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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AMONGST WOMEN.
AN INVESTIGATION IN CONTEMPORARY NOVEL WRITING

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Tesi di Dottorato di:
Chiara Biscella

Tutor:
Chiar.ma Prof.ssa Caroline Patey

Co-tutor:
Chiar.ma Prof.ssa Mariacristina Cavecchi

Coordinatore del Dottorato:
Chiar.mo Prof. Alessandro Costazza

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“It was [...] all our childhood.”

A.S. Byatt

The Children's Book

To my grandma, with infinite love

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INTRODUCTION

The reception of Shakespeare throughout the centuries has always been accompanied by a parallel history of appropriation. It is indeed three centuries at least since playwrights, novelists and poets started to draw heavily on Shakespearean drama, perceiving it as a framework of images, characters and themes. Women seem to occupy a position of their own in this long tradition of Shakespearean appropriations, somehow tracing a path which diverges from the one of male writers. It is precisely this path that I have explored in my research, what is more conjugating such a gendered approach to a generic one: after delineating some aspects of women's relation to Shakespeare through the centuries, I have as a matter of fact concentrated on four contemporary women novelists and on the ways Shakespearean drama shapes and complicates their novels. Specifically, I have dealt with *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor¹ (1988), *Wise Children* by Angela Carter² (1991),

¹ Gloria Naylor was born in New York in 1950. She attended classes at Medgar Evers College and Brooklyn College, discovering African-American literature and thus starting to define herself as a black woman. In 1977, after reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, she felt the need to write fiction. In 1981 she began graduate work in African-American Studies at Yale University. Her novels (*The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day*, *Bayley's Café*, *The Men of Brewster Place*) are all connected the one to the other and focus mainly on black women experiences. 1996, her latest work, is instead a personal memoir telling the story of a massive covert surveillance operation perpetrated against her by an official of the U.S. government.

Indigo by Marina Warner³ (1992), and *The Children's Book* by Antonia Susan Byatt⁴ (2009).

All born between the Thirties and the Fifties, Byatt, Carter, Warner and Naylor have lived, studied and made their appearance on the literary landscape during a very intense period for the history of women. The Sixties and Seventies were indeed characterized by Second-Wave Feminism, that surged in the United States and rapidly spread throughout the United Kingdom as well. Feminists struggled for equal pay, equal access to education, and equal job opportunities; they demanded economic and legal independence; they fought for free contraception, abortion and free child care provision; they campaigned against domestic and sexual violence. In the United Kingdom, the movement had strong connections with socialist and Marxist ideas, thus demanding the end of patriarchy on the one hand, a liberation from capitalism on the other; in the United States, the ideas of the National Organization for Women crossed and overlapped with those belonging to other movements, like the Student Nonviolent Committee, the National Welfare

² Angela Olive Stalker was born in Eastbourne in 1940. During the war, she moved with her grandmother to South Yorkshire. In 1960 she married Paul Carter and started attending the University of Bristol, graduating in English Literature. Nine years after her marriage she separated from her husband and spent two years in Tokyo. This experience informs her novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, (1972), and her short story collection *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces*, (1974). After leaving Japan, Angela Carter spent many years holding residence at different universities, like Brown University, the University of Adelaide, the University of East Anglia. In 1977 she married Mark Pearce, with whom she had a son. Angela Carter's production is very extensive and versatile, including novels and short stories, dramatic works and radio plays, poetry collections, essays and newspaper articles. Through her writings she conducted a feminist critique of the Western society, exploring themes such as power distribution, sexuality, gender roles.

³ Marina Warner is a novelist, critic and cultural historian. She was born in London in 1946, from an Italian mother and an English father. She read French and Italian at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, of which she is now an Honorary Fellow. Influential for her literary career was her catholic education, which transmitted her a heritage of images, rituals and myths that she has often explored in her writing. She sees herself as a feminist and attention to female historical or fictional figures has indeed characterised and is still a recurrent aspect of her production.

⁴ Much renowned for her 1990 Booker Prize winning novel *Possession*, Antonia Susan Drabble was born in Sheffield in 1936 and moved with her family to York during the second world war. She read English at Newnham College, Cambridge and continued her education at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania and at Somerville College, Oxford. In 1959 she married Charles Rayner Byatt, divorcing from him ten years later. Split between a scholarly and a literary career, A.S. Byatt wrote essays, novels and short stories, all of them much informed by her extensive academic culture and particularly influenced by Romantic and Victorian literature.

Rights and the Black Panther Party; as a consequence, the debate about the condition and the role of women in society and in politics intersected the struggle for African-American liberation and the ones against poverty and class oppressions.⁵

This epoch of social as well as cultural turmoil deeply affected the four writers I am dealing with, especially if we consider that all of them – with the only exception of Gloria Naylor – are not only writers but also scholars and academics. Angela Carter was a declared socialist and feminist, as it is evident both from her literary and journalistic production and from her collaboration with Virago Press, founded in 1973 by Carmen Callil in order to give voice to women's opinions, ideas, lives and histories. Marina Warner and Gloria Naylor have both explicitly defined their feminism as a cultural rather than a political one.⁶ On the contrary Antonia Byatt, although recognizing the role of feminism in the process of women's social and political emancipation, has recently pronounced against literary feminism.⁷

⁵ For an analysis of Second-Wave Feminism in the U.S. and the United Kingdom see: Ann. M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington D.C.*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008; Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

⁶ Marina Warner stated when interviewed by Chantal Zabus: "I am seen as a feminist by the enemies of feminism, seen in that light by journalists or spectators who like to sneer at feminism of any kind. But feminists don't see me as a feminist. I am sort of caught in between. That isn't true of all feminists, but I am perhaps not socially and politically active enough, more literary and cultural." In "Spinning a Yarn With Marina Warner", in Anna Rutherford, Lars Jensen and Shirley Chew, (eds.), *Into the Nineties. Post-colonial Women's Writing*, Armidale: Dangaroo Press, 1994, p. 528. Gloria Naylor, interviewed by Michelle C. Loris and Sharon Felton, defined herself not as a feminist, but as female centered: "I define feminism as believing in social, economic, and political equality for all human beings. So a man has the same rights as I have. But to be female centered, I believe, is to see the world 'gynecologically', to see the world through the eyes of a woman. Women have to operate differently because of the way the power structure is. I think that feminism is a political term and to be female centered is more of a cultural term, a humanist term." In "Interview: The Human Spirit is a Kick-Ass Thing", in Michelle C. Loris and Sharon Felton (eds.), *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1997, p. 253.

⁷ Interviewed by Paula Marantz Cohen for *The Drexel InterView* in December 2010, A.S. Byatt claimed: "I think literary feminism has had a bad effect on women's writing. I think it has had a good effect on studies in many ways and a very good effects on our lives; but somehow, certainly in Britain, [...] when we got feminism women became much more conscious they were writing about women; the men became very flamboyant and the women were rather quiet and withdrew somehow. I would not have expected this to happen but I have observed it happening. [...] I blame this not to feminism, but to literary feminism. [...] Women writing became a niche and became a kind of programme: there were things you had to do, things you could say and things you shouldn't say, and it wasn't just writing." (<http://www.drexel.edu/thedrexelinterview/>)

If Second-Wave Feminism has influenced the personalities, opinions and consequently the literary production of the four writers, it has also invested literary and Shakespearean criticism, which was going through a phase of extreme vitality. Although it would be impossible, as a matter of fact, to give a full account of the critical activity that has sprang around Shakespeare from the Sixties until today, still many critical theories and movements, ranging from feminism to new historicism⁸, from structuralism⁹ to deconstructionism¹⁰, from post-structuralism to post-modernism¹¹ and cultural studies¹² have contributed to generate a lively debate around Shakespeare, his work and his afterlives. It must thus come as no surprise that the four women writers which are the object of my research have not only been influenced by all this diversity of literary theories and practices, but have also been studied through the lenses of these critical perspectives.

When it comes to analysing the relation existing between Shakespeare and women, three are the main directions followed by criticism and the three of them are usually informed by feminism. First, a number of critics have concentrated on the analysis of women in Shakespeare's plays: some of them see Shakespeare's female characters not as the stereotyped portrayals of Renaissance women, submitted to patriarchy, but on the contrary as having a strong and independent

⁸ Stephen Orgel's name stands out in Shakespearean, new-historicist studies, which tried to read and analyse Shakespeare's plays in relation to the cultural context that produced them. Among his works are: *The Illusion of Power* (1975), *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (1996), *The Authentic Shakespeare: and Other Problems of the Early-Modern Stage* (2002).

⁹ Based on Saussure's theories, structuralism reached France and Europe in the Fifties and Sixties, thanks to Lévi-Strauss and his structural anthropology; it then entered literary criticism, finding its basis on anti-historicism and formalism. In the Seventies, Terence Hawkes was a relevant figure of Shakespearean structural criticism.

¹⁰ Derrida's deconstructionism, according to which the text is an infinite source of contradictory significations, first entered Shakespearean studies in the Seventies but truly developed in the late Eighties. One of its main exponent is Howard Felperin, author of *Beyond Deconstruction* (1985).

¹¹ Post-structuralism undermines structuralism's cornerstones, and, together with deconstructionism, opens the way to postmodernism. The text is not seen as a defined, closed entity, but as an open and hybrid one; it is a texture of references, allusions and repetitions. Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette are indeed some of the main names in postmodern criticism and theory.

¹² Cultural studies were at first introduced in Great Britain and rapidly spread throughout Europe and the U.S.A. Texts are examined in relation to issues of gender, race, sexuality and social class, thus allowing cultural studies to develop in connection with other critical theories: gender studies, social and political studies, communication studies, and so on.

personality, disruptive of the patriarchal culture. Juliette Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975) considers for example Shakespeare as a proto-feminist writer, who thoroughly explores and questions the natures of women; a similar view is shared by Irene Dash who, in *Wooing, Wedding and Power. Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (1981), states that Shakespeare "reasons for a sexual equality that will free both men and women to enjoy the full value of life."¹³ An opposite view informs instead the works of other critics, who tend to see in Shakespeare the representative of a patriarchal ideology. Myra Glazer Schotz's article "The Great Unwritten Story: Mothers and Daughters in Shakespeare" (1980) moves precisely in this direction, arguing that the evident lack of maternal figures in Shakespeare's plays represents "the absence of a feminine principle to act as symbolic and psychological counterbalance to male authority."¹⁴ Also Linda Bamber's *Comic Women, Tragic Men. A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (1982) endorses the idea that Shakespeare's plays are penned by an exclusively masculine, misogynous point of view: she supports her thesis by analysing Shakespeare's tragic heroines, described as "nightmare female figures" whose "evil is inseparable from their failure as women."¹⁵ Other critics have instead concentrated on Shakespeare's marginal female characters: Shakespeare's plays – and *The Tempest* in particular – would thus embody the supposed superior, dominant culture of the colonizer as opposed to the 'inferior' culture of the colonized. In this case, critics have not only investigated the female character of Sycorax but also the ones of Caliban and Ariel: such a post-colonial perspective allows to go beyond a gendered approach to Shakespeare's plays, in order to investigate issues of race, ethnicity and cultural identity.¹⁶

¹³ Irene G. Dash, *Wooing, Wedding and Power. Women in Shakespeare's Plays*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 5.

¹⁴ Myra Glazer Schotz, "The Great Unwritten Story. Mothers and Daughters in Shakespeare", in Cathy N. Davidson, E.M. Broner (eds.), *The Lost Tradition. Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1980, p. 47.

¹⁵ Linda Barber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men. A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982, p. 2.

¹⁶ See for example Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (1991), Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman's (eds.), *The Tempest and Its Travels* (2000), Chantal Zabus's *Tempests after Shakespeare* (2002).

A second direction in Shakespearean criticism studying the connection between women and Shakespeare aims at exploring the general condition of women in Early-Modern England, comparing it to the situation of women as described in Shakespearean drama: Lisa Jardine's book *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (1983) looks into Shakespeare's female characters in relation to Queen Elizabeth's reign and to the historical, social and religious changes that were taking place in Renaissance England. Leah S. Marcus's essay "Shakespeare's Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I and the Political Uses of Androgyny" (1986) draws an interesting parallel between Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines and the 'male disguise' of Elizabeth I and maintains that "the 'ungendering' of Shakespeare's heroines recapitulates royal rhetoric in various subtle ways, helping to lend credibility to the queen's androgynous language while at the same time commenting upon it, placing it within reassuring limits, and thereby enhancing its power."¹⁷ More recently, Catherine Belsey's *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* (2001) has investigated family relationship in Renaissance England through the lens, among others, of Shakespearean drama.

Finally, Shakespearean critics have also concentrated on women who have written in the wake of Shakespeare. Among them, the name of Marianne Novy, whose work is both informed by feminist criticism of the playwright and by feminist criticism of women writers, definitely stands out; she is as a matter of fact the author of *Engaging with Shakespeare. Responses of George Eliot and Other Women Novelists* (1994) and the editor of three collections of essays: *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare. On the Responses of Dickinson, Woolf, Rich, H.D., George Eliot, and Others* (1990); *Cross-Cultural Performances. Differences in Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare* (1993); *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance* (1999). Her 1990 and 1994 books concentrate more on women's writing through the centuries rather than on contemporary literature and are both very effective in arguing that

¹⁷ Leah S. Marcus, "Shakespeare's Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I and the Political Uses of Androgyny", in Mary Beth Rose (ed.), *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Literary and Historical Perspectives*, Syracuse and New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986, p. 137.

Shakespeare has always been perceived by women as a figure to identify with. Less incisive are instead her 1993 and 1999 collections: apart from stressing the great importance for contemporary women – both novelists and dramatists, both European and Extra-European – of *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, the essays remain somehow too independent the one from the other, failing to provide a final, unitary thesis. Feminism, together with “particular contexts – historical, social, political and even critical”¹⁸ also informs Julie Sanders’s *Novel Shakespeares: Twentieth-Century Women Novelists and Appropriation* (2001), that investigates the works of thirteen women writers; even in this case, a great attention is given to *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, adopted by contemporary authors to explore post-colonial issues or to reflect on father-daughter relationships; Sanders however studies each author individually, thus “patterns of narrative strategies and approach”¹⁹ that she aimed at discovering in twentieth-century women’s appropriation of Shakespeare remains somehow unexplored or definitely on the margins of her work. Kate Chedgzoy’s research on Shakespeare, Renaissance drama and Shakespearean rewritings, of which the book *Shakespeare’s Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture* (1995) is one of the results, is instead more general although shaped by a strongly feminist ideology: her research does not investigate only Shakespearean rewritings by women writers, but by authors who are somehow excluded from the literary canon; women are thus here perceived in their marginality.

Many others are the critics working in the field of appropriation studies: their work analyses the literary production of women as well as men and is thus not necessarily shaped by a gendered perspective. Apart from books and collections of essays concentrating on specific literary periods, interesting is the volume *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (1999) edited by Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, and the monumental *Shakespeares after Shakespeare: An Encyclopedia of the Bard in Mass Media and Popular Culture* (2007) edited by Richard Burt. Scholarship has also looked

¹⁸ Julie Sanders, *Novel Shakespeares: Twentieth-century Women Writers and Appropriation*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 3

into the works respectively of Angela Carter, Gloria Naylor, Marina Warner and Antonia Byatt in order to explore, among other issues, each writer's liaison with Shakespearean drama; much less has instead been written on the topic of contemporary women's literature as fertilized by Shakespeare's plays.

With my work on the novels of Byatt, Carter, Warner and Naylor I have tried to fill some gaps that I believe exist in the way contemporary women's writing in its intersection with Shakespeare's plays is studied: although I could not, in my investigation of the four novels, overlook feminist and postcolonial criticism, yet it seemed important to go beyond these two perspectives, in order to discover more hidden and relatively unexplored territories. Moreover, the aim of my research has not been to investigate each of the four writers in their specificity, but on the contrary to analyse their novels the one in relation to the other, in order to truly delineate a common Shakespearean pattern standing at the basis of all of them. Although there are, evidently, some differences in the way each novelist reflects on Shakespeare, still I have succeeded in tracing some regular strategies of cross-fertilization which needed to be thoroughly mapped, examined and questioned.

I have articulated the results of my research into four chapters. The first one, "Women's Shakespeare through the centuries: an overview", is in fact an excursus in women's writing from the late Sixteenth century to English modernism, from Margaret Cavendish to Virginia Woolf. I have sketched the works of some selected authors in order to see how each of them has interpreted Shakespeare, rewritten his plays and characters, adopted his language. It has thus been possible to realize how Shakespeare has very often been seen as a historical figure to identify with, a model to follow and an impulse to women's writing. With the second chapter, "Mapping Shakespeare's presence", I have truly started the investigation of the novels of Angela Carter, Marina Warner, Gloria Naylor and Antonia Byatt in their relation to the playwright; I have tried to follow the traces of Shakespeare at his most 'tangible', that is to say by looking at the Shakespearean names, characters and plays in the four narratives, focusing in particular on the plays which are truly staged, or read, or

watched by some of the characters. On the one hand the same names and the same plays crop up in all the novels; on the other, nicknames sometimes appear side by side Shakespearean names and new, different names are bestowed on characters whose origins are definitely Shakespearean. By using or refusing Shakespearean names, women writers seem to dialogue and at the same time struggle with the literary tradition and the literary canon that the English playwright somehow embodies; by dealing with some specific plays of the Shakespearean corpus they allow their novels to reflect on precise issues, either endorsing or rejecting the way Shakespeare had already discussed them in his drama. The third chapter, “Towards a matriarchal utopia” shows how two important aspects, indeed matriarchy and utopia, shape the four novels. The poignant role that maternal figures play in the narratives have prompted me to focus on them, discovering how intricate and complex mother-daughter relationships have indeed been explored by all writers: their works appear thus to fill some spaces left void by Shakespearean drama, which indeed usually staged father-daughter relationships. Around such maternal figures, who live in places strongly significant for the Shakespearean geography (islands and woods), matriarchal, utopian communities are constituted. I reflected on them and on their relation to Shakespearean drama in the lights of Foucault’s heterotopias, Bakhtin’s idyllic chronotope and Augé’s anthropological non-places. Finally, an analysis of Shakespearean languages and themes has been conducted in the last chapter of my thesis, “Exploring new linguistic territories”. What I am suggesting in this chapter is that Shakespearean drama shapes and modifies the very narrative framework of the four novels and challenges their belonging to a single literary genre: as a matter of fact, all the narratives have complicated diegetic structures and all of them shift from fiction to drama, from realism to magical realism, from myth to fairy-tale. What is more, specific Shakespearean themes are re-interpreted and re-read through a series of lenses: fantastic literature and its tropes, Freud’s theory of the uncanny, the Victorian culture as well as the African-American one, or again

Greek and Latin literature. In this way some Shakespearean themes – the one of the double definitely a dominant one – are given new lives and new shapes.

Through my research I have thus realized how Shakespeare is an extremely pervasive presence in contemporary women's writing. Shakespeare is to a certain extent recycled²⁰, filtered, destroyed and finally made new in the novels of women writers. His plays, far from merely influencing contemporary fiction, truly establish a dialogue with it, which sometimes transforms into a struggle to get out of the shadow of patriarchy or of bardolatry. If Shakespeare's work has never ceased to be so important, it is probably because his characters, his language and the issues his plays have raised function as catalysts, as a sort of primary energy standing behind the very experience of writing. As A.S. Byatt has recently revealed in an interview, "the glory of him [Shakespeare] is the freedom of his language, you never feel that he was constrained or stuck, if he wanted to say something he could say it. He is an immensely liberating presence for a writer"²¹. It is this freedom that writers have loved and appropriated through the centuries; it is this freedom that contemporary women writers continue to exploit, delineating in their novels new modes to look at Shakespeare, modes that definitely move beyond the concept of appropriation.

²⁰ In his *Recycling Shakespeare* (1991) Charles Marowitz uses this same verb, 'recycle', to indicate how Shakespearean drama is constantly re-formulated in the hands of contemporary theatre directors: "Over the years, our Shakespearian understanding has developed from text to subtext to ur-text and has now reached the stage of pretext – that is, a point where the original texts are being used as paradigms for new texts. What we most want from Shakespeare today is not the routine repetition of his words and imagery, but the Shakespearian Experience, and ironically, that can come only from dissolving the works into a new compound.", in Charles Marowitz, *Recycling Shakespeare*, London: MacMillan, 1991, p. 31.

²¹ A.S. Byatt interviewed by Paula Marantz Coehn for the *Drexel InterView*, December 2010, <http://www.drexel.edu/thedrexelinterview/>

CHAPTER 1

Women's Shakespeare through the centuries: an overview

1.1. Feminizing Shakespeare: Margaret Cavendish, Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Griffith

And so Well he hath Express'd in his Playes all Sorts of Persons, as one would think he had been Transformed into every one of those Persons he hath Described; [...] nay, one would think that he had been Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman, for who could Describe *Cleopatra* Better than he had done, and many other Females of his own Creating, as *Nan Page*, Mrs. *Page*, Mrs. *Ford*, the Doctors Maid, *Bettrice*, Mrs. *Quickly*, *Doll Tearsheet*, and others, too many to Relate?¹

It is with this passage from her *Sociable Letters* that Margaret Cavendish, as early as 1664, inaugurated the flourishing tradition of women identifying with Shakespeare. Shakespeare is for her, using a phrase coined by Marianne Novy, the “artist of wide-

¹ Margaret Cavendish, “Letter 123”, in *Sociable Letters Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle*, Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2004, p. 177.

ranging identification”², the playwright who, thanks to his deep knowledge and understanding of human nature, gave birth to true-to-life characters, men as well as women; for her, Shakespeare’s endowment and talent as a playwright reside in his exceptional capacity to transmit the broad and varied range of his emotions and passions to the characters of his plays. The English Bard is thus depicted as a man of profound feelings, gifted with an extraordinary sensitivity: according to Cavendish these characteristics not only contributed to make of him a great writer, but have also allowed her to enrol him under the banner of protofeminism. Sensitivity and sympathy, two of the playwright’s peculiar traits, are in fact usually considered as feminine attributes. Shakespeare is consequently perceived as the artist who transcends gender, the one who possesses a feminine mind in a man’s body, who can be man and woman at the same time.

Coupled with the emphasis on Shakespeare’s sympathy is, in Cavendish’s criticism, the insistence on another of the Bard’s merits: his natural wit, which not only allows the Duchess of Newcastle to place him above all other playwrights, but which also endorses her project of “clearing a space for women to lay claim to Shakespeare as a model for their own authorship”³. According to Margaret Cavendish,

Shakespear had a Clear Judgment, a Quick Wit, a Spreading Fancy, a Subtil Observation, a Deep Apprehension, and a Most Eloquent Elocution; truly, he was a Natural Orator, as well as Natural Poet [...]⁴

The iteration of the adjective “natural” draws attention to Shakespeare’s “small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*”⁵, once again creating a bond between Shakespeare’s uncultured and uncultivated status and the condition of women, to whom a proper

² Marianne Novy (ed.), *Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare. On the Responses of Dickinson, Woolf, Rich, H.D., George Eliot and Others*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990, p. 2.

³ Katherine M. Romack, “Margaret Cavendish, Shakespeare Critic”, in Dympha Callaghan (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 26.

⁴ Margaret Cavendish, “Letter 123”, cit., p. 178

⁵ Ben Jonson, “To draw no envy (Shakespeare) on thy name”, in *Ben Jonson*, in 11 volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, vol. 8, p. 391.

education was still inaccessible. As Shakespeare found himself outside the circle of the University Wits but still succeeded in becoming one of the most famous Renaissance playwrights – to the point of raising jealousies and envies, so women, themselves outsiders in a society which considered them as intellectually inferior and apt only to tend to their houses and their children, could nonetheless aspire to greatness and to ambitious literary projects.

Indeed, the fact that women were quickly gaining cultural importance is reflected not only in the books they slowly started to publish, but also in the role they played in establishing the English literary canon. The circulation of Shakespeare's plays increased, for instance, thanks to a circle of English ladies that at length contributed to consecrate the 'Swan of Avon' to eternal fame:

Some ladies indeed have shewn a truly public spirit in rescuing the admirable, yet almost forgotten Shakespear, from being totally sunk in oblivion: – they have generously contributed to raise a monument to his memory, and frequently honoured his work with their presence on the stage: – an action, which deserves the highest encomiums, and will be attended with an adequate reward; since, in preserving the fame of the dead bard, they add a brightness to their own, which will shine to late posterity.”⁶

The ladies to whom Eliza Haywood refers all belonged to the “Shakespeare Ladies Club”, founded in 1736 with the purpose of persuading theatrical managers to give Shakespeare a greater share in their repertoires. Even though the group is now almost completely obliterated, still it fulfilled its aim: many of Shakespeare's long-ignored plays were brought back to the stage and the frequency of Shakespearean performances was intensified. In addition, prologues recited by the character of the playwright's ghost started to make their appearances at the opening of each Shakespearean performance and fake letters written from Elysium by the dead William Shakespeare began to be published on daily newspapers: the Bard wanted to

⁶ Extract from Eliza Haywood, *The Female Spectator*, quoted in Elizabeth Eger (ed.), “Elizabeth Montagu”, in Gary Kelly (gen. ed.), *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785*, in 6 volumes, London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999, vol. 1, p. lxvi.

thank the “Fair Supporters of Wit and Sense, the Ladies of Great Britain.”⁷ Women, for far too long excluded from the canon of English literature, were in fact deeply contributing to its formation. As Elizabeth Eger points out, it would not be far-fetched to affirm that “women’s cultural ascendancy coincided with the formation of the literary canon”⁸; indeed, women were strongly associated with Shakespeare’s name in a period in which he was quickly gaining the title of national poet and was growing into a symbol of national identity.

The status of women had slowly begun to evolve: although they were still culturally framed as domestic creatures, other, different versions of the feminine figure were now emerging. Addison, from the pages of *The Spectator*, implicitly testifies the coexistence of many and varied views on the gentle sex, choosing to underline on the one hand the inveterate idea of women as angels of the hearth, stressing on the other also their emerging intellectual qualities. In an article of the 5th May 1711, for example, he writes that “Women were formed to temper mankind and soothe them into tenderness and compassion”⁹, thus embedding the canonical construction of women; only one month later, however, on the 15th June, he records: “My fair readers are already deeper scholars than the beaus: I could name some of them who talk much better than several gentlemen that make a figure at Will’s; and as I frequently receive letters from the fine ladies and pretty fellows, I cannot but observe, that the former are superior to the others, not only in the sense, but in the spelling”¹⁰.

In Addison’s opinion the fact that reason and understanding were not just men’s privileges constituted a positive and encouraging sign of progress; the general cultural establishment was however unprepared to such a change: “the intellectual

⁷ From “Daily Advertiser”, 26th May 1737, quoted in Emmett L. Avery, “The Shakespeare Ladies Club”, in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 7, n. 2, Spring 1956, pp. 153-58.

⁸ Elizabeth Eger, “‘Out Rushed a Female to Protect the Bard’: The Bluestocking Defense of Shakespeare”, in *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 65, n.1/2, 2002, University of California Press, p. 129.

⁹ Joseph Addison, “The Spectator, n. 57, Saturday, May 5, 1711” in *The Works of Joseph Addison*, in 6 volumes, ed. by Richard Hurd, London: G. Bell and Sons, 1915, vol. 2, p. 340.

¹⁰ Joseph Addison, “The Spectator, n. 92, Friday, June 15, 1711”, in *The Works of Joseph Addison*, cit., p. 411.

and thereby supra-domestic woman [was] transgressing into learned (male) discourse and often tagged with the pejorative term ‘masculine’¹¹. Women who enjoyed reading and writing and who wanted to see their work published became the object of scorn and derision; they were deprived of all their feminine qualities and were despised as brainy and tedious spinsters. It goes without saying that the famous Bluestocking Circle, founded around the 1750s and counting among its members women of the stature of Elizabeth Carter, Angela Kauffman, Elizabeth Griffith and Elizabeth Montagu – most of them readers and critics of Shakespeare, did not escape the attribute. Because of this prejudice against women who dared to lay a claim to typically masculine spheres such as literature and literary criticism, the first three editions of Montagu’s work, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets*, were published anonymously. In a letter to her father, who had discovered her authorship, Montagu thus explained her choice:

In the first place, there is in general a prejudice against female Authors especially if they invade those regions of literature which the Men are desirous to reserve to themselves. While I was young, I should not have liked to have been class’d among authors, but at my age it is less unbecoming. If an old Woman does not bewitch her Neighbours Cows, nor make any girl in the Parish spit crooked pins, the World has not reason to take offence at her amusing herself with reading books or even writing them. However, some circumstances in this particular case advise secrecy. Mr Pope our great Poet, the Bishop of Gloucester our Great Critick, & Dr Johnson our great Scholar having already given their criticism upon Shakespear, there was a degree of presumption in pretending to meddle with a subject they had already treated tolerably well, sure to incur their envy if I succeeded, their contempt if I did not. Then for a weak & unknown Champion to throw down the gauntlet of defiance in the very teeth of Voltaire appear’d too daring.... I was obliged to enter seriously into the nature of the Dramatick purposes, & the character of the best dramatick writings, & by sometimes differing from the Code of the great Legislator in Poeticks, Aristotle, I was

¹¹ Gary Kelly, “General Introduction: Bluestocking Feminism and Writing in Context” in Gary Kelly (gen. ed.), *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785*, cit., vol. 1, p. xxvi.

afraid the Learned would reject my opinions, the unlearned yawn over my pages, so that I was very doubtfull of the general success of my work.¹²

The *Essay* proved however to be very successful both in Great Britain and in France, where its author, who had criticised with a great deal of ferocity Voltaire and his Shakespearean translations, found herself at the heart of a national controversy and was even invited to give a speech at *the Académie Française*, thus giving concrete proof of the power of the female intellect. Thanks to Montagu's attentive and well-documented criticism, women, although still characterized by passion, sentimentality and delicacy of feeling, also started to be recognized for their discernment, wit and competence. The masculine supremacy in culture still remained, corroborated by Montagu's choice to remain anonymous because fearful of the judgment of the great, male writers; however, the fact that Montagu explicitly inscribed herself in the wake of Johnson, Voltaire and Pope proves that she was conscious of her achievements and of her intellectual qualities and that she wished to have them acknowledged and legitimized.

Montagu's defense of Shakespeare against Voltaire's attack revolved around two pivotal points: the morality of Shakespeare's plays on the one hand and the playwright's powers of sympathy and characterization on the other. It is precisely on this second point that the foundations for women's appropriation of Shakespeare were once again laid. As Cavendish had done before her, Montagu stressed Shakespeare's unique capacity "to hold [...] the mirror up to nature"¹³, creating so many verisimilar characters with complex personalities and individualities:

Shakespear seems to have had the art of the Dervise, in the Arabian tales, who could throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his

¹² Extract of a letter of Elizabeth Montagu to Matthew Robinson, 10th September 1769, quoted in Elizabeth Eger (ed.), "Elizabeth Montagu", cit., p. 170.

¹³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, ii, 20. (All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, based on the Oxford edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jane E. Howard, Katharine Eiseman Mans, New York and London: Norton & Company, 1997).

sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situation.¹⁴

A similar assertion is also to be met in the work of Elizabeth Griffith, one of Montagu's admirers; in her *Morality of Shakespeare's Drama Illustrated* the following words are to be found: "What age, what sex, what character, escapes the touches of Shakespeare's plastic hand!"¹⁵

In particular, both Montagu and Griffith claimed that the playwright's profound knowledge of the human heart, attained thanks to observation and experience, was mirrored in his very detailed portrayal of female characters and in his clear differentiation between the sexes, as emerges in the following passage that Montagu wrote about Macbeth and his wife:

There are also some touches of the pencil that mark the male and the female character. When they deliberate on the murder of the king, the duties of host and subject strongly plead with him against the deed. She passes over these considerations; goes to Duncan's chamber resolved to kill him, but could not do it, because, she says, he resembled her father while he slept. There is something feminine in this, and perfectly agreeable to the nature of the sex; who, even when void of principle, are seldom entirely divested of sentiment; and thus the poet, who, to use his own phrase, had overstepped the modesty of nature in the exaggerated fierceness of her character, returns back to the line and limits of humanity, and that very judiciously, by a sudden impression, which has only an instantaneous effect. Thus she may relapse to her former wickedness, and, from the same susceptibility, by the force of other impressions, be afterwards driven to distraction.¹⁶

One of the reasons why Cavendish, Griffith and Montagu defended and appropriated Shakespeare was his accurate descriptions of the sentiments and passions of his heroines. His powers of sympathy and identification, his supposed

¹⁴ Elizabeth Montagu, *An Essay on the Writings and the Genius of Shakespeare compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets*, New York: A.M. Kelley, 1970, p. 37.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Griffith, *Morality of Shakespeare's Drama Illustrated*, New York: A.M. Kelley, 1971, p. 169.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Montagu, *An Essay on the Writings and the Genius of Shakespeare compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets*, cit., p. 201.

sensitivity and intensity of feeling were qualities sufficient to align him alongside women, who were historically associated with emotionalism, subjectivity and compassion. Shakespeare became an ally for women writers, who now had a model to follow and an authority to identify themselves with. For the first women writers Shakespeare was exactly like them: an unlearned outsider who had acquired a unique position in the Pantheon of British authors thanks to his natural wit, his profound understanding of human nature and his extraordinary poetic and dramatic talent.

1.2. The nineteenth century: Mary Lamb, Jane Austen, George Eliot

1.2.1. Mary Lamb: Didactic Shakespeare

The image of Shakespeare as a man of profound feelings and emotions – an image much praised indeed by Cavendish, Montagu and Griffith, went hand in hand with another image of the Bard, that of the moral playwright; if all critics recognized that Shakespeare wrote in order to entertain, charm and amuse his audience, even more they acknowledged that his plays were composed to instruct the theatregoer. Tending toward this moralistic approach were, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Charles and Mary Lamb: their 1807 *Tales from Shakespeare* were conceived under a clear didactic scheme, made explicit in the Preface:

What these Tales shall have been to the *young* readers, that and much more it is the writer's wish that the true Plays of Shakespeare may prove to them in older years – enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity; for of examples, teaching these virtues, his pages are full.¹⁷

Such a perspective is surely limiting, in that it reduces Shakespeare's plays to a collection of *exempla*: the plots must always have something to teach, the characters

¹⁷ Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, London and Glasgow: Collins, 1900, p. vi.

must always represent a virtue to imitate or a vice to abhor and they must be accordingly rewarded or punished.

However other less visible but surely more intriguing aspects may be revealed when going beyond the prosaic, somehow tiresome morality of Charles and Mary Lamb's project. It is surely interesting to see how a double, contradictory approach to Shakespeare – and, through Shakespeare, to the condition of women, pervades the *Tales*. On the one hand a conservative ideology runs throughout Charles and Mary Lamb's work, on the other there are some hints of innovation; it would be premature, of course, to label these hints as feminist, still they may be interpreted as a consequence of some early feminist writings: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, claiming equality for both sexes and thus promoting a better education for women, had been indeed published in 1792.

The fact that Mary's name did not appear next to her brother's one as author of the *Tales from Shakespeare* clearly outlines a deeply-rooted tradition of patriarchy, accentuated by the following words from the Preface:

It was no easy matter to give the histories of men and women in terms familiar to the apprehension of a very young mind. For young ladies, too, it has been the intention chiefly to write; because boys being naturally permitted to use of their father's libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book; and, therefore, instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand; and when they have helped them to get over the difficulties, then perhaps they will read to them (carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister's ear) some passage which has pleased them in one of these stories, in the very words of the scene from which it is taken;¹⁸

Not only the “young ladies” in Lamb's time did not have access to their fathers' libraries, but they were also evidently expected to be inferior, so that their brother's

¹⁸ Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, cit., pp. iv-v.

assistance was necessary to help them when their intelligence was lacking. Some of the *Tales* stage the same conservative ideology, even when it is Mary, a woman, to write them. Considering that Mary adapted Shakespeare's comedies while Charles worked on the tragedies, *The Taming of the Shrew* may be read as an explicit example of Mary's still conservative conception of Shakespeare. If in her tale Petruchio is described in a very sympathetic manner and his qualities as a "witty and most happy-tempered humorist"¹⁹ are much praised, Kate is instead typically portrayed as an obstinate and relentless wench and no words are written in her defence. By the same token, Mary suppresses the framing device about Christopher Sly, thus abolishing the only element which may have transformed shrew-taming into an ironic joke. Mary's rewriting is therefore thoroughly in line with Shakespeare's play: the misogynistic components are still there as well as the strongly conventional representation of femininity. In Lamb's adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare remains a symbol of patriarchy, male authority and female inferiority.

There are instances, however, in which Mary Lamb's perspective is completely different and her tales would seem to be crafted to stress the strong personality of Shakespearean heroines, of whom she wants to underline the intelligence, wit, and strong-willingness. A case in point is her retelling of *All's Well That Ends Well*, a rewriting which is surely more suitable to an audience of young boys and girls – the bed trick being erased – but which also accentuates Helena's resourcefulness. As a matter of fact, in Lamb's version Bertram is not forced to accept Helena as his wife because he got her pregnant, but because he really falls in love with her:

In the evening, after it was dark, Bertram was admitted into Diana's chamber, and Helena was there ready to receive him. [..].

Bertram never knew how sensible a lady Helena was, else perhaps he would not have been so regardless of her; and seeing her every day, he had entirely overlooked her beauty; a face we are accustomed to see constantly losing the effect which is caused by the first sight either of beauty or plainness; and of her understanding it was impossible he should judge, because she felt such reverence, mixed with her love for him, that

¹⁹ Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, cit., p. 227.

she was always silent in his presence; but now that her future fate, and the happy ending of all her love projects, seemed to depend upon her leaving a favourable impression on the mind of Bertram from this night's interview, she exerted all her wit to please him; and the simple graces of her lively conversation and the endearing sweetness of her manners so charmed Bertram that he wowed she should be his wife.²⁰

Both in Shakespeare's and in Lamb's versions, it is Helena's astuteness and keenness that gives her back her husband; however, if in Shakespeare's play Helena's deception is solely physical – and by doing so she does not gain Bertram's love, in Mary's tale she earns her husband's affection and respect by seducing him with her intelligent speech and her charming manners, by showing him her entire personality. In *All's Well That Ends Well* Lamb produces

a sympathetic portrait of a woman who persists in her aims against the conventional constraints of feminine propriety and passivity. It is as if Lamb had taken the opportunity of writing about Helena as a way to study the exercise of female ambition in a world of social restriction and written the tale to suggest to her young ladies what women can accomplish with wit, intelligence and commitment.²¹

Mary Lamb's ambivalent appropriation of Shakespeare is probably the signal of an age which worshipped Shakespeare as the major representative of a literary tradition to assimilate and imitate, yet a tradition which still remained exclusively and intrinsically masculine and in which women had to strive to let their voice be heard. In this same period only Jane Austen will go further in her handling of Shakespeare, of course adopting some of his lines but also deeply changing them and adding to them new layers of meaning.

²⁰ Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 221-22.

²¹ Susan J. Wolfson, "Explaining to Her Sister: Mary Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare", in Marianne Novy (ed.), *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, cit., p. 30.

1.2.2. Jane Austen: a 'prose Shakespeare'

Like the heroines of her novels, Jane Austen first got in touch with the English literary tradition in her father's generous library: notwithstanding her presumed love for books and the consequent extent of her readings, still she lacked a well-organized, canonical education, so that it was mainly thanks to her personal critical judgement that she managed to recognize literary value, appropriate it and become a writer herself. The alleged patchwork-like quality of her readings, far from diminishing the value of her fiction, actually enhanced it by producing a rich, vivacious and original language. As Isobel Grundy states:

Austen is a novelist; fiction must be her tradition. In fact she cares nothing for generic boundaries, but a great deal for the way the tradition of fiction flowed outwards to mix with those of history, and essays, and drama, and poetry. The English novel was seen in her day as a legitimate heir of Shakespeare, working as it did with dialogue and character and passion and interaction.²²

It comes therefore as no surprise that Jane Austen, writing in the wake of Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, should be identified both by her contemporaries and by later critics as a "prose Shakespeare"²³. Indeed, the reasons why her novels were so appreciated were the very same for which Shakespeare's plays had always been praised: a profound knowledge of the human heart which resulted in the creation of a varied range of characters, each with a peculiar and original personality, the realization of a witty and comic dialogue, and, although at a smaller rate in Austen's case, the morality of the plot.

As early as 1816, one year before Jane Austen's death, Walter Scott reviews *Emma* and congratulates its author for the verisimilarity yet originality of plot and characters:

²² Isobel Grundy, "Jane Austen and Literary Traditions", in Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 193.

²³ G.H. Lewes, "Extract from The Lady Novelist", in *Westminster Review*, 58, July 1852, in Ian Littlewood (ed.), *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, in 4 volumes, Mountfield: Helm Information, 1998, vol. 1, p. 337.

We, therefore, bestow no mere compliment upon the author of *Emma*, when we say that, keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life, she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality, that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events, arising from the consideration of minds, manners and sentiments, greatly above our own. [...] The narrative of all her novels is composed of such common occurrences as may have fallen under the observation of most folks; and her dramatis personae conduct themselves upon the motives and principles which the readers may recognize as ruling their own and that of most acquaintances. The kind of moral, also, which these novels inculcate, applies equally to the paths of common life [...].²⁴

G.H. Lewes recurs to similar words in his 1859 critique of Austen's novels, in which he recognizes her superiority:

If, as probably few will dispute, the art of the novelist be the representation of human life by means of a story; and if the truest representation, effected by the least expenditure of means, constitutes the highest claim to art, then we say that Miss Austen has carried the art to a point of excellence.²⁵

However, it is in discussing Austen's characters that critics explicitly refer to William Shakespeare as one of her forerunners; both Macaulay and Lewes recognize that Austen, like Shakespeare, fathered an elevated number of characters, managing to portray each of them in a unique way, attributing them a specificity and an individuality as to make them seem real. Macaulay states that, although no author can be directly compared to Shakespeare, Austen has approached his greatness more than any others, by creating

²⁴ Walter Scott, "Unsigned Review: *Emma*", in *Quarterly Review*, 14, March 1816, in Ian Littlewood (ed.), *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, cit., p. 292.

²⁵ G.H. Lewes, "The Novels of Jane Austen", in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 86, July 1859, in Ian Littlewood (ed.), *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, cit., pp. 342-3.

[...] a multitude of characters, all in a certain sense, common-place, all such as we meet every day. Yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings.²⁶

Some years later, Lewes will go even further by declaring:

But Miss Austen is like Shakespeare: she makes her very noodles inexhaustibly amusing, yet accurately real. We never tire of her characters. They become equal to actual experience. They live with us, and form perpetual topics of comment.²⁷

Not only Austen portrays plausible characters and thus engenders credible plots, but, according to Scott, she also brings both characters and plot “to the service of honour and virtue”²⁸. Exactly as Shakespeare, Austen chooses not to bore the reader with long lessons of morality, yet she always concludes her novels by rewarding the virtuous characters and ‘punishing’²⁹ the immoral ones.

Finally, it is on the basis of Austen’s style that critics associate her name to that of Shakespeare. Austen’s novels actually possess a strong dramatic quality, in their being so abundant both in dialogues and in letter-writing (and reading). Walter Scott talks about “a quiet yet comic dialogue”³⁰, Richard Whately attributes to Austen’s narrative “a dramatic air”, reached by “introducing frequent conversations”³¹ and G.H. Lewes presents her as having

²⁶ T.B. Macaulay, “Characters in Jane Austen”, in *Edinburgh Review*, 76, January 1843, in Ian Littlewood (ed.), *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, cit., p. 335.

²⁷ G.H. Lewes, “The Novels of Jane Austen”, cit., p. 343.

²⁸ Walter Scott, “Unsigned Review: Emma”, cit., p. 288.

²⁹ As Lloyd W. Brown pointed out, Jane Austen’s conclusions are a “[...]realistic reappraisal of the rigid insistence on rewarding virtue and punishing evil.” So what we call punishment “[...] depends wholly on the individual’s value and conscience; [...] In addition to the individual’s capricious sense of right and wrong, society determines the nature of the punishment, but the worth of such retribution is undermined by the inequity and double standards of social forms and conventions.” In Lloyd W. Brown, “The Comic Conclusion in Jane Austen’s Novels”, in *PMLA*, n. 84, October 1969, pp. 1582-87.

³⁰ Walter Scott, “Unsigned Review: Emma”, cit., p. 295.

³¹ Richard Whately, “Unsigned Review: Northanger Abbey and Persuasion”, in *Quarterly Review*, 24, January 1821, in Ian Littlewood (ed.), *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, cit., p. 327.

the rare and difficult art of *dramatic presentation*: instead of telling us what her characters are, and what they feel, she presents the people, and they reveal themselves. In this she has never been surpassed, not even by Shakespeare himself. If ever living beings can be said to have moved across the page of fiction, as they lived, speaking as they spoke and feeling as they felt, they do so in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Mansfield Park*. What incomparable noodles she exhibits for our astonishment and laughter! What silly, good-natured women! What softly-selfish men! What lively-amiable, honest men and women, whom one would rejoice to have known!³²

Lewes is here referring not only to the many and often witty dialogues that Austen includes in her novels, but also to her pioneering use of the free indirect speech. Austen further complicates this narrative device by rendering it so deeply intertwined with the narration – and often within a single sentence – that it is difficult to understand where the narrator's voice ends and the character's voice begins. However, by adopting it, Austen allows her readers to have direct access to the characters' thoughts and feelings, giving the impression that characters are showing themselves rather than being described by the omniscient voice of the narrator³³.

However, far from merely mimicking Shakespeare's dramatic style, Austen also appropriated Shakespearean characters in her own novels. Through her rewriting, it seems to me that she aims at subverting the paradigm of patriarchy, bestowing authority not on men, but on women. At the very beginning of the homonymous novel, Emma is depicted as "handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition [...]"³⁴. This first and quite superficial description may indeed associate Emma to different Shakespearean heroines, since many intelligent, beautiful and wealthy young ladies actually inhabit various Shakespeare's plays. However, there are some peculiarities in Emma's personality

³² G.H. Lewes, "The Novels of Jane Austen", cit., p. 347.

³³ Many are the studies on Free Indirect Speech and, even more specifically, on Austen's use of it. Just to cite a few: Ann Banfield, "Narrative Style and the Grammar of Indirect Speech", in *Foundations of Language*, vol. 10, n. 1, May 1973, pp. 1-39; Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1972; Daniel P. Gunn, "Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in *Emma*", in *Narrative*, vol. 12, n. 1, January 2004, pp. 35-54.

³⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma*, in *The Complete Novels of Jane Austen*, London: Penguin, 1996, p. 723.

that may suggest a comparison with the Shakespearean Portia. Needless to say that both of them possess a quick intelligence that shows itself in the witty words they pronounce and in their ability either to interpret jokes and charades or to discover quibbles and cavils in the severe law of Venice; they are not married (although for different reasons: Portia cannot marry because of her father's device of the three caskets, while Emma's occasional interest in falling in love is nothing more than a pastime) and their unmarried state makes of them two strong, independent women, who look after themselves and their household: if Portia's father is dead, Emma's one is too much concerned with health matters to take care of Hartfield, so that Emma has been "mistress of his house from a very early period"³⁵. What I find more fascinating, however, is the active role the two characters are given by their authors: the fact that their actions and choices allow the plot to flow towards its dénouement makes of them not only two characters, but in a way two director-like figures, two parallel writers who actively contribute to the advancing of the story: Portia first helps Bassanio to choose the right casket by accompanying the moment of his choice with an appropriate song, then intervenes, in a much more significant and authoritative manner, to save Antonio from certain death; Emma instead creates all the fictitious intrigues of the novel with her match-making mania, she keeps inventing affections that do not exist and she even feigns to be in love with Frank Churchill for the mere sake of entertainment and amusement. Both Emma and Portia eventually marry the man they love, following a pattern that is as typical of Shakespeare's comedies as of Austen's novels.

As Austen somehow rewrites Shakespeare's most independent and active heroines, she also appropriates some of Shakespeare's male characters; in this case, however, her models are very often dull, silly and ridiculous. Everyone agrees, for instance, in considering Mr Collins one of the best caricatures ever created by Jane Austen and some of his most distinguished characteristics may indeed be traced in Shakespeare's Malvolio. Austen's clergyman, with his pompous and moralizing sentences easily calls to mind the puritan butler of Shakespeare's comedy, the kill-

³⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 723.

joy *par excellence*, always silencing and scolding the other servants of Olivia's household; furthermore, both of them are the amusing protagonists of scenes which involve courtship and declarations of love, scenes in which they both make a fool of themselves because of their sad and tragicomic incapacity to see and understand the reality of the situation. Malvolio, fallen into the trap that Maria had set for him, makes his inappropriate appearance wearing flashy yellow stockings and an idiotic smile on his face, stuffing his speech to Olivia with daring allusions, sometimes even sexual ones. The superiority he is convinced to possess renders him totally unable not only to understand that he is the mere object of a joke, but also to see what is displayed before his eyes, specifically that Olivia is scared of rather than attracted by him. A similar blindness – deafness in the case would probably be more appropriate – affects Mr Collins during his marriage proposal to Elizabeth Bennett, when he repeatedly refuses to hear and comprehend her denial, to the point of exclaiming “You are uniformly charming!”³⁶ after she has already expressed, for nothing less than five times, her determination not to marry him.

The appropriation of Shakespeare is in this case functional to Austen's discourse on women and on their progressive thirst for independence: by giving her heroines psychological traits typical of Shakespeare's most tenacious female characters and by bestowing on Mr Collins – her best foolish character – some features which remind Malvolio at his most ridiculous, Austen reverses the canonical relationship between man and woman as it had always been depicted. If her heroines are empowered, some of her male characters are, on the contrary, disempowered; if Austen's heroines are looking for independence, her male characters are somehow represented as dependent. Many are the passages, in Austen's novels, that prove her will to reassess the position of women; one of them is the following extract from *Emma*:

Contrary to the usual course of things, Mr Elton's wanting to pay his addresses to her had sunk him in her opinion. His professions and his proposals did him no service.

³⁶ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, in *The Complete Novels of Jane Austen*, cit., p. 287.

She thought nothing of his attachment, and was insulted by his hopes. He wanted to marry well, and having the arrogance to raise his eyes to her, pretended to be in love; [...] she need not trouble herself to pity him. He only wanted to aggrandize and enrich himself; and if Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty thousand pounds, were not quite so easily obtained as he had fancied, he would soon try for Miss Somebody else with twenty, or with ten. [...] But he had fancied her in love with him; that evidently had been his dependence;³⁷

Emma's reflections after Mr Elton's marriage proposal are a clear sign of her superiority or, at least, of her refusal to be considered inferior to a man whom she describes as a calculator and a gold-digger; furthermore, the word "dependence", that Jane Austen here employs to describe Mr Elton (and that she will further on associate also to Frank Churchill)³⁸ strikingly contrasts with the adjective 'independent', so often used, instead, to describe Emma's attitude. If other Austenian heroines equal in terms of strength, wit and stubbornness Shakespearean characters such as Portia, Juliet or Rosalind, and are thus directly appropriated by Austen to develop her discourse on women's position in society, it is also interesting to notice how even the novelist's more "subdued heroines"³⁹ still manage to obtain what (specifically, a husband) they want. There are very few, in my opinion, subdued heroines in Austen: the majority of her feminine characters know or discover what they want and fight to obtain it, never coming to compromises; even Fanny, the passive and docile heroine of *Mansfield Park* who is not in a social position that would allow her a convenient match, refuses Henry Crawford's proposal, a choice which will in the end be rewarded:

Henry Crawford, ruined by early independence and bad domestic example, indulged in the freaks of a cold-blooded vanity a little too long. Once it had, by an opening undesigned and unmerited, led him into the way of happiness. Could he have been satisfied with the conquest of one amiable woman's affections, could he have found

³⁷ Jane Austen, *Emma*, cit., pp. 799-801.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 806: "Such language for a young man entirely dependent to use!"

³⁹ The reference is to an essay by Valerie Shaw entitled "Jane Austen's Subdued Heroines", in *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 30, n. 3, December 1975, University of California Press, pp. 281-303.

sufficient exultation in overcoming the reluctance, in working himself into the esteem and tenderness of Fanny Price, there would have been every probability of success and felicity for him. His affection had already done something. Her influence over him had already given him some influence over her. Would he have deserved more, there can be no doubt that more would have been obtained; especially when that marriage had taken place, which would have given him the assistance of her conscience in subduing her first inclination, and brought them very often together.⁴⁰

By offering the reader a glimpse of another, possible ending, in which Henry Crawford wins Fanny's love by making her forget – 'subdue' is the term that Austen uses – her feelings for Edmund, Austen redefines, once again, the social status of women. As a matter of fact, this ending remains only a possibility: Fanny does not have to submit and Henry remains unchanged in his bad behaviour; Fanny, who in the course of the novel has been described as a meek, weak woman, makes a better use of her little independence, while Henry is said to be ruined by it. My position is thus distinct from the one delineated by Gilbert and Gubar, according to whom there is a subplot, a 'covert story', in Austen, aiming at showing

[...] how and why female survival depends on gaining male approval and protection [...]. Dramatizing the necessity of female submission for female survival, Austen's story is especially flattering to male readers because it describes the taming [...] of a rebellious, imaginative girl who is amorously mastered by a sensible man [...] and reinforces women's subordinate position in patriarchal culture.⁴¹

To me, it is rather the opposite: there is a 'covert story' in Jane Austen, which however does not narrate the reinforcement of women's subordination; it is a story that represents instead a wish to demonstrate, through strategies which also include precise Shakespearean appropriations, how women can and are detaching themselves from male judgment and from the claimed superiority of men. The heroines of Jane Austen do marry well and do, in the end, put themselves in the care

⁴⁰ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, in *The Complete Novels of Jane Austen*, cit., p. 716.

⁴¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 154.

of their husbands; because of their so often stressed independence, however, their marriages are based on equality and not on submission. Austen does end all her novels with happy wedding-scenes, but she also overtly condemns and disapproves of a society in which unmarried women are the object of ridicule and in which marriage is reduced to a mere matter of wealth. It is not a case if Elizabeth Bennet pities her friend, Miss Lucas, because of her marrying Mr Collins, nor is it a case that the many characters who marry for money (like Mr Willoughby and Lucy Middleton in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr Elton in *Emma*, Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park*,...) are mainly described as immoral and self-interested and are usually shown to repent for their marriages of convenience.

Love is a complex sentiment in Jane Austen's novels and one that is dealt with in a problematic way: Austen never indulges in the representation of too sugary or too sentimental scenes, nor does she depict episodes of love at first sight or similar, exceedingly idealistic infatuations. At the beginning of her novels, her heroines rarely fall in love with the person they will eventually marry: so Elizabeth is at first blinded by the seducing manners of Mr Wickham, Marianne is attracted by the handsomeness and the cultivation of Mr Willoughby and Emma pretends to be in love with Frank Churchill. However, all these young ladies will sooner or later change their minds and will come to love someone whom they had previously misjudged and whom they have later had the opportunity to get to know and esteem. Thus, there is hardly any space for exceedingly romantic love stories in Jane Austen, in this case contrarily to the idea of love at first sight that many Shakespearean comedies seem to convey. Interestingly, however, it is once again through Shakespeare that Austen manages to express her own ideas on the subject.

There does seem to be a something in the air of Hartfield which gives love exactly the right direction, and sends it into the very channel where it ought to flow.

The course of true love never did run smooth –

A Hartfield edition of Shakespeare would have a long note on that passage.⁴²

⁴² Jane Austen, *Emma*, cit., p. 764.

Such a citation from *Emma* is indicative of Austen's ironical treatment both of love and of the excessively romantic interpretations of Shakespeare's comedies: the quotation from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which emphasises the difficulties of true love understating, however, its victory over every obstacle, is here introduced in a completely unromantic context; as a matter of fact Emma is persuading her friend Harriet of Mr. Elton's love for her, a sentiment that not only does not belong to Mr. Elton, but that is not spontaneous in Harriet either, whose heart appears to be unconsciously and blindly guided by Emma's match-making pastime. Although the Shakespearean quotation may be appealing to the sentimental reader, Jane Austen is in fact parodying the literary conventions of love by presenting Lysander's line in an inappropriate context (the supposed love between Mr. Elton and Harriet which will prove to be no more than an invention of Emma's mind). What is more, Jane Austen is winking at the cultivate reader of Shakespeare, who knows that love conventions were already a target of Shakespeare's plays: even if *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ending with the traditional wedding feast, seems to celebrate conjugal love, still it hides a more bitter truth: the four lovers are united not because of their true love for each other, but because of Oberon and Puck's magic, while Theseus has, as he says, wooed Hyppolita with his sword. Shakespeare is thus for Austen a powerful resource: by appropriating his characters or by misappropriating his lines, Austen aims both at breaking with the patriarchal tradition and at deflating the stereotypical and naïf pattern of romantic love. In this way her novels, although framed between love skirmishes and happy marriages, are never banal but, on the contrary, manages to express modern, almost feminist views on the English society.

If Jane Austen made such a consistent use of Shakespearean references in her novels, it is because she could count on the fact that her readers would recognize them. As Gary Taylor writes:

[Shakespeare's plays] became things; they became, primarily books. [...] The transformation of Shakespeare's actions into books thus permitted and encouraged their disintegration into assemblages of quotable fragments.⁴³

Indeed, the period of Jane Austen's lifetime was also the one in which the presence of Shakespeare was becoming invasive: the nowadays so common attitude of bardolatry was already in the air and Shakespeare was beginning to become an icon of English literature and of Englishness in general. 1769, which means less than ten years before Austen's birth, is the year of the Shakespeare Jubilee: the event, held in Stratford upon Avon, definitely introduced Shakespeare into mass culture and made of him the centre of commercial interests and strategies. The process of commodification that would increase in the twentieth century had started for the first time: Shakespeare was getting ready to be metamorphosed into hundreds of souvenirs and to become a tourist attraction.

Needless to say, Jane Austen herself today belongs to and is exploited by this flourishing literary tourism although, probably, she would not like it at all. In fact, Austen has often parodied, in her works, the growing omnipresence of Shakespeare in the British culture. Three are the directions in which the writer's parody moves: firstly, she caricatures "the seizing of occasions for quotation, and the vapidness of the tags quoted"⁴⁴ (quoting or misquoting Shakespeare, even in a totally haphazard manner, had become the norm for the majority of well-educated English gentlemen); secondly she questions a real, profound knowledge of the Shakespearean corpus on the part of those who quote him time and time again (Shakespeare had also become a mere decorative device, used – appropriately or not – to embroider descriptions in books, to support arguments in conversations or to embellish someone's speech at the same time offering the speaker the possibility to show off: quoting Shakespeare was most of the times an easy way to boast a fake knowledge of his plays); thirdly she mocks the sacralisation of Shakespeare, the

⁴³ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare. A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*, London: Vintage, 1991, p. 108.

⁴⁴ Isobel Grundy, "Jane Austen and Literary Traditions", cit., p. 192.

mythical status that is conferred to his person. The 34th chapter of *Mansfield Park*, which sees Henry Crawford reading aloud a speech from *Henry VIII*, well summarises all the aspects that Austen wants to ridicule:

“[...] But Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is part of an Englishman’s constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them every where, one is intimate with them by instinct. – No man of any brain can open at a good part of one of his plays, without falling into the flow of his meaning immediately.”

“No doubt one is familiar with Shakespeare in a degree”, said Edmund, “from one’s earliest years. His celebrated passages are quoted by every body; they are in half the books we open, and we all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions; but this is totally distinct from giving his sense as you gave it. To know him bits and scraps, is common enough; to know him pretty thoroughly, is, perhaps, not uncommon; but to read him well aloud, is no every-day talent.”⁴⁵

Austen brilliantly establishes a distinction between two verbs: one thing is ‘talking’ Shakespeare, another is ‘reading’ Shakespeare. As Susan Harlan noticed, if the first verb indicates a superficial knowledge, the second one entails a total appropriation of Shakespeare’s plays, which thus acquire a new significance and new meanings. ‘Reading’ Shakespeare is exactly what Jane Austen demands from her readers and what she, as a writer, is doing. Whenever she quotes the English playwright, she does so by giving the quotation a very personal meaning, by creating something new and unique:

Austen explores the implications for the novel of the process by which reading becomes “talking” and “talking” becomes something more: the ability to imbue language with sense. Reading aloud is no mere quotation of Shakespeare’s words, but rather a novelistic mode of self-presentation and self-knowledge through the

⁴⁵ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, cit., pp. 640-41.

presentation of dramatic characters. Like Crawford, Austen appropriates Shakespeare, imbuing his play with a “meaning” or “sense” that is uniquely novelistic.⁴⁶

1.2.3. George Eliot: on Shakespeare and gender

Long before she wrote *Deronda*, long before she became a novelist, George Eliot read Shakespeare with a special interest in his female characters. Her letters, especially the first volume (written between the age of sixteen and twenty-two), abound in Shakespearean references.⁴⁷

George Eliot’s private correspondence indeed testifies to the writer’s enthusiasm for Shakespeare; however, the way she uses quotations and allusions remains in her letters only superficial, more a form of personal amusement than a means to express her real opinion on the playwright’s works. It is instead in her participation in the late-nineteenth century debate concerning the plays and the characters of Shakespeare that her very ideas definitely come to the fore. A Victorian woman, Eliot embraced Victorian criticism of Shakespeare, both conforming to the innovative interpretations of his female characters and keeping her distance from the most conservative approaches. As many women of the eighteenth century had already done, Victorian critics often praised Shakespeare for his sympathy, a characteristic which resulted in the creation of a varied and deeply-defined set of characters. It was William Hazlitt who wrote, using expressions that echo the very same words already employed by Cavendish and Montagu, that Shakespeare

⁴⁶ Susan Harlan, “Talking and Reading Shakespeare in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*”, in *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 39, n. 1-2, Winter/Spring 2008, p. 43.

⁴⁷ Marianne Novy, “Daniel *Deronda* and George Eliot’s Female (Re-Vision) of Shakespeare”, in Marianne Novy, (ed.), *Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, cit., p. 90.

seemed scarcely to have an individual existence of his own, but to borrow that of others at will, and to pass successively through 'every variety of untried being' – to be now Hamlet, now Othello, now Lear, now Falstaff, now Ariel.⁴⁸

However, if Eliot agreed with William Hazlitt on this point and she was herself, as a writer, compared to Shakespeare because of sympathy⁴⁹, she was instead seriously critical of Hazlitt's considerations about Shakespeare's female characters. According to the critic,

It is the peculiar essence of Shakespear's heroines, that they seem to exist only in their attachment to others. They are pure abstractions of the affections. [...] No one ever hit the true perfection of the female character, the sense of weakness leaning on the strength of its affection, so well as Shakespear.⁵⁰

If Hazlitt seems to suggest that Shakespeare portrayed only fragile and sentimental women, without a strong will and deprived of decisional power, Eliot's interpretation goes in quite the opposite direction. As she writes in the *Leader*, "Shakspeare's women have no more decided characteristic than the frankness with which they avow their love, not only to themselves, but to the men they love."⁵¹ Eliot indeed greatly stressed the self-affirmation typical of some Shakespearean female characters, sharing Anna Jameson's⁵² line of thought, according to which not only the majority of Shakespeare's heroines are good-natured and amiable, but also tenacious, powerful, and independent. As Marianne Novy explains, George Eliot "enjoyed Shakespeare partly because she saw him as a creator of powerful women,

⁴⁸ William Hazlitt, "On Posthumous Fame – Whether Shakespeare was influenced by a love of it?", in *The Round Table. A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men, and Manners*, in 2 volumes, Edinburgh: George Ramsay and Co., 1817, vol. 1, p. 76.

⁴⁹ In 1877 Edward Dowden wrote that Eliot "with Shakespeare unite breadth of sympathy with power of interpreting the rarer and more intense experiences of the souls of men", quoted in Adrien Poole (ed.), *Scott, Dickens, Eliot, Hardy. Great Shakespearians*, London: Continuum, 2011, p. 96.

⁵⁰ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, London: George Bell and Sons, 1908, pp. 2-3.

⁵¹ Extract from an article appeared in *The Leader* in August 1855, quoted in Adrien Poole (ed.), *Scott, Dickens, Eliot, Hardy: Great Shakespearians*, cit., p. 104

⁵² Anna Jameson is the author of *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical* (1832).

and that she saw herself as writing both in his tradition and from a female viewpoint.”⁵³

Indeed, even if in a few occasions George Eliot criticized the somehow too submissive attitude of some Shakespearean female characters⁵⁴, the operation she performs in her novels is either to appropriate Shakespeare’s most vivacious and intelligent heroines or to transform his female characters into new women, thus attributing them a personality definitely closer to her own sensibility. According to Marianne Novy, who has extensively written on the interrelation between Eliot’s narrative and Shakespearean drama⁵⁵, the presence of Shakespeare can somehow be traced behind every major work of the Victorian writer. All the same, she agrees with Knoepfmacher in stating that “*Daniel Deronda* is the most consciously Shakespearean of all her novels”⁵⁶. Surprisingly, if “in a book teeming with spatial allusions to Jewish figures of fact and fiction the character of Shylock is tactfully avoided”⁵⁷, other plays deeply inform the novel, shaping its characters and helping Eliot structure a discourse around gender.

One of the plays to which George’s Eliot text explicitly refers is *The Winter’s Tale*. Chapter 6 presents as a matter of fact the description of a familial performance of the play, in which Gwendolen, the main female character of Eliot’s novel, plays the role of the Shakespearean Hermione:

⁵³ Marianne Novy, “Daniel Deronda and George Eliot’s Female (Re)Vision of Shakespeare”, in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 28, n. 4 (Nineteenth Century), Autumn 1988, pp. 671-2.

⁵⁴ In her journal, the 16th March 1855, she wrote about *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: “That play disgusted me more than ever in the final scene, where Valentine, on Proteus’ mere begging pardon, when he has no longer any hope of gaining his ends, says ‘All that was mine in Silvia, I give thee!’ Silvia standing by.” In George Eliot, *The Journals of George Eliot*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Marianne Novy has written extensively on the subject, particularly in a book she edited, *Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare. On the Responses of Dickinson, Woolf, Rich, H.D. George Eliot and Many Others* (1990) and in her own *Engaging with Shakespeare. Responses of George Eliot and Other Women Novelists* (1994).

⁵⁶ U.C. Knoepfmacher, “Daniel Deronda and William Shakespeare”, in *The Victorian Newsletter*, n. 19, Spring 1961, p. 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

The tableau of Hermione was doubly striking from its dissimilarity with what had gone before: it was answering perfectly, and a murmur of applause had been gradually suppressed while Leontes gave his permission that Paulina should exercise her utmost art and make the statue move. Hermione, her arm resting on a pillar, was elevated by about six inches, which she counted on as a means of showing her pretty foot and instep, when at the given sign she should advance and descend. [...]. Herr Klesmer, who had been good-natured enough to seat himself at the piano, struck a thunderous chord – but in the same instant, and before Hermione had put forth her foot, the movable panel, which was on a line with the piano, flew open on the right opposite the stage and disclosed the picture of the dead face and the fleeing figure, brought out in pale definiteness by the position of the wax-lights. Everyone was startled, but all eyes in the act of turning towards the opened panel were recalled by a piercing cry from Gwendolen, who stood without change of attitude, but with a change of expression that was terrifying in its terror. She looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered: her pallid lips were parted; her eyes, usually narrowed under their long lashes, were dilated and fixed.⁵⁸

Not only does the narrative voice directly equate Gwendolen and Hermione, but it also points out how Gwendolen's transformation into the living image of a statue should occur precisely on her glimpsing the picture of the dead face: as Hermione has just come back from the realm of the dead, passing through the disquieting experience of death and return to life, so "Gwendolen's shock comes out of a more primitive fear of death."⁵⁹ However, although Gwendolen is explicitly compared to Hermione, yet there is a strong, significant difference between the two female characters: if Gwendolen is only a girl, still young, puerile and unripe, Hermione is a mature woman who has lived the ineffable; if Gwendolen's tragic marriage is still to come, Hermione has already paid a high price for her husband's jealousy and his consequent mistakes; most importantly, if Hermione courageously bears Leontes' punishment, Gwendolen cannot stand Grandcourt and, during a trip to Italy, she watches him drown, trying to save him but actually wishing him to die. Thus,

⁵⁸ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, London: Penguin, 1986, p. 91.

⁵⁹ Marianne Novy, "Daniel Deronda and George Eliot's Female Re-Vision of Shakespeare" in Marianne Novy (ed.), *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, cit., p. 97.

Gwendolen somehow becomes Leontes, learning, like him, from her mistakes and living the rest of her life tragically devoured by guilt and remorse.

Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* will explicitly resort once again in the course of the novel, in the form of the epigraph preceding chapter 31:

'A wild dedication of yourselves
To unpath'd waters, undream'd shores'⁶⁰

The epigraph, a quotation from Camillo's cue suggesting Florizel take Perdita to Leontes' court and thus alluding to the perfect love between the two young characters of Shakespeare's play, is significantly placed before the chapter describing Gwendolen and Grandcourt's wedding. Consequently, "the romantic happiness of Florizel and Perdita is re-written, reversed and ironized"⁶¹ by transforming Gwendolen into "an ironic Perdita, Eliot's heroine being lost just as Shakespeare's is about to be found."⁶² The irony through which George Eliot looks at and presents her heroine is however an extremely grim one. Through Gwendolen, Eliot aims at heavily criticising the Victorian society in which she lives and which still regards marriage as "a question of economics [...] through the emphasis on woman as an object of exchange in a male-centered economy"⁶³. That such a view is central in *Daniel Deronda* is indeed proved by the epigraph preceding chapter 10, an epigraph invented by the writer herself and recreating a dialogue between two gentlemen:

1st gentl. What woman should be? Sir, consult the taste
Of marriageable men. This planet's store
In iron, cotton, wool, or chemicals –
All matter rendered to our plastic skill,

⁶⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, IV, iv, 568-69; quoted in George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, cit., p. 400.

⁶¹ John Lyon, "Shakespearian Margins in George Eliot's 'Working-Day World'", in Peter Holland (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey – Shakespeare and Narrative*, vol. 53, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 118.

⁶² John Lyon, "Shakespearian Margins in George Eliot's 'Working-Day World'", cit., p. 119.

⁶³ Kate Flint, "George Eliot and Gender", in George Levine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 174-75.

Is wrought in shapes responsive to demand:
The market's pulse makes index high or low,
By rule sublime. Our daughters must be wives,
And to be wives must be what men will choose:
Men's taste is woman's test. You mark the phrase?
'Tis good, I think? – the sense well winged and poised
With t's and s's.⁶⁴

Eliot's discourse on the condition of women in Victorian England indeed becomes explicit only later on in the novel, with the character of Deronda's mother finally making its appearance and explaining her reasons for abandoning Daniel:

'I don't mean to speak ill of myself', said the Princess, with proud impetuosity, 'but I had not much affection to give you. I did not want affection. I had been stifled with it. I wanted to live out the life that was in me, and not to be hampered by other lives. You wonder what I was. I was no princess then.' [...] 'I was a great singer, and I acted as well as I sang. All the rest were poor beside me. Men followed me from one country to another. I was living a myriad lives in one. I did not want a child.' [...] 'I did not want to marry. I was forced into marrying your father – forced, I mean, by my father's wishes and commands [...]';⁶⁵

Although this image of motherhood seems somehow unnatural and although the character of Daniel's mother is here presented as selfish and narcissistic, still the narrative voice of *Daniel Deronda* never condemns her choice. The Princess repetitively states that she is no monster, thus suggesting a larger reflection on womanhood and maternity. What is at stake here is indeed not the right or the wrong of her action, rather the "recognition of the ideological pressure on women to conform; the expectation, which many women either internalize or profess, that maternity is somehow sufficient in its own right."⁶⁶ Tragically rewriting *The Winter's Tale* and introducing such a subversive character as the one of Daniel's mother,

⁶⁴ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, cit., p. 132.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 688-89.

⁶⁶ Kate Flint, "George Eliot and Gender", cit., p. 167.

George Eliot develops in her novel a discourse on the condition of women and on the differences between the sexes, who are actually expected to occupy completely different positions in society and with a completely different degree of freedom.

Such a discourse on gender is sustained by two other Shakespearean plays that linger on *Daniel Deronda*. *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* are as a matter of fact both appropriated by Eliot who creates and at the same time disrupts a possible parallel between the characters of the two Shakespearean texts and the ones of her novel. Gwendolen's identification with Rosalind is directly suggested by the narrator:

It was agreed that they were playing "As You Like It"; and when a pretty compliment had been turned to Gwendolen about her having the part of Rosalind, she felt the more compelled to be surpassing in loveliness.⁶⁷

Yet, Gwendolen's personality is completely different from Rosalind's one: as the Shakespearean heroine is portrayed as sympathetic and generous, Eliot's female protagonist is described as ambitious and insensitive; as the one faints believing her lover to be dead, the other does not even care for the endangered health of one of her suitors, fallen from his horse. Daniel is instead never explicitly identified with the Shakespearean 'hero', although some factual details of his life clearly goes in this direction: as Hamlet goes back to Denmark after having been sent to England by his uncle, so Daniel has just returned to England after having studied on the continent; if Ophelia drowns herself, Daniel saves his future wife Mirah from drowning; most importantly, however, Daniel's personality seems to coincide with the one of Shakespeare's Hamlet:

It happened that the very vividness of his [Daniel's] impressions had often made him the more enigmatic to his friends, and had contributed to an apparent indefiniteness in his sentiments. His early-waked sensibility and reflectiveness had developed into a many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, cit., p. 188.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 412.

This description of Daniel Deronda is not only clearly evocative of some of Hamlet's characteristics, but also lists some qualities – sympathy and sensibility above all – which were indeed perceived as typically feminine. Thus Deronda's characterization is, as Kate Flint writes, “signed by a confusion, even a collapse of gender norms.”⁶⁹ Gender norms that disintegrate even more if we think that Daniel's feminine sympathy is somehow contrasted by Gwendolen's masculine thirst for ambition and by her desire – although a suppressed one – to live independently. The different personalities of Daniel and Gwendolen will to a certain extent determine the evolution of their plots: Deronda's plot is a definitely idealized one and follows the pattern of typical love stories; Hamlet finds his Ophelia and tragedy transforms into comedy. On the contrary, Gwendolen's plot goes in a much more realistic direction, with Shakespeare's *As You Like It* somehow rewritten as a tragedy; indeed, as Marianne Novy states, “Gwendolen's story ends more sadly than Rosalind's because of Gwendolen's own limitations as well as because of the greater harshness of the world where Eliot places her.”⁷⁰

Shakespeare, his plays and his characters are thus manipulated by George Eliot to shape a vaster discourse on gender and on the condition of women in Victorian England. Through Shakespeare, she gives life to characters that either defy the traditional stereotypes of womanhood and motherhood or that, on the contrary, bend to a still dominating patriarchy. Through Shakespeare, she thus gives voice to a contradiction which was indeed her very own: she was a woman writing of women, yet behind the pseudonym of a man.

⁶⁹ Kate Flint, “George Eliot and Gender”, cit., p. 176.

⁷⁰ Marianne Novy “Daniel Deronda and George Eliot's Female Re-Vision of Shakespeare”, cit., p. 103.

1.3. A twentieth-century appropriation: Virginia Woolf's 'Sh-p-re' from poetry to drama

Virginia Woolf's relationship with William Shakespeare is undoubtedly a dense and very complex one: quotations and allusions either to the Bard's works or to his historical figure indeed permeate her literary (but also her private) production. Yet, instead of evolving into a more unitary vision, all these Shakespearean references remain scattered fragments, which refuse to take a more definite and ordered shape. As a matter of fact, when Woolf was asked by David Garnett to write an essay about Shakespeare, she replied with the following words: "I have a kind of feeling that unless one is possessed of the truth, or is a garrulous old busybody, from America, one ought to hold one's tongue."⁷¹ Apparently persuaded not to possess any truth about Shakespeare, Virginia turned down Garnett's offer, thus giving definitely up the possibility of writing, explicitly and thoroughly, about William Shakespeare.

However, the absent presence of the playwright in Woolf's production is only the most evident contradiction in the novelist's treatment of his figure and his plays, a contradiction that may stem from another, more profound one: what did Shakespeare represent for Virginia Woolf? Was he associated to that cultural patriarchy against which she struggled all her life, or was he considered, instead, a writer to admire and to try to imitate? This contradiction seems to reveal itself from very early on in the life of Virginia Woolf, as the following extract from a 1901 letter to her brother Thoby proves:

I read *Cymbeline* just to see if there mightn't be more in the great William than I supposed. And I was quite upset! Really and truly I am now let in to the company of worshippers – though I still feel a little oppressed by his – greatness I suppose. [...] about the characters. Why aren't they more human? Imogen and Posthumous and Cymbeline – I find them beyond me – Is this my feminine weakness in the upper

⁷¹ Quoted in Julia Briggs, "Virginia Woolf Reads Shakespeare: or, Her Silent on Master William", in Peter Holland (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey – Writing about Shakespeare*, vol. 58, 2005, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 125.

region? But really they might have been cut out with a pair of scissors – as far as mere humanity goes – Of course they talk divinely.⁷²

Christine Froula shows how Woolf's perspective is in this case that of an outsider: she is a woman who, precisely because of her gender, is denied access to higher education; because of her gender, too, she is induced to doubt her own authority, feeling a “feminine weakness” in judging and understanding Shakespeare's characters; however, it is her same “feminine weakness” that makes her debate Shakespeare's authority as well: his characters are for her too unreal, too false to be human⁷³. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Woolf's criticism of William Shakespeare goes hand in hand with her admiration for him, for the beauty of his language and the greatness of his work. In the above-quoted short and still unripe comment on *Cymbeline*, the kernel of Woolf's life-long relationship with the Bard is already to be found. As Froula maintains,

The Shakespeare she makes her own is already a complex figure: a great genius and poet, yet lacking in the ‘humanity’ that she, as a woman reader, looks for; associated with male cultural privilege, yet not inseparable from it – on the contrary, admitting of appropriation by the daughter-writer, even from her position outside the line of succession.⁷⁴

In her writing (and I believe more than anywhere else in *To the Lighthouse*, *A Room of One's Own*, *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*) Woolf both discards and adopts Shakespeare: while rejecting him as an icon of male predominance in the literary field, she bends his words and she appropriates his figure to assert her vision of literature and her feminist engagement. What is more, the widespread presence of Shakespeare in her production – a presence that includes the playwright's poetry as well as his drama and that stretches from Woolf's novels to her critical essays –

⁷² Virginia Woolf, “Letter to Thoby Stephen, November 5th, 1901”, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, in 6 volumes, London: The Hogarth Press, 1975, vol. 1, p. 45.

⁷³ See Christine Froula, “Virginia Woolf as Shakespeare's Sister: Chapters in a Woman Writer's Autobiography”, in Marianne Novy (ed.), *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 123-42.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

seems also to suggest that Virginia appropriated Shakespeare and the totality of his corpus as a way to reflect about literary genres, their structure, their ideal readers or audience, and, finally, their role and importance.

In her essay on the relationship between William Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf, Julia Briggs conducts an interesting investigation of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and demonstrates, by comparing the drafts of the novel with its final version, how the author somehow modified, while writing, her attitude towards Shakespeare.

Why, then, did one mind what [...] Charles Tansley said, Lily Briscoe wondered. – insignificant as he was! O it's Shakespeare, she corrected herself – as a forgetful person entering Regent's Park, & seeing the Park keeper was coming toward her menacingly; might exclaim Oh of course I remember dogs must be on a lead! So Lily Briscoe remembered that every man has Shakespeare & women have not. What then could she say? Inferior as she was; [...] ⁷⁵

The image of Shakespeare quite explicitly conveyed by this extract from the very first draft of *To the Lighthouse* is that of a patriarchal author: if men have free access to Shakespeare and his works, women, supposedly inferior, must instead be kept on a lead: like dogs, they must be guided in their reading of Shakespeare because their mediocre, incapable minds would prevent them from a full understanding of his plays or of his poetry. Indeed, as Briggs states, Shakespeare seems here incarnated in the menacing keeper of Regent's Park, thus becoming “an official policing the park of literature”⁷⁶. For Lily Briscoe (but is it so for Virginia Woolf?), struck by Tansley's declaration that “Women can't write, women can't paint”⁷⁷, Shakespeare comes to represent an exclusively male culture, inaccessible to women; all the more, he turns into the very antagonist of every woman artist, who feels not only inferior, but also excluded from any possible artistic achievement. Yet this extract, with all the patriarchal and misogynous meanings attached to it, was in the end expunged by

⁷⁵ *To The Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, quoted in Julia Briggs “Virginia Woolf reads Shakespeare: or, Her Silence on Master William”, cit., p. 120.

⁷⁶ Julia Briggs, “Virginia Woolf reads Shakespeare: or, Her Silence on Master William”, cit., p. 120.

⁷⁷ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 94.

Woolf, somehow testifying her ever-evolving reflection on Shakespeare. In the final version of *To the Lighthouse*, as a matter of fact, Tansley remains the only representative of a strict patriarchy, the only opponent of women emancipation and of their artistic struggles⁷⁸; Shakespeare instead, whose traces Virginia Woolf does not completely erase, is evoked in quite different terms and in ways that not only strongly connect him to femininity, but which also help Woolf shape a more general discourse on poetry:

She [Mrs Ramsay] was climbing up those branches, this way and that, laying hands on one flower and then another.

Nor praise the deep vermillion in the rose,
she read, and so reading she was ascending, she felt, on to the top, on to the summit.
How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day struck to this magnet;
her mind felt swept, felt clean. And then there it was, suddenly entire shaped in her
hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and
held rounded here – the sonnet.⁷⁹

With Mrs Ramsay's reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 98, poetry breaks into the domain of prose narrative. Interestingly, Woolf immediately appropriates it – and, through it, she appropriates Shakespeare – for women. Indeed, as Julia Briggs has rightly pointed out, Mrs Ramsay's reading experience is “subtly gendered”: she is reading poetry, while her husband is reading prose⁸⁰; what is more, her reading appears to be conducted in a typically feminine way, because it expresses “the life of feeling and imagination that Woolf associated with her mother and herself”⁸¹.

Thus Shakespeare and his works, which in the first draft of the novel were seen as a male prerogative, are in this final version far from being conceived as

⁷⁸ According to Christine Froula, Lily Briscoe would represent Woolf's autobiographical artist-figure; her painting would thus symbolize Woolf's own struggle of surpassing male antagonism. See Christine Froula, “Virginia Woolf as Shakespeare's Sister: Chapters in a Woman Writer's Autobiography”, cit., pp. 123-42.

⁷⁹ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, cit., p. 131.

⁸⁰ See Julia Briggs, “Virginia Woolf reads Shakespeare: or, Her Silence on Master William”, cit., p. 120.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

unavailable to and unattainable for women; on the contrary, Shakespeare is not anymore related to male cultural privilege only, but is directly linked to a specifically feminine sensibility that, Woolf seems to suggest, possesses all the capacity, the knowledge, the insight to deeply and truly understand Shakespeare. If women's minds are considered less rational and less logical than men's, still they are thought to be more imaginative and emotional: these characteristics cannot but help women to better enjoy poetry, thoroughly experiencing it. "Poetry" – Coleridge had written some years before – "gives the most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood"⁸². Virginia Woolf appears to confirm this statement, since Mrs Ramsay's way of reading is certainly not tidy and organized, but "at random, [...] swinging herself, zigzagging this way and that"⁸³; it is precisely through such an apparently disordered manner of going through the sonnet, that she is able to grasp its very essence, losing herself in the texture of sounds created by the verses and, finally making sense, a very personal one, of them. Poets are not necessarily addressing methodical minds – as men's mind only were believed to be; on the contrary, the ideal reader of poetry may be precisely someone as Mrs Ramsay, whose kind of intelligence the patriarchal culture of Woolf's time would have probably perceived as incomplete, inferior, and inadequate. That Shakespeare should enter the reign of narrative as a poet becomes thus extremely poignant. In this way he comes to represent not a threat or a reason for anxiety, but, as Christine Froula suggests, a symbol of the necessary equanimity between male's and female's intellectual capacities.⁸⁴ If women can read, appreciate and appropriate Shakespeare, they can also lay claim on domains, like the literary one, that were still considered as prevalently masculine; women, contrarily to what Tansley stated, can write and can paint: Lily Briscoe finally completing her painting is Woolf's explicit way of saying so.

⁸² Entry in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's diary on 10th October 1798. See *Coleridge's Notebooks. A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 13.

⁸³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, cit., p. 129.

⁸⁴ See Christine Froula, "Virginia Woolf as Shakespeare's Sister: Chapters in a Woman Writer's Autobiography", cit., p. 128.

If in *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf chooses to describe the experience of reading poetry, in *Orlando* she reflects on the very essence of the poet's mind and on the very act of creating poetry, by describing the struggles of her hero/heroine to write a good poem. Once again, the presence of Shakespeare lingers on the text, where he is directly portrayed as a mysterious but indeed fascinating figure:

But there, sitting at the servant's dinner table with a tankard beside him and paper in front of him, sat a rather fat, rather shabby man, whose ruff was a thought dirty, and whose clothes were a hodden brown. He held a pen in his hand, but he was not writing. He seemed in the act of rolling some thought up and down, to and fro in his mind till it gathered shape or momentum to his liking. His eyes, globed and clouded like some green stone of curious texture, were fixed. He did not see Orlando. [...] the man turned his pen in his fingers, this way and that way; and gazed and mused; and then, very quickly, wrote half-a-dozen lines and looked up.⁸⁵

This obscure character, of whom Orlando catches sight only once as a child, nonetheless comes back to his memory a century later, precisely while he is trying hard to make progress with his own poetry⁸⁶, and accompanies him/her until the 11th October 1928, the day that not only marks the end of the book but also the one in which Orlando eventually associates the “rather fat, rather shabby man” to William Shakespeare:

‘He sat at Twitchett's table’, she mused, ‘with a dirty ruff on...Was it old Mr. Barker come to measure the timber? Or was it Sh-p-re?’ (for when we speak names we deeply reverence to ourselves we never speak them whole). She gazed for ten minutes

⁸⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 16.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 56: ‘This is the face of the rather fat, shabby man who sat in Twitchett's room ever so many years ago when old Queen Bess came here to dine; and I saw him,’ Orlando continued, catching at another of those little coloured rags, ‘sitting at the table, as I peeped in on my way downstairs, and he had the most amazing eyes,’ said Orlando, ‘that ever were, but who the devil was he?’ Orlando asked, for here Memory added to the forehead and eyes, first, a coarse, grease-stained ruffle, then a brown doublet, and finally a pair of thick boots such as citizens wear in Cheapside. ‘Not a Nobleman; not one of us [...], a poet I dare say.’

ahead of her, letting the car come almost to a standstill. 'Haunted!' she cried, suddenly pressing the accelerator. 'Haunted! ever since I was a child. [...].'⁸⁷

Woolf's fictional descriptions of the poet (Shakespeare as it would seem) haunting Orlando seem to be somehow influenced by a certain romantic, indeed idealistic image of the artist: a man wrapped up in his own thoughts, whose inscrutable eyes appear to see things that no one else will ever see, and whose sudden inspiration leads him to write a number of lines in one go. However, that this vision is in fact a sort of parodic description of the figure of Shakespeare and of poets in general is actually demonstrated by the novel itself: indeed, for a long time Orlando is incapable of writing good poetry and his many moments of romantic exaltation only turn out to be disastrous. The good poet, Woolf appears to be suggesting, is not the one inspired by the Muses, rather the one that possesses an androgynous mind.

Feminist criticism has indeed often remarked that Orlando manages to write good poetry only after he has turned into a woman and Cary DiPietro even affirms that "only once Orlando has been transformed into a woman does she overcome her anxiety in relation to her once-contemporary literary precursors so as to complete and publish her poem, 'The Oak Tree'."⁸⁸ What I believe, instead, is that Orlando's poetic ability has nothing to do with what Bloom would define as "anxiety of influence"⁸⁹; on the contrary, I agree with Christine Froula that Orlando is his/her own tradition, rewriting "The Oak Tree" for centuries.⁹⁰ What is more, Woolf does not concentrate so much on Orlando's femininity but rather on his/her androgyny:

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. [...] But here we leave the general question and note only the odd effect it had in the particular case of Orlando herself.

For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the

⁸⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, cit., pp. 215-16.

⁸⁸ Cary DiPietro, *Shakespeare and Modernism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 183.

⁸⁹ See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

⁹⁰ See Christine Froula, "Virginia Woolf as Shakespeare's Sister: Chapters in a Woman Writer's Autobiography", cit., p. 129.

other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn. The curious of her own sex would argue, for example, if Orlando was a woman, how did she never take more than ten minutes to dress? And were not her clothes chosen rather at random, and sometimes worn rather shabby? And then they would say, still, she has none of the formality of a man, or a man's love of power. [...] Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided.⁹¹

Orlando is neither man nor woman, and it is precisely this in-betweenness, this androgynous nature that, Woolf would appear to suggest, allows her/him to become a poet. Furthermore, it is on the basis of androgyny that Woolf implicitly establishes a comparison between her fictional character of a poet and the poet William Shakespeare: both are androgynous minds, refusing “to be pinned down, to be confined and in particular to be confined to a single gender role”⁹². If, for Woolf, the very essence of the poet's mind is androgyny and if Shakespeare is believed to possess such androgynous characteristics, it follows that Shakespeare does not belong *either* to men or to women, but *both* to men and women.

It is however only in a text following *Orlando*, the essay *A Room of One's Own*, that Woolf explicitly delineates a connection between Shakespeare and androgyny, what is more critically exploring for the very first time androgyny as related to the poetic imagination:

[...]that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. In fact one goes back to Shakespeare's mind as the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind, though it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women.⁹³

Being the man-womanly intensively creative mind, Shakespeare is for Woolf a model to imitate and a constant prompt for her writing. What is more, although as

⁹¹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, cit., pp. 132-33.

⁹² Julia Briggs, “Virginia Woolf reads Shakespeare: or, Her Silence on Master William”, cit., p. 127.

⁹³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, in *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 89.

reported by some critics her androgynous vision would seem to soften her feminism⁹⁴, according to others it instead reinforces it. For Jane Marcus, for example

A Room of One's Own is the first modern text of feminist criticism, the model, in both theory and practice, of a specifically socialist feminist criticism. The collective narrative voice of *A Room of One's Own* is a strategic rhetoric for feminist intellectuals. [...]. Woolf has transformed the formidable lecture form into an intimate conversation among female equals. Men are excluded. Shakespeare is important to *A Room of One's Own* because he is used as a barrier to the text for the male reader. In order to gain entry to the closed circle of female readers and writer, the male reader must pass a test, find the correct password; he must agree that Shakespeare's gender has nothing to do with his greatness.⁹⁵

It is again Jane Marcus that argues how the three narrators of *A Room of One's Own* represent a strong feminist assertion, an attempt to free women writing both from the constraints of patriarchy and from the magniloquence of men writing: "All our egotism and individuality, the swords and shields of the hated 'I, I, I' must be abandoned outside the doors of her fiction."⁹⁶ Indeed, Woolf protests in her essay, various women writers have succumbed to the pomposity of men's style, a pomposity that instead does not belong to Shakespeare's androgynous way of writing and that she is herself trying to discard. As Elizabeth Wright states, for Woolf "to write androgynously ignoring the 'persistent voice' of patriarchy is the only way to save the literature of both sexes from stasis, corruption or deformity"⁹⁷.

⁹⁴ According to Elaine Showalter, for example, "The androgynous vision, in Woolf's terms, is a response to the dilemma of a woman writer embarrassed and alarmed by feelings too hot to handle without risking real rejection by her family, her audience and her class. *A Room of One's Own* is the first step toward her solution." In Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*, London: Virago, 1978, p. 287.

⁹⁵ Jane Marcus, "Still practiced, A/Wrestled Alphabet. Towards a Feminist Aesthetic", in Shari Benstock (ed.), *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 79.

⁹⁶ Jane Marcus, "Thinking Back through Our Mothers", in Jane Marcus (ed.), in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 1981, p. 9.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Wright, "Re-Evaluating Woolf's Androgynous Mind", in *Postgraduate English*, n. 14, September 2006, p. 10.

A Room of One's Own thus proceeds in the same direction of the two novels I have previously analyzed, recognizing in Shakespeare and in androgyny a way to escape patriarchy and a means for women to affirm their literary value. Liberated from patriarchal authority and looking back at Shakespeare as their literary mother⁹⁸, women can finally allow Judith Shakespeare, forgotten in the midst of an Elizabethan England where women artists did not have much possibility of reaching fame, to “come again, and women must wait and work for her second coming.”⁹⁹

Through her fiction and her essay writing, Woolf has somehow conducted a discourse on Shakespeare seen either as a poet or as the artist gifted with an androgynous mind. Surprisingly, drama has always remained on the margins of her literary production and it will as a matter of fact come directly to the fore only in her very last novel, significantly entitled *Between the Acts*. The presence of Shakespeare is here strongly felt and pervades the novel at different levels. As Gillian Beer explains,

The book is not so much studded with quotation and allusion as combed through: sometimes mere sparks of reference remain, sometimes clandestine glories. Shakespeare is dispersed among limber sentences. *Lear*, the sonnets, *Macbeth*, *Troilus* and *The Tempest* all play their parts, in fragments often shorn of context or contextual urgency.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, Shakespearean quotations, references and echoes are scattered throughout the pages (starting from the very much recurrent “orts, scraps and fragments”)¹⁰¹ concocting a net of fragments that seem to allude on the one hand to the forthcoming second world war and to the wake of destruction and debris that

⁹⁸ See Beth C. Schwartz, “Thinking Back Through our Mothers: Virginia Woolf Reads Shakespeare”, in *English Literary History*, vol. 58, n. 3, Autumn 1991, p. 722: “[...] an examination of Woolf’s fiction and autobiographical writings suggests that, rather than figuring as a fatherly source of inspiration or anxiety, Shakespeare seems to play the part of a maternal muse in Woolf’s creative process, as well as to help shape her feminist vision and agenda.”

⁹⁹ Julia Briggs, “Virginia Woolf reads Shakespeare: or, Her Silence on Master William”, cit., p. 127.

¹⁰⁰ Gillian Beer, “Introduction” to Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. xix.

¹⁰¹ As Gillian Beer stated “That image of fragmentation becomes also a binding refrain in the book: ‘orts, scraps, and fragments’. The lines from Shakespeare’s play *Troilus and Cressida* are persistently referred to, re-arranged, and riffled through the text.” In “Introduction” to Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, cit., p. xix.

would have inexorably followed, on the other to the incapacity of giving a sense to reality as perceived in between the two ‘acts’ of the first and second global conflicts. Shakespeare’s presence, however, also provides the very structure of *Between the Acts*, which seems to be definitely inspired by *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*¹⁰²: Woolf’s novel as a matter of fact presents a play within the fiction, a simple theatrical performance staged with poor means by the lower classes (the “mechanicals”) of the village. Virginia Woolf appropriates the strategy of the play within the play so often exploited by Shakespeare (in the *Dream*, but also in *Hamlet* or *Love’s Labour Lost*) as a way to reflect on the essence of theatre and on its complex relation with reality:

Between the Acts destabilizes the relation between what is represented and what is ‘real’, what passes (within the novel) for actual life. Like a nest of Chinese boxes, play scenes are performed within the pageant, which is performed within the novel, yet the title directs attention away from the ‘acts’ to the interval that falls between them.¹⁰³

What is that interval, however, if not life itself, probably seen by Woolf, as it was by Shakespeare, as an unending play, the world transformed into a stage on which to reiterate the same social roles, perform the same duties, repeat the same (often quoted) words? Isa already knows the ‘cues’ of the ‘characters’ around her before they pronounce them, she has herself been part of a performance which is repeated, unchanged, year after year:

So when Isa heard Mrs. Swithin say: ‘I’ve been nailing the placard on the Barn’, she knew she would say next:

‘For the pageant.’

And he would say:

‘Today! By Jupiter! I’d forgotten!’

‘If it’s fine,’ Mrs. Swithin continued, ‘they’ll act on the terrace...’

‘And if it’s wet,’ Bartholomew continued, ‘in the Barn.’

¹⁰² On this subject see also Claudia Olk, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Elizabethan Play’: *Between the Acts* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”, in Sabine Schülting (ed.), *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, vol. 146, 2010, pp. 113-29.

¹⁰³ Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf. An Inner Life*, Orlando: Harcourt, 2005, p. 387.

‘And which will it be?’ Mrs. Swithin continued. ‘Wet or fine?’

Then, for the seventh time in succession, they both looked out of the window. Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year, they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was – one or the other.¹⁰⁴

Even in the graphic structure, the exchange of sentences between Bartholomew and Mrs. Swithin resembles a short theatrical dialogue, a script learned by heart and rehearsed times and times again. It is not by chance that the final act of the pageant, the one supposed to stage the present era, is nothing more than Hamlet’s famous statement about playing put into practice: mirrors are literally being held up to nature, reflecting an audience scared and to a certain extent ashamed of seeing itself so unexpectedly exposed.

Criticism has been much more concerned, however, with yet another Shakespearean presence in the text: that of Miss La Trobe, who is to Prospero what *Between the Act* is to *The Tempest*. By creating, organizing and directing the play she becomes a demiurge-like figure whose pageant is destined, nonetheless, to fade.¹⁰⁵ It is interesting, I believe, that Woolf, writing her very last novel before suicide, should allude to Prospero’s last speech, often considered – be it right or wrong – as Shakespeare’s *adieu* to playwriting. I do not want to infer that Woolf was conscious of the fact that *Between the Acts* would be her last novel, nor I intend to suggest, consequently, that she wished to leave her readers in the same way that Shakespeare is imagined to have left his audiences. Yet, it is fascinating to see how Woolf’s last Shakespearean reference indeed echoes Shakespeare’s most hypothetical last work. It is as if Shakespeare plays, from the very first to the very last, have indeed accompanied Woolf’s novels, from her very first to her very last, symbolizing a tradition and a literary canon that Woolf strongly wanted to make her own and of which she wished to be part.

¹⁰⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, cit., p. 16.

¹⁰⁵ Prospero’s last speech is evoked through the following words: “Sitting in the shell of the room she watched the pageant fade”, in Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, cit., p. 128.

On 13th April 1930, Woolf wrote the following words in her diary:

I read Shakespeare *directly* I have finished writing. When my mind is agape and red-hot. Then is it astonishing. I never yet knew how amazing his stretch and speed and word coining power is, until I felt it utterly outpace and outrace my own, seeming to start equal and then I see him draw ahead and do things I could not in my wildest tumult and utmost press of mind imagine. Even the less known plays are written at a speed that is quicker than anybody else's quickest; and the words drop so fast one can't pick them up. [...] Evidently the pliancy of his mind was so complete that he could furbish out any train of thought; and, relaxing, let fall a shower of such unregarded flowers. Why, then, should anyone else attempt to write? This is not "writing" at all. Indeed, I could say that Shakespeare surpasses literature altogether, if I knew what I meant.¹⁰⁶

It almost seems as if Shakespeare is a too strong and oppressive presence for every writer to keep writing. Yet Virginia Woolf did write, getting over her anxiety of influence by incorporating Shakespeare in her very self. Through Shakespeare, Woolf the novelist and the non-fiction writer conducts a reflection on poetry and drama; through Woolf, Shakespeare is given a new life, a new identity and, most importantly, a new horizon of meaning: he becomes the androgynous artist *par excellence*, he is liberated from the heavy task of representing patriarchy and he is appropriated by women as a prompt and model for their writing.

1.4. Conclusion

For obvious reasons and as its title suggests the first chapter of my thesis cannot aspire to completeness. Rather, it has taken the form of an overview in order to offer, through a selection of a few significant authors, some nonetheless interesting insights in the relation between William Shakespeare and women's writing through the centuries. What I believe stands out is how all the women writers I have dealt with in the course of my excursus have, although in different ways and through different strategies, definitely endorsed Shakespeare, both as an historical figure and

¹⁰⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, London: The Hogarth Press, 1959, p. 148.

through his characters and plots. Indeed, the British playwright is not interpreted – or at least not only – as the representative of a male, patriarchal culture; his mythical status in the literary canon does not generate the strong “anxiety of influence” that Gilbert and Gubar describe in the following terms:

Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority, [...], they attempt to enclose her in definition of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. [...] Thus the “anxiety of influence” that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary “anxiety of influence” – a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.¹⁰⁷

Of the writers I have discussed, the only one who has explicitly expressed a similar point of view is Virginia Woolf. Yet, the very fact that she managed to write, what is more incorporating Shakespeare in her production, stands as a proof that this “anxiety of influence” – should it exist – is also successfully overcome. Thus Shakespeare, far from preventing women from writing, has actually provided them with a model to follow and has been regarded as an incentive to progress:

Shakespeare is not the exclusive possession of any one social group or cultural formation, but has provided an enabling and empowering resource which has allowed ‘other’ voices to make themselves heard, to stake a claim to cultural centrality, often in the face of those forces which would consign them to eternal exile.¹⁰⁸

Shakespeare has empowered women, somehow lending them his own sensibility and wit, his language and style, his characters and plots.

However, there is another interesting aspect that has come out from my overview: the way Shakespeare has cross-fertilized the works of women writers

¹⁰⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, cit., pp. 48-49.

¹⁰⁸ Kate Chedgzoy, *Shakespeare's Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 2.

changes not so much from writer to writer, rather according to the historical period in which the writers lived. Women writers were on the one hand stimulated by their own times' critical response to Shakespeare, on the other they reflected on their condition of women and often bent Shakespeare's figure or Shakespeare's works to their ideas. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the birth of the myth of Shakespeare; his ascendance in the literary canon was as a matter of fact much fostered by women, whose literary importance and dignity were, however, still scarcely recognized. Women writers like Margaret Cavendish, Elizabeth Montagu and Elizabeth Griffith thus appropriated Shakespeare as a way to legitimize their literary production and criticism; they explicitly compared themselves to Shakespeare, both by perceiving him as an outsider (exactly like them, Shakespeare did not possess a university education), and by stressing his very feminine personality (his sympathy and sensibility). Eighteenth-century women's struggles to have their voices heard were not fruitless: although sometimes remaining in the shadow of male intellectuals (the *Tales from Shakespeare* were still published for example under the name of Charles Lamb only) women writers started to be more and more appreciated, to the point that Jane Austen was herself considered as a "prose Shakespeare". All the same, the general condition of women in the nineteenth century was not much improved: women were often forced into marriages that were based more on economical interests than on love and were mostly considered as angels of the house, whose role was limited to taking care of their husbands and children. In a period which saw a huge critical interest in Shakespearean characters, women writers appropriated and rewrote precisely those characters: through this strategy they underlined the independence and intelligence of Shakespeare's heroines what is more stressing the difference existing between the romantic world of Shakespearean comedy and the real world. Through the works and characters of the British playwright *par excellence*, women truly developed a discourse on the condition of women. At the beginning of the twentieth century such a discourse grew stronger and stronger: the experience of the First World War gave new vigour to feminist movements which demanded equality between men and

women. Virginia Woolf still remains the most representative voice of this period and it is no surprise that her relation with Shakespeare should be based on doubts and contradictions: as a feminist she tended to perceive Shakespeare as the major representative of patriarchal culture, as a writer she admired his works, his language, his characters. She solved this contradiction by underlining, in her novels as well as in her essays, the androgynous nature of the playwright: Shakespeare, being neither man nor woman, was perceived as the very essence of the artist, as a model of style and a stimulus to creativity.

After the Second World War things changed once again and modernist literature slowly gave way to postmodernism. Antonia Byatt, Angela Carter, Marina Warner and Gloria Naylor, writing from the Sixties and Seventies onwards, are truly representatives of the ways twentieth-century women writers still reflect on Shakespeare, whose plays continue to feed women's painstaking search for new voices and new languages.

CHAPTER 2

Mapping Shakespeare's presence

2.1. Proper names, significant characters

In *Indigo*, *Wise Children*, *Mama Day* and *The Children's Book*, signs of Shakespeare's pervasive influence are variously disseminated and made tangible. Yet, the most visible mark of the playwright's presence is clearly to be found in proper names: in the four novels, as a matter of fact, a number of characters are named directly after some of the most significant Shakespearean characters, openly manifesting the writers' wish to draw on Shakespeare in order to appropriate, modify, or rewrite his plays. The patent importance of names makes it necessary to further investigate them, although it may not be indispensable, for the analysis I will conduct in this chapter, to enter the philosophical debate that has flourished around the issue of names; reasons of personal competence indeed prevent me from doing so, together with Michael Ragussis's belief that "philosophy seeks general names, for things and

ideas, while fiction seeks proper names, for individual people”¹. I will thus look into the many Shakespearean proper names scattered in the novels merely from a literary perspective, certain that “ce qui est «monstruosité» à éviter pour le savant peut être «merveille» à cultiver pour l’écrivain.”²

What is more, the authors themselves suggest a close reading of the proper names they have chosen for their characters, either explicitly, as Gloria Naylor did in an interview³, or implicitly, by hiding clues that may guide the readers’ – and thus the critics’ – interpretation in the novel itself. Olive Wellwood, one of the characters in Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* and herself a writer, says for example that names are “things over which writers sometimes have little control”⁴ and again that “names impose themselves on writers, and will not be changed, and come to be facts in nature, like stones, like plants, that are what they are.”⁵ Either attributed consciously or unconsciously, after a deep reflection or somehow at random, names are nonetheless conceived as fixed facts, whose presence enriches the novel, delineates both the characters’ identities and the course of their actions. Indeed, as Alistair Fowler writes,

¹ Michael Ragussis, *Acts of Naming. The Family Plot in Fiction*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 5.

² François Rigolot, *Poétique et Onomastique. L'exemple de la Renaissance*, Genève: Librairie Droz, 1977, p. 11: “[...]what the scientist considers as ‘monstrous’ can be instead perceived as ‘marvellous’ by the writer. (Translation is mine).

³ Gloria Naylor interviewed by Michelle C. Loris and Sharon Felton declared: “I would say [...] that I would like someday for someone to look at the importance of naming, the whole act of naming, names themselves within my work because that’s real conscious when I play certain games with that. [...] because I get names first and when you asked me about the creative process, the first thing I did were names. Named the book, named the characters, then the other stuff gets filled in later.” In “Interview: The Human Spirit is a Kick-Ass Thing”, in Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris (eds.), *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1997, p. 263.

⁴ A.S. Byatt, *The Children’s Book*, London: Vintage, 2010 p. 197.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 520.

[...] literary names have often strategic functions, organising themes and associations, and providing an interface between fictive and historical worlds. Naming is the mind of fiction, the directory of allusion, and the soul of association.⁶

Proper names are thus “emotionally charged words”⁷, something which is even truer when these same names echo significant characters: the Miranda of Naylor’s *Mama Day* or of Warner’s *Indigo*, for example, cannot but recall the Shakespearean Miranda, precisely as the name Ophelia remains inevitably and permanently associated to Shakespeare’s heroine and to her tragic destiny. Names are “a kind of condensed, covert version of the essence of [...] characters”⁸, yet, which characters? Is a name enough to transfer the whole essence of a Shakespearean hero or heroine into a character belonging to a contemporary novel? Are proper names truly predetermining the characters’ destiny? How are they appropriated by contemporary writers and what does this appropriation entail? To all these questions I will try to give an answer in the following pages, investigating Shakespearean names, Shakespearean characters, and their transformations in contemporary literature.

2.1.1. Miranda and Prospero

“Your eyes I have not forgotten, Miranda. What a beautiful name, and it suits you.”⁹ Interestingly, the compliment that the actor George Felix pays Miranda almost at the end of Marina Warner’s novel creates a strong connection between Miranda’s name and Miranda’s eyes, somehow concentrating the reader’s attention on the etymology of the proper name Miranda. Derived from the latin verb *mirari*, which means “to look at something in amazement”, the name Miranda literally means, in its gerund form, “to be admired”. The name is already significant in Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, where Miranda is on the one hand the beautiful young woman who

⁶ Alastair Fowler, “Proper Naming: Personal Names in Literature”, in *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 58, n. 2, April 2008, pp. 112-13.

⁷ Michel Grimaud, “Hermeneutics, Onomastics and Poetics in English and French Literature”, in *MLN*, vol. 92, n. 5, December 1977, p. 889.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 891.

⁹ Marina Warner, *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters*, London: Vintage, 1993, p. 394.

raises admiration and love, on the other the innocent girl that, thanks to the events following the shipwreck her father generated, finally opens her eyes on reality, discovering her past, finding out a world of which she was completely ignorant and becoming conscious, to her own astonishment, of the existence of a whole humanity. Her universally famous words “O wonder!/How many godly creatures are there here!/How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world/That hath such people in it”¹⁰ indeed summarize the sentiments of someone who is for the very first time truly seeing and admiring the world, being at the same time admired by it.

In her novel, Marina Warner definitely incorporates the meaning of the name Miranda, but, as a critic has written, she

actualizes what her name suggests etymologically: a renewed and self-reflexing gaze on the Other, admiringly, which explores and transforms the ways to perceive and to be perceived, and, therefore, generates new stories.¹¹

Warner’s Miranda indