Myth, metamorphosis, sexuality. Ovidian images and erotic mythology in Shakespeare's work

Federica Ambroso

Eroticism and theatricality: a close association

Shakespeare's Ovid

Shakespeare was an ardent reader of Ovid – his own favourite classical poet and one of his greatest sources of inspiration – and his readings are embedded in his own works. To him we owe the fact that he proved that a classical poet like Ovid could reach a popular audience and give it pleasure as well as edification. The title-page of *Venus and Adonis*, the first work which Shakespeare saw into print, was adorned with an epigraph from the *Amores* (I, XV, 35-36):

> Vilia miretur vulgus: mihi flavus Apollo
> Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua[1].

The reference to Muses' springs or Mount Parnassos invokes a literary context that immediately suggests the scope and subtlety of the author's purposes and aesthetic design (Stritmatter 2004: 313). These verses express Ovid's wish for immortality through his writing, setting himself among a pantheon of immortal poets. As *Venus and Adonis* constitutes the first appearance of the name "*William Shakespeare*", this quotation proclaims Shakespeare's ambition: the author is introducing not only the new poem, but also his own new identity as a writer.

Critics have articulated various theories about the epigram's meaning, the most intriguing is the one proposed by Annabel Patterson, according to that, the epigram intended to alert an educated audience to the possibility of hidden meaning (Patterson 1984). Roger Stritmatter notices that the epigram «draws conspicuous attention to the most fundamental and enduring problem of interpretation known to literary historians: the distinction between topical ("vulgar") and literary ("universal") readings» (Stritmatter 2004: 313), and he suggests that the epigram—paradoxically—authorize a topical, local reading, in which characters represent not only their mythic exemplars but real living persons known to the author.

In fact, Renaissance reading and writing practices were more social, and more comparative, than modern ones; meaning was not contained within a text but established by ascertaining a relationship between texts. Consequently, the reader of a Renaissance text «was conscientiously attuned to the modern critical principle that literary allusion always "brings with it another meaningful context"» (*ibidem*: 319), he was always expected to simultaneously keep in mind two contexts of interpretation: an "original" or traditional version and the text he was actually reading.

Ovid's influence in the sixteenth century was easily perceived after Cardinal Wolsey's decision to introduce the *Metamorphoses* into the curriculum of English grammar-schools and in this way, Shakespeare became familiar with the poem (Soubriet Velasco 1996: 297). With the Bible, Ovid was one of the most important classical models that young writers were instructed to imitate to develop their powers of invention.

Ovid's inspiriting of Shakespeare seems to have been recognized ever since 1598, when Francis Meres wrote *A Comparative Discourse of our English Poets with the Greeke, Latine and Italian Poets*, in which the author claimed that Shakespeare has metamorphosed into Ovid's soul, the poet of metamorphosis, in a way that

ISSN 2421-2679

permits a translation of one poet into another[2] (Bate 1993: 2-3). It is difficult to deny that the two poets present many points of similarity:

- a method of composition which involves shaping inherited stories in such a way that they are wrote completely anew
- a refusal to submit to the decorum of genre
- a delight in the juxtaposition of contrasting tones
- a big interest in human psychology
- a delight in rhetorical ingenuity, verbal fertility, linguistic play.

As Jonathan Bate claims, the Ovidian and the Shakespearean self is always in motion; the myth of Actaeon – the hunter who becomes the hunted in punishment for his gaze upon the naked Diana – is emblematic of the worlds of the two writers because in their works «when you think you've seen what you most desire, it destroys you» (*ibidem*: 3).

Eroticism and theatricality: Ovidian "invisible pictures" in Shakespeare's plays

Shakespeare enjoyed Ovid hugely, but also found in him a source of disturbance. The coexistence of vitality and disturbance is apparent above all in the matter of human desire and sexuality, for which Ovid was best known in the Renaissance (*ibidem*: 15). In the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid associates theatergoing with sex, noting that the theater is a good place to take a prospective lover, since «the rows compel closeness, like it or not, and by the conditions of space your girl must be touched» (Ovid [1929] 1979: 23, vv. 719-728).

