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Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

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A Feast of Strange Opinions: Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes on the English Renaissance Stage

Edited by Marco Duranti
and Emanuel Stelzer

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The series of CEMP volumes offers studies and fully annotated scholarly editions related to the CEMP open-access digital archive. This archive includes texts pertaining to the genres of the paradox, of the paradoxical fiction, and of the problem, which were published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which are currently unavailable online and/or not open access (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/bib-arc/cemp). Our digital archive features diplomatic, semidiplomatic, and modernised editions of selected works, furnished with critical apparatuses and editorial notes, alongside related documentary materials, which, in turn, are relevant to poetic and dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. These texts provide fundamental testimony of the early modern episteme, functioning as a hinge joining widespread forms of the paradoxical discourse in different genres and texts and within the development of sceptical thinking.

The project is part of the Skenè Centre as well as of the Project of Excellence Digital humanities applied to foreign languages and literatures (2018-2022) Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Verona (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/en/).

Contents

Contributors 13

Marco Duranti and Emanuel Stelzer
Introduction 19

1. Ancient Paradoxical Culture and Drama

1. Alessandro Stavru
The Paradox of 'Making the Weaker Speech the Stronger': on Aristophanes' *Clouds*, 889-1114 33

2. Robert Wardy
Paradoxical Agathon and His Brethren 55

2. Paradoxes in/of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama

3. Beatrice Righetti
The Incidence of the Speakers' Gender on Paradoxes in Shakespeare's Comedies 79

4. Rocco Coronato
The Backstage. Honesty as Paradox in *Othello* 107

5. Bryan Crockett
Paradox in Performance 131

6. Andrew Hadfield
The Digges' Family and the Art of War 143

7. Francesco Dall'Olio
"Indiscreet chroniclers and witty play-makers": William Cornwallis and the Fiction of Richard III 159

3. Paradoxes in Drama and the Digital

8. Gloria Mugelli and Federico Boschetti
Searching for Ritual Paradoxes in Annotated Ancient Greek Tragedies 205

9. Alessandra Squeo
"It Is a Happiness to Be in Debt": Digital Approaches to the Culture of Paradox in Early Modern Drama 231

10. Michael R. Best
"Do you see this?" Ambiguity and Paradox in *King Lear* 259

Index 279

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2. Paradoxes in/of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama

3

The Incidence of the Speakers' Gender on Paradoxes in Shakespeare's Comedies

Beatrice Righetti

Abstract

Stemming from a preliminary analysis on paradoxes in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (Righetti 2022), this essay is framed within the broader research field of paradoxical writing in early modern England, which has also focused on the presence and role of paradoxes in Shakespeare's works (Vickers 1968; Platt 2009; Bigliazzi 2011, 2014, 2022; Coronato 2014). The present contribution aims to broaden the corpus of plays of the former study to include all of Shakespeare's comedies and investigate the existence of a specific correlation between Shakespeare's dramatic writing and paradoxical tradition, that is the presence of possible causal relations between the character's gender and the form and function of the paradoxes they use.

Results show that male characters utter paradoxes which follow rhetorical conventions and rely on them irrespective of the dramatic context, either comical or momentarily tragical. Contrariwise, female characters use paradoxes more rarely and turn to *endoxa*, Aristotle's term for common opinion, when confronted with crucial, possibly life-threatening events. This change seems to mirror a rhetorical tendency in the works by early modern male and female writers of the *querelle des femmes* and suggests that this early modern debate on women may have had an indirect impact in Shakespeare's construction of his characters' paradoxical language.

Keywords: William Shakespeare; comedy; paradox; gender; female voice

As generative as the paradox itself,[1] the present study is the result of a precedent analysis on the presence of mock encomia in

[1] The generative power of paradoxes lies in their defiance on *endoxa* and common knowledge as it allows them to "present audiences with new ideas, new ways of thinking above ideas, and new constructs for organizing and solving problems" (Hyde 1979, 218).

Shakespeare's comedies (Righetti 2022). Besides their argument and role, the study dealt only partially with the relationship between paradoxes and their speakers, who were investigated according to their social standing rather than gender. To bridge this gap, the present essay aims to analyse the role of the speaker's gender in the paradoxical expressions in Shakespeare's comedies.

Few scholarly studies have addressed the interactions between the categories of gender and paradox which have been usually analysed on a thematic level only. Instead of referring to gender and paradox as literary/dramatic variables like social status or literary/dramatic genre, they usually rely on paradox as a rhetorical tool which helps navigate early modern gender issues and their layers of complexity. In *Governing Masculinities in the Early Modern Period*, Jacqueline Van Gent relies on paradox to define the gender-based social and psychological mechanisms underlying the instability of early modern patriarchal rule:

> Patriarchy was predicted on an intrinsic paradox. It was a common contemporary view that women were inherently sexually uncontrollable; nonetheless, the patriarch's position was dependent upon his establishment of control over the necessarily subordinate woman, including over this unruly female sexuality. (2011, 144)

Likewise, in "The Woman Writer as Public Paradox: Elizabeth Carter and the Bluestocking Circle", Lisa A. Freeman refers to Puttenham's definition of paradox but does not focus on its logical implications, but on the example of paradoxical thinking the author provides ("that a woman should dominate her husband in the field of wit or intelligence is marked here as a cause for wonder, for it violates a normative gender hierarchy", 2010, 122), which Freeman uses as a starting point for her discussion of rape and its handling in the early modern period. Although having penned an extremely informative – and almost unique – study on Shakespearean paradoxes, Peter G. Platt too explores the possible relationship between gender and paradox as a topical rather than structural issue embodied by the multi-layered figure of the boy actor ("[u]sing these paradoxes, Shakespeare goes to great lengths in this play to foreground the performance of gender by highlighting the material fact that his

theater's women were played by boys . . . the boy actor plays Rosalind; Rosalind becomes a young man, Ganymede; . . . Ganymede becomes 'Rosalind'" 2009, 173).

Unlike these studies, the present essay considers paradoxes as affecting not only the linguistic, but also the contextual and illocutionary codes (see Bigliazzi 2011, 127). As such, paradoxes still respond to their Ciceronian definition ("[*q*]*uae quia sunt admirabilia contraque opinionem omnium*", see Galli 2019) which requires them to counter doxa, that is, common opinion and common sense, as well as show their deeply metalogic nature as they necessarily test and/or reconfigure the dramatic action (Bigliazzi 2011, 127). The paradoxical expressions here addressed are mock encomia, "a species of rhetorical jest or display piece which involves the praise of unworthy, unexpected, or trifling objects" (Knight Miller 1956, 145); oxymora, that is "figures which are intrinsically contradictory while being commonly accepted"; and logical paradoxes, "which flaunt the principle of non-contradiction, according to which a proposition cannot be simultaneously true and false, or deny factual evidence" (Duranti and Stelzer 2022, 23). Although mock encomia and oxymora usually contradict the cultural and linguistic codes respectively and seldom undermine their logical framework, they may acquire a paradoxical value when "combined in complex articulations of thought that not only describe a puzzling sense of the real but in so doing perform actions" (Bigliazzi 2022, 54). On the other hand, logical paradoxes depend on their situational and illocutionary contexts and as such often distort not only their cultural and linguistic, but also logical background. Defined as "metalogisms", logical paradoxes are then considered "especially relevant in drama, where every speech act is tied to its situationality, because metalogisms belong to the ostensive, deictic sphere" (Duranti and Stelzer 2022, 24).

The theatrical dimension is thus the best context where to experience such logical impasses and see how they affect both their onstage and offstage audience and their "ability to measure the gap, as it were, between reference and referent" (Elam 1980, 108). For the sake of brevity and coherence, the corpus of plays here investigated focuses on Shakespearean comedies and includes *The Comedy of Errors* (1589), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593), *Love's Labour's Lost*

(1594), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598), *As You Like It* (1599), *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602) and *Measure for Measure* (1604).

The thesis underlying this study is that male characters use paradoxes more frequently and distribute them more evenly throughout the play than female ones, who seldom rely on paradoxical reasoning, especially when confronted with critical situations. In these cases, they prefer *endoxa*, the Aristotelian 'common opinion', that is "the things believed" or "which seem so" (*ta dokounta*) "to everyone or to most people or to the wise – to all of them, or to most, or to the most famous and esteem [of them]" (Aristotle 1997, 100b21-3).[2] The purpose of this distinction is not to diminish the significance of paradoxes in female characters as a means of social critique. Instead, it aims to emphasise the greater frequency and clarity with which this critique is conveyed through the use of *endoxa*. One of the reasons behind this choice may lay in Shakespeare's – possibly unconscious – assimilation of contemporary rhetorical practices. Comparisons between early modern male and female authors seem to suggest that women writers usually favour *endoxa* and avoid paradoxical expressions, which are rather common in their male counterparts' misogynist writing. This rhetorical differentiation may derive from women writers' perception of the dangers deriving from paradoxical reasoning. The diversion of the readers' attention from the content to the peculiar logic and implications of the paradoxical form was unproblematic to male writers, who were defending conventional positions about men's superiority over the female sex, and often relied on paradoxes as rhetorical *divertissement*. Women instead

[2] "[T]hose opinions [which] are 'generally accepted'", "which are accepted by every one or by the majority or by the philosophers – i.e. by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and illustrious of them" (qtd in Eikeland 2016, 31). Eikeland explains how this approach differs from the paradoxical one in critically developing dialogical or dialectical argumentations: it works from within common practises and relies "on an initial confidence in the experience (empeiría) of everyday practitioners", it "play[s] out, distinguish[es] and explor[es] ambivalences, inner tensions and contradictions . . . prov[es] them right in certain senses but not in others . . . and solve[s] or dissolve[s] paradoxes" (ibid).

were already in a weaker position as they were struggling to be acknowledged as equal interlocutors and intellectually gifted partners. In this light, the use of paradoxes could have easily provided male readers with the perfect excuse to avoid addressing thorny issues by focusing on rhetorical and logical fallacies in their paradoxical form.

1. Paradoxes and Male Characters: Frequency and Conventions

In Shakespeare's comedies, male characters seem at ease in relying on paradoxical thinking given the frequency and range of paradoxical passages that can be found in their lines, irrespectively of the gravity of their content.

Although more thoroughly analysed elsewhere (Righetti 2022), mock encomia are common in Shakespeare's plays, possibly given their comical reach which well fits the genre. In *As You Like It* (Shakespeare 1975), the clown Touchstone addresses cuckoldry, one of the most popular subjects belonging to the so-called *infames materiae*, namely shameful topics or conditions. In dealing with it, writers such as Anton Francesco Doni, Antonfrancesco Grazzini and Tommaso Garzoni in Italy and François Rabelais and Jean Passerat in France (Figorilli 2008, 37-8)[3] usually turn the shameful visibility of the cuckold's horns into a source of pride and admiration, a sign of his abundance for the owner through examples from the animal world, myths and religion ("[o] le sono il bel tropheo; o le sono il bel cimieri; o le son la bella cosa", Doni 1551, Dvi*r*).[4] Likewise, Touchstone associates the cuckold's horns with worldly goods by stating that as "[m]any a man knows no end / of his goods" so "[m] any a man has good horns and knows no end / of them" (3.3.49-50). He expands this notion of pride and wealth by conjuring the image

[3] The works mentioned above are "Al Cornieri da Corneto" by Doni (1551, 42-64), *In lode delle corna* by Grazzini, *Mirabile cornucopia consolatorio* by Garzoni (posthumously published in 1601, but possibly written in 1588-1589), *Tier Livre des faits et dits Héroïques du noble Pantagruel* (1546) by Rabelais and *La Corne d'Abondance* (1606) by Passerat.

[4] "Aren't they a pretty trophy? Aren't they a pretty [helmet's] crest? Aren't they a pretty thing?".

of the "noblest deer" and of "a wall'd town", whose mural defences make it "more worthier than a village", and concludes by stating that "the forehead of a married man [is] more honourable than the bare brow of a bachelor" (3.3.51-7). A similar paradoxical praise of the horns also appears in *All's Well That Ends Well* (Shakespeare 1985), where the Clown explains the perks of being a cuckold by stating that the lover of his wife does him a service by "com[ing] to do that for me which I am aweary of" (1.3.32). Such an inversion of perspective enables the listener to judge a traditionally negative and shameful condition as potentially desirable since it not only frees the husband from his marital duty, but also strengthens the couple's happiness ("he that cherishes my flesh and blood loves my flesh and blood; he that loves my flesh and blood is my friend: ergo, he that kisses my wife is my friend", 34-6).

