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Voices of the *servetta*: the role of Emilia and Nerissa in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*

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*A mia mamma, Teresa
Vorrei che fossi qui con me*

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1. Introduction

The two plays chosen for this thesis are *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. They were selected for the reason that they both offer plenty of opportunities to explore the roles of women and, more specifically, female servants in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre and society. The female characters that will be analysed are *Othello*'s Emilia and *The Merchant of Venice*'s Nerissa, respectively Desdemona and Portia's ladies-in-waiting. Although they are minor characters (Emilia has 103 lines in total, while Nerissa only 36), with different social backgrounds and placed in different contexts, they both play fundamental roles for the development of the plays' plot. This study, through the analysis of various critical articles and works, aims to both examine their roles as women in service during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras and analyse Shakespeare's possible sources and inspiration for these specific plays and characters, in particular, the role that the Italian novelle and Commedia dell'arte had in the development of his works and the characterisation of his characters. Italian comedy, writing, masks and improvisation played a significant role in laying the foundation for English drama and Shakespeare's productions.

"I am bound to speak" (5.2.180) is what Emilia declares in *Othello* after Desdemona has been murdered by the hands of Othello and, indirectly, Iago. It is perhaps the perfect expression to summarise the content of this thesis. Both Emilia and Nerissa share the role of the confidante for their mistresses and they are not afraid of speaking up for them, even when the male characters in the plays try to threaten, harm, dismiss or ignore them. The subsequent chapters will discuss the importance of women's speech and voices inside the plays, how Emilia and Nerissa employ them and the significance of what at first glance seem like innocent objects but in fact turn out to be symbols that convey the thoughts or the social circumstances of a character (for example the handkerchief, the marital sheets, the caskets and the rings).

This study will consist of four chapters. The first one will discuss the sources from which Shakespeare drew inspiration for the plots of his works, in order to have the basis from which explore his innovations, writing choices and improved characters; the second will explore the Commedia dell'arte and its plausible connection with Shakespeare; the third will focus on the similarities between various Shakespeare's characters and several masks of the Italian Commedia dell'arte, such as Pantalone, Brighella and, in particular, Colombina; the fourth and final chapter will probe the role of women, wives and, above all, female servants in

England and in Shakespeare's plays. This thesis will, therefore, analyse how they are viewed and treated by other characters, especially by their mistresses and their husbands, whether or not they decide to speak their truths, how they change or help change the outcome of the plays and how they are received by the audience.

2. *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*'s probable sources and inspiration

Othello dates back to possibly 1602. It is based on a short story (Decade 3, Story 7) by Giovanni Battista Giraldi, a novelist from Ferrara also known as Cinthio, which was included in the *Hecatommithi* (a collection of 100 short stories distributed in 10 "deche", first published in Montereale, Sicily, in 1565, and modelled after Boccaccio's Decameron). The whole plot of Shakespeare's opera was developed from Cinthio's short story, except for some details and a few characters. In Cinthio's original version, Disdemona, a virtuous Venetian lady, marries a valiant military commander only known as the Moor, despite her family's opposition. She is the only character explicitly named in Cinthio's narrative; her name derives from the Greek term, Δυσδαίμονία, for "unlucky", which could have been chosen and used deliberately as a foreshadowing. The other characters are instead referred to by their roles, such as "the Moor", "the Ensign", "the Corporal of the squadron" and "the Ensign's wife". The Moor is sent to Cyprus and Disdemona accompanies him together with the Ensign and his wife. The Ensign, a handsome but depraved man, falls deeply in love with Disdemona and seeks revenge after he convinces himself that she does not reciprocate him for she is in love with a Corporal who often visits the Moor's house. The Ensign convinces the Moor that Disdemona has an extramarital affair with the Corporal of the squadron and offers him proof, a handkerchief. Just like Shakespeare's play, the Moor repeatedly asks his wife for a love token and, when she admits that she cannot find it, he convinces himself that she is guilty of cheating on him with the Corporal. In this version, Disdemona is deceived by her husband into opening a closet in their bedroom where the Ensign is hiding; as soon as she opens it, the Ensign comes out and kills her by beating her with a stocking full of sand. In order to make it look like an accident, the Moor and the Ensign stage the scene, knock the ceiling down and call for help. The Moor eventually discovers the Ensign's lies about his wife's betrayal and just demotes him, sparing his life. This action, however, does not go unpunished: the Ensign gets his revenge on the Moor by revealing to the Caporal the truth about who attacked and killed Disdemona. The Moor's death does not come from the Caporal or the judges at his trial, but from Disdemona's relatives. At the end of Cinthio's story, the Ensign eventually gets his punishment when one of his later schemes leads to him being tortured to death.

Cinthio's novella gave Shakespeare the basic structure for his plot and main characters: the military leader known as the Moor - Othello; his wife Disdemona, who gets unfairly accused of cheating and is murdered - Desdemona; a captain who gets demoted and is almost killed

by the villain - Cassio; the vindictive and wicked Ensign - Iago; the wife of the Ensign and Desdemona's friend - Emilia. However, there are a few differences between the two stories. In Cinthio's version, the Ensign's wife knows everything that he is contriving and does nothing to stop him or help her friend Desdemona. In *Othello*, Emilia is in the dark about her husband's machinations and, when she becomes aware of them, she immediately tries to help her mistress and condemn Iago. Unlike Othello, the Moor in Cinthio's short story never expresses remorse for killing his wife, and both he and the Ensign eventually flee Venice, meeting their deaths much later. Additionally, Cinthio incorporated a moral through the lady's perspective, claiming that Italian women are unsuitable for marriage to men of other nations, as they are depicted as uncontrollable and too passionate, a judgement Shakespeare chose not to retain. Shakespeare also introduces a new valuable character, the gullible Roderigo, who harbours a desire for the Moor's wife and is ultimately killed while attempting to assassinate Cassio.

Shakespeare, by setting his play during the War of Cyprus, also known as the Fourth Ottoman-Venetian War (1570-1573), gave Othello a stronger political context with which he managed to intensify the tension of an intimate and domestic tragedy. The conflict began with the Ottoman invasion of Cyprus, an island situated in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and controlled by the Republic of Venice since 1489. Shakespeare's story likely takes place in 1571 during the Battle of Lepanto, a significant naval battle won by the Holy League (a coalition arranged by Pope Pius V that included the Republic of Venice, the Spanish Empire, the Republic of Genoa, the Knights of Malta, the Duchy of Tuscany, Savoy, Urbino and Parma).

Even though it is a commonly accepted opinion that Shakespeare drew inspiration from Cinthio's novella, there are some scholars who do not agree. For example, Alexander Haggerty Krappe¹ lists various reasons why it is gratuitous to suppose that at the time Shakespeare actually read Cinthio's story and suggests another possible used source for his play. Krappe notices a certain amount of differences between *Othello* and Cinthio's novella. For example, in Shakespeare's play the two newlyweds leave for Cyprus immediately after getting married, while in the *Hecatommithi* they live together in Venice for some time; furthermore, in Cinthio's story the murder scene is different from *Othello*'s. In Giraldi's tale, the Ensign murders Desdemona with a stocking full of sand with the Moor's help, while in Shakespeare's play, it is Othello himself who kills Desdemona, not with a weapon but with his bare hands. Krappe ponders Shakespeare's change of the plot and of the murderer and

¹ A. H. Krappe, "A Byzantine Source of Shakespeare's *Othello*", *Modern Language Notes*, Volume 39, No. 3 (1924) The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 156-161.

suggests that the reason for these variations is the existence of another source: *Digenis Akritas*, the most renowned epic poem of Byzantine literature written in medieval Greek by an anonymous author in the 12th century. The epic illustrates the life of the hero Basil Digenis Akritas and is divided in two parts: the first one follows the lives of Basil's parents; the second one, instead, narrates Basil's childhood, his struggles and acts of heroism. In this second half, the hero falls in love with Eudocia, the daughter of a Byzantine general, and, after Basil defeats the young woman's opposing brother and the soldiers, he marries her. This epic offers various parallelisms with Shakespeare's play. Basil is the son of a Moorish emir and a Byzantine lady; he falls in love with the daughter of a governor; they get married without her father's consent; she accompanies him to his battles; clouded by jealousy and wishing that no other man would possess her after his death, he murders her. Krappe argues that, thanks to the existence and discovery of various manuscripts, it is probable that the epic poem was well known in the Byzantine empire and later in Europe. A manuscript of it was, in fact, found in the library of the Abbey of Santa Maria di Grottaferrata, Lazio, which is the last surviving medieval Byzantine monastery in Italy. According to Krappe, this proves that the epic was also known in Italy and that Cinthio's novella could have been inspired by it. There are naturally some differences between them: for example, in the epic there is no traitor or slanderer that tries to corrupt or control the hero, Basil decides to assassinate his wife on his own. Another one is the fact that in Giraldi's story, it is Disdemonia who makes the first move in courting the Moor, while in the epic, it is Basil who, after hearing of the beauty of Eudocia, takes the initiative and plays the lyre under her window in order to seduce her. Krappe elaborates on how the theme of the beautiful girl wooed with music goes back to the legends of King Solomon, widely known in the Byzantine empire, but also in Western Europe and in Russia. Whereas the theme of the girl initiating the courtship is typically Western and frequently employed in old French epic. Krappe suggests that in the *Hecatommithi* the Byzantine musical theme was probably replaced with the Western one because it was more familiar to the Italian readers. Another evidence of the Byzantine origin of Giraldi's story is the name of Disdemonia, which, as mentioned before, derives from the word "unfortunate" in Greek. Krappe concludes his article stating that Giraldi drew inspiration and elaborated a series of episodes from *Digenis Akritas*, that Giraldi's story is not the only reworking of these Byzantine episodes (he in fact suspects that there is another mysterious and lost version more faithful to the Greek epic, circulating in Italy during the Renaissance) and finally that

Shakespeare based his tragedy on this second unknown version, for *Othello* allegedly bears greater resemblance to the Byzantine epic than does the story of Cinthio.

Maurienne S. Adams provides a list of words that Shakespeare took from the Italian novella.² Adams explains how even though “verbal parallels often provide no definite clues as to whether Shakespeare had made use of the Italian or the French, the appearance in *Othello* of words transliterated from the Italian appears to confirm Shakespeare's use of the *Hecatommithi* in its original language”. One example of this transliteration from the Italian is the use of “acerbe” (1.3.350) which, according to Adams, suggests that Shakespeare saw Cinthio’s “in acerbissimo odio”; another one is “the signiory” (1.2.18) that is very close to “i signiori Venetiani”. Adams also suggests that Shakespeare drew inspiration from Giraldi’s *Hecatommithi* not only for *Othello* but for *Measure for Measure* (1603-1604) as well; in particular he used the fifth tale of the eighth deca (later known as *Epitia*, when in 1583 Giraldi dramatised and adjusted it), and George Whetstone’s *Right Excellent and Famous Historye of Promos and Cassandra* (1578).