Shakespeare too establishes a connection between images, eroticism, and theatricality in a comedy from the early 1590s, *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play's treatment of images seeks to appeal to art connoisseurs with its references to beguiling erotic images (Tassi 2005: 183). In fact, «Drama's unique power fuses verbal and visual signals not simply through the combination of words and spectacle, but also to word painting, so that the audience sees and hears at the same time» (Mason Vaughan- Cioni-Bessell 2010: 12). Thanks to that, like painting, drama could be used as a "book" for the illiterate (Tassi 2005: 40).

Prior to the first act, the induction is characterized by the effort to create an illusory theater space in front of the drunkard Christopher Sly, who is tricked into believing he is a gentleman. The Lord and his company of actors offer to entertain Sly by showing him Ovidian "wanton pictures"[3] – which were usually fit in a gentleman's chamber for private entertainment and erotic enticement – hung all around the chamber. Shakespeare indicates the Lord's social rank in the fact that he owns pictures. Here, «Shakespeare transforms the classical writer's erotic images into visually provocative descriptions designed to be enticing the listeners» (*ibidem*). In fact, the pictures never appear literally on the stage, they are invoked rather than shown, undoubtedly because the Lord Chamberlain's Men did not possess such paintings, but also because these invisible pictures signify meanings in several ways. The description of these "lively" images emphasizes their realism, which associates them closely with drama.

In this way, «pictures and drama become part of the undifferentiated dreamlike haze of sensuality that convinces Sly he is what is not, a Lord» (*ibidem*: 184).

Sly fails to respond to these images, remains silent about the paintings and this lack of response – conditioned by his social rank – marks him as a laughable naïf. He does not recognize these images from their original source, while the violent conclusions to the Ovidian tales – death, rape, metamorphosis – can be inferred by those who know the stories. These erotic images point to the play's image of pursuit, taming and revelation, with the thinly disguised presence of violence as an implied subtext of eros (*ibidem*).

Painting and eros are again coupled in *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia entertains a host of suitors who are forced to choose among three caskets to win her hand. Each casket contains a visual icon: a skull lies in the gold casket, a portrait of a fool in the silver and Portia's picture in the lead. In facing the alluring portrait of his beloved into the lead casket, Bassanio becomes enamored of the image and celebrates the mysterious nature of the painter's power; the painter is compared to a spider, recalling the Ovidian myth of Arachne, punished for her presumption although her work of art was perfect.

Bassanio's perception is double: on the one hand, he sees the portrait as an expression of the pride and the vanity of the artist, on the other hand, he

ISSN 2421-2679

senses a living presence in the picture, as well as a kind of dangerous power (*ibidem*: 186). Perhaps he detects what David Freedberg calls "the body in the image", closely associated with sexuality:

> We fear the body in the image, we refuse to acknowledge our engagement with it (the image), and we deny recognition of those aspects of our own sexuality that it may seem to threaten or reveal (Freedberg 1989: 12).

Ovidian myths and metamorphosis in Shakespeare

Allusions to Ovidian characters and their reinvention

Ovid's works are endlessly reinvented by Shakespeare, whether it is the text itself which is altered or simply the perspective from which it is viewed[4].

In comedy, Shakespeare lets his characters off the hook: they are arrested in the moment of intense emotion and released after extreme violence, into a vital world of anthropomorphic nature. True love does not run smooth, but drastic violence is always forestalled and those who intend it are converted or expelled. But the resolutions are always fragile; the Ovidian allusions, with their violent ends, remain to remind the audience that we can never be sure that all will end well (Bate 1993: 119-120).

The females who speak the *Heroides* and a variety of figures in the *Metamorphoses*, for instance Myrrha and Medea, are among the models for the soliloquizing that is the distinctive activity of Shakespeare's most admired characters. The soliloquy creates the illusion that a fictional being has an interior life, and this illusion is achieved by the arts of language. The verbal rhetoric inherited from Ovid is accompanied in Shakespeare by a new visual rhetoric of stage gestures and actions (*ibidem*: 5).

The detachment of the *Metamorphoses* is simultaneously rejected and confirmed in Shakespeare's plays. One of the books of the *Metamorphoses* on which Shakespeare drew most extensively during the 1590s was the fourth, with the stories of Pyramus and Thisbe and Salmacis and Hermaphroditus and the leading role of Cadmus, including narratives concerning some of his relatives, like Actaeon, Semele and Ino. Jonathan Bate notices:

> The works in which these stories are recast, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Venus and Adonis*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, are themselves contained within a definable part of Shakespeare's career which begins with the supposes of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Protean interchanges of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* and the confusions, separations, and reunions of *The Comedy of Errors*. (*Ibidem*: 145).

In all these stories, love has a destabilizing effect on the protagonists. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia is saved by Valentine from Proteus' attempt (who reminds Apollo and Daphne's story) to rape her in the forest, and playing the role of a boy, she plays a woman's "lamentable part", that of «Ariadne, passioning/ For Theseus' perjury, and unjust flight» (Shakespeare 1968: 124, IV.IV.163-165). The allusions to *Heroides X*, the lamenting letter of Ariadne to Theseus after he has left her on Naxos, evokes the pain of a deserted lover (Bate 1993: 5).

Twelfth Night, last play in which this mode is dominant, is pervaded by a sense of mutability and the myths of Actaeon, Narcissus and Echo are among the controlling structures of the play. The lovesick Duke Orsino casts the beautiful Olivia as Diana and himself as Actaeon:

> Oh, when mine eyes did see Olivia first,
> Methought she purged the air of pestilence.
> That instant was I turned into a hart,
> And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
> E'er since pursue me (Shakespeare 2009: 5, I.I.18-21).

For Orsino the hounds have been internalized as his own self-destructive desires and the pun on "heart" and "hart" suggests that any metamorphosis he has undergone transforms his mind rather than his body, in contrast to Ovid's version of the story. Although Olivia did not intend to be cruel, the impact of her indifference is as great as Diana's fury, and simply by invoking this myth, Orsino implies that Olivia is to blame for not returning his love (Brown 2005: 76-77).

Orsino is in love with the idea of being in love, and that is a state approaching the self-love of Narcissus. *Twelfth Night* recognizes the pervasiveness of Narcissus but also the fragility of Echo. Viola implicitly compares herself to Echo by speaking of an imaginary sister, really herself; she also gives words to Orsino's own thoughts: «It gives a very echo to the seat/ where love is throned» (Shakespeare 2009: 63, II.IV.20). They echo each other in the belief that music echoes love (Bate 1993: 146-150).

ISSN 2421-2679

Ovidian parallelisms

Shakespeare institutes interesting parallelisms between Ovidian myths or characters and his protagonists or situations. It is a fine example of the Renaissance habit of thinking in terms of parallels between present experience and mythological precedent. The parallelisms suggest not only a comparison among characters, but also a different interpretation from their mythological model. We could propose two examples in Shakespeare's plays:

1. *Twelfth Night*: Cadmus and his wife/ Sebastian and Viola. Like Cadmus and his wife are washed up on the coast of Illyria, not knowing that their daughter and her child have been saved from drowning by being metamorphosed, Viola and Sebastian are washed up separately on the coast of Illyria, neither knowing that the other has been saved (*ibidem*: 145).
2. *The Merchant of Venice*: Medea and Jason/ Portia and Bassanio. Where the love of Medea assists Jason in his winning of the fleece, Bassanio views Portia as the fleece itself. She is a precious treasure to be won, not a human being to be loved. Graziano, Bassanio's friend, introduce the comparison «We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece» (Shakespeare 2013: 67, III.II.239). The success of the two friends as Argonauts is nothing but a means of compensation for the loss of Antonio's wealth (Bate 1993: 152). Bassanio is not the heroic figure whom Portia imagines, a Hercules who rescues his beloved, but a *fallax Jason*, an archetype of male deceit and infidelity. As Jason was unfaithful to Medea, Bassanio will be symbolically unfaithful to Portia in the act of giving away her ring[5] (*ibidem*: 153).