Besides cuckoldry, *Measure for Measure* (Shakespeare 1991) shows a reversed mock encomium of death whose main logical argumentation consists in finding faults with its opposite ("[in this life] lie hid moe thousand deaths; yet death we fear", 3.1.39-40). This kind of mock praise was very popular in early modern Europe as it allowed to question – though ironically – not only logical structures but also doxastic, religious beliefs otherwise passively taken for granted. Besides contemporary paradoxical praises on the same subject, such as Thomas Becon's *Prayse of Death* (1563) or E.A.'s English translation of Philippe de Mornay's *Excellent discours de la vie et de la mort* (*The Defence of Death*, 1577), Vincentio's reversed mock encomium seems to echo Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, first translated into English in 1534, and *Tusculanae Disputationes*, where death is considered the supreme good since it frees man from the only cause of human suffering, life.

Other conventional mock praises can be found in *Love's Labour's Lost* (Shakespeare 1998), where Biron turns two traditionally unpleasant conditions, such as black beauty and ignorance, into desirable qualities. The praise of black beauty is famously dealt with by Shakespeare himself in his 'Dark Lady Sonnets' and grows even more popular in the seventeenth century, as proved by the anonymous and undated "That a Black-a-moor Woman is the greatest Beauty; in a Letter to a Lady exceeding Fair", Thomas Jordan's *A Paradox on his Mistresse, who is cole Blacke, Blinde, Wrinckled,*

Crooked and Dumbe (1646) and Herbert of Cherbury's posthumous *Sonnet of Black Beauty* (1665). Likewise, Biron's paradoxical praise of ignorance easily recalls one of the best-known mock encomia of ignorance of that time, namely Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* (1524). Both Biron and Agrippa seem to consider knowledge "pernicious" and "destructive to the well-being of Men, or to the Salvation of our Souls" (Agrippa 1684, B1*v*) given the impossibility of fully mastering the range of notions necessary to achieve such a wisdom.[5] Although with little connections to early modern writing, *The Comedy of Errors* (Shakespeare 1962) too shows another instance of mock praise in Dromio of Ephesus' ironical defence of his master's physical violence (4.4.30-40).

Also presenting a mock encomium of male superiority over women, *The Taming of the Shrew* (Shakespeare 2002) is the only comedy to show instances of oxymora which transcend purely linguistic contradictions. Although they cannot be defined as metalogisms since they do not contradict the dramatic action in itself, they differ from mock encomia and semantic oxymora in that they show structural ties with the events onstage. In Kate and Petruchio's wedding scene, Biondello announces the arrival of the bridegroom as follow: "News, and such old news as you never heard of!" (3.2.30). The intention of delivering something unprecedented which is somehow both already known ("old") and unknown ("never heard of") to the listeners/speakers creates a cognitive loop which seems impossible to solve. This degree of paradoxicality is enhanced by the presence of a multi-layered oxymoron which plays on the contrast between "old" and "new" in a twofold way and serves the dramatic action since it anticipates what the actors onstage and the audience are about to see, that is the (un)expected arrival of the groom in weary and torn clothes. First, the plain contradiction between "news" and "old" regards Petruchio's arrival at his wedding: his presence is both "news", and good news for once, since Kate and Baptista were starting to doubt he would show up at all ("Why, is it

[5] "Light seeking light doth light of light beguile" (*LLL*, 1.1.77); "[t]he knowledge of all Sciences is so difficult, if I may not say impossible, that the age of Man will not suffice to learn the perfection of one Art as it ought to be" (Agrippa 1684, B3*v*).

not news to hear of Petruchio's coming?", 34) as well as "old news", since the arrival of the groom at his own wedding is rather obvious. However, this oxymoronic expression concerns not only the fact but also the way Petruchio shows up at his wedding: Biondello's use of "old" to define "news" sounds programmatic since it anticipates Petruchio's inappropriate attire consisting in his "old" clothes and horse ("Why, Petruchio is coming in a new hat and an old jerkin; a pair of old breeches thrice turned . . . his horse hipped – with an old mothy saddle . . . possessed with the glanders and like to mose in the chine" (41-9).

In 4.1, Petruchio provides another example of oxymoron which gains a performative, structural reach: his often-quoted words, "to kill a wife with kindness" (195), which he utters in an aside as he explains his plan to tame his shrewish wife.[6] Being somewhat an exception, this oxymoron cannot be defined paradoxical in its contradiction of doxastic principles. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humanists as well as writers of conduct books and manuals generally supported the use of forceable means other than reasonable conversation to tame curst wives as long as they did not involve overt physical violence (Sharpe 1981; Dwyer Amussen 1988). William Gouge's *Of Domestical Duties* (1622, 397) still stated that "[a wife] may be restrained of liberty, denied such things as she most affecteth, be kept up, as it were, in hold" (Detmer 1997, 279). This bit of advice fits Petruchio's strategy, which disguises thoughtful gestures as subtle means of physical and psychological coercion ("[a]s with the meat, some undeserved fault / I'll find about the making of the bed; . . . and amid this hurly I intend / That all is done in reverend care of her", 186-91). Still, its clear semantical paradoxicality, which describes "kindness" as a result of a violent intention ("kill"), has a fundamental performative role in both legitimising Petruchio's

[6] Farley-Hills (1981) briefly comments on this passage: "[a]dmittedly there is something paradoxical too about Petruchio's 'kindness': it is a kindness that is so concerned that she has fine enough food that she is allowed none and so concerned that she'll have fine linen on her bed that she is allowed to get no sleep: 'I, and amid this hurlie I intend, That all is done in reverend care of her…' (1837-8). The paradox of hurting her with kindness, so that kindness is ultimately done by hurting, is itself an extension of the sexual role of the male, whose love-making is aggression and whose aggression is an act of love" (168).

otherwise unintelligible previous behaviour towards his wife and predicting those to follow. In Scene 3, for instance, Petruchio rips and tears apart the newly fabricated gown and hat which Kate should have worn for her sister's marriage. As anticipated in the previous oxymoronic utterance, these violent actions are disguised as acts of service which Petruchio performs to allegedly spare her any social embarrassment provoked by such inappropriate clothing ("Why, true, he [the tailor] means to make a puppet of thee", 104).

Lacking such a performative reach, merely semantical oxymora are not considered in the present study given their tendency to only contradict the linguistic code and leave their logical framework unscathed. This is the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare 1988), where Quince's "lamentable comedy" (1.2.9), Demetrius' "[c]rystal is muddy" (3.2.139) and Hippolyta's "I never heard so musical a discord, such sweet thunder" (4.1.114-5) do not undermine the logic at play. Titania's praise of Bottom's asinine figure too ("[t]hou art as wise as thou art beautiful", 3.1.123) is paradoxical only on a linguistic level since it is the result of a love charm and as such to be considered honest despite its seemingly paradoxical form.[7] The same can be applied to Friar Francis' "[c]ome, lady, die to live" in *Much Ado About Nothing* (Shakespeare 2016, 4.1.253). This line presents no paradoxical aspects from a religious point of view, since it implies the doxastic belief that death leads to eternal life. Likewise, it does not show any degree of paradoxicality from a performative perspective since both the characters onstage and the audience are aware of the logic underneath the priest's words ("[l]et her [Hero] awhile be secretly kept it, / And publish

[7] Another example of this kind of false paradox can be found in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Replying to the King's question about Bertram's alleged affair with the maid Diana, Parolles rather enigmatically states that Bertram "loved her, sir, and loved her not" (5.3.244). Though paradoxical from a linguistic point of view, the sentence retains a veridical value when framed within its dramatic background: Bertram did love a maid who answered to the name of Diana and at the same time he did not truly lay with *her* since the woman he bedded was Helena in disguise. The same reasoning is applied to Diana's comment, "he [Bertram]'s guilty, and he is not guilty" (5.3.279), since he bedded a virgin –his wife – but not herself. A more detailed account of this borderline case is given in Righetti 2022.

it that she is dead indeed . . . this well carried shall on her behalf / Change slander to remorse", 203-11).

Similarly, logical paradoxes which only flaunt the principle of non-contradiction and/or deny factual evidence from a linguistic, imaginative point of view have been excluded. This is the case with Dromio's "[i]f she lives till doomsday, she'll burn a week longer than the whole world" (*The Comedy of Errors*, 3.2.98-100), which recalls very common oxymoronic expressions in Shakespeare's time like Joseph Swetnam's "[to] draw water continually, to fill a bottomlesse tubbe" (1615, B3*v*) to express the uselessness of men's attempts to mend women's crooked nature. Likewise, Touchstone's description of solitary life loses some of its paradoxicality because of its subjectivity. Its contradictory utterance does not extend to the abstract notion of solitary living in general, but it applies to the kind of life he is experiencing in the forest of Arden only ("in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd's life, it is nought; in respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; . . . but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious", *AYL*, 3.2.13-18).[8]

Rather, proper logical paradoxes usually confirm as well as deny specific characteristics or definitions of one's identity in relation to their role within family or society. In *As You Like It*, Adam talks with Orlando about Oliver, the latter's brother, and defines him as "[y]our brother – no, no brother; yet the son – yet not the son" (2.3.19-20), thus identifying a coexistence of opposites which create a paradoxical loop in his description.[9] In other cases, similar utterances can be

[8] Demetrius' paradoxical description of Helena as a murderer too is partially jeopardised by linguistic ambiguity ("[y]et you, the murderer, look as bright, as clear / As yonder Venus in her *glimmering* sphere", *MND*, 3.2.60-1, emphasis added). The use of "glimmering" conveys uncertainty about the factuality of Helena's evil nature, hinted at by the verb "to look", and suggests a subjective reading of the statement, which then weakens its paradoxical reach.

[9] Likewise, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Salerio's description of Antonio as "[n]ot sick, my lord, unless it be in mind; / Nor well, unless in mind" (3.2.233-5) poses a similar logical paradox since it shows the coexistence of opposite conditions in him: Antonio is both "not sick", thus well, and "not well", thus sick in mind due to the news he received of the shipwreck which destroyed his goods. The same reasoning can be applied to the Clown's portrayal of Helena's mother in *All's Well*: "[s]he is not well; but yet she has her health:

solved as soon as they are framed within a temporal perspective. Hamlet's "[w]as't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet" (5.2.179-80) does not account for a coexistence of opposites in himself but rather clarifies that he has changed after his murder of Polonius (Bigliazzi 2022, 58). In *As You Like It*, time does not apply to Oliver's conduct and as such does not offer a solution to Adam's paradoxical reasoning: Oliver's ruthless behaviour has always been so much at odds with his relatives' that it is hard to think he truly is Orlando's brother and Sir Rowland's son ("no brother", "yet not the son"), although he surely shares their bloodline ("your brother", "yet the son").[10]

Although similar in form, the paradoxical impasse posed by Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* differs from the previous quoted passage as it stands for more than a logical loop; rather, it clarifies and typifies some of his most characterising traits such as wit and rhetorical mastery. After implying that Hero is everything but the portrayal of the ideal Renaissance woman since she is short, slight and brown, Benedick poses two opposite statements which lead to the same result:

> Benedick Why, i' faith, methinks she's too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise and too little for a great praise: only this commendation I can afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome; and being no other but as she is, I do not like her (1.1.163-7)

The first proposition argues that if Hero could be different from herself ("were she other than she is") she would be "unhandsome", and thus possibly not pleasant to him. The second proposition confirms that Hero cannot be anything but herself ("and being no

she's very merry; but yet she is not well: but thanks be given, she's very well and wants nothing i', the world; but yet she is not well" (2.4.2-4).

[10] In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio's description of Kate as "plain Kate, and bonny Kate" (2.1.185-6) clashes with her conventional label of "Kate the curst" (2.1.186) and creates a logical paradox more similar to Adam's than Hamlet's. In this case, it is the audience rather than the speaker, who does not acknowledge Kate's two identities as coexisting, to be faced with a difficult choice to make and decide whether Kate is the renowned shrew of Padua or Petruchio's mild and obedient wife-to-be.

other but as she is"), thus handsome, but it suggests that beauty alone does not suffice and Benedick tops his reasoning with a resolute "I don't like her". This conclusion activates the logical paradox as it shows how two opposite conditions, Hero's ugliness and beauty, lead to the same result, Benedick's indifference towards her.

Besides being numerous and rather conventional in form and content, paradoxes uttered by male characters also seem to be evenly distributed throughout the play. They appear in rather passing, unproblematic moments, as happens with Dromio's mock encomium of physical violence in *The Comedy of Errors* ("[w]hen I am cold, he heats me with beating; when I am / warm, he cools me with beating" 4.4.34-5). His paradoxical praise is uttered in one of the most confusing passages of the play, where the endless equivocations and identity exchanges arouse laughter in the audience and lead to the conventional resolution which takes place in the following scene ("I see two husbands, or mine eyes deceive me", 5.1.331).

More interestingly, such expressions, which own a potentially comical reach, also show in more crucial passages where the characters are faced with uncanny, if not altogether tragic, events.[11] In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Biron's revelatory acknowledgment of his feelings towards Rosaline is signalled by a mock encomium of black beauty ("[a] wightly wanton with a velvet brow, / With two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes; . . . And I to sigh for her! to watch for her! / To pray for her!", 3.1.191-6). Such feelings resurface in 4.3, where Biron faces the King's shock at his love for such an unconventional beauty ("[b]y heaven, thy love is black as ebony", 4.3.243) with a rhetorical inversion ("[i]s ebony like her? O wood

[11] In *All's Well*, the Clown's contradictory portrayal of Helena's mother ("[s]he is not well; but yet she has her health: she's very merry; but yet she is not well: but thanks be given, she's very well and wants nothing i', the world; but yet she is not well", 2.4.2-4) bridges the gap between male paradoxes uttered in plainly comical/tragical passages since it is placed as a comic pause between two scenes which unfold Helena's unfortunate destiny. The audience is made aware of Bertram's plan of leaving Helena, his bride, and sail to France ("I'll to the wars, she to her single sorrow", 2.3.273), while, later, they witness this plan coming to fruition as Bertram leaves her unawares ("[g]o thou toward home; where I will never come / Whilst I can shake my sword or hear the drum", 2.5.84).

divine! / A wife of such wood were felicity", 244-5) immediately perceived as paradoxical ("[o] paradox!", 250). Similarly, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio's "to kill a wife with kindness" (4.1.195) is uttered in a crucial moment of the play as he explains for the first time to his baffled on and offstage audience the logic behind his uncanny behaviour towards his wife:

> Thus have I politicly begun my reign,
> And 'tis my hope to end successfully.
> My falcon now is sharp and passing empty.
> And till she stoop she must not be full-gorg'd,
> . . .
> This is a way to kill a wife with kindness,
> And thus I'll curb her mad and headstrong humour
> (4.1.175-96)

Paradoxical thinking also characterises Petruchio's last test of Kate's obedience as it marks the utmost degree of logical complexity the conceptual horizon of the play affords. Here, Petruchio relies on logical contraries, that is universal categorical propositions opposed to each other which create dichotomic alternatives out of single elements (A is either B or not B) and lead to paradoxical conclusions if such alternatives are allowed to coexist. Not only does his paradoxical reasoning contradict onstage and offstage reality, but also becomes self-effacing as it forces Kate to counter both truth and her own words:

> Petruchio I say it is the moon.
> Kate I know it is the moon.
> Petruchio Nay, then you lie; it is the blessed sun.
> Kate Then, God be bless'd, it is the blessed sun;
> But sun it is not, when you say it is not;
> And the moon changes even as your mind.
> What you will have it nam'd, even that it is,
> And so it shall be so for Katherine.
> (4.5.16-22)

The presence of paradoxes uttered by male characters also marks life-threatening scenes where they express contrasting passions and unreconcilable thoughts. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the tragical

climax of the play, that is, Claudio's public slandering of Hero at the altar and his consequent rampage, is punctuated by frequent oxymora which voice his difficulty in accepting his fiancée's loose behaviour, which he deems incompatible with her well-known spotless reputation ("[o] Hero! . . . But fare thee well, most foul, most fair. Farewell / Thou pure impiety and impious purity", 4.1.100-4). As it is the case with Shakespeare's tragedies and later comedies, paradoxes adapt to tragical settings too where they convey the contrasts and internal struggles of divided minds and broken hearts rather than linguistic acrobatics of witty minds (see Bigliazzi 2022).

While male characters seem to easily adapt paradoxical reasoning to any context and theme they want to convey, regardless of the gravity of its dramatic setting, female ones tend to avoid paradoxes altogether, especially when addressing serious content. As the following section suggests, this rhetorical tendency may have been unconsciously adapted by Shakespeare in giving voice to his female characters from early modern writing practices by female authors.

2. Endoxa Over Paradoxa in Female Characters' Rhetoric

While male characters utter a wide range of paradoxical expressions, this is not the case with female ones, who seldom rely on this rhetorical trope. Out of the nine plays here considered, only two, namely *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, show instances of mock encomia, oxymora and logical paradoxes uttered by female characters. To these, one may also add *The Taming of the Shrew*, thanks to Kate's final monologue, the only instance of a paradoxical utterance by a female character in the play. As the following analysis shows, such paradoxes are not only fewer in number than those uttered by male characters, but also seldom appear in crucial moments of the play.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's comments about her loathed suitors are contradictory as well as paradoxical in their resolution. However, they have no structural resonance in the play since they do not affect either her father's will or her decision to respect it. Her description of Monsieur Le Bon as "every man in no man" (Shakespeare 1964, 1.2.57) implies a contradictory as

well as paradoxical conclusion which reverberates in titles of later plays, such as the anonymous *No-body and Some-body* (1606) and Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King* (1619); likewise, her definition of the Duke of Saxony's nephew ("when he is best, he is a little worse than a man, and when he is worst, he is little better than a beast", 82-4) implies that the nobleman impossibly bridges two distinct evolutionary stages, those of the beast and the man, which conventionally share no middle term. While Petruchio's "to kill a wife with kindness" (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 4.1.195) justifies past and future actions as it provides the interpretative key to his behaviour towards Kate, Portia's paradoxical descriptions of her suitors cannot be considered programmatic since they do no explain or affect the unfolding of the plot.

Unlike Portia and Kate, Beatrice shows her mastery of paradoxical rhetoric from the beginning of the play as she conveys sharp critiques of the ruling class misbehaviours and misogynist social paradigms through logically contradicting utterances.[12] Her description of man as "valiant dust" (3.1.54) oxymoronically rewrites a biblical image to question his innate superiority over women. This rhetorical stratagem was common among proto-feminist writers of the time.[13] In *Jane Anger Her Protection for Women* (1589), Anger too relies on the myth of Creation to stress how Adam's base birth mirrors his base nature ("formed *In principio* of drosse and filthy clay [, Adam] did so remaine until God saw that in him his workmanship was good", C1*r*). Unlike him, Anger stresses, Eve was made out of "mans fleshe, that she might bee purer then he, doth evidently showe, how far we women are more excellent then men" (ibid.).[14] Likewise, Beatrice's disdain for marriage and men

[12] Other paradoxical expressions by Beatrice include a logical paradox ("but believe me not; and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing", 4.1.271-2) and an oxymoron ("I am gone, though I am here", 293).

[13] "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7, *KJV*).

[14] Maxwell states that Beatrice relies on copiousness as humanist rhetorical principle to defamiliarise and render more humorous this biblical passage adding unexpected synonyms such as "wayward marl" (2008, 67). This argumentative technique can still be found in seventeenth-century women writers, such as Mary Tattle-well ("man was made of pollution, earth,

in general is conveyed through a logical paradox which leaves no suitor standing ("[h]e that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man: and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him", 2.1.30-4).[15] Her reasoning process is duly explained by Hero in the following act as she clarifies how Beatrice maintains the formal convention of the mock encomium genre, thus dealing with one characteristic at a time, only to subtly subvert its final aim. In her paradoxical tirades, Beatrice does not find virtues in unworthy subjects, but rather faults in any man who threatens to jeopardise her singleness ("[i]f fair-faced, she would swear the gentleman should be her sister; if black, why Nature, drawing of an antic, made a foul blot", 3.1.61-4).

Similarly, Kate's only paradoxical remark, that is her conclusive monologue, stands for a witty reversed mock encomium on male authority and supremacy over women. Its ironical, if not parodical reach is given by the presence of linguistic and performative exaggerations (Kingsbury 2004, 77)[16] as well as logical paradoxes which punctuate her reasoning and provide it with a degree of verbal ambiguity sufficient to allow different, at times opposite, interpretations of it. Kate's advice to her female audience to "vail your stomachs, for it is no boot" (5.2.177), for instance, may have a twofold, contradictory reading which, paradoxically, lead to the same result. If the verb "to veil" is considered an alternative spelling for 'to vail', namely "[t]o lower in sign of submission or respect"

& slime; and woman was formed out of that earth when it was first Refin'd", 1640, E12*v*).

[15] Beatrice's logical paradoxes echoes in structure Benedick's: "[w]hy, i' faith, methinks she's too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise and too little for a great praise: only this commendation I can afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome; and being no other but as she is, I do not like her" (1.1.163-7)

[16] Kate's powerful gesture of submission – i.e. offering to place her hand below Petruchio's foot – is considered an exaggeration pre-reformation wedding rituals. The Salisbury Manual prescribes that brides should "prostrate . . . at the feet of the bridegroom" and "kiss his right foot". However, Kate enhances the performativity of this gesture as she claims to be ready to "place [her] hands below [her] husband's foot", thus risking the pain of having her hands crushed by Petruchio's booted feet.

(*OED* I.1.b),[17] then Kate seemingly suggests other women to bend their will to their husband's. Contrariwise, if 'to veil' is interpreted as "[t]o hide or conceal from the apprehension, knowledge, or perception of others", possibly also as "to treat or deal with in such a way as to disguise or obscure; to hide or mask the true nature or meaning of" (*OED* 4.a.i), then Kate's message gains a subversive tone as she suggests other women to conceal their stomachs – the seat of their passions and emotions – from their husbands in order to play the obedient wife (Kingsbury 2004, 79). This results in a paradoxical conclusion: no matter what they chose, either 'to veil' or 'to vail', women are always forced by social and cultural conventions to show their allegiance to patriarchal power and thus to necessarily submit to it ("[f]or it is no boot / And place your hands below your husband's foot", 177-8) (see Righetti 2022, 17-18).

Despite the social and cultural criticism inherent in such utterances, paradoxes by female characters fail to deeply question and overturn or affect the events of the play. While Petruchio's "kill with kindness" strategy provides the dramatic structure of most of the events in the play, neither Portia's nor Beatrice's comments deeply influence the dramatic action. Kate's monologue may prove the exception to such rule; however, given its conclusive position in the comedy, it is up to the audience to decide whether its implicit irony may lead to a new power struggle within the couple. Also, the few paradoxical expressions by female characters are unevenly distributed throughout the play; in particular, they are consistently absent in crucial situations. While male characters rely on paradoxical expressions independently from the dramatic context and eventually adapt paradoxes to express an either comic ("[n]ews, and such old news as you never heard of!", *The Taming of the Shrew*, 3.2.30) or tragic content ("most foul, most fair", *Much Ado about Nothing*, 4.1.103), female characters seem to prefer *endoxa*, namely

[17] In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature the stomach, as well as the heart, often stood for the inward seat of passion and emotion; see Kingsbury 2004, 78. Here, Kingsbury also recalls Elizabeth I's Tilbury speech, where the queen states "I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king", thus assuring that underneath her female physical appearance she owned behavioural traits traditionally identified as male.

common opinion, especially when confronted with life-threatening situations. In this case, they follow Aristotle's suggestion to "mov[e] critically" through complicated, contradictory issues in order to develop dialogical or dialectical argumentations to solve logical impasses and overcome formal, aesthetic and logical complexity, also resulting from the use of paradoxes (Aristotle 1997, 31). If thus analysed, it may seem that female characters' harshest and most serious critiques against contemporary society are conveyed through rational reasoning than paradoxical argumentation.

This strategy is used by Kate in her first attempts to resist Petruchio's paradoxical account of her identity. While he manipulates her name ("Good morrow, Kate, for that's your name, I hear", 2.1.182) and personality traits ("you are call'd plain Kate, and bonny Kate", 185-6), she closely follows *endoxa* about her sense of self and promptly corrects him ("Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing", 183) by repeatedly asserting her shrewish nature and identity ("They call me Katherine", 184). Kate follows analytical reasoning also when faced with Petruchio's cruel and paradoxical plan of depriving her of any comfort. This leads her to first question Petruchio's final aim ("What, did he marry me to famish me?", 4.3.3), break a comparison with common experience ("[Beggars that come unto my father's door / Upon entreaty have a present alms; If not, elsewhere they meet with charity", 4-6) and almost unveil his true intentions ("And that which spites me more than all these wants – / He does it under name of perfect love", 11-12) and their paradoxical quality ("[a]s who should say, if I should sleep or eat, / 'Twere deadly sickness or else present death", 13-14).

Beatrice exploits this strategy when faced with a truly life-threatening situation, Hero's tragedy. When Claudio publicly accuses Hero of loose behaviour, Beatrice momentarily abandons her usual display of paradoxical wit and relies on *endoxa* to save her cousin from the tragic destiny which usually awaits slandered women. In this case, her reliance on *endoxa* or common opinions concerns past actions rather than the present moment, as happens with Kate, and requires an attentive revision of her past habits to prove her cousin's spotless reputation with certainty ("No, truly not; although, until last night, / I have this twelvemonth been her bedfellow", 4.1.148-9). This comment questions the truthfulness of

Claudio's accusations – partially expressed through paradoxes – and reinforces Hero's claims of innocence, thus giving Benedick and Leonato a further reason for listening to the priest's plan to save her.

The lower frequency of paradoxes in female characters' utterances seems to echo a rhetorical practice to be found in early modern female authors' writing. In the European debate on the worth of women, female writers who defended the female sex from misogynist attacks seldom relied on paradoxical thinking. Among the very few paradoxical strategies used by them, the most common one requires the author to first accept her opponents' accusations and then turn them in her favour by manipulating the logic underneath. In *Esther Hath Hang'd Haman* (1617), Esther Sowernam counters the misogynist accusations of her literary opponent, Joseph Swetnam, and transforms them into proofs of women's excellence by means of paradoxical reasoning: if weaker remarks usually regard petty offences and unimportant offenders and harsher ones regard most notable subjects, then men's violent attacks against women prove the relevance of the female sex and, more at large, its more perfect nature ("[i]n no one thing, men doe acknowledge a more excellent perfection in women then in the estimate of the offences which a woman doth commit: the worthinesse of the person doth make the sinne more markeable", D4*v*). Likewise, in *Her Protection of Women* (1589), Jane Anger turns common opinion on conventional female vices and flaws into necessary social qualities to mend men's ill conduct. In this view, female talkativeness becomes the expression of a wife's loving habit of thoughtfully counselling her partner ("[o]ur tongues are light, because earnest in reprooving mens filthy vices, and our good counsel is termed nipping injurie, in that it accordes not with their foolish fancies", B3*v*).[18]

[18] This paradoxical strategy can also be found in contemporary Italian defences of women. In Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* (1600), Corinna, one of the female protagonists of this Boccaccian dialogue, uses this paradoxical argumentative strategy to reverse the traditional misogynist claim that imputes men's superiority to their physical strength. To her, male strength stands not for a virtue, but rather for their natural status as servants of weaker, though nobler female masters ("For don't we see that men's rightful task is to go out to work and wear themselves out trying to accumulate wealth, as though they were our factors or stewards, so that we can remain

Thus, in dealing with such a sensitive issue as gender balance, women writers joining the debate too preferred *endoxa* and analytical thinking to support their unconventional claims. At times, *endoxa* equal with common opinion as well as common sense. In *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), Aemilia Lanyer underlines how Adam's guilt must be considered greater than Eve's since he, conventionally more prefect than she, should have resisted temptation and taken her back to the righteous path ("But surely *Adam* can not be excusde, / Her fault though great, yet hee was most too blame; / What Weaknesse offerd, Strength might have refusde", D1*r*).[19] In fact, it is only when Adam eats the apple that the original sin is deemed perfected and humankind condemned. In other cases, *endoxa* is to be considered as the opinion accepted "by the most notable and illustrious of them [men]" (Aristotle 1997, 31). In *A Muzzle for Melastomus* (1617), Rachel Speght appeals to her vast knowledge of the Holy Scriptures to counter Swetnam's use of Saint Paul's claims against marriage. Insisting on the historical circumstances in which the saint wrote, Speght underlines how "[a]s long as the Corinthians were 'persecuted by the enemies of the Church', celibacy was a practical advantage, but only as long as 'these perturbations should continue'" (C4*v*). In Sowernam's pamphlet, *endoxa* surface as both common sense in her sharp insights on Swetnam's poor logical structure ("[n]ow let the Christian Reader please to consider how dishonestly this Authour dealeth, who undertaking a particular, prosecuteth and persecuteth

at home like the lady of the house directing their work and enjoying the profit of their labors? That, if you like, is the reason why men are naturally stronger and more robust than us — they need to be, so they can put up with the hard labor they must endure in our service", Fonte 1997, 60). Contrariwise, conventional female flaws are thus turned into virtues to excuse women from sins and misbehaviours ("[o]h come now, Cornelia dearest," said Lucretia. "You're not trying to tell us that vice is goodness?", 90).

[19] In Italy, Isotta Nogarola weakens Eve's guilt by recalling that she is God's creation and as such all her traits, and her weakness too, are to be attributed to God rather than to herself ("Eve sinned out of ignorance and inconstancy, an hence you contend that she sinned more gravely . . . But Eve's ignorance was implanted by nature, of which nature God himself is the author and founder", 2003, 151).

a generall", B2*v*) as well as authoritative opinion ("Did Woman receive her soule and disposition from the rib; Or as it is said in Genesis, God did breath in them the spirit of life?", B2*r*).

While the comedies so far analysed have shown a rigid differentiation in the rhetorical habits of male and female characters, little has been said about the potential linguistic alterations resulting from characters who cross such gender, and rhetorical, boundaries. *The Merchant of Venice* provides such an exceptional case with Portia as soon as she cross-dresses as Balthasar, a young male 'doctor' in Antonio's trial against Shylock. The following analysis of her linguistic habit as a male figure will show the blurring of gender-based boundaries imply a redefinition of standard rhetorical practices.

3. The Exceptional Status of Portia/Balthasar

Posing as Balthasar, "a young doctor of Rome" (4.1.151-2), Portia thoroughly questions Shylock and Antonio on their life-threatening bond. Like Kate and Beatrice before her, she tries to overcome such a complex issue by means of good rhetoric ("we do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy", 196-8) and sheer logic ("[i]s he [Antonio] not able to discharge the money?", 204). Her witty reading of the bond seems to follow *endoxa* as it spots a solution only by way of analytical reasoning: in cutting Antonio's flesh, Shylock must diligently follow the terms of the agreement and thus not spill a single drop of his enemy's blood ("[t]his bond doth give thee here no jot of blood; / The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh'", 302-3) nor cut "less nor more but just a pound of flesh" (321). The impossibility of such a task forces Shylock to withdraw as well as free Antonio from the agreement.

Cross-dressing, however, grants Portia not only the respect and the status that come with being a well-reputed male judge, but also they rely on linguistic attitudes never witnessed before in a female character, such as the use of a logical paradox in a critical situation. Unlike Kate and Beatrice, Portia hides in her witty interpretation of the Venetian law a logical paradox which forces Shylock to renounce to his pound of flesh irrespectively of what he does: if he tries to

collect his debt, he will necessarily cut more or less than one pound of flesh and make Antonio bleed, thus breaking the agreement and being punished for it; likewise, if he decides not to collect his debt, he withdraws from the agreement and is eventually condemned for threatening the life of a Venetian citizen.

In Portia's solution of Antonio's case, *endoxa* and *paradoxa*, that is female and male rhetorical tendencies, seem to be brought together by her gender-fluid status as a woman cross-dressed as a man. This exceptional use of paradoxical reasoning can be witnessed among some women writers joining the debate as well, especially among those whose gender identity is still debated.[20] On one occasion only, both Anger and Sowernam introduce the same kind of logical paradox in their meticulous and fully doxastic analysis of the socio-economic reasons for gender imbalances to show how misogynist thinking cages women in logical impasses which seem impossible to overcome:

> If we wil not suffer them to smell on our smockes, they will snatch at our peticotes: but if our honest natures cannot away with that uncivil kinde of jesting then we are coy: yet if we beare with their rudenes, and be somwhat modestly familiar with them, they will straight make matter of nothing, blazing abroad that they have surfeited with love, and then their wits must be showen in telling the maner how. (*Jane Anger her Protection*, B1*r*-B1*v*)

> [w]e know not how to please them in any degree: For if we goe plaine we are sluts they doe say, They doubt of our honesty if we goe gay; If we be honest and merrie, for giglots they take us, If modest and sober, then proud they doe make us: Be we housewifly quicke, then a shrew he doth keepe, If patient and milde, then he scorneth a sheepe. (*Esther Hath Hang'd Haman*, H1*v*)

[20] Although her *Protection* has been generally accepted as a pioneering pro-feminist defence, there are no irrefutable proofs of Anger's female gender. Likewise, little is known about Ester Sowernam. Her pseudonym plainly refers to the Old Testament figure of Esther, who revealed her husband Haman's treachery and caused him to be hanged. Her fictional surname is clearly in opposition to Swetnam's as she kept the ending of it while playing with the first letters, thus turning Swet-nam ("sweet") to Sower-nam ("sour"), a useful hint at the quality of her writing. For further information, see Malcolmson and Suzuki 2002 and O'Malley 2016.

Framed within a doxastic reasoning, deeply entrenched in *endoxa*, the paradoxicality of such passages highlights one of the key concepts of such writings, that is how the social acceptability of a female behaviour depends exclusively on its male recipient and his interpretation of it.

4. Conclusion

This study has aimed to prove how the use of paradoxical expressions in Shakespeare's comedies varies according to the gender of the speaker. While paradoxes uttered by both male and female characters do not show differences in form as they usually follow early modern conventions, those voiced by male characters have closer ties to the situationality of the dramatic action as they justify, explain or anticipate onstage events. This study has also shown a tendency among female characters to use few paradoxical expressions, which is especially evident in crucial dramatic situations. While in the plays here analysed, male characters use paradoxes in any context, irrespective of its gravity, female ones usually prefer *endoxa* over paradoxical reasoning especially when they feel themselves or the people they love in danger. Usually, these opposite attitudes towards paradoxical rhetoric show no degree of permeability since the character's gender remains well-defined and static throughout the play. The only exception thus permitted lies in characters such as Portia, who, in crossing gender boundaries, overcomes linguistic ones too. Such rhetorical custom, however, seems not to be a sheer creation of Shakespeare's undeniable literary genius as it is echoed in contemporary works by women writers and thus may stand as just another literary cypher of Shakespeare's permeability to contemporary writing practices, which he then adapts to the dramatic dimension of his plays.

Still, it may be argued that the maintenance of this rhetorical differentiation may not only be useful to make the characters' language sound as realistic as possible. It may prove to be a subtle rhetorical tool which effectively shows women's difficulty in dealing with unconventional, thorny topics. Men's point of view was customary and widely accepted; thus, its expression through

paradoxes, which own a potentially ironical reach, did not hinder the strength of the argumentation or the credibility of the speaker. Contrariwise, in such a highly patriarchal context, women had to prove more often and harder than men that their opinions were valuable and their words worthy of attention given that their argumentations were conventionally more thoroughly judged in terms of language and style. In this light, the inclusion of paradoxes in their speeches could prove more harmful than beneficial since the presence of rhetorical expressions which convey a peculiar topic in an elaborated form may have diverted the listener's or reader's attention from content to style and taunted the seriousness of such claims with accusations of logical or formal inaccuracy. Far from establishing any kind of equality among the sexes, *endoxa* stand as the only means women writers had to momentarily reverse this power balance based on rhetoric and create a safe place from which to voice possibly controversial opinions. As Kate and Beatrice in particular show, analytical investigation and confutation of common opinions and facts force the interlocutor's attention on the content, leaving no room for rhetorical manipulation ("[w]ell have you heard, but something hard of hearing . . . they call me Katherine", *The Taming of the Shrew*, 2.1.183-4).

Given the restricted number of plays here analysed, the present contribution acknowledges the limits of such an analysis and for this reason wishes to widen this study to Shakespeare's tragedies and history plays in order to question whether such a relationship between gender and paradoxical expressions is unique to Shakespeare's comedies. Hopefully, this hypothesis could also be tested against a more composite early modern dramatic background to determine the presence or lack of similar writing practices and thus ascertain the popularity of such a rhetorical tendency among early modern authors and dramatists.

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