Another probable source for Shakespeare’s *Othello* may be the novella *Il cavaliere Spada per gelosia ammazza se stesso ed anco la moglie perché non restasse viva dopo lui* written by Matteo Bandello in 1554, translated in François de Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques* in 1561, which in turn was translated in Felton’s *Certaine Tragicall Discourses* in 1567 as *The Albanoyse Captain*. Shakespeare could have had access to all three versions and could have taken inspiration for his play, for there are interesting similarities between the Italian novella and *Othello*. In Bandello’s short story, Regina, a beautiful twenty-four-year old widow, gets married to an Albanian soldier, who, as the tale unfolds, grows so jealous of his faithful and gentle wife that he decides to murder her so that, after his death, no other man can have her. It is clear that there are some parallels with Shakespeare’s play: the jealous foreign soldier who unfairly murders his wife; the lovely and kind wife who gets punished for her husband’s paranoia and who, even at the end, defends his actions; the maid who discovers the lady’s death and calls for help; the priest who offers the lady’s last confession; the mentions of the Turkish invasion and dangerous past lives and adventures.

While Shakespeare follows the basic structure of Cinthio and Bandello’s stories, the portrayal of Othello’s character seems to be influenced by *Cosmographia et geographia de Africa*, a work written in 1526 by Joannes Leo Africanus (born al-Hasan Muhammad

² M. S. Adams, “Ocular Proof” in *Othello* and Its Sources”, *PMLA*, Volume 79. No. 3 (June 1964), Modern Language Association, pp. 234-241.

al-Wazzan), an Andalusí diplomat, and published under the title *Della Descrittione dell’Africa et delle cose notabili che ivi sono* by Giovanni Battista Ramusio in his collection of travellers’ first-hand accounts *Delle navigationi e viaggi* in 1550. John Pory translated it in English in 1600 under the title *A Geographical Historie of Africa, Written in Arabicke and Italian by Iohn Leo a More*; this collection provides more than just a geographical account of the African continent, but it also contains detailed studies and observations on African people - their most noticeable and striking characteristics - which played a significant role in shaping the European perception of Africa and its inhabitants during the early modern period. These depictions and views on African inhabitants likely contributed to the development of Othello’s portrayal in Shakespeare’s play, framing the tragic protagonist’s outsider status and his complex relationship with himself and other characters in a broader and racial context. In his accounts, the author, while he praises Africans for their remarkable honesty and noble character, he also criticises them for their naivety, arguing that they are highly credulous, gullible and prone to believe things that are clearly impossible. Shakespeare’s Othello perfectly embodies these stereotypes, displaying traits such as uprightness, nobility but also an overwhelming tendency toward jealousy and poor self esteem. There are additional parallels between Shakespeare’s character and Leo Africanus himself. Both Othello and Africanus, in fact, share a significant personal history: they were born into Islam and later converted to Christianity; just as Africanus survived numerous perilous situations (he was first captured by Spanish corsairs and later imprisoned by the Knights Hospitaller), Othello, too, is depicted as having survived many life-threatening moments, with his own words recalling “Where in I spake of most disastrous chances, of moving accidents by flood and field, of hair-breadth scapes i’th’ imminent deadly breach, of being taken by the insolent foe and sold to slavery” (1.3.135-139).

The question of the source of *The Merchant of Venice* has been equally the subject of many studies. Believed to have been written around 1596 and 1597, a period following Shakespeare’s creation of plays like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III*, but prior to his composition of major tragedies of his later career, *The Merchant of Venice* has a long list of possible sources, from Italian’s tales to French drama, from English tragedy to Latin anecdotes. The fundamental structure of the play, featuring key characters such as the merchant, the impoverished suitor, the beautiful lady and the antagonist Jewish moneylender, closely mirrors stories found in various Italian narrative collections of the time. Shakespeare drew upon several aspects of these sources, including the symbolic casket test that Portia

subjects all of her suitors to. Although the play's Italian setting and its central marriage plot are typical of Shakespeare's earlier comedies, it is the characters of Portia, who represents his first truly remarkable female protagonist, and Shylock, the complex villain, that distinguish *The Merchant of Venice* and elevate it to a new artistic and thematic height. Shakespeare drew upon a wide range of medieval and early modern literary works in the creation of *The Merchant of Venice*. Scholars trace the concept of the three caskets, a central motif in the play, to the *Gesta Romanorum*, a 13th century Latin collection of tales and anecdotes. However, the primary inspiration for the plot of the play seems to have come from *Il Pecorone*, a 14th century Italian collection of short stories written by an unidentified Ser Giovanni Fiorentino between 1378 and 1385. The collection contains fifty short stories, organized in twenty-five days, each preceded by a preface and framed within a larger structure. One of them includes a story in which an Italian merchant is forced to forfeit a pound of flesh to a Jewish moneylender after his godson borrows money to court a woman in Belmont. In *Il Pecorone*, a rich merchant named Bindo, close to death, bequeaths all his fortune to his two older sons and leaves nothing to his younger child, Giannetto, for he desires for his son to go to Venice and work for one of the richest merchants of the city, sir Ansaldo, who has no successor. When Gianetto arrives in Venice he is welcomed by sir Ansaldo who treats him like a son and allows him to travel by sea searching for wealth. During his journey, Giannetto catches sight of an island, Belmont, where a beautiful widow is said to live and challenge men: whoever arrives in her island, after a night of dances and celebrations, has to sleep in her bed; if he succeeds in actually sleeping with her, then he can marry her and become the lord of Belmont but if he falls asleep and does not wake up until the morning after, then the widow will take everything he has with him. After the party, when it is time to go to bed with the woman, a maid offers Gianetto a glass of wine and he instantly falls asleep. The morning after, when he wakes up, the lady offers him a horse and money for his journey. Giannetto feels shame for the ship and riches that he has lost and is scared of Ansaldo's reaction, who, however, is just glad that his godson returned home safe and sound. This happens two times. The third time, however, Ansaldo does not have enough money to prepare a new ship, therefore he asks them to a Jewish moneylender from Mestre, who will take a pound of Ansaldo's flesh if he does not give them back in a year. Giannetto departs on his new ship and arrives once more in Belmont, where he is celebrated by everyone; when it comes the time to go to bed, a maid recommends him not to drink the wine the lady is going to offer him. This time, Giannetto does not fall asleep and spends the night with the widow.

Giannetto becomes the lord of Belmont and spends a whole year with his new wife, when he at last remembers the clause of the Jew's contract. When he arrives in Venice, he is helped by a young judge from Bologna (his wife dressed like a man), who explains to the Jewish moneylender that he can indeed obtain a pound of Ansaldo's flesh but only if he does so without spilling even a drop of blood, for if he fails and spill it, he will be executed. Giannetto offers money to the young judge in order to thank him for saving his godfather's life, but he refuses and instead asks for Giannetto's ring. When the lord arrives back home in Belmont, together with Ansaldo, his wife questions him about the missing ring and accuses him of cheating but ultimately reveals that she was the judge, making Giannetto fall even more in love with her.

Other critics have also found elements of *The Merchant of Venice* in Le Sylvain's *The Orator*, in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, in the lost *The Jew*, in Munday's *Zelauto*, and in *The Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages*. In Alexander Van De Busche's *The Orator* (1596), for example, a Jew threatens to demand a pound of Christian flesh. Scholars often point to Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589-1590) as yet another possible influence on *The Merchant of Venice*. The play was first performed in London a decade before Shakespeare's play. Although there is no concrete documentary evidence to confirm the extent of Shakespeare's exposure to Marlowe's work, it is likely that he would have at least heard of *The Jew of Malta*, if not seen a production. In Marlowe's play, the Jewish merchant Barabas embarks on a murderous rampage, ultimately killing his own daughter, Abigail, after she converts to Christianity. Like *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Jew of Malta* has sparked considerable discussion regarding its depiction of Jews. However, unlike Shylock, Barabas actually inflicts harm upon others, and his story ends with his capture and death, with his enemies united in their hatred for him. In contrast, the conclusion of *The Merchant of Venice* sees Shylock stripped of his wealth and religion but spared from death. This more lenient treatment of Shylock has led some critics to suggest that Shakespeare's portrayal of him could be seen as a humanistic counterpoint to Marlowe's Barabas.

In 1579, in his pamphlet "School of Abuse", Stephen Gosson, a sixteenth-century English satirist, refers to a lost play called *The Jew*, which he describes as "showing the greediness of worldly choosers, and the bloody minds of usurers".³ The words chosen by Gosson persuaded a number of scholars that *The Jew* must have been one of Shakespeare's sources for *The Merchant of Venice*, for its description seems to combine both peculiar plots. "The greediness

³ S. Gosson, *School of Abuse*, (1895) Westminster: A. Constable & Co., p. 30.

of worldly choosers” refers to Portia’s suitors from around the world who have to choose correctly among gold, silver or lead caskets in order to win the lady’s hand. The “bloody minds of usurers” instead refers to Shylock’s attempt to exhort a bloody penalty from Antonio.⁴ However, as Arthur Stonex argues: “unless the main outlines of it have been preserved in *The Merchant of Venice*, we can know nothing of the nature of *The Jew*, which was being acted at The Bull in 1579, beyond Stephen Gosson’s description on it”.⁵ Additionally, in Antony Munday’s *Zelauto* or *The Fountain of Fame* (1580), two friends fall in love with two women, one of whom is the daughter of a rich usurer; they pledge their right eyes in order to borrow money from the usurer, and when the sum is due and the moneylender brings them to court, they are saved by the wit of the two young women, disguised as lawyers. Hidden behind their male camouflage, they argue that the usurer must not shed a single drop of blood in his extraction of his fleshly payment and win the case.

J. Madison Davis and Sylvie L.F. Richard discuss the resemblance between Shakespeare’s story and the French tale of *Le Miracle de un marchand et un juif* (*The Miracle of the Merchant and the Jew*), which is the thirty-fifth play in the collection *Miracles de Notre Dame par personages*, also called the Cange manuscript.⁶ This collection consist of forty miracle plays dating from 1339 to 1382; Davis and Richard explain that, “originally written for the *Puys des orfevres a Paris*, a Parisian goldsmiths' guild, these plays first appeared during the reign of Phillippe de Valois as part of an annual poetry and drama competition. Each year the guild recorded the ‘minutes’ of their competition. By the end of the century, they had created a large manuscript, which is now the only surviving example of guild dramatic activities between 1313 and 1380”. Whilst *Le Miracle* lacks the casket plot, the commonly named bond plot is there: a merchant, Audry, who is kind with his friends, a Jewish usurer, Mousse, a sea journey to recover the money, a trial in which the Jew demands his due and his consequent conversion to Christianity. Even though Lady Belmont is absent, the Virgin Mary plays the role of the central moral figure who teaches the other characters how to live, like Portia basically does in Shakespeare’s play. The French merchant, Audry, just like his English counterpart, Antonio, remain good Christians showing mercy towards the Jew. However, even though Antonio asks the court to return Shylock’s fine, he does instigate the Jew’s forced conversion. While this results distasteful and cruel to modern audiences and

⁴ S. Gosson, *School of Abuse*, (1895), Westminster: A. Constable & Co., p. 30.

