it and turn this friend into an a posteriori mimetic model[331].

Not only does Valentine turn Proteus into an a posteriori mimetic model, but also into his main rival – "Valentine I'll hold an enemy" (2.6.29) declares Proteus – ready for anything, even to resort to assault, to win Silvia. Before going this far, however, Proteus resorts to his intellect, and devises a plan that consists in revealing Silvia and Valentine's organised elopement to the Duke:

> I cannot now prove constant to myself
> Without some treachery used to Valentine.
> This night he meaneth with a corded ladder
> To climb celestial Silvia's chamber-window,

[329] Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*, p. 14.
[330] Ibid., p.13.
[331] Ibid., pp. 13-14.

Myself in counsel, his competitor.
Now presently I'll give her father notice
Of their disguising and pretended flight,
Who, all enraged, will banish Valentine

(2.6.31-38)

It is hard to think that it is Valentine himself who makes Proteus privy to his intent, trusting his friend to help him: "Good Proteus, go with me to my chamber / In these affairs to aid me with thy counsel" (2.4.182-183). Before Valentine's naivety, we cannot but exclaim, borrowing Julia's words: "Alas, poor Valentine, thou hast entertained a fox to be the shepherd of thy lambs".

3.1.4. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and the traffic in women

The ambiguous relationship between the play's male protagonists, oscillating between friendship and rivalry and culminating in Proteus' betrayal, acts, as shown, as a counterweight to the pure, honourable, sympathetic relationship between Silvia and Julia. It is Silvia's words and behaviour, in particular, that emphasise all of this on various occasions. Her cutting remarks are directed at Proteus, whose infidelity to both Valentine and Julia she does not miss a chance to highlight: "When I protest true loyalty to her, /" laments Proteus, "She twits me with my falsehood to my friend, / When to her beauty I commend my vows, / She bids me think how I have been forsworn / In breaking faith with Julia, whom I loved" (4.2.7-11). As a matter of fact, Silvia does not spare Proteus the worst attributes. What is more, she always thinks of Julia and the offense he has caused to her, and makes it clear that his advances are not welcome:

Thou subtle, perjured, false, disloyal man,

Think'st thou I am so shallow, so conceitless,
To be seduced by thy flattery
That hast deceived so many with thy vows?
Return, return, and make thy love amends.
For me – by this pale queen of night I swear –
I am so far from granting thy request
That I despise thee for thy wrongful suit,
And by and by intend to chide myself
Even for this time I spend in talking to thee.

(4.2.92-101)

When Proteus sends to her the ring that Julia gave him, her words express consideration for the other woman and scorn for him[332]. She even refuses to thank him when he saves her from an outlaw's grasp: "Had I been seized by a hungry lion / I would have been a breakfast to the beast / Rather than have false Proteus rescue me. / [...] / I do detest false perjured Proteus. /Therefore be gone, solicit me no more" (5.4.33-40).

Silvia voices her hatred openly and unambiguously because she cannot accept Proteus' awful behaviour towards the two people he should have respected the most:

Read over Julia's heart, thy first, best love,
For whose dear sake thou didst then rend thy faith
Into a thousand oaths, and all those oaths
Descended into perjury to love me.
Thou hast no faith left now, unless thou'dst two,
And that's far worse than none; better have none
Than plural faith, which is too much by one.
Thou counterfeit to thy true friend!

[332] See page 113 above.

(5.4.46-53)

At this point, Proteus tries to defend himself by means of establishing a hierarchy between love and friendship: "In love / Who respects friend?" (5.4.53-54). Silvia is sharp and harsh at the same time: "All men but Proteus" (5.4.54). Better she had not uttered such words. Frustrated, irritated, rejected and repeatedly insulted, Proteus resorts to violence:

> Nay, if the gentle spirit of moving words
> Can no way change you to a milder form,
> I'll woo you like a soldier, at arm's end,
> And love you 'gainst the nature of love – force ye.
> [*Seizes her.*]
>
> (5.4.55-58)

Silvia then pronounces her last words, which sound like a supplication filled with terror: "O heaven!" (5.4.59).

In the meantime, Valentine is secretly witnessing the horrific scene. Having been banished from Milan because of his intended elopement with Silvia, he does not know about his friend's betrayal. He thus comes out in the open and nips Proteus' act in the bud: "Ruffian, let go that rude uncivil touch" (5.4.60). He then lets his disappointment, sorrow, and disillusionment find expression, and arrive at the person who has elicited them: "[...] Treacherous man, / Thou hast beguiled my hopes. [...] / [...] / [...] Proteus, / I am sorry I must never trust thee more, / But count the world a stranger for thy sake. / The private wound is deepest. O time most accurst, / 'Mongst all foes that a friend should be the worst!" (5.4.63-72). Proteus' reaction is immediate. Caught red-handed while committing a crime, he acknowledges his fault and asks for forgiveness. We

would expect Silvia to be the recipient of his repentance, since she is the principal victim of his repugnant conduct. On the contrary, Valentine seems to be the only one who deserves an apology: "My shame and guilt confounds me. / Forgive me, Valentine" (5.4.73-74). Silvia's plight is made even worse by Valentine himself. Not only does he accept Proteus' apology as hastily as it was made – "Then I am paid, / And once again I do receive thee honest" (5.4.77-78) –, but he also utters a line which, together with Proteus' attempted rape, has incited the critical debate about the play, and determined, in most cases, an unfavourable opinion on it: "All that was mine in Silvia I give thee" (5.4.83). According to Girard, Valentine's words are evidence that he is aware of the crucial part he has played in setting in motion the unconscious process that, degenerating, has led to the current situation. His readiness to forgive his friend originates from his will to take half of the responsibility for what has just happened:

> Valentine must share part of the blame for the treachery of his friend. At first, Valentine himself did not understand what his own mimetic teasing did to Proteus, but now he does and so is in no mood for self-righteous indignation. The only peaceful solution is to let the rival have the disputed object, Silvia[333].