The transmission and reinvention of Ovidian eroticism in Shakespeare

Unnaturalness and bestiality: a violent relation between rhetoric and sexuality

The *Metamorphoses* is a book which implicitly seems to raise questions about the nature of love (love or rather sex is the topic with which Ovid has often been associated) and Ovid's mythology apparently licenses unnatural manifestations of love, which could only be celebrated in the visual arts and in literature. Motifs of erotic mythology belonging to Italian Renaissance spread all over Europe thanks to the development of printing and the iconographical crystallization of the erotic Ovidian tales which became a model and contributed to create the imaginary space of early modern reception (Lafont 2013).

The most famous translation ever written in Renaissance England, Arthur Golding's *Metamorphoses*, which was published in 1567, assumed that, in Ovid's poem, «metamorphosis was a punishment for sexual unnaturalness» (Soubriet Velasco 1996: 273-276). Sexual feeling is frequently both violent and unreciprocated and perverse sexuality seems almost to be the norm (Brown 1999: 8-9).

Elizabethan and Jacobean interest in sexual "beastliness" found a focus in the stories narrated by Ovid, in which "unnatural" desire is elsewhere: in Orpheus' homosexuality, in the Propoetides, the first prostitutes, in Pygmalion's love for his statue or in Myrrha's incest. Even in these cases, Shakespeare, exactly like Ovid, is a psychopathologist rather than a moralist; he is more interested in the causes of love, in the origin of amorous feelings, than in moralizing and condemning the experience of love (*ibidem*: 53). In fact, Shakespeare had an exclusive ability to grasp the dynamics of the human mind and to present the dysfunctions of the human psyche, of which he made a remarkable analysis. Through his observations, he presented his literary characters so naturally expressing their inner mental conflicts and behavior in an aesthetic form (Jayatunge 2015).

At the center of Ovid's work lie violated bodies; the fractured body is the place where the usually separated realms of the rhetorical and the sexual most insistently meet. «Language become a violent act compared to rape» (Enterline 2000: 1). This labile, violent relation between rhetoric and sexuality was codified and rewritten in an Ovidian mode by Shakespeare, who explains the perverse nature of sexual love by using the art of language. As he shows in *The Rape of Lucrece* (*ibidem*: 152-197) and the Countess of Salisbury scenes in *Edward III*, the dividing-line between the verbal play of the rhetoric and the physical one of rape is thin (Bate 1993: 63).

ISSN 2421-2679

Overcoming boundaries: a fondness for transgression

In Ovid's work, is frequent the absorption in borderline states and the fondness for blurring boundaries of all kinds. Not only spatial and geographical boundaries, as well as temporal ones, are subject to confusion in the poem. Ovid also plays with the boundary between reality and fiction and proposes a dissolution of the conventional barriers of gender.

If on one hand Ovid sympathizes with his heroines and their difficulties, on the other hand he depicts them as victims of rape, mutilation, or punitive metamorphosis. Anyway, he is undeniable interested in the female perspective, and he often makes us aware of the difficulties women face. In Ovid emerges a new point of view, that of the woman who loves and suffers; its originality comes from the reworking technique of a motif that in ancient society, which took little account of women, had never been noticed. Especially in the *Heroides*, the female figures, as they are undoubted protagonists, often play a role that is in fact antagonist and are proposed as a painful and vibrant contrast with respect to male figures, whose opacity is not only attributable to the obvious factors of distance and absence. The Ovidian notion of femininity appears as a non-victimizing contrast to the male pole (Silvestri 2005: 9-11). In the *Metamorphoses,* the feminine narrated by Ovid and matured through his previous works, reaches its maximum expression, it is placed in the statute of an epos in which until then he had been a subordinate and often discharged guest (Todini 2005: 36). As a tortured, passionate woman, Medea is part of the tradition of striking "anti-heroines" lying behind Lady Macbeth (Brown 1999: 28-30); the violent attitude towards her children and her dismissal of female characteristics in favour of an "unsexed identity" draw upon an image of Medea (Griffiths 2006: 105).