⁵ A. B. Stonex, “The Usurer in Elizabethan Drama”, *PMLA*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1926), Modern Language Association, pp. 190-210.

⁶ J. M. Davis and S. L.F. Richards, “The Merchant and the Jew: A Fourteenth-Century French Analogue to *The Merchant of Venice*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1985), Oxford University Press, pp. 56-63.

readers, to Shakespeare's spectators it was probably seen as an act of mercy. Mousse, the *Le Miracle Jew*, is less of a villain than Shylock, as Davis and Richard claim: "He seems to hold no hatred for the Christians and is more than willing to lend money to Audry, and with no ulterior motive. [...] Furthermore, Mousse does not demand Audry's bondage on a technicality as does Shylock. When Mousse is visited by God and His angels, he willingly converts".⁷ And this conversion does not leave the reader with the mixed feelings that Shylock's incites. The presence of *Le Miracle de un marchand et un juif* shows the inherent complexity involved in the field of source studies. This work not only suggest the existence of a network of interconnected narratives, including folk tales and early drama that may have influenced Shakespeare, either directly or indirectly, but also invites reflection on the extent of the cultural and literal exchange between the European Continent, particularly France and Italy, and the Renaissance drama of England.

However, *Le Miracle de un marchand et un juif* is not the exclusively possible French source used by Shakespeare. Davis and Richard, in addition, cite two other works. *Le Farce of maistre Pierre Pathelin* (*The Farce of Master Pathelin*), composed between 1464 and 1469 by an unknown French author, presents a few resemblances to *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, Pathelin's use of a disguise in order to plead the case of a shepherd against a tradesman. He acts as an advocate in the same way that Portia does, "ironically undermining the legal system in the service of justice". The second work is *L'Advocacie Nostre Dame* (*Our Lady's Lawsuits*, 1321-1324) in which the Virgin Mary (mentioned in *Le Farce of maistre Pierre Pathelin* as the patron saint of lawyers) plays a role similar to that of Portia. *L'Advocacie Nostre Dame* belongs to a body of medieval Western European texts known as *Processus Sathanae* (*Satan's lawsuit*), in which Satan lays legal claim to the soul of humankind in order to repopulate hell, the Virgin Mary acts as a defence attorney for humanity and Christ sits in judgment; the majority of the text is cast in the form of a *disputatio*, as a confrontation between Satan and the Virgin Mary. When Satan asserts that women have no right to argue in court, Mary answers that women may defend all the miserable creatures in the world and that there is nothing more miserable than humanity. She wins every argument against him and saves the human race from damnation. Just as the Virgin Mary outwits Satan and saves humanity, Portia outwits Shylock and saves Antonio.

⁷ J. M. Davis and S. L.F. Richards, "The Merchant and the Jew: A Fourteenth-Century French Analogue to The Merchant of Venice", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No, 1 (1985), Oxford University Press, pp. 56-63.

Christopher Whitfield suggests a probable friend of Shakespeare's, Sir Lewis Lewkenor, as a possible source of details of Venice and its law.⁸ Lewkenor translated *De magistratibus et Republica Venetorum* (*The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, 1599), a treatise written between 1524 and 1541 by Gasparo Contarini in which he describes the institutions of the Republic to non-Venetian readers.

In addition to all these possible sources, there is another one that is essential to explore and examine in the following chapter, for, with its famous characters, improvisation techniques and dynamic performance style, it played a significant role in shaping Shakespeare's comedic vision. Another key element within this interconnected network of culture and literature: the Italian Commedia dell'arte.

⁸ C. Whitfield, *Sir Lewis Lewkenor and 'The Merchant of Venice': A Suggested Connexion*, (April 1964), Notes and Queries, pp. 123-133.

3. The Commedia dell'arte and its presence in Shakespeare's plays

It was 25 February 1545 when, in Padua, eight men appeared before a notary, Vincenzo Fortuna, and signed a contract. These artists had decided to form a sort of fraternal company to perform comedies from place to place to seek out an ever-new audience with the aim of earning money that they would divide equally. The company that sanctioned the baptism of the Commedia dell'arte was that of Maffeo del Re, the first documented Italian theater director. The contract would last a year, they would buy a horse to transport costumes and stage props and they would provide assistance in the event of accidents or illnesses. That day in Padua, when some artists decided to turn their artistic knowledge into a real profession, the so-called Commedia dell'arte (or "a soggetto" or "all'improvviso") was symbolically born. The company was formed by Maffeo del Re, or Maphio, Vincenzo da Venezia, Francesco de la Lira, Geronimo da San Luca, Giandomenico Rizzo, Giovanni da Treviso, Tofano de Bastian and Francesco Moschini. However, not everyone could boast the title of theatre professional; only companies that established their own statute of laws and rules and were recognised by the duchies could use it. With the Commedia dell'arte appeared a new organization of specialized actors with technical, mimetic, vocal, even acrobatic training behind them and sometimes with cultural preparation too. All the others remained simple amateur companies or, in a derogatory term, "ruba piazze". From here on, first in Italy, and later in Europe, shows were produced for a paying audience - an audience that decided on its own initiative to sit in the theatre, recognizing the work of the actor as a real profession. These actors performed written regular works, tragedies, pastoral dramas and the so-called "opere regie", adapted from Spanish. However, their true field, for which they became famous throughout Europe, was the commedia "a soggetto", that is, the comedy for which nothing was written except a scenario ("canovaccio"), leaving the dialogic and mimetic development to the improvisation of the comedians.

In total rupture with the past, in which female roles were portrayed by disguised men and young boys, this moment represents an early milestone in the historical emancipation of women. In a substantially patriarchal society, women with a certain culture and strong artistic talents joined the stage professionals. It was the Commedia dell'arte that brought women on the stage. The name of a woman, Lucrezia di Siena, appeared for the first time in a 1564 contract drawn up by a notary in Rome. While only at the end of the century,

around 1577, women, replacing the disguised men in the female roles, would enter the companies as full members. The first actresses were "cortigiane oneste", experts in music, singing and dancing. One name among all the women who took part in this great theatrical season of Isabella Andreini Canali (1562-1604) from Padua: she joined the Bologna theatre company, called Comici Gelosi, which included Francesco Andreini (1548-1624), stage name of Francesco Cerracchi, whom she married in 1578. She was extremely famous in Italy and Europe for her compositions in verse and prose and her marked interpretative ability.

Initially, these artists performed in the cities' squares with very simple sets. The desire for emancipation, however, quickly led to the construction of theatrical spaces expressly dedicated to this new way of doing theatre. Alongside the performance halls of the ducal spaces where a selected audience could access only if invited, the first paying theatres began to flourish. These theatres were open to a varied audience belonging to different social classes. At that time the commoners could attend while standing, in the area surrounding the stage; while the bourgeois and aristocrats paid a higher price to sit comfortably high up in the boxes. In Venice, several "stanze" were built by the most influential families to try to get hold of the shows of the most important and famous fraternal companies that were formed in those years. The first Italian public theatre, built in the San Cassian district in Venice, at the behest of the Tron family, dates back to 1637. Obviously, building theatrical spaces became synonymous with wealth, a sign of a growing enrichment of the Italian cities.

Although they did not respect the canonically Aristotelian three unities (of action, of time and of place) and expanded love intrigues, the Comici dell'arte brought to the stages not only the stories of the comedies of Plautus and Terence, but also the stories of contemporary authors, such as Ariosto and Machiavelli. They did so in their own innovative way: every actor played the same character throughout his career, such as Pantalone, Dottore, the Capitano, the "innamorata", comic servants (called "zanni"), and so forth; the jokes, closing remarks, monologues and catchphrases were memorised and adapted with very few variations to the various comedies; the script was replaced by the "canovaccio", a plot outline, divided in scenes, that indicated the characters and main events but not the lines, which were improvised by the actors directly on stage; the use of "lazzi", improvised comic business, either visual or verbal.

Every Commedia dell'arte company had various characters (masks), scenarios and comical witty exchanges that were characteristic and typical of the Italian region in which the company was founded. These characters were, then, created and developed by the actors themselves. Various Italian performers, in fact, are associated with the masks and roles that they perfected: for example, Francesco Andreini took the stock mask of the Capitano and created the arrogant Capitan Spaventa; Tiberio Fiorillo (1608-1694) did the same with Scaramouche (his French version of Scaramuccia). A common Commedia dell'arte plotline usually centered on the romantic struggles of the "innamorati", a young beautiful couple whose relationship is hampered by their parents, generally hers. The typical Commedia performance employed: two elderly men (Pantalone and Dottore, for example), two "innamorati" (the lovers, such as Isabella and Florindo), two "zanni" (comic servants, like Arlecchino and Pulcinella), a maid (the most famous one is Colombina), a soldier (for example, Capitano) and additional supporting roles. Pantalone was generally portrayed as a serious Venetian merchant, seldom intentionally comic and prone to long tirades and good advice. Dottore was originally a gullible doctor or a lascivious lawyer from Bologna who spoke in an overly pedantic blend of Italian and Latin. The "innamorati" were notably unmasked and enticing thanks to their physical attractiveness, grace, elegance and Tuscan dialect. The "zanni" (a variant of the name Gianni) originated in the second half of the fifteenth century in the comic companies of the Valle Padana, in the North of Italy, where he embodied an extremely ignorant and impoverished peasant; by the second half of the sixteenth century, he became a central character in the plays of the Commedia dell'arte.

Various Commedia characters began as stock masks and later evolved into much more complex and well-known roles, particularly with the help and talent of accomplished actors. Capitano, for example, began as a satirical representation of the Spanish soldier who was known for being boastful and for bragging about foreign dangerous adventures while running away from every threat at home. Actor Tiberio Fiorillo, as previously mentioned, reinterpreted this character during his performances in Paris (1640), perfecting and polishing it to suit the French audience preferences: here he preferred the guitar to the sword and became celebrated for his wit, more complex soul and sophisticated pantomime. It was customary that a Commedia character was inherited from one generation to the next; Silvio Fiorillo (1560-1632), in fact, inherited the Capitano mask from his father, Tiberio. He made it his own and created the mask of Capitan Matamoros,

a cowardly Spanish soldier who brags about feats that he has never actually accomplished. However, it was another mask that made him famous: Pulcinella. Fiorillo was, in fact, the very first actor to create and interpret this Neapolitan character. Thanks to him, the mask of Pulcinella landed in the renowned comic companies of the North of Italy and became the antagonist of Arlecchino, the foolish and gullible servant from Bergamo. Pulcinella and Arlecchino are the most famous “zanni” in the *Commedia dell’arte* tradition. Over time, the role of the servant evolved into two distinct categories: the first one consists of masks like Brighella or Pedrolino, clever servants and scheming masterminds who were behind the plot’s complications; the second one, in contrast, entails the foolish servants prone to comic absurdities and ludicrous ideas, like Arlecchino and Pulcinella. The “zanni” employed various comic techniques, such as “burle” and “lazzi”: the former are practical jokes involving a trickster being outwitted by a seemingly simple but cunning peasant; the latter are comic routines and gags. In the *Commedia* custom the servant Arlecchino often had a romantic interest: Colombina, the “servetta”.