Even assuming that Valentine's controversial words mean something different from his wanting to cede Silvia to Proteus as if she were an object – he may just be meaning that he wants to transfer the love for Silvia to Proteus –, Julia-as-Sebastian's reaction to them is unmistakable as to the fact that what is going on before her eyes is a real exchange: "O me unhappy! [*Faints.*] (5.4.84). On a stage where men avail themselves of women as they please, "organising the world in the way that suits them"[334], women

[333] Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*, p. 16.
[334] Penny Gay, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008, p. 42.

respond by either realising their condition in such a painful way that they faint, or, as in Silvia's case, by resorting to silence. Indeed, following Valentine's infamous line, Silvia's position as an object in the hands of men becomes more evident and dramatic. "[...] Why, man, she is my own" (2.4.166) says Valentine at the time of inflaming Proteus' mimetic desire. But the right to possess Silvia is also claimed by Turio, the man that the Duke has chosen for her – "Yonder is Silvia, and Silvia's mine" (5.4.123) –, a right that he later renounces because of Silvia's indifference to him, thus allowing Valentine to own her: "I hold him but a fool that will endanger / His body for a girl that loves him not. / I claim her not, and therefore she is thine" (5.4.131-133).

The final act of this drama in which Silvia is assigned the role of bargaining chip is written by the Duke who, having recovered his respect for Valentine, deems him worthy of having her: "[...] Sir Valentine, / Thou art a gentleman, and well derived; / Take thou thy Silvia, for thou hast deserved her" (5.4.143-145). Valentine expresses his gratitude: "I thank your grace; the gift hath made me happy" (5.4.146).

An outstanding example of what Gayle Rubin calls "the traffic in women", Silvia's, and more generally a woman's, passing from one man to another reinforces the bond between the men – a bond whose outcome is ultimately the formation of society –, while excluding women from enjoying the fruits of their being traded. In the words of Rubin:

> If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it. The exchange of women does not necessarily imply that women are objectified, in the modern sense [...]. But it does imply a distinction between gift and giver. If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers

> its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges – social organization[335].

Since not a word comes out of Silvia's mouth at the play's end, it is legitimate to wonder whether the Duke's act of giving her to the man that she loves makes her as happy as Valentine. If we retrace her story, we would say 'yes'. After all, it is she who initiates the courtship by means of a love letter that she charges Valentine to write – "Last night she enjoined me to write some lines to one she loves" (2.1.80-81) – and of which Valentine is the addressee, although he does not know it:

> Valentine: Madam, they are for you.
> Silvia: Ay, ay, you writ them, sir, at my request,
> But I will none of them. They are for you.
> (2.1.115-117)

Most of all, she cannot accept Turio – "[...] my father would enforce me marry / Vain Turio, whom my very soul abhorred" (4.3.16-17) – from whom she escapes by trying first to run away with Valentine, but their plan, as we have seen, is sabotaged by Proteus, and then to join Valentine exiled to Mantua. All of this leads us to think that she finally gets what she wanted.

And yet, we are left with the impression that the very moment Valentine becomes her father's choice[336], all the things about her that the Duke, as authority, could not tolerate,

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[335] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1975, p. 174.

[336] A father, it should be noted, that locks her up in a tower: "I nightly lodge her in an upper tower, / The key whereof myself have ever kept; / And thence she cannot be conveyed away" (3.1.35-37).

but which made her unique to the eyes of those who look for strong and uncompromising female characters – "[...] she is peevish, sullen, froward, / Proud, disobedient, stubborn, lacking duty" (3.1.68-69) – disappear into a will that does not belong to her anymore.

3.2. "Son donna come lei": the articulation of an exceptional desire in Alessandro Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro*

Awareness of the nature of her own desire, which does not have to submit to any paternal authority and which, in truth, goes against the rules and the expectations of the patriarchal society, is what characterises the female protagonist of the Italian comedy *L'Alessandro*, written by Alessandro Piccolomini (1508-1578), a member of the oft-mentioned *Accademia degli Intronati*[337], in 1544[338]. When she appears in Act two, Scene one, a stage direction introduces her as "Fortunio, cioè Lucrezia innamorata, sotto abito di maschio"[339] ("Fortunio, namely Lucrezia in love, in male attire"). Piccolomini's decision to include such a character, and to describe her the way he does, is not fortuitous, but in line with a specific dramatic tendency popular at the time. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the shift from the imitation of the Latin archetype to the composition of original plays[340] is marked by the arrival of a female character who controls the dramatic action with the force of her erotic desire. As Clubb puts it:

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[337] See pages 12, 78, 82 above.
[338] See Florindo Cerreta, *Alessandro Piccolomini: letterato e filosofo senese del Cinquecento*, Accademia senese degli Intronati, Siena, 1960.
[339] *L'Alessandro: Commedia di Alessandro Piccolomini Stordito Intronato*, G. Daelli e C. Editori, Milano, 1864, p. 33. All quotations from the play are from this edition.
[340] See page 10 above.

> The choice of a sexual center differentiating Renaissance New Comedy from its Roman model [...] directed the mainstream of the Cinquecento genre toward the figure of the woman desired and desiring, a requisite datum of plot that with usage would become the staple *giovane innamorata*[341].

The figure of the woman desired and desiring reminds us of a female spectator's position in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century public theatre. The end of the section entitled "Objects/subjects of desire"[342] put on hold the hypothesis that female spectators, as desiring subjects, could be wanting what the theatre offered them also in terms of a fictional world represented on stage in which a woman like them was seen pursue her desires.

Women's attendance at the spectacles put on by the *Intronati* is a fact. Reference to them can be found in the prologue to the comedy *Gl'Ingannati*[343], as well as at the end of *L'Alessandro*, where one of the characters invites the female spectators to participate in the nuptials with which the comedy ends: "Spettatori nobilissimi: qua non s'ha da far altro. Le nozze di Lampridia, di Fortunio, e di Cornelio, si faran dentro. Se alcuna di voi donne vuol venire, ei saran degli sposi per lei ancora. E non volendo, fate segno d'allegrezza"[344] ("Most noble spectators: there is nothing left to do here. The marriage of Lampridia, of Fortunio, and of Cornelio will be held inside. If some of you women want to come, there are still some grooms left. If you don't, be cheerful").

Given the fleeting nature of the theatrical performance, it is difficult to imagine the effects that the representation could have had on the audience, and especially on the female section of it. This notwithstanding, "it is important to remember" Ruggiero

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[341] Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time*, p. 8.
[342] See page 76-79 above.
[343] See pages 78, 82 above.
[344] *L'Alessandro*, p. 116.

observes, "that these comedies come down to us not as they were performed but as they were written down for publication"[345], and that the version written down for publication most likely bore the traces of the spectators' reaction to it:

> although we cannot know what the audience's response was to certain characters or their deeds on stage except in rare instances in which letters or chronicles record this, what we may have in the final written form of these comedies is a rewriting of them which has responded to the audience's responses[346].

Despite the uncertainty about the way things truly went, the idea that the real world could influence aspects concerning the characters' identity and sexuality is quite fascinating. As Ruggiero admits:

> Obviously this is highly hypothetical, but still it is worth considering that the authors of such works in rewriting them for publication had the opportunity to adjust characters to make their identity clearer and to portray their sexuality in ways that worked better for the time[347].

As far as sexuality is concerned, the question is: what did work better for the time? The ambivalence that marked such an aspect does not permit us to give a definitive answer. Ruggiero highlights the presence of a double sexuality at the time, one official and well-established, the other in the making and uncontrolled: "On the one hand we have a dominant culture of sexuality characterized by marriage and childbirth; on the

[345] Guido Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2007, p. 10.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Ibid.

other, a much more inchoate and developing culture of illicit sexuality. [...] its point of reference was [...] its existence outside the boundaries of accepted Eros"[348].

Such dualism was reflected in the dramatic production of the time, in view of the fact that "literature (and its imaginary) is not a separate reality but a significant part of the reality of an age, an important part of the way life was lived, thought, and perceived"[349].

That the comic genre, in particular, incorporated that dualism into its own dynamics is indicated by the fact that comedies "dealt with 'private lives', and that meant that they were laced with the dominant patriarchal vision of family, gender, sex, and marriage, but as comedies, that vision was often imaginatively and playfully questioned"[350].

In *L'Alessandro*, the way in which Piccolomini imaginatively questions the patriarchal order is by displaying a female desire that does not let itself be limited by any social impositions on either sex or gender. Clearly, the amount of space granted to the pursuing of such desire is restricted, in that the conventions of the comic genre requires the resolution of the plot with marriage. In this regard, if we wonder whether this final act should make us reconsider the sense of what has happened before in terms of erotic interests and attitudes, and whether it in fact cancels any previous affair, Catherine Belsey reminds us that "the plays are more than their endings"[351]. Indeed, the comedy's ending cannot erase the astonishment that one experiences in the presence of the explicit articulation of a desire that leaves no doubt as to its nature, all the more so when we bear in mind that *L'Alessandro* was written and performed about five hundred years ago. Generalising, Laura Giannetti writes:

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[348] Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford, 1985, p. 10.
[349] Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy*, p. 12.
[350] Ibid., p. 6.
[351] Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies", in John Drakakis (ed.), *Alternative Shakespeares*, Methuen, London, 1985, p. 188.

> A 'heterosexual' marriage apparently returned life to 'normal' at the end of most of these comedies, but that does not take away the fact that for the space of the play, another discourse of sexual desire and pleasure was presented as normal and possible, even as characters were declaring it impossible[352].

In her first soliloquy, Lucrezia-as-Fortunio states: "non è possible ch'io ottenga quel che desidero"[353] ("it's not possible for me to get what I desire"). What is it that she desires?

As spectators and readers who still do not know who Fortunio is, we hear from the maidservant Niccoletta about his desperate love for Lampridia, the woman that Niccoletta serves. Fortunio is presented as a man in pain and on the verge of committing suicide: "Or ben Lampridia, che vogliam noi far di questo Fortunio; vogliam noi che si muoia per amor vostro?"[354] ("And so Lampridia, what do we want to do with this Fortunio; do we want him to die for the love he has for you?"); and later on: "volete che si disperi, s'impicchi, e si uccida per amor vostro?"[355] ("do you want him to despair, hang himself, and kill himself for the love he has for you?"). Judging Fortunio's behaviour pathetic and exaggerated, Lampridia gives a disenchanted answer: "E' non s'impiccherà, no; quanti n'hai veduti impiccar per amore ai tuoi dì?"[356] ("He will not hang himself; how many people have you seen hang themselves for love in your day?"). But Niccoletta insists on the truthfulness of what she is saying by giving a firsthand testimony to Fortunio's suicide attempts due to his consuming passion: "Lampridia, voi non lo conoscete: vi dico che egli è stata talora, che ho riparato io, che per disperazione

[352] Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy*, p. 17.
[353] *L'Alessandro*, p. 34.
[354] Ibid., p. 19.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Ibid.

non si sia gittato in Arno; arde, muore, abbrucia, e non trova luogo"[357] ("Lampridia, you don't know him: I'm telling you, if it were not for me, he would have jumped into the river Arno out of despair; he burns, dies, is on fire, and cannot find peace").

We are in Act one, Scene three. At the time of this exchange between Niccoletta and Lampridia we know that Lampridia is actually a man disguised as a woman, for shortly before he has confessed: "O fortuna, quanto tempo hai da pigliarti scherzo de' casi miei? E son pur già sett'anni, ch'io sconosciuto fuor di casa mia, sotto abito di femmina, essendo maschio, son vissuto con pericolo della vita miseramente"[358] ("Oh fortune, for how long will you make fun of me? It is seven years since I, a stranger away from home, in female attire being a man, have endangered my life"). What we do not know yet is that Fortunio is actually a woman disguised as a man.

The implications of such confusing situation built on Lampridia's and Fortunio's gender crossing, and on the characters' and the spectators' fluctuation between knowledge and ignorance, are at least two, both connected with that double sexuality discussed before.

Analysing the events that involve Lampridia and Fortunio, Giulio Ferroni talks about "una corrente erotica, che sfrutta le sfasature date dai reciproci travestimenti con continue oscillazioni tra l'eterosessualità e l'omosessualità"[359] ("an erotic flow, which capitalises on the displacements caused by their mutual disguise with ongoing oscillations between heterosexuality and homosexuality").

Since the audience does not know that Fortunio is the male-attired Lucrezia, who, in her own turn, does not know that Lampridia is the female-attired Aloisio, it concedes that, from Fortunio's standpoint, the love he has for Lampridia is a man's love for a

[357] *L'Alessandro*, p. 19.
[358] Ibid., p. 17.
[359] Ferroni, *Il testo e la scena: saggi sul teatro del Cinquecento*, p. 57.

woman. Unlike Fortunio, however, spectators know that Lampridia is the female-impersonating Aloisio, therefore perceive a latent homoeroticism in Fortunio's desire.

To this it should be added that, although Aloisio-as-Lampridia refuses to reciprocate Fortunio's love because he believes him to be a man, he is not at all immune from feeling a certain attraction for him: "Ma mi par miracolo che non passi oramai di quà quel cortigiano di monsignor de i Flischi, che fa meco l'amore: [...] non posso far ch'io non lo guardi volentieri"[360] ("But it is curious that monsignor of the Flischi's courtier has not yet passed by: [...] I cannot but gladly look at him").

The play's homoeroticism turns from latent into explicit when Lucrezia, disguised as a man, arrives on the scene, and in a remarkable soliloquy declares in no uncertain terms that she is in love with a woman. Conscious that her feelings diverge from the norm, she complains about her sad condition:

> Oh che vita infelice è la mia! Io son pur lo scherzo e il giuoco di te, Fortuna. Gli altri, se ardon per amore, almen godono di quella fiamma, sperando che, vinta la crudeltà dell'amante loro, ogni cosa ritorni in gioia; ma io amo con tutto il cuore, e se ben io vincessi con la mia servitù la durezza di Lampridia, ch'avrei fatto? Son donna come lei, e rimarrebbe ingannata del caso mio[361].
>
> (Oh how miserable is my life! I'm your fool, Fortune. If other people burn for love, at least they enjoy that flame, hoping that, once their lover's cruelty is overcome, everything may turn into joy; but I love with all my heart, and even if I overcame with my servitude Lampridia's inflexibility, what would have I done? I'm a woman like her, and she would be left deceived by my situation.)

[360] *L'Alessandro*, p. 18.
[361] Ibid., p. 33.

The impossible nature of what she desires makes her blame her own fate: "Ah Fortuna, Fortuna! [...] m'hai fatto, più crudele, innamorar d'una femmina [...] dalla quale né dura né pietosa, non è possibile ch'io ottenga quel che desidero"[362] ("Ah Fortune, Fortune! [...] you made me fall in love with a woman [...] from whom it's not possible for me to get what I desire"). So saying, Lucrezia-as-Fortunio introduces the theme of impossibility that has prevailed in the critics' approach to women's same-sex desire in the pre-modern period. Traub, who has written extensively about gender and sexuality in the literary texts of the early modern age, underlines how "to many responsible, even ground-breaking scholars, female homoeroticism prior to the Enlightment has seemed silent and invisible. Impossible"[363]. Her attempt "to demonstrate the existence of a cultural awareness of women who desired other women in the early modern period"[364] underlies also the analysis of *L'Alessando*, and is in line with the more general objective of bringing to light aspects concerning women, both real and fictional, usually neglected by historians and critics. Lucrezia-as-Fortunio's conviction that she cannot get from Lampridia what she desires does not support the belief that an early modern woman could not possibly be attracted by another woman. In point of fact, despite her fear and hesitation, Lucrezia-as-Fortunio, as we shall see, will act courageously and resolutely to satisfy her desire.

Not to mention Piccolomini, who was unlikely to let Lucrezia-as-Fortunio express such a desire if he was not persuaded of its possibility, and of his spectators' acceptance of it. Indeed, as Giannetti points out, "there is too much space dedicated to the theme of 'woman with woman' in the comedy to believe that the author considered it

[362] *L'Alessandro*, p. 34.
[363] Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 3.
[364] Ibid., p. 6.

unimportant, impossible, or unattractive to an audience"[365]. Lucrezia-as-Fortunio's erotic experience proves that spectators and Piccolomini alike belonged to a culture that conceived of love and desire between women. In this regard, Denise Walen rightly wonders:

> How could constructions of erotic energy between female characters exist in dramatic literature if playwrights had no knowledge of same-sex attractions or sexual experience? [...] Further, why would playwrights construct [...] homoerotic scenarios in dramatic form if they had no expectation that their audience would understand them?[366].

After all, if the period's cultural context could not accept the idea of a woman loving and/or desiring another woman, we would not be able to explain the reason why Lucrezia-as-Fortunio utters an incredible line as to her being persuaded that what she feels for Lampridia is not unique in the landscape that embraces the lives and the stories of women: "Io già non son la prima donna ch'amasse donna"[367] ("I'm not the first woman in love with a woman").

Lucrezia-as-Fortunio is a tormented character because she recognises the peculiarity of her feelings for Lampridia. At any rate, her uncertainty about the way in which Lampridia might respond to the discovery of her true sex does not weaken her explicitly sexual will to pleasure herself. To get an idea of her inner conflict, we should consider the moment in which Niccoletta, unbeknownst to her own mistress, proposes that Fortunio draws near Lampridia in Lampridia's house while she is resting. Left alone on

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[365] Laura Giannetti, "'Ma che potrà succedermi se io donna amo una Donna': Female-Female Desire in Italian Renaissance Comedy", *Renaissance Drama*, New Series, Vol. 36/37, 2010, p. 113.
[366] Denise A. Walen, *Constructions of Female Homoerotism in Early Modern Drama*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005, pp. 2-3.
[367] *L'Alessandro*, p. 39.

the stage, Lucrezia-as-Fortunio lets her soul vent all its torment by means of a soliloquy in which her intentions and hopes find clear expression:

> Or che farai misera Lucrezia? accetterai tu questo partito, o no? S'io l'accetto e ch'io vada da Lampridia, e che la persuada a far quanto ch'io voglio, e ella conosca poi che io son femmina, non sarà uno scorgimento? [...] Dall'altra parte io avrei pure un gran contento di trovarmi seco, e baciar il volto e 'l petto di sì bella donna. [...] Ella mi avrà per iscusata, e per mio bene, s'io ne la priego, terrà segreta la cosa; in modo che, dal far questo non me ne può venir se non piacere. Anderò dunque, [...] e mi scoprirò. Già so, ch'ella non è un aspide sordo, che non si muova a pietà di me, ancor ch'io sia donna [...][368].
>
> (What will you do now, miserable Lucrezia? will you accept this proposal, or not? If I accept it and I go to Lampridia's, and persuade her to do what I want, and then she discovers that I'm a woman, won't it look bad? [...] On the other hand I'd be very happy to be with her, and kiss the face and breasts of so beautiful a woman. [...] She'll forgive me, and for my sake, if I beg her, she'll keep my secret; so that, by doing this I won't get anything but pleasure. I'll go then, [...] and I'll reveal myself. I know that she's not a deaf asp incapable of pitying me, even though I'm a woman [...].)

According to Giannetti, "*Alessandro* was one of the texts of the period that gave the greatest voice to female desire; [...] to the possibility and the appeal of eroticism between women"[369]. What surprises and amazes us the most is that in a theatre like the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European one, where many female characters, despite their strong-mindedness, end up conforming silently – like Silvia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* – to the roles that society assigns them (daughter, wife), there are other characters, like Lucrezia, who live and love "in a manner totally dissociated from

[368] *L'Alessandro*, p. 39.
[369] Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy*, p. 99.

marriage, duty, family and reproduction"[370]. This is what makes *L'Alessandro* a text ahead of its time, as well as an almost unique specimen in relation to the period in which it was written. As stated by Ferroni: "l'espediente del reciproco travestimento [dà] luogo allo svolgimento di una singolare fantasia omosessuale, con effetti che sono rarissimi nel teatro del Cinquecento"[371] ("the device of the mutual disguise gives rise to a peculiar homosexual fantasy, with effects that are extremely rare in the sixteenth-century theatre").

3.3. Sex and gender issues in Guillén de Castro's *La fuerza de la costumbre*

At the beginning of the seventeenth-century in Spain, two fictional siblings, Hipólita and Félix, are brought up and educated as if they were, respectively, a man and a woman. Because of some familial troubles, the two siblings spend their childhood, and most of their youth, apart from each other, and grow up by having only one of their parents to count on – their father, Don Pedro, in the case of Hipólita; their mother, Doña Costanza, in the case of Félix.

At the opening of the Spanish comedy of which the Moncada family members are the main characters, we see them reunited for first time since Hipólita's, and soon after Félix's, birth. On the whole, the play revolves around the two parents' attempt to bring their children's situation back to normal by means of making the sex that they were assigned at birth coincide with their gender:

Pedro: Y a Hipólita le poned
largo vestido y tocado,

[370] Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy*, p. 16.
[371] Ferroni, *Il testo e la scena: saggi sul teatro del Cinquecento*, p. 57.

y en aposento y estrado
para consuelo tened.
Yo a don Félix llevaré
De ordinario al lado mío,
porque aprenda a tener brío,
y sí tendrá, yo lo sé;
pues mudará pareceres
en ciñéndose la espada;
que la casa de Moncada
no consiente hombres mujeres.
Y ansí podremos hacer,
para que el mundo se asombre,
vos una mujer de un hombre,
yo un hombre de una mujer.
En los ombre cosa es cruel
faldas largas de doncella;
id luego, y ponelde a ella
las que le quitáis a él.
Quedaré con esperanza
de trocar con el vestido
las costumbres que ha tenido.

(1.2.319-341)

(And as for Hipólita, put her
in a long dress and do her hair;
in your chamber and sitting-room
you will console yourself with her.
I will take Don Félix
to keep always at my side,
so that he can learn to show spirit,
and he will, I know it,
he will change his appearance
when he puts on his sword;

for the House of Moncada
does not allow any girly men.
That is the way we will do it,
for the amazement of the world,
you will make a woman of this man,
and I will make a man of this woman.
It is cruel to force men to wear
long skirts like girls –
go now, and put on her
the clothes you take off him.
I will wait here, hopeful
that we can change habits
by exchanging clothes.)

If *L'Alessandro* is a play ahead of its time for the reason that we have seen, *La fuerza de la costumbre* (*The Force of Habit*) by the Valencian dramatist Guillén de Castro (1569-1631), published in 1625[372], is likewise a work ahead of its time, in that it seems to have been written by taking into account the difference between sex and gender that was theorised by the end of the 1960s. At that time, feminist theorists borrowed and began to use the grammatical category of gender to indicate the artificial nature of the concepts of 'man' and 'woman', and, consequently, the groundlessness of the different social roles given to them. As Sedgwick notes: "The charting of a space between something called 'sex' and something called 'gender' has been one of the most influential and successful undertakings of feminist thought"[373]. Previous to the introduction of the sex/gender differentiation, to be a man or a woman was nothing

[372] See the "Introduction" to Melissa R. Machit (ed.), *The Force of Habit: La fuerza de la costumbre*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2019. All quotations from the play, translated by Kathleen Jeffs, are from this edition.
[373] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Axiomatic", in S. During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London, 1999, p. 325.

more than a matter of anatomical traits: "This conception" Linda Nicholson points out, "was reflected in the fact that the word most commonly used to depict the [man/woman] distinction, *sex*, was a word with strong biological associations"[374].

But to see men and women as natural beings, rather than social ones, left no room for opposing women alleged inferiority and subordination to men. Sexism, in other words, could not be fought against as long as the constructed character of 'man' and 'woman' was not put forward conceptually. The word gender was thus adopted to challenge the contention that anatomy is a destiny which no one can escape from, let alone Hipólita, who even repudiates her gender – "[tengo] de mujer no más del nombre" (3.3.673) ("[...] only in name am I a woman") – in that she is well aware that it represents a limit to her freedom of action:

Pedro:	Tente, mujer.	
Hipólita:	El nombre me ha reportado,	
	afrentoso para mí.	
		(1.4.740-742)
(Pedro:	Stop, woman.	
Hipólita:	That name holds me back;	
	I despise it.)	

As the action develops, we come to know how much difficult it is for her to accept her condition – "Y cáusale pesadumbre / verse en efeto mujer" (1.2.267-268) ("And it causes her distress / to see herself as a woman") –, a condition which torments her incessantly. Throughout the play, she struggles to come to terms with her parents' decision to restore her gender:

[374] Linda Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender", *Signs*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Autumn 1994, p. 81.

Pedro: Hipólita, ¿ qué es aquello?
¿ Siempre insistes en querce
ser hombre, siendo mujer?
Hipólita: Siempre me pesa de sello.
(2.2.301-304)
(Pedro: Hipólita, what's all this?
You still insist on wanting
to be a man, though you're a woman?
Hipólita: It still pains me to be one.)

Human bodies matter insofar as they fall into the male/female binary. Indeed, one of the very first questions that is asked about an unborn baby concerns his/her sex. The question is so ordinary, spontaneous, and straightforward that its weight and implications go generally unrecognised. Knowing the baby's sex is useful because it helps to make certain assumptions about his/her future social life. As a matter of fact, sex will shape the baby's fate in a significant way. But what people normally ignore is that sex – a congenital feature which is linked to the anatomy of bodies – is something different from gender – a socio-culturally constructed entity –, and that those assumptions that soon become expectations, end up constraining the child to follow fixed patterns of behaviour that may ultimately limit the possibilities of his/her self-expression. In this respect Rubin notes: "exclusive gender identity [...] requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of 'feminine' traits; in women, of the local definition of 'masculine' traits. The division of the sexes has the effect of repressing some personality characteristics of virtually everyone, men and women"[375].

The attention needs to be focused on the motive that inadvertently guides the curiosity concerning the baby's sex, that is, an oblivious readiness to steer the child

[375] Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", p. 180.

towards the proper formation of his/her gender identity. There is nothing ineluctable, however, about gender, and the adults' suppositions about the gender-determined position that the child will have within society rest on a number of cultural stereotypes. The child's conduct is constantly interfered with. It is imperative, indeed, that s/he comply with the norms that culture deems becoming in relation to his/her gender.

It goes without saying that all of this does not apply neither to Hipólita, nor to the person responsible of her upbringing, namely, her father. To rest on the way in which he chooses to educate her daughter, there is good reason to think that he does not believe in the ineluctability of gender. And if he plays, as he does, a decisive role in regulating Hipólita's conduct, compliance with the gender norms is precisely what he avoids:

Pedro: si no el ser, le mudé el nombre
y con pensamientos de hombre
el hábito se vistió,
por ser más desenfandado
[...]
Criose en la guerra, y vio
vencer, herir, y matar,
y agora puede enseñar
lo que entonces aprendió.
[...]
juega una pica y dispara
un arcabuz y un mosquete;
pues pelea, yo lo fío,
y como yo se aventura,
si no con tan gran cordura,
a lo menos con más brío.

(1.2.248-266)

(I have changed her name and thoughts,

if not her being, into those of a man.
I dressed her in male attire
in order to embolden her
[...]
She grew up in the war and she saw
how to fight, wound, and kill,
and now she could teach
the lessons she learned as a child.
[...]
she can wield a pike and fire
a harquebus and a musket.
She fights and attacks
just like I do, I tell you,
if not with as much wisdom,
at least with more manly spirit.)

Hipólita herself emphasises the peculiarity of a growth – her own – on which gender had no bearing at all: "El la guerra me he criado, / y basta para saber / que tengo, aunque soy mujer, / resolución de soldado" (3.1b.249-252) ("I was raised in war, / and suffice it to say / that I have, even though I am a woman, / the iron will of a soldier").

But what do the terms sex and gender refer to? The first explanation to be taken into account is Rubin's: "As a preliminary definition" she writes, "a 'sex/gender system' is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity"[376]. By set of arrangements Rubin means the cultural and social conventions that, by guiding people's behaviour and supervising their relationships, are deemed responsible for turning sex into gender. Thus, sex pertains to the structure of bodies and indicates whether a person is male or female. It is therefore an essential and

[376] Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", p. 159.

basic fact. Gender, on the other hand, signifies the process whereby sex comes to attain "cultural meaning and form"[377], which implies that, in terms of identity and conduct, men and women are basically the result of a number of cultural practices, and that, in the end, there is nothing inherent about them. In the words of Nicholson: *"Gender* was developed and is still often used as a contrasting term to *sex*, to depict that which is socially constructed as opposed to that which is biologically given. On this usage, gender is typically thought to refer to personality traits and behaviour in distinction from the body"[378].

The preceding argumentation is partly summarised by Hipólita who, compelled to leave her old ways behind, makes use of the term *género*, gender, in a pioneering way to highlight its mutability: "[...] tan bien me acomodo / a ser varón, diera modo / con que acertara major, / y como mudo el valor, / mudara el género y todo" (1.4.576-580) ("[...] though it suited me so well to be / a young man, now I exchange my ways / for those which will be better suited, / and as I change my valour, my gender / and everything will change").

If gender is an artificial thing that cannot be determined once and for all, then to throw off the shackles of gender is perhaps not entirely impossible, as Simone de Beauvoir also seems to imply with her famous claim that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"[379].

Awareness of the difference between biology and culture surfaces out of Don Pedro's words as well. Worried about Felix's lack of courage, he asks his son's tutor whether it has to be imputed to the boy's character, or rather to the way he was brought

[377] Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*", *Yale French Studies*, No. 72, 1986, p. 35.
[378] Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender", p. 79.
[379] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, London, 1956 [1949], p. 273.

up: "dime tú, que le has criado, / si el quedar así encogido / don Félix, mi hijo, ¿ha sido / naturaleza o cuidado?" (1.2.351-354) ("you tell me, since you raised him, / if these cowardly qualities / in Don Félix, my son, are due to / his nature or upbringing?").

The relation between nature and nurture is made clear by Nicholson by means of a simile whereby she compares the body to a rack and identity to a coat which is being hung on it: "Such a conception of the relationship between biology and socialization makes possible what can be described as a 'coatrack' view of self-identity. Here the body is viewed as a type of rack upon which differing cultural artefacts, specifically those of personality and behaviour, are thrown or superimposed"[380]. What this means is that men and women develop their character by acting in conformity to what society expects from them. It is culture that, on the basis of their sexual traits, defines the ways in which men and women are to behave. Behaviour indeed, as the set of one's verbal and non-verbal actions, functions as a means to both show and reinforce one's gender identity, that is, one's sense of being a woman or a man. The construction of gender in rigorous compliance with the anatomy of bodies on the one hand confines gender itself to a strict duality in which 'man' and 'woman' emerge as the only conceivable gender identities; on the other hand, it limits one's possibilities of thinking and behaving unconventionally. Needless to say, Hipólita does not run such a risk. She cannot stand to dress like a woman, her most loved accessory being the sword – "dáme [la espada] a mí, maricón, / y desos chapines ten / cuidado" (1.4.757-758) ("give [the sword] to me, you weakling, / and take care of these / high heels") –; there is only one place where she wants to spend her time, proving her courage – "Pues el miedo no me ataja; / al campo saldré segura" (2.5.694-695) ("Well, fear doesn't stop me; / I'll go to the battlefield

[380] Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender", p. 81.

right now") –; she does not adhere to any standard ideas of femininity – "¿Tú me tienes, picarón? (*Dale una puñada*) (2.5.856) ("You think you can stop me, lowlife?" *She punches him*).

La fuerza de la costumbre is a play which suggests, from its very title, that the enduring, regular, reiterated conformity to the norms of gender gradually leads to the stabilization of one's gender identity.

Reiteration, or repetition, is at the heart of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, according to which gender consolidation rests precisely on its being repeated, or reproduced, over and over again:

> In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation[381].

Gender is nothing more than a matter of acts and gestures, "a set of corporeal styles"[382] which, being 'put on' time and again, end up being assimilated as natural facts. But the truth is that what is regarded as natural is rather a naturalized practice, the outcome of the force of habit:

Otavio:	¿No es extremo peregrino
	Los contrapuestos hermanos?
	Causa admiración el verlo.
Marcelo:	Es notable cosa el ver,
	él pareciendo mujer,

[381] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York-London, 2006 [1990], p. 191.
[382] Ibid.

y ella no acertando a serlo.
Ni al uno viene la espada,
no al otro el manto le viene.

Luis: Todas esas fuerzas tiene
la costumbre dilatada.

Otavio: Fuertemente es ponderosa;
más que papas, más que reyes;
divinas y humanas leyes
puede hacer.

(2.1.51-68)

(Otavio: Aren't the cross-dressed siblings
a rare sight to behold?
They're quite shocking to look at.

Marcelo: It's an extremely odd thing to see,
he seeming so like a woman,
and she not knowing how to be one.
One can't handle a sword,
And the other can't master the shawl.

Luis: These are the many forces
of long-held habit.

Otavio: It is strong and powerful;
more than popes, more than kings;
it can make divine
and human laws.)

In relation to the character of Hipólita, definitely less inclined than her brother to succumb to her parents' will ("Reniego de tal mudanza" (1.2.342) ("I refuse to change"), the position of this play at the end of the present work marks in fact a woman's character gradual shift from a situation in which she acts as an object of exchange between men (Silvia), to a situation where that position is called into question by the expression of a non-normative desire (Lucrezia), to, finally, the representation of

a subjectivity that deconstructs all the conventions and convictions concerning women (Hipólita). Remarkable, in this regard, are the words with which Hipólita lays claim to a femininity which runs contrary to any stereotypes: "Tú te rindes cortésmente, / habiendo usado conmigo / lo que con otras mujeres / que se precian de hermosas, / y no estiman el ser fuertes" (1.5.856-860) ("You surrender with empty flattery / trying it on with me / as if I were like other women / who value themselves as pretty things / and are not esteemed for being brave").

Conclusions

In *Principi della comunicazione letteraria: introduzione alla semiotica della letteratura*, Maria Corti writes: "nessun oggetto di ricerca è evidente in partenza, ma lo diviene man mano che si passa a diversi piani di indagine" [383] ("no object of research is clear from the start, but it becomes so as one goes through different plans of investigation").

From the time I first drafted my research project at the beginning of my doctorate, the path of my research has developed into an ever clearer structure, which is why I deem Corti's words meaningful and true. Progressive definition of the object of my research has been brought about by my regular conversations with my supervisor from the University of Bologna, Prof.ssa Gilberta Golinelli; by the reading material I systematically obtained and consulted; and by the writing process itself.

When we put together a PhD program in women's and gender studies[384] with one in European literatures[385] whose compulsory topic for the 3-year period 2015-2018 was Eros[386], we cannot but consider closely the themes of gender and desire, which I have explored, on the one hand, with the theoretical support of the semiotics of theatre and drama and gender studies, and, on the other hand, by tracking them down in plays from three sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European contexts: the English, the Italian, and the Spanish. My aim was to connect facts that pertained to the space of the stage with facts that concerned the broader theatrical situation, with, in turn, aspects of Renaissance life and society, using gender and desire as tools of investigation.

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[383] Maria Corti, *Prinicipi della comunicazione letteraria: introduzione alla semiotica della letteratura*, Bompiani, Milano, 1976, p. 7.
[384] EDGES – Joint European PhD in Women's and Gender Studies
[385] DESE – Les Littératures de l'Europe Unie
[386] *L'Eros dans la littérature européenne*

But if, as Burke claims, "To understand human productions, it is necessary to employ three kinds of analysis [...]: the chronological, the social, and the geographical"[387], then I thought it appropriate to begin my thesis with some reflections on the cultural-historical background of the Renaissance theatrical traditions of England, Italy, and Spain.

At the same time, since I was to deal with texts written for the theatre, I was aware that reading them in the same way as one reads a poem or a novel was an anomalous activity because it left outside of the theatrical equation, as it were, the most crucial component of a play: its performance. In point of fact, we can be so radical as to affirm that no play exists before it is enacted on the stage. As Brook reminds us, "A play is play"[388], and as such it needs to rely upon the actor's body in order to escape its confinement to the written page.

If ostension of the actor on stage is the necessary condition for the representation to start, the audience's role in making the theatrical communication possible is likewise fundamental. We tend to believe that spectators are passive beings whose ideas, emotions, and behaviour can be changed by the persuasive and sometimes manipulative abilities of both the actors and the director. This was indeed what enemies of the theatre feared the most: that spectators could perform in real life the mischievous actions that they saw represented in the theatre. Actually, the audience's participation in the theatrical event is an active participation, in that it involves interpreting, understanding, and eventually evaluating the spectacle.

There is no doubt as to the fact that early modern women attended theatrical performances. The presence of women within the public sphere of the theatre opens an

[387] Burke, "The Historical Geography of the Renaissance", p. 88.
[388] Brook, *The Empty Space*, p. 157.

interesting perspective on women's position in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, a perspective which I proposed to investigate by drawing upon feminist theory and criticism:

> Even as they demonstrate the complex strategies by which patriarchal authority re-exerted itself, feminist scholars increasingly have sought to resist the allure of a critical model of ideological containment, which tends to reinscribe patriarchy as monoliyhic and early modern women as powerless. [...] ferreting out diverse instances of female agency and power, they have shown the manifold ways that women resisted the ideology of domestic confinement [...]. Scholars have turned our attention, for instance, [...] to the freedoms that they may have experienced as consumers of theatrical entertainments[389].

Women's theatregoing had at least one important political implication which had to do with their entering a public, therefore conventionally male, space. It was not only the licentiousness of the plays that represented a source of anxiety especially for the antitheatricalists, but also the promiscuousness of the theatrical space. As Howard points out: "In the Renaissance public amphitheatres playgoing involved much more than being the witness to an enacted narrative. [...] it involved mingling with, observing, and being observed by playgoers of at least two sexes"[390]. Not that being the witness to an enacted narrative was of no consequence for women theatregoers, for what was enacted at the theatre were sometimes narratives in which the female character, defying common notions of feminine chastity, obedience, and passivity, took centre stage and pursued her own desires, sometimes by disguising herself as a man. Theatrical cross-dressing was often used as a means to create a space where desire could circulate in its

[389] Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, p. 10.
[390] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, p. 73.

multiple forms, a circumstance which represented both a release of positive erotic forces and a source of social anxiety. What kind of reactions and consequences did, for example, a homoerotic passion produce when staged?, a question prompted by one of the comedies that I analysed, *Alessandro* by Piccolomini, a prominent member of the *Accademia degli Intronati* of Siena and also an advocate of the education of women and of their involvement in the literary and artistic life of the period.

The theoretical path that I followed underpinned a close reading of two more texts.

With respect to the English dramatic production, my choice fell upon *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, one of Shakespeare's early plays and indeed a repository of the themes that are central to my research. Eros and desire push the action forward in this play, a play which the French literary critic Girard has used as a case study in his book *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*. Proteus, who falls in love with Silvia because his friend Valentine is in love with her, embodies perfectly Girard's theory of mimetic, that is imitative, desire, whereas Valentine's decision to hand Silvia over to Proteus for the sake of their friendship, thus treating her as a mere object, has allowed me to go deep into questions of gender in the seventeenth century.

As far as the Spanish literature is concerned, texts for the theatre were mainly based on Italian comedies or novellas. There is one play, however, whose original plot is pioneering and outstanding in making the case that gender is the product of conventions established at the social level. *La Fuerza de la Costumbre*, written by de Castro, is the story of two siblings, Félix and Hipólita, who are raised separately as if they were, respectively, a girl and a boy, and whom, throughout the course of the action, we see struggle to conform to what society prescribes as appropriate for their gender. Of the two, Hipólita is undoubtedly the one who resents the most the restrictions imposed on

her sex. A feminist character ante litteram, she fiercely rebels against the shackles of her gender.

My research was mostly devoted to comparing the English, the Italian, and the Spanish theatres in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. I have endeavoured to share out my attention equally among them, although I have sometimes struggled to ensure fair and equal treatment for each. Therefore, if and when one of the three contexts has managed to prevail over the others in terms of space and consideration, this was not the result of deliberate choice, but rather a consequence of the objective difficulty that one encounters when one puts together situations so different and far away, both spatially and conceptually, from each other.

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