In his poem *Art of Love*, Ovid instructs young men how to get girls into bed, but in the last book he advises girls how best to entice men. The sexual-role reversal is also explored by Shakespeare in the poem *Venus and Adonis*, which entails a new perception of the conventional norms that govern love poetry and its conceptualization in the Renaissance tradition, and, moreover, the nature of female desire (Soubriet Velasco 1996). This deliberate intention to stress a sexual ambiguity in the roles that Venus and Adonis take in the game of love is mirrored in the reversal which brings about Adonis' death – the hunted boar becomes the hunter and gores Adonis with his tusks. Sarah Annes Brown notices that «his death suggests a further inversion: rather than an active male wooer he is the passive object of the boar's desire, which is expressed in unambiguously homoerotic language» (Brown 1999: 30):

> And, nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine
> Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin (Shakespeare 2006: 143, vv. 1115-1116).

The intense sense of transgression or boundary-crossing inherent in these myths may figure same-sex desire, even in the cases in which the contest seems to be heterosexual.

Homosexual behavior is condemned and punished in Elizabethan England, but Elizabethan poetry is frequently polymorphous in its sexual orientation: Shakespeare, but also Marlowe, takes delight in lovely teenage boys one moment and females the next. «In the theatre, the embrace between a male and a female character may bring with it a frisson of the homoerotic, in that it is an embrace between two male actors» (Brown 1999: 30). The practice of employing boys to act the parts of women was an English solution that «made possible complex desires and fantasies, and mediated cultural anxieties. Those desires and anxieties were not only gendered but erotic in their origination and implication» (Traud 1992: 117-118). Costuming boys as women was especially well suited for a drama devoted to exploring the construction and dissolution of identity, intended as «a complex subjectivity always already imbricated by gender and erotic pressures» (*ibidem*: 118). Through this expedient, homoeroticism can be safely explored, and erotic desire can be played out in a heterosexually overdetermined field.

Shakespeare derives the style of Adonis' behavior from Hermaphroditus, a beautiful youth who falls victim to a man-eating nymph, Salmacis. The union between Salmacis and Hermaphroditus is the nearest thing to a myth of sexual equality (Bate 1993: 63-64), expressed by the figure of the androgyne, which embodies the ambivalences and the ambiguities of homosexual desire in English Renaissance: if Hermaphroditus represents a

ISSN 2421-2679

double sexuality, the androgyne presents not only two sexual organs, but both genders. Shakespeare, through the delight in the charm of girlish boys, celebrates sexuality even as it is a «disturbing exposure of the dark underside of desire» (*ibidem*: 165).

Cross-dressing is another expedient which permits Shakespeare to explore the ambivalence between the sexual genders, opening «a gap between the supposed reality of one's social station and sexual kind and the clothes that were to display that reality to the world» (Howard 1988: 421). Crossdressing practices allow for challenges posed to masculine authority and the traditional gender hierarchy, to the most repressive aspects of patriarchal ideology. The possibilities of transgressing or subverting the Renaissance sex-gender system and the contradictions within the social formation enabled opposition to and modification of certain forms of patriarchal domination, and that struggle, resistance, and subversive masquerade are terms as important as recuperation and containment in analyzing Renaissance gender relations (*ibidem*: 419).

About one fifth of Shakespeare's comedies involve cross-dressing, which makes the heroines' gender identity ambiguous: they are both men and women, masculine and feminine. Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is Sebastian, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is Balthazar, Viola in *Twelfth Night*[6]is Cesario and Rosalind in *As You Like It* is Ganymede (Bate 1993: 165). Their women's part and men's part always mix, which is dramatically effective, and proves that gender is free-floating[7].

The last word on Ovidian desire

Shakespeare's final representation of sexual relations is uncompromising. There is no idealized image of marriage conveyed through a celebratory reading of the fusion of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus.

In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, «Shakespeare's last word on Ovidian desire» (*ibidem*: 266), the only achieved union is a kind of pre-sexual love: the relation between Emilia and Flavina, who died when she was 11 years old. When Emilia remembers Flavina, she talks about the plucking of paired flowers – a theme also present in *Venus and Adonis* as an emblem of unrequited love. Prior to dying, the flowers become two phoenixes (a wonderful contradiction of the bird's defining uniqueness): thus, the perfection of same-sex love is proclaimed (*ibidem*: 265).

> The flower that I would pluck
> And put between my breasts (then but beginning
> To swell about the blossom), oh, she would long
> Till she had such another, and commit it
> To the like innocent cradle, where phoenix-like
> They died in perfume (Shakespeare 2015: 211, I.III.66-71).

Conclusions

The present study investigated the presence of Ovidian images and erotic mythology in Shakespeare's work.

The analysis focused on three main themes: myth, metamorphosis, sexuality, which characterize both Ovid and Shakespeare's works.

The first part of this essay presented the close association between eroticism and theatricality proposed by the two writers. In the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid links theatergoing to sex, while Shakespeare establishes a connection between images, eroticism, and theatricality in *The Taming of the Shrew* and in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The second part examined the allusions to Ovidian characters and their reinvention in Shakespeare's work. In comedy, Shakespeare lets his characters off the hook; the Ovidian allusions, with their violent ends, remain to remind the audience that we can never be sure that all will end well. The females who speak the *Heroides* and a variety of figures in the *Metamorphoses*, for instance Myrrha and Medea, are among the models for Shakespearean soliloquy. The verbal rhetoric inherited from Ovid is accompanied in Shakespeare by a new visual rhetoric of stage gestures and actions.

The third part tracked down the transmission and reinvention of Ovidian eroticism in Shakespeare. Shakespeare explains the perverse nature of sexual love by using the art of language, instituting a violent relation between rhetoric and sexuality. Elizabethan and Jacobean interest in sexual "beastliness" found a focus in the stories narrated by Ovid, in which "unnatural" desire is elsewhere. In his works, Ovid presents a fondness for transgression: sexual-role reversal and homosexuality are also explored by Shakespeare,

ISSN 2421-2679

who staged the dissolution of the conventional barriers of gender through the expedient of cross-dressing. The figure of the androgyne embodies the ambiguities of homosexual desire in English Renaissance: the union between Salmacis and Hermaphroditus is the nearest thing to a myth of sexual equality.

Shakespeare's final representation of sexual relations is uncompromising. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the only achieved union is the relation between the little girls Emilia and Flavina: a kind of pre-sexual, perfect same-sex love.

The analysis of content and style of the most renowned Shakespearean plays reveals an interesting intertextual relationship with Ovid. Shakespeare, in his work, not only offers different examples of allusions to Ovidian images, but also reinvents the erotic mythology proposed by the Latin poet.

Bibliography

Bate, Jonathan, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Clarendon Paperbacks, Oxford 1993.

Brown, Sarah Annes, "Ovid and Ovidianism: influence, reception, transformation", *The Metamorphosis of Ovid from Chaucer to Ted Hughes*, Duckworth, London 1999: 1-22.

Brown, Sarah Annes, *Ovid. Myth and metamorphosis*, Bristol Classical Press, London 2005.

Enterline, Lynn, *The rhetoric of the body from Ovid to Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000.

Freedberg, David, *The power of images. Studies in the history and the theory of response*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1989.

Griffith, Emma, *Medea*, Routledge, Oxon 2006.

Howard, Jean E., *Crossdressing. The Theatre and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England*, «Shakespeare's Quarterly», vol. 39, n. 4, George Washington University, Washington 1988: 418-440.

Jardine, Lisa, "Twins and travesties", *Reading Shakespeare historically*, Routledge, London 1996: 65-77.

Jayatunge, Ruwan M, *Shakespearean Work and Common Mental Disorders*, Lankaweb, 2015,https://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2015/08/02/shakespearean-work-and-common-mental-disorders-3/ online (last accessed 14/04/2021).

Kryger, Rebecca J, *Shakespeare, Ovid, and the Expression of Feminine Voice*, English Master's Thesis, The College at Brockport, New York 2008.

Lafont, Agnès, *Shakespeare's erotic mythology and Ovidian Renaissance culture*, Ashgate Publishing, Farnham 2013.

Levine, Laura, *Men in Women's Clothes, Anthitheatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994.

Mason Vaughan, Virginia- Cioni, Fernando-Bessell, Jacquelyn, *Speaking Pictures. The visual/verbal nexus of dramatic performance*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Vancouver 2010.

Meres, Francis, *Palladis Tamia. Wits Treasury being the Second Part of Wits Common Wealth*, Cuthbert Burbie, London 1598.

Newman, Karen, *Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in The Merchant of Venice*, «Shakespeare's Quarterly», vol. 38, n. 1, George Washington University, Washington 1987: 19-33.

Ovid, *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, translated by J.H. Mozley, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1979 (1929).

Patterson, Annabel, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison WN 1984.

Shakespeare, William, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* Penguin Books, London 1968.

Shakespeare, William, *The poems: Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece, The Phoenix and the Turtle, The Passionate Pilgrim, A Lover's Complaint*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006.

Shakespeare, William, *Twelfth Night*, Random House Publishing Group, London 2009.

Shakespeare, William, *The Merchant of Venice*, Harper Collins, London 2013.

Shakespeare, William, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2015.

Silvestri, Domenico, "Contrastività femminile nelle *Heroides*", *L'universo femminile in Ovidio*, Liceo Classico Ovidio, Sulmona 2005: 9-26.

Soubriet Velasco, Beatriz, *Ovid and Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis: A Study of sexual-role reversal*, «Sederi», n. 7, Universidad de Coruña, Coruña 1996: 273-276, http://sederi.org/docs/

yearbooks/07/7_34_soubriet.pdf, online (last accessed 03/03/2016).
Stritmatter, Roger, *A law case in verse: Venus and Adonis and the authorship question*, «Tennessee Law Review», n. 72, Knoxville TN 2004: 307-355.
Tassi, Marguerite A., "Images Lawful and Beguiling: Ambivalent Responses to Painting in Shakespeare's Drama", *The Scandal of Images: Iconoclasm, Eroticism, and Painting in Early Modern English Drama*, Susquehanna University Press, Cranbury NJ 2005: 178-215.
Todini, Umberto, "Eros mundi. Note sparse sugli scrittori di Roma, su Ovidio e sul femminile ´fantasma´", *L'universo femminile in Ovidio*, Liceo Classico Ovidio, Sulmona 2005: 27-38.
Traub, Valerie, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulation of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, Routledge, London – New York 1992.

Notes

1 «Let base-conceited wits admire vile things, / Fair Phoebus lead me to the Muses' springs"» (trad. Marlowe c. 1599).
2 «the sweete wittie soule of Ouid liues in mellifluous & hony-tongued Shakespeare». (Meres 1598, 281^{v}-282^{r}).
3 Supposed wantonness was a great provoker of anti-stage polemic on the part of Elizabethan "puritans", like Phillip Stubbes and Stephen Gosson. Gosson viewed the theater as «the devil's playground where he lures spectators into idleness, wantonness, ostentation, and idolatry» (Tassi 2005: 36), he accused the theatre of being both effeminate and effeminizing and argued that women who went to the theatre made themselves spectacles and therefore vulnerable to the suspicion of being prostitutes (Howard 1988: 439). Stubbes also claimed that transgressions of the dress code do not just signal social disruption; they constitute such disruption, and the stability of the social order depends as much on maintaining absolute distinctions between male and female as between aristocrat and yeoman. (*Ibidem*: 422).
4 For example, in Shakespeare there are also works in which Ovid, in particular the *Metamorphoses*, are brought onto the scene just as a volume, a prop (*Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline*).
5 "Ring" puns on the slang for female genitals, thus implying the husbands' guarding of their wives' chastity. What is really open to question is the future conduct of the man. Here the word "ring" could also represent «the codified, hierarchical relation of men and women in the Elizabethan sex/gender system in which a woman's husband is "her lord, her governor, her king"». (Newman 1987: 25). The ring could be «a visual sign of her vow of love and submission to Bassanio; it is a representation of Portia's acceptance of Elizabethan marriage which was characterized by women's subjection, their loss of legal rights, and their status as goods or chattel. It signifies her place in a rigidly defined hierarchy of male power and privilege; and her declaration of love at first seems to exemplify her acquiescence to woman's place in such a system». (*Ibidem*).
6 In *Twelfth Night*, as with Ovid's Orphic narration, the context is homoerotic: Orsino's desire for Cesario echoing Apollo's for Cyparissus.
7 For an analysis of the meaning and the story of cross-dressing cf. Jardine 1996: 65-77.