Colombina (literally, little dove) is one of the most important figures of the *Commedia dell’arte*. She has Venetian origins but is mentioned already in 1530 in the texts of the *Accademici Intronati* of Siena. She embodies the character of the crafty, graceful and lively servant, always at the center of the amorous intrigues of her mistress, Rosaura or Isabella, whom she serves with every kind of stratagem. Colombina’s characteristics, such as cunning and ingenuity, have their origins in Plautus’ comedies. Although she is attractive and frequently pursued, she remains devoted to her beloved Arlecchino. In fact, she often appears on stage as his betrothed or wife, to the extent that she occasionally adopted the name of Arlecchina (the female Arlecchino) and even his typical costume. She frequently becomes the target of Pantalone’s affections, Rosaura’s stern and authoritative father, whom she effortlessly outwits every time. Pantalone lives in an opulent palace overlooking the Grand Canal in Venice with his daughter, who is usually portrayed as talkative, spirited, quick-tempered and vain. She is in love with the young Florindo, the *Innamorato*, though their relationship is hampered by her father’s disapproval. Nevertheless, she finds an ally in her maid, Colombina, who assists her in arranging secret meetings with her beloved. One of the earliest and most famous actresses to play the role of this maidservant was Caterina Biancolelli (1665-1716); her family members were part of the *Comédie-Italienne* troupe *Ancienne Troupe de la Comédie Italienne*, which performed in France.

Commedia dell'arte reached its peak in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Italian theatre troupes toured the royal courts all across Europe (especially France and Spain) with their renowned performers, such as Isabella Andreini and Caterina Biancolelli. While specific mentions of Italian comic performances are relatively scarce in English theatrical records, various references of the Commedia dell'arte characters by Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights suggest that these performances were probably also held in London at the time. Given his own professional interests, it is not to be excluded that Shakespeare might have had the chance to be somehow familiar with such techniques.⁹ Drusiano Martinelli (1557-1630), a renowned “capocomico”, is known to have appeared in London in 1578, though the specifics of his performance - its nature or venue - remain undocumented. Italian culture and civilisation exerted a significant influence on Elizabethan London. Interactions occurred between English and Italian touring theatre companies, particularly in Paris, where the Italian Gelosi troupe spent extended periods. Notably, the English comic actor William Kemp (1560-1603), known for his roles as Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, was present in Rome around the year 1600. In his 1926 article *Will Kemp and the Commedia dell'arte*, Louis Wright explores the potential interactions between Will Kemp, Shakespeare's clown until 1599, and the Italian Commedia dell'arte.¹⁰ As a member of the Earl of Leicester's Men, one of the most prominent acting troupes in Elizabethan England, Kemp toured continental Europe in 1586. During this tour, the company performed at the Danish court in Elsinore and in Utrecht, where they presented *The Labours of Hercules*, an acrobatic performance previously staged by Italian actors before English diplomats in Paris on 18 June 1572. By 1590, Kemp appears to have been recognized by Italian performers. Moreover, in 1601, after departing from Shakespeare's company, he travelled to Italy and Germany.¹¹ Kathleen Lea's research provides a critical documentary foundation for examining this topic. Her comprehensive study addresses the various channels of contact between England and the Commedia dell'arte. She systematically considers the roles of English travellers in Italy, English diplomats in Paris who attended Commedia performances, and English actors performing across Europe (one of the most

⁹ T. J. Faherty, “Othello dell'arte”: The Presence of “Commedia” in Shakespeare's Tragedy”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May 1991), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 180.

¹⁰ L. B. Wright, “Will Kemp and the Commedia dell'Arte”, *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 41, No. 8 (1926), The John Hopkins University Press, p. 517.

¹¹ R. Henke, “Back to the Future: A Review of Comparative Studies in Shakespeare and the Commedia dell'Arte”, *Early Theatre*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2008), *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama*, p. 230.

compelling instances of English and Commedia actors being in the same place at the same time occurs in Paris in 1604, shortly before the Gelosi troupe embarked on the ill-fated journey that would lead to Isabella Andreini's death), Italian performers in England and the staging of Italian plays in London by Italian musicians and amateurs such as Alfonso Ferrabosco (1543-1588).¹² Given his familiarity with Italian literature and comedy and his use of novellas written by Italian authors, such as Boccaccio, Giraldi, Bandello, Fiorentino and Ariosto for his plot material, it has been suggested that Shakespeare even possessed some knowledge of the Italian language. However, it is equally possible that he became acquainted with these stories and theatrical plays just through other intermediaries fluent in Italian. Nevertheless, being an active member of London's theatrical society, Shakespeare would almost certainly at least have heard accounts of Drusiano Martinelli's visit in 1578. The impact of the "comici" on London audiences should not be underestimated.¹³

The influence of the Commedia dell'arte in Shakespeare's plays is also evident in his incorporation of Italian "lazzi", improvised comic routines, whether visual or verbal. Instances of the visual variety, such as beatings, comic horseplay and the like, appear frequently throughout his works and have been documented. Examples of the verbal kind are more difficult to trace for the surviving "canovacci" are no more than brief plots upon which the "comici" improvised dialogue and action. They usually are only a few pages long therefore, it is impossible to know precisely what any given character actually said during a performance. Over the course of time, however, the actors began memorizing set pieces for use at appropriate moments in the plays. These connections were passed on from one generation to the next. In his *Selva, ovvero Zibaldone di concetti comici* (1734), Placido Adriani (1690-1766) collected and provided examples of verbal "lazzi": prologues, tirades, entrance and exit passages, love poems, reprimands, afflictions, misplaced words and so forth. All these can be found in Shakespeare's works.¹⁴ Wordplay through puns and proverbs constituted another prominent source of verbal "lazzi". The mask Pantalone, in particular, was renowned for his extensive use of puns. In Shakespeare's plays, such linguistic devices range from the trivial and clichéd to the

¹² R. Henke, "Back to the Future: A Review of Comparative Studies in Shakespeare and the Commedia dell'Arte", *Early Theatre*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2008), *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama*, p. 231.

¹³ E. Steele, "Verbal Lazzi in Shakespeare's Plays", *Italica Anglo-Italian Studies and Italian Literature in English Translation*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (1976), American Association of Teachers of Italian, pp. 214-215.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

bawdy and, at times, even the incomprehensible. Much like the performers of the Commedia dell'arte, Elizabethan actors appeared to relish in the display of verbal technique reminiscent of medieval drama and Tudor morality plays. Shakespeare employed puns not solely for humorous purposes, but also to convey antagonism or to provide moments of emotional release.¹⁵ As Eugene Steele eloquently asserts: "Influence cannot be ruled out, the more so as Italian players of the Commedia and Elizabethan players were certainly in contact in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, if not in England. Coincidence is always possible in literature".¹⁶

¹⁵ E. Steele, "Verbal Lazzi in Shakespeare's Plays", *Italica Anglo-Italian Studies and Italian Literature in English Translation*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (1976), American Association of Teachers of Italian, p. 219.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 220.

4. Pantalone, Brighella, Capitano, Isabella and Colombina

Shakespeare's potential debt to Italian Commedia dell'arte is observable in various characters of his plays. Therefore, it is worth outlining a detailed analysis of the parallels and analogies between major and minor characters in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* and those of the Commedia. These similarities collectively reinforce the hypothesis that Shakespeare might have drawn some elements from the Italian theatre. Shakespeare often favoured adapting pre-existing novellas, reinterpreting and reworking them within his own dramatic universe.¹⁷ Even though critics and scholars, over time, have acknowledged the possibility that the Italian theatre, especially Commedia dell'arte, had influenced Shakespeare and his plays, its significance has historically been underestimated. As Louis Geroge Clubb has observed, even though direct evidence of Shakespeare's exposure to specific Commedia performances remains elusive, his plays nevertheless exhibit a clear affinity with the conventions of Italian theatre.¹⁸

The Commedia dell'arte is characterized by a recurring ensemble of stock characters who appear, with slight variations, across most scenarios. These typically include two or more pairs of young lovers ("innamorati"), an occasional braggart soldier (Capitano), a pair of servants ("zanni"), one clever, the other foolish, one or two older men ("vecchi"), such as Pantalone and Dottore, a maidservant ("servetta"), commonly Colombina or Franceschina, and, when required, a variety of secondary characters. Some scholars contend that in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare drew upon the traditional Commedia dell'arte figures, such as Pantalone and his youthful, marriageable daughter ("innamorata") in creating the characters of Shylock and Jessica.¹⁹ Pantalone is usually portrayed as an elderly Venetian and a miserly merchant. Depending on the dramatic context, he may appear as a parsimonious figure, a sympathetic father, or even an ostentatious dandy. He is typically depicted as treating his employees with cruelty, a trait that evokes historical accusations against Venetian merchants for exploiting the working class. Shylock's appearance likely bore a strong resemblance to the Commedia dell'arte character Pantalone, not only in terms of certain personality traits but also in visual

¹⁷ S. Costa, "Commedia dell'Arte Translations: Three Pantalones in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shakespeare in Succession: Translation and Time*, (February 2023), McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 246-247.

¹⁸ L. G. Clubb, "How Do We Know When Worlds Meet?" from *Shakespeare and Renaissance Literary Theories*, Michele Marrapodi, (March 2011), Routledge, London, p. 283.

¹⁹ S. Costa, "Commedia dell'Arte Translations: Three Pantalones in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shakespeare in Succession: Translation and Time*, (February 2023), McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 245.

representation. Although Shakespeare's plays contain few stage directions, a careful reconstruction of stage action based on the dialogue reveals two notable details: Shylock wears a gabardine coat, as he himself states in *The Merchant of Venice* (1.3.104); and he carries a knife and a sharpening tool, as indicated by Bassanio's question, "Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly?" (4.1.121). These elements, his attire, his age, and features traditionally associated with Jewish identity from the eighteenth century onward, such as a pointed beard and a long nose, correspond closely with the established visual characteristics of the Venetian mask of Pantalone, as evidenced in some of its most iconic portrayals.²⁰ While Portia can be associated with the Italian "innamorata", for her late father hinders her attempt at marrying a man of her choosing, when she is disguised as the young male lawyer Balthasar, she also plays the role of the Dottore.²¹ The Dottore is an aristocrat who travels to Bologna in pursuit of a university degree. He is a jurist and plays one of the wealthy "vecchi" who forbid the comedy's lovers to pursue their relationship. The entire courtroom scene, therefore, can be seen as a re-enactment of a typical exchange between the two "vecchi", Pantalone and Dottore, frequently found in Commedia dell'arte scenarios.

Another character inspired by Italian Pantalone can be found in the opening scene of *Othello*, in which Iago rouses the half-dressed Brabantio with cries that "his daughter, and his bags" (1.1.80) have been stolen. This scene evokes a classic scenario drawn from the Commedia dell'arte, specifically, the dynamic between the mischievous Brighella and the excitable, miserly figure of Pantalone. Brabantio's unsuccessful attempts to arrange a marriage for Desdemona with one of the "wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (1.2.68); his obliviousness to her clandestine relationship with Othello under his very own roof, and his ready belief in the power of love potions and trickery, all reflect conventional traits of the comic character Pantalone.²² One more *Othello* scene, featuring Iago and Roderigo, introduces another note of comic potential: the clever and discontented servant acting in opposition to a credulous master, an arrangement that, in both Commedia dell'arte and Shakespeare's work, ensures the master remains the last to uncover the truth. One particular servant figure from the Commedia tradition closely parallels Iago. Among the

²⁰ S. Costa, "Commedia dell'Arte Translations: Three Pantalones in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shakespeare in Succession: Translation and Time*, (February 2023), McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 250-253.

²¹ H. Scolnicov, "The Jew and the Justice of Venice", *Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance: Appropriation, Transformation, Opposition*, (April 2016), Taylor and Francis, pp. 287.

²² T. J. Faherty, "Othello dell'arte": The Presence of "Commedia" in Shakespeare's Tragedy", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May 1991), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 185-186.

“zanni” (such as Arlecchino and Francatrippa), Brighella stands out as the archetypal schemer, an instigator of plots and manipulations on the comedic stage. Although Brighella’s character was somewhat softened by the late seventeenth century, during the period contemporaneous with *Othello*, he was still regarded as “without doubt the most disturbing” of the Italian comic figures.²³ Brighella inhabits the “calli” (narrow Venetian streets) and harbours of Venice; although not a merchant himself, he embodies the mercenary spirit. Nothing is sacred to him. He willingly facilitates any request in exchange for payment. He thrives when able to serve multiple interests at once, much like Iago, who simultaneously promises Desdemona to Roderigo, reinstatement to Cassio, reconciliation to Desdemona, and vengeance to Othello. In this, Brighella, like Iago, is a master of betrayal. As has been noted, “Brighella’s spine is so flexible that he can insinuate himself into any sort of nook or cranny and disappear completely [...] he knows [...] how to make the most of every occasion.”²⁴ Just like Iago slipping away under cover of night before Brabantio can identify him or stealing Desdemona’s handkerchief and planting it in Cassio’s lodgings. He also stabs Roderigo and returns to the scene under the guise of a concerned bystander.²⁵

In her analysis of *Othello* in relation to the Italian Commedia dell’Arte, Barbara de Mendonça contends that Othello is the sole character who lacks a direct counterpart within the traditional Commedia framework. She argues that Shakespeare deliberately isolates him in this manner to underscore his status as an outsider in Venetian society and to highlight his unfamiliarity with its customs and values. According to de Mendonça, Othello’s incongruity with the other characters - who reflect types from Commedia - serves to make his estrangement both within the narrative and on stage visually and thematically apparent to the audience.²⁶ Nevertheless, within the microcosm of the Commedia dell’Arte, there exists a character type who is, by definition, an outsider among the Venetians. Mercenary captains, often employed alternately by Venice and its rival city-states, were widely despised by the civilian population, who regarded them with fear due to their ferocity in combat and their cruelty during peacetime. Although these soldiers played a role in enabling Venice’s acquisition of wealth from the East, they were perceived

²³ P. L. Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*, (June 1966), New York: Dover Publications, p. 161.

²⁴ Ivi, pp. 162.

²⁵ T. J. Faherty, “*Othello dell’arte*”: The Presence of “Commedia” in Shakespeare’s Tragedy”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May 1991), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 183-184.

²⁶ B.H. de Mendonça, “*Othello: A Tragedy Built on a Comic Structure*”, *Shakespeare Survey*, (January 1969), Cambridge University Press, p. 36.

merely as necessary evils within the economic system.²⁷ The Venetians' disdain for these figures was satirised on the Commedia stage through the character of Il Capitano, a boastful, bombastic figure, known for brandishing his sword, engaging in bluster, and ultimately revealing himself to be both a coward and a fool. Well-known incarnations of this archetype included Capitan Giangurgolo, Il Vappo, Capitan Matamoros, and Capitan Coccodrillo, all descendants of a prototype created by Francesco Andreini. A former soldier himself, Andreini had been captured and enslaved by the Turks for several years before returning to Venice, where he introduced his theatrical creation, Capitan Spaventa della Valle Inferna, to the stage.²⁸ The character of Capitano expresses himself exclusively in exaggerated hyperboles, and his grandiose rhetoric virtually demands ridicule. He is domineering toward women and servants, yet deludes himself into believing that they are captivated rather than repelled by his ostentatious bravado. He imagines that his fantastical tales, featuring battles against gods, giants, and even Death, are received with awe, despite the conspicuous absence of any witnesses to corroborate them. While he claims, with feigned humility, that women are irresistibly drawn to him, he asserts that indulging their affections would simply interfere with his professional duties. This underlying sexual insecurity is easily manipulated: when a playful, mocking flirt offers him flattery, he is instantly smitten and transforms into a fool for love. However, once she begins to reveal her genuine disdain, Capitano turns to threats and bluster, until her true "innamorato" appears on stage. At that point, he feigns indifference and retreats in fear, leaving the lovers and the audience, who have been in on the joke all along, to laugh at his expense.²⁹ Teresa Faherty invites to momentarily set aside Othello's more sympathetic qualities in order to recognize the striking presence of Commedia dell'arte elements in his characterization. In particular, she highlights the clear echoes of Il Capitano in Othello's speech "for know, Iago, / But that I love the gentle Desdemona, / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth" (1.2.24-28). Although the tone of the passage is confessional and seemingly modest, the self-centeredness and hyperbolic language characteristic of the Capitano figure remain discernible. Furthermore, voices within the play - most notably that of Iago - actively reinforce Othello's resemblance to the braggart soldier. Iago derides Othello's romantic

²⁷ T. J. Faherty, "Othello dell'arte": The Presence of "Commedia" in Shakespeare's Tragedy", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May 1991), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 187.

²⁸ T. J. Faherty, "Othello dell'arte": The Presence of "Commedia" in Shakespeare's Tragedy", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May 1991), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 187.

²⁹ Ivi, 188.

tales used to win Desdemona as nothing more than “bragging and telling her fantastical lies” (2.1.223-224), thereby casting him firmly in the mold of the boastful, theatrical Capitano.³⁰ It is possible that the endless inventiveness and boastful rhetoric of Capitano is what initially inspired Shakespeare to conceive a *Commedia dell’arte*-style play centered around this figure reimagined as a tragic hero. Although Shakespeare tempers many of Capitano’s more excessive traits in the character of Othello, certain comic features, particularly his tendency toward intimidation and cowardice, take on a more unsettling dimension in their tragic context. Lines such as “I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me!” (4.1.200) and “You heard her say herself, it was not I” (5.2.127) exemplify this transformation. Shakespeare reinforces Othello’s resemblance to the Italian Capitano by assigning him a subordinate, his lieutenant, who despises him for what he perceives as arrogance. Subsequently, Iago’s strategy for Othello’s undoing involves staging a scenario drawn directly from *Commedia dell’arte*: the extravagant and credulous Capitano is duped by the “innamorata,” who in truth prefers another lover.³¹

Commedia dell’arte “innamoratas” are typically depicted as long-suffering, permissive wives, coquettish lovers or defiant daughters; they are usually involved in romantic affairs challenged by their family, especially by their fathers. Isabella, the most famous “innamorata” of the *Commedia* tradition, was originally created by Isabella Andreini. Initially conceived as an idealised representation of a young woman in love, she was also acclaimed for her sharp wit and eloquent speech. Eventually, her character evolved from a gentle, affectionate young woman into a more assertive and flirtatious one, who exerted control over both her suitors and her parents. She became the embodiment of an independent spirit, which some deem as a somewhat masculine disposition.³² This characterization aptly suits both Desdemona and Portia. Desdemona, a gentle and motherless young woman, defies her father’s will to marry the man she loves. Her fierce defence of her marriage to the Moor demonstrates the duality of the mask of the “innamorata”, combining demure demeanor with passion and decisive action. Desdemona’s secret elopement with Othello, her bold defiance with both her enraged father and the Venetian senate (1.3), her adventurous spirit, for example when she demands to leave for Cyprus together with her husband (1.3.611), and her titillating verbal

³⁰ T. J. Faherty, “*Othello dell’arte*”: The Presence of “*Commedia*” in Shakespeare’s Tragedy”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May 1991), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 188.

³¹ Ivi, 190.

³² P. L. Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*, (June 1966), New York: Dover Publications, pp. 272-276.

exchange with Iago on the quay while waiting for Othello's ships to arrive (2.1), all contribute to her resemblance to Isabella. However, whereas the Italian "innamorata" charm lies in her enchanting nature, Desdemona's defiance, particularly her deception of her father, carries a more unsettling implication on Shakespeare's deeply patriarchal stage. Brabantio's warning to Othello that "she deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (1.3.293) reflects this anxiety, casting Desdemona's independence not merely as alluring, but as potentially dangerous.³³ Portia demonstrates similar qualities when, disguised as a young male lawyer, she ingeniously intervenes to save Antonio's life on behalf of Bassanio. Even though she is neither a queen nor a courtesan, she manages to achieve global renown. Both Bassanio and the Prince of Morocco are bewitched by her beauty, captivated by her virtue and tempted by her wealth - all qualities celebrated across the world. It is perhaps this fame that compels her to act and put herself out there. Seizing the opportunity to enhance even more her reputation, she hastily departs for Venice with only a loosely formed plan and her loyal maidservant and sidekick, Nerissa. There, she astonishes the entire court with her brilliant and cunning interpretation of legal and moral principles and laws. Her passion for performance and decisive action seems to surpass even her professed loyalty and submission to Bassanio, as well as her concern for preserving her own reputation. Her performance, while dressed as a male lawyer, leaves all present, including Shylock, thoroughly impressed. Portia speaks the most lines in the play (578), has more prominent scenes than any male character, and consistently takes the initiative in her interactions, contributing to her commanding and authoritative presence.³⁴ Thanks to their verbal skill and wit, Portia and Desdemona deviate from the early modern ideal of the submissive, silent and obedient wife. Instead they align more closely with the tradition of the shrew - assertive, articulate and resistant to patriarchal norms.

Emilia and Nerissa may be compared to the stock character known as the "servetta". This archetype is embodied by numerous maidservants and confidantes, most notably Colombina, as well as characters like Corallina and Smeraldina, who typically serve as attendants to noblewomen. These figures frequently assist their mistresses in romantic endeavours, occasionally challenge the ambitions of older male authority figures, or act as mediators on behalf of the young lovers ("innamorati"). Despite the diversity of their

³³ T. J. Faherty, "Othello dell'arte": The Presence of "Commedia" in Shakespeare's Tragedy", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May 1991), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 187.

³⁴ P.A. Brown, *The Diva's Gift to the Shakespearean Stage: Agency, Theatricality, and the Innamorata*, (2021) Oxford University Press, pp. 194-196.

functions, they are almost invariably portrayed as the objects of Arlecchino's romantic interest. Within the traditional comedic hierarchy, the maid servant occupies a position just below the "innamorata". Accordingly, she would typically hold one of the lowest ranks in the dramatic structure. However, as theatrical conventions evolved, particularly in eighteenth century French and Italian theatre, the female servant gained increasing prominence. In many cases, she emerged as the principal comic actress, often rivaling or even surpassing the importance of the leading dramatic or serious female roles. The "servetta" represents a fully developed theatrical character, portrayed with specific attributes such as youthfulness, vivacity, lightness, flirtatiousness, charm and, at times, skill in dance. When dance is involved, she is also referred to by the French term "soubrette". Colombina first gained prominence as a leading female character within the Fiorelli-Locatelli troupe, which later evolved into the Ancienne Troupe de la Comédie Italienne. This troupe was the last Commedia dell'arte company to remain in France before being expelled in 1697 by order of Louis XIV, following their announcement of a performance of *La Fausse prude*, a satire believed to target the king's secret wife, Madame de Maintenon. Although Isabella Franchini Biancolelli was the first actress to perform the role of Colombina, it was her granddaughter, Caterina Biancolelli, who later inherited and expanded the role, becoming the second Colombina in the repertoire. Caterina was the daughter of Domenico Biancolelli (1636-1688), one of the most renowned Arlecchinos, and Orsola Cortesi (1637-1718), who played Eularia, a stock character representing either the "ingenua" or the "innamorata". While Isabella Franchini enjoyed considerable popularity in the early seventeenth century, critics generally attribute the character's heightened psychological depth and comedic vitality to Caterina. From 1683 onward, Caterina Biancolelli portrayed Colombina in performances by the Ancienne Troupe de la Comédie Italienne.³⁵ During this period, while the character of Isabella, the "innamorata", was being reimagined as a whimsical, outspoken young woman skeptical of marriage, Colombina was bringing a new level of female wit and comedic brilliance to the French stage and to the broader Commedia tradition. Her role increasingly gained in complexity, occasionally even surpassing that of her mistress or blending with the "innamorata" herself. As a result, the supposedly fixed roles of Commedia dell'arte became more fluid. Colombina took on a wide variety of personas, not limited to the clever maid. She was also portrayed as a cunning schemer, a deceptive ingénue, and even

³⁵ D. Radulescu, "Caterina's Colombina: The Birth of a Female Trickster in Seventeenth-Century France", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (March 2008), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 87-88.

assumed roles typically reserved for male characters, such as a verbose writer, a physician, a lawyer, a merchant, a soldier, a captain, and even a government official.³⁶ Although Colombina's speeches and monologues present a diverse portrayal of the character, there is limited information regarding her actual stage performance, her contributions through improvisation, and her creative influence on the role.³⁷

It is essential to recognise that Biancolelli and her contemporaries inherited a rich legacy from female Commedia dell'arte performers who, through the masks they played and helped shape, actively challenged the traditional social roles in which women were constrained and that excluded them from the narrative and public domain. Isabella Andreini and her troupe played an innovative role in the cultural emancipation of women in early modern Italy; as a matter of fact, she is often credited for helping shape the ideal of the Renaissance young woman. Caterina drew upon this significant and well-established tradition of female comedic expression and through professional training and her own improvisational brilliance. She elevated the figure of the trickster "servetta" to new heights of subversive and humorous performance.

Across Renaissance Italy, women, despite varying social contexts ranging from the seclusion of convents to the bustling life of urban centres, cultivated a vibrant culture of performance and comic expression. There is every reason to believe that later actresses, even those born and raised in France such as the Biancolelli sisters, retained the oral traditions of comedic dialogues ("contrasti"), ballads, dramatic songs (such as the Willow song in *Othello*), improvisational techniques, humorous jokes ("beffas"), and a love for disguise and cross-dressing (just like Portia and Nerissa during Antonio's trial in *The Merchant of Venice*).³⁸ Colombina's comedic lineage includes not only Italian actresses who captivated audiences and led touring companies across Europe, but also the bold, witty women of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the flamboyant courtesan-poet Veronica Franco (1546-1591), and nuns who staged plays that explored gender roles within convent walls. The character of Colombina arose from a longstanding tradition of female performance and comic wit extending back to the Middle Ages. This female legacy includes courtesans known for their theatrical skills and sophisticated conversations, female jugglers, mimes, nuns involved in convent drama, wedding entertainers, the Roma street performers,

³⁶ D. Radulescu, "Caterina's Colombina: The Birth of a Female Trickster in Seventeenth-Century France", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (March 2008), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 89.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 90.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 95.

prostitutes, and Commedia dell'arte actresses. Within her own family, Caterina found both inspiration and rigorous artistic training that enabled her to excel in the role of Colombina. Her use of multiple disguises, often involving cross-dressing, and her humorous lessons to her mistress serve to highlight how women's comedy frequently challenges and facilitates social change³⁹: "In the seventeenth century, Caterina's Colombina demonstrated the performativity of gender and challenged the idea that gender roles have an essential or immutable basis in so-called masculine and feminine natures. Through her performance, she destabilises and reconstructs the feminine gender in fluid and revolutionary ways that [...] would give women more power and freedom".⁴⁰

Pierre Louis Duchartre notes that the servant-confidantes "were sometimes crafty and nearly always of doubtful morals".⁴¹ In *The Merchant of Venice*, Nerissa helps her mistress not only because she is loyal to her but also because in doing so she can marry Gratiano, a friend of Antonio and Bassanio. In fact, she refuses to marry him unless Portia is happily married to Bassanio, therefore she has an additional reason to assist her mistress in her machinations. In *Othello*, the Moor comes to believe that Emilia is acting as an intermediary between Desdemona and Cassio. Although she denies this role, aspects of her character seem to support such an interpretation. Her remarks to Desdemona regarding men and sexuality are consistently marked by a worldly, subtly corrupting tone. Regardless of her intentions, she nonetheless facilitates encounters between Cassio and Desdemona. Emilia's similarity to the Commedia dell'Arte figure of the "servetta" is most evident in the scene where she discreetly takes Desdemona's handkerchief (3.3), echoing the behaviour of the classic trickster-servant. At this moment, Emilia appears to align herself more with Iago, reflecting shared social status, than with Desdemona, whose claims to solidarity based on personal or gender loyalty are disregarded. However, Shakespeare instils Emilia with greater psychological complexity than a typical "servetta", inviting the audience to contemplate her motivations in a way that would not be expected with a stock comic character.⁴² Shakespeare, moreover, unlike with Nerissa, denies Emilia the conventional happy resolution typically afforded to the "servetta", who customarily unites with the "zanni" in marriage at the play's conclusion. In contrast to her Italian

³⁹ D. Radulescu, "Caterina's Colombina: The Birth of a Female Trickster in Seventeenth-Century France", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (March 2008), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 93- 95.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 103.

⁴¹ P. L. Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*, (June 1966), New York: Dover Publications, p. 278.

⁴² T. J. Faherty, "Othello dell'arte": The Presence of "Commedia" in Shakespeare's Tragedy", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May 1991), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 184.

counterpart, Emilia ultimately unmasks her husband's deceit and denounces him, thereby bringing about his downfall. This act positions her as a far more integral figure within the play's narrative than the traditional "servetta", who generally participates in schemes orchestrated by the "zanni" but seldom holds a decisive role in their outcome.⁴³ Another distinction between the Italian stock character and Shakespeare's maid servants concerns age.⁴⁴ In seventeenth century Commedia dell'Arte, the "servetta" was typically portrayed as an older woman, worldly-wise and often cast in a quasi-maternal role toward her mistress. While Emilia clearly possesses greater worldly experience than Desdemona, she does not appear to be significantly older.⁴⁵ Although Shakespeare does not explicitly state Nerissa's age, it is estimated, through text interpretation and theatrical context, that she is probably close to Portia's age, perhaps slightly more mature, for they are both depicted as young women of marriageable age.

⁴³ M. Ward, *A New Tradition: Understanding Othello through the Performance of Emilia*, Paper 30 (2015), College of Arts and Science Senior Honors Theses, p. 7.

⁴⁴ B. Righetti, *This Double Tongue: Paradoxes and the Querelle des Femmes in Shakespeare's Shrews*, University of Padua, p. 237.

⁴⁵ A. Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin, a Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte*, (1963), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 96.

5. Emilia and Nerissa against the patriarchy

During Queen Elizabeth I's reign, England, despite being ruled by a female monarch, remained fundamentally a patriarchal society. At the core of patriarchy there is a conflict, a tension between the emotional integrity of the family and the demands of a political order that needs the disruption of familial bonds in order to preserve itself. Patriarchy, in fact, consists of two primary systems of affective loyalties: the familial sphere, governed by the father and the broader social-political sphere, sustained through alliances among men and into which the father is integrated. In order to uphold a political order that is entirely male-dominated, men forge alliances through familial connections, in other words marriages. However, in doing so, the father must compromise the internal dynamics of his own family and household, for he has to relinquish his authority over his daughter. This creates a critical contradiction between the private (familial) sphere and the public (political) sphere - one marked by conflicting demands on emotion, loyalty and authority. In portraying the complexities of marriage, Shakespeare depicts the challenges in reconciling the conflicting demands between these two patriarchal spheres.⁴⁶

In Elizabethan society, a woman was expected to dutifully fulfill three primary roles within the private sphere of the family: that of a daughter, a wife and a mother. Initially controlled by the authority of the father and later by that of the husband, the patriarchal daughter embodied the ideal model of successful familial socialization. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, doctrine, moral example and discipline were fundamental elements in the upbringing of children, especially young girls. Within the family, daughters were, in fact, shaped by their mothers - who imparted maternal teachings and responsibilities - and by their relationship with the fathers - which would define the young girls' social identity. Therefore, a woman's sense of self was built within the father's household. Shakespeare was acutely aware of this restricted reality and integrated it into the development of his fictional female characters. In his play, he often modeled the father-daughter dynamic on the structure of the marriage ceremony.⁴⁷ In all cases, a daughter was expected to comply with her father's decisions regarding who she will marry, when, where and marriage in general. This view is supported by texts from the Elizabethan age, such as *Catechism* (1560) by Thomas Beacon (1511-1576), in which the

⁴⁶ C. McEachern, "Fathering Herself. A Source Study of Shakespeare's Feminism", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1988), Oxford University Press, p. 273.

⁴⁷ G. G. Kakkonen and A. Penjak, "The Nature of Gender: Are Juliet, Desdemona and Cordelia to their Fathers as Nature is to Culture?", *Critical Survey*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2015), Berghahn Books, p. 21.

author advises young women not to be misled by a suitor's flattering words but instead to seek the approval of their parents, teachers and peers before entering a marriage.⁴⁸ By portraying female characters who, either in small or big ways, reject these patriarchal norms, Shakespeare explored the implication of defying gender and social expectations. In doing so, he invited his audience and readers to ponder over these constraints and consider new possibilities for female agency.⁴⁹ Although a marriage without parental consent or even a secret one remained legally valid, such defiance carried significant psychological and economic consequences, especially for women. Elizabethan martial customs granted women little to no agency in selecting a spouse; the notion of a woman choosing a husband on her own was considered inconceivable, improper and even scandalous. Women were brought up and indoctrinated to be obedient and subservient to men (first to the father and then to the husband), for these were regarded as central virtues in their upbringing.

As David S. Kastan debates, Shakespeare's representation of womanhood is inherently problematic, for female identity is constructed in relation to male authoritative figures. Within such dynamics women are placed at a disadvantage, a position that ultimately culminates in tragedy, usually in the form of the marginalization or even the death of female characters. Women are frequently portrayed as deceitful and even the innocent ones are cast aside, vilified or murdered (like Emilia and Desdemona). Kastan argues that the purpose of Shakespeare's tragedies is to disrupt and dismantle any sense of unity or coherence and as a result, love becomes a source of disillusionment, easily fractured and inevitably doomed to failure. "Love fails, as it always does in tragedy".⁵⁰ Shakespeare was aware of the instabilities, contradictions and constraints of the patriarchal society, and through his dramatic works, he exposed and interrogated these questions. Therefore, rather than passively perpetuating the archetypes and norms of the male dominated society in which he lived, Shakespeare deliberately defies them: "He recasts and demystifies the role of the father, and, mimicking the action he presents, Shakespeare, in the rebellious but also a revisionary act of rewriting, questions the power of fathers, a power that demands replication for the

⁴⁸ T. Beacon according to L. C. Knights in *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, (1962), Harmondsworth : Penguin Books in assoc. with Chatto and Windus, p. 126.

⁴⁹ G. G. Kakkonen and A. Penjak, "The Nature of Gender: Are Juliet, Desdemona and Cordelia to their Fathers as Nature is to Culture?", *Critical Survey*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2015), Berghahn Books, p. 25.

⁵⁰ D. S. Kastan, "Shakespeare and the Way of Womenkind", *Daedalus*, Vol. 111, No. 3 (1982), The MIT Press on behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences, p. 120.

perpetuation of the patriarchal system”.⁵¹ In the Shakespearean plays that include a father-daughter relationship, the subject of the woman’s relationship with the patriarchal system and her marriage inexorably acquires a special kind of attention. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, while the protagonist is supposed to be the merchant (either Antonio or Shylock), the focus of the play is Portia, her desire to marry a man of her choosing and her ingenious ploy to make this marriage happen without setbacks. She is forced to get married with someone essentially chosen by chance by a father who is no longer even alive. Therefore, even when the authoritative patriarchal figure is not in the picture anymore, he still has power over his daughter’s life and decisions. In *Othello*, marriage is the focal point of the tragedy. Desdemona challenges her father’s authority by secretly marrying a foreigner man without his permission; while being a secondary character, Emilia is fundamental for the play for her unsuccessful and unhappy marriage with Iago is the spark that will trigger the tragic ending. Both of them will die because they tried to make their marriages work. Shakespeare, therefore, engages critically with inherited conventions, challenging prevailing gender ideologies and employing his insights into social pressures to lend greater depth and complexity to his plays.⁵²

In early modern England, around 60% of young girls (between 15 and 24 years) worked as servants in rural and urban households. In the Elizabethan era, service played a significant role in England’s transition to a modern state; economic growth was sustained by the labour of young women, single women who married late and spinsters. These female servants were not bound to the domestic sphere and their work was not restricted to domestic and familial chores. They played a central role in their communities at a social and economic level. Service life at the time is depicted as a lifelong experience in which young women learn skills and knowledge in order to serve their masters well and, eventually, to create their own household. The patriarchal household usually saw the male authoritative head in a position of power over his biological family and the servants, who were bound to work under their master’s rhythms and watchful eye. However, it was not always the case. The patriarchal society may have relegated female servants to a position of disadvantage compliance; however, some of these young women could, and did, defy the system, the rigid structure and the behavioural rules demanded of them.⁵³ Shakespeare may have drawn inspiration from his

⁵¹ C. McEachern, “Fathering Herself. A Source Study of Shakespeare’s Feminism”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1988), Oxford University Press, p. 272.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ C. Mansell, *Female Servant in Early Modern England*, (2024), Liverpool University Press, Oxford, pp. 2-3.

contemporary reality in writing the female servants in his plays: Emilia goes against her husband and her duty as a wife in order to bring justice to her innocent mistress; Nerissa is more of a friend and sidekick rather than a maidservant to Portia.

While the titular character of *The Merchant of Venice* is Antonio, he is not the protagonist of neither the romantic plot nor the Shylock one. It can be argued that the real protagonist, central to both plots, is Portia. Every main character is either dependent on her, indebted to her or belittled by her. Ultimately, it is her who defeats Shylock in court and she does so with the help of her maid Nerissa.⁵⁴ Her role as a waiting-maid extends far beyond that of a typical servant, for she is more precisely described as a close companion and confidante. What distinguishes Nerissa from other female servants and secondary characters, is that she shares many of Portia's qualities. In speech and behaviour, she often mirrors her young mistress, to the extent that she may be even seen as a scaled-down version of Portia. While she does resemble her mistress, Nerissa remains a charming and appealing female figure in her own right. Even though she lacks Portia's beauty and wealth, she appears to be perceptive and highly intelligent, with such a deep understanding of her lady's temperament. This is evident when Portia is introduced in a state of melancholy and it is Nerissa who succeeded in lifting her spirit, reminding her of the many reasons she has to be content and satisfied and reassuring her that her late father's casket lottery is ultimately an effective method for selecting and securing a worthy husband (1.2.87-114). Nerissa also has a sharp wit and a keen sense of humour. She actively participates in Portia's amusing commentary of the unsuccessful suitors who visit Belmont and she takes great delight in Portia's astute stratagem of the rings. The exchange of gifts was a significant facet of Elizabethan and Jacobean social intercommunication, for it regulated both romantic and political relationships. Not only the aristocracy, but also common people, even the poorest, took part in this exchange system. In England rural villages, in fact, it was custom to place a basin in the church at weddings, into which the guests donated gifts in order to help the newlyweds. However, in the first half of the seventeenth century, this custom gradually declined.⁵⁵ In Shakespeare's play, the ring is a sign of love, devotion and submission. It is the depiction of Portia and Nerissa's acceptance of Elizabethan marriage (characterised by women's compliance and passivity and their loss of rights and sense of self). It is a symbol of the patriarchal arrangement made by the two

⁵⁴ R. Russin, "The Triumph of the Golden Fleece: Women, Money, Religion, and Power in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shofar*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2013), Purdue University Press, p.116.

⁵⁵ K. Newman, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (1987), Oxford University Press, p. 24.

women with Bassanio and Gratiano. However, in the fourth act, when the men accept to give away their rings and break their promise to Portia and Nerissa, they seem to lose the very male and patriarchal privileges that the exchange of the rings guaranteed them. When in the final act, Portia and Nerissa return their ring and reveal that it was them dressed as male lawyers during the trial, their love tokens no longer represent the English traditional marriage relationship. Now it has new meanings, for example: “cuckoldry and thus female unruliness, female genitalia, woman’s changeable nature and so-called animal temperament, her deceptiveness and potential subversion of the rules of possession and fidelity”.⁵⁶ Therefore, both Portia and Nerissa take back a little of the power that they were forced to give up when they decided to marry, respectively, Bassanio and Gratiano. They are now playing a more powerful role, usually restricted to men, in their relationships and future marriages.

Emilia has been frequently marginalised by scholars and is often relegated to a few superficial remarks. She is often described as a secondary figure, a woman of lower social status whose role is to exist merely to highlight the main female protagonist, Desdemona. In some theatrical performances, her role is omitted entirely. However, while she indeed is a secondary character, few other Shakespearean minor characters play as important a role as her in *Othello*. In the first four acts of the play, Emilia experiences a deep internal struggle between her moral awareness and her incapacity to act upon it. Even though she expresses disapproval for her husband’s behaviour, she continues to humour his demands, in part motivated by a sense of marital duty and obligation, and in part by a lingering hope of rekindling his affection (3.3.304-317). From her very first entrance, when Cassio greets her with a kiss, Iago responds with a pointed remark “Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me / You’d have enough” (2.1.100-103) that seems to be more a humiliating insult to his wife than a mere reprimand to the lieutenant. His hateful comment reflects a cultural patriarchal prejudice prevalent in early modern England: women who spoke too freely were seen as transgressing the boundaries of their gendered role; such authority was reserved for men. Therefore from the beginning of the play, Emilia is shown as a woman unjustly accused and effectively silenced by her husband, paralleling Desdemona’s fate throughout the play.⁵⁷ It is not until the fifth and final act that Emilia, in the face of a grave injustice, finally takes a stand. This act of defiance, however, is too late and it ultimately leads to her own death. Because of her indecisiveness and delay in deciding who to

⁵⁶ K. Newman, “Portia’s Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (1987), Oxford University Press, p. 31.

⁵⁷ A. Petrina, *Shakespeare: guida ad Otello*, (2022), Bussole 648, Carocci editore, pp. 86-88.

help, her husband rather than her mistress, modern theatre audiences have often been unfriendly and hostile towards her. However, as Thomas Bowman argues in his article, this is a popular misconception, for Shakespeare's purpose was for Emilia to be a sympathetic character.⁵⁸ After all, she is loyal to her sentiments toward her husband and her mistress, well-meaning and morally sensible. The most common complaint against her is that she gives Iago Desdemona's handkerchief (and unleashes a series of events that will lead to her mistress's death). However, in the play, it is clear that it is Iago who takes it by force, against her will. Emilia's intention is, in fact, to temporarily keep it in order to duplicate the embroidery and then return it to her rightful owner. It is her wifely obedience that compels her to admit to Iago that she possesses the handkerchief. For once, she can be of help to Iago, she finally has something that he wants. This is her mistake, the one that will lead to tragedy. Furthermore, once Iago obtains his prize, he hides it in his pocket and refuses to reveal to his wife his intentions with it (3.3.319). Emilia, therefore, is guilty of nothing more than wanting to be of use to her husband. There is another scene, in which Emilia decides to stay silent because of loyalty. Iago, alone with Othello, implies that Cassio had received a love token, a napkin, from some young woman. Othello, then, with Emilia present, asks Desdemona to fetch this impossibly important token that he gifted her during his courtship (3.4.52). Again Emilia refuses to talk and defend her lady as she witnesses Othello berating Desdemona. However, it is not because of cowardice, disloyalty or self-interest. Her silence comes from a place of innocence and decency. "For one thing it is here that her worldly knowledge of man's susceptibility to jealousy works to her mistress' disadvantage".⁵⁹ In this scene, she concludes that Othello's wraith must be motivated by something deeper than the loss of a sentimental but simple love token. She reasons that the loss of the handkerchief is just a deception, a convenient artifice for something more significant and profound that afflicts him. Being married to an unreasonably jealous husband herself, she has learned that men can be enraged for the slightest trifle. Therefore, in her mind it does not make sense to bring up the handkerchief, especially because Desdemona herself lies and promises to Othello that she has not lost it. Consequently, saying something would just prove her mistress a liar.⁶⁰ In Act IV, Emilia delivers the most important dramatic speeches of the play. While Emilia helps Desdemona to prepare for bed, the two of them talk about men, women, love and sex.

⁵⁸ T. D. Bowman, "In Defence of Emilia", *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1947), Oxford University Press, p. 99.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 100.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 101.

Desdemona sings a tragic song (the Willow song) about the betrayal of love. Singing Barbary's song, she becomes the last of a long line of betrayed women who sang it before her. The atmosphere in the bedroom is intimate, slow, private and feminine. "The knowledge most readers or audiences have that within a very short time both these women will be dead, violently murdered by their husbands, must also contribute to the special pathos the scene generates".⁶¹ The scene is enlightened by its intimate conversation, the rise and fall of the women's voices, the slow unpinning, the sad song, the growing intensity of Emilia's speech in defence of women and Desdemona's final short prayer at the end. This scene, made of peace, freedom, feminine calmness (Desdemona's) and feminine rage (Emilia's), gives the audience a brief interlude from the violence and urgency that preceded it and that will follow it. Desdemona's speech is one of acceptance; while she is realistic about her fate, she has only words of love, which is the antithesis of Othello's vile unjustified jealousy. This speech proves her loyalty to Desdemona and the strength of her character. "It is also a most fervent and eloquent defence of sex equality and the single standard of morality".⁶² When Desdemona asks her if there are really wives who betray their spouses and vows to never do such a thing, Emilia replies that such wives indeed exist. This is not an admission of guilt: she simply is old enough and not so innocent to know better compared to her young lady. After witnessing Othello backhanding his wife in front of Iago and Lodovico, Emilia is enraged with the Moor for his violence towards Desdemona and his unreasonable accusations. Therefore, during the bedroom scene, she claims that the ones to blame for their wives' betrayal are the husbands themselves. For if they behave in such unbecoming and disgraced ways, wives have the right to avenge themselves by being unfaithful to them. If a wife is unjustifiably accused of cheating, then she should do what she is already accused of. Her speech does not solicit Desdemona and women in the audience to betray their husbands, but it is a warning for the men in order to keep them loyal, loving and trustful. This is the declaration of a strong woman who probably endured submission all her life and now finds it offensive and despicable.⁶³ Her speech is an intense and incensed defence of women against male double standards; it asserts that women and men have the same common sexual natures and that women should feel free in sexual matters, just like men. Behind her rant, it can be detected Emilia's disappointment, frustration, bitterness and pain at Iago, suggesting the fact

⁶¹ E. Grennan, "The Women's Voices in "Othello": Speech, Song, Silence", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1987), Oxford University Press, p. 277.

⁶² T. D. Bowman, "In Defence of Emilia", *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1947), Oxford University Press, p 101.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 103.

that he has denied his wife the freedom to be who she is and who she wants to be. For just a few minutes in that bedroom, both Emilia and Desdemona can speak their minds and hearts, something that they cannot afford to do in their patriarchal world.⁶⁴

As Ruth Vanita claims, a large amount of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays showed or finished with the murder of a wife because of the (alleged or real) infidelity. While these plays set up the murders of the wives as tragedies, they also support them as a form of justice. Although murder was against the law in England, the patriarchal society of the time perceived a betrayed husband as having the right to kill his unfaithful wife. It was seen almost as a duty. These were called domestic tragedies, for the events were seen as something private and familial. In *Othello*, the private is made public.⁶⁵ For Desdemona's death, some critics blame Othello, others blame Iago, others both; while most of them hold only Iago responsible for the death of Emilia. However, Vanita argues that both Desdemona and Emilia die the same death and for the same reasoning. While the death blow is struck by Othello (for Desdemona) and by Iago (for Emilia), their murders are also possible thanks to a number of characters who refuse to act in front of a domestic tragedy. Whilst Montano and Lodovico intervene in order to save the life of a man (Iago) from another one (Othello), they remain almost indifferent before the abuse and murder of two women. Desdemona dies, not only because it is a tragedy and it has to end in death, but also because those, like Lodovico, who see her humiliated, defeated and abused and fail to intercede and get involved. When Othello strikes her in public, in a fit of jealousy and rage, in front of Iago, Emilia and Lodovico (4.1.239), the latter looks shocked but fails to intervene and defend his cousin. Desdemona's tragedy is avoidable over and over again throughout the play, however it transpires because of those who could and should intervene and simply decided not to. What happens between a husband and a wife is private, familial, domestic and no one should enter this sphere, not even in order to defend or save an innocent woman. The same happens with Emilia. In the final scene, after Desdemona's death, in the bedroom, there are other people with Othello, Iago and Emilia, Gratiano and Montano are also there, witnessing the violence and chaos that is the last Act of the play. At the same moment in which Iago stabs his wife, Othello tries to stab him. Montano has only the time to disarm one of them and he decides to disarm Othello, leaving Iago to successfully kill Emilia. Montano has to choose between a woman -

⁶⁴ E. Grennan, "The Women's Voices in "*Othello*": Speech, Song, Silence", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1987), Oxford University Press, p. 282.

⁶⁵ R. Vanita, "Proper" Men and "Fallen" Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in *Othello*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 34, No.2 (1994), Rice University, p. 341.

somebody else's innocent wife - and a man - who tricked everyone and almost killed Cassio; he decides to save the killer instead of the victim.⁶⁶ Shakespeare, by portraying these murders on the stage, makes the audience a silent witness. The viewers are in the same position as Lodovico, Montano and Gratiano, men of power who silently witness the humiliation, abuse and murder of Desdemona and Emilia. And just like those men, the audience fails to intervene while watching a domestic tragedy; a tragedy that still occurs behind innumerable bedroom doors. "The ultimate irony in the play's representation of male-female relations is the fact that two women accused by their husbands of "falling" morally, actually fall not morally but physically [...] felled by those morally "fallen" husbands' hands and, symbolically, by the male-dominated society which endorses the murder of supposedly fallen women".⁶⁷

After Othello violently murders Desdemona, there is only silence. Emilia's voice crying out for speech breaks it by saying: "What ho! my lord! my lord! [...] O good my lord, i'd speak a word with you. [...] I do beseech you / That I may speak with you! O good my lord!" (5.2.88-90-100-101). Emilia begs for speech and refuses to leave Desdemona's door. From here on, from her mistress's murder to her own, it is Emilia's speech that dominates the stage and conquers the audience. Her lovely and innocent mistress is dead because of a cunning plan that she unintentionally helped succeed, therefore, Emilia is sick to stay silent and finally feels free to speak her (and Desdemona's) truth and condemn both Othello and Iago. When her husband demands her obedience and bullies her, she bravely answers: "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak" (5.2.180). Her simple truth (that it was her who found the lost handkerchief, that it was Iago who took it and that Desdemona was innocent all along) plunges the stage into chaos: violence, fury, passion, there is no more time for words. Othello wounds Iago and Iago murders Emilia. He kills her for daring to speak against him and his faults, for having a voice, however, not even death can stop her anymore. Dying, she evokes Desdemona, Barbary and the infinite line of women betrayed and killed by men. Her final words are to Othello, defending until the very end her lady by saying: "Moor, she was chaste; she lov'd thee, cruel Moor; / So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true" (5.2.249-250) and to herself (and the audience): "So speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2.251). Both Emilia and Desdemona lie on the stage, dead and finally silenced by their husbands, however, their silence is now louder than ever.

⁶⁶ R. Vanita, "Proper" Men and "Fallen" Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in *Othello*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 34, No.2 (1994), Rice University, pp. 348-350.

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 352.

6. Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis it was suggested that Shakespeare may have drawn inspiration from the Italian Commedia dell'arte for his plays and characters. While this inquiry cannot be answered with absolute certainty, through the analysis of various critical articles and works, this thesis suggests that there is indeed a high probability that Shakespeare borrowed numerous plots from Italian novelle and characters from Italian theatre. The research focused principally on three Italian stories from which Shakespeare supposedly took inspiration for *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*: Giraldi's novella 7 from *Hecatommithi*, Bandello's *Il cavaliere Spada per gelosia ammazza se stesso ed anco la moglie perché non restasse viva dopo lui* and Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone*. Not only do the plots of these Italian short tales resemble the storylines written by Shakespeare, but they also share some characters' names (for example, Disdemona/Desdemona) and verbal parallels, in other words, terms that seem to be transliterated from the Italian language (such as "acerbe", "signiory" in *Othello*).

Analysing the role that Italian Commedia dell'arte played in Europe, especially in England, France and Spain, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a list of various masks that recall some Shakespearean characters has been drawn up: for example, Pantalone can be linked to both Shylock and Brabantio; Porthia plays the role of the "innamorata" but when she is dressed as a male lawyer, she resembles Dottore; Iago, because of his incessant manipulations and instigations, represents the trickster, Brighella; for some scholars, even Othello can be associated to the mask of the Capitano; lastly, both Emilia and Nerissa match the Italian character of the "servetta", Colombina. The similarity is clear not only because they are maid servants, but also thanks to their characterisation, intelligence, wit, passion and speech. Just like Colombina and the Italian remarkable actresses who played her over the years, Emilia and Nerissa challenged the patriarchal and societal construct in their own ways: Emilia refusing to obey her husband in order to avenge her mistress and Nerissa by being a friend and sidekick, instead of just a servant, to her lady.

The final part of this essay, in fact, dissected both Nerissa and Emilia's roles and conduct in front of the plays' challenges. While the former comes out victorious, as a promised bride, satisfied that she has regained some of her feminine power after Gratiano chose to give up the ring that she entrusted him with, the latter suffers a patriarchal and misogynistic punishment at the hand of her own husband. In conclusion, Emilia and Nerissa bear more resemblance to the "servetta" from the Italian Commedia tradition than to the English one from Elizabethan

and Jacobean eras, for both of them choose to speak up and not let themselves be restrained by a society so hateful towards women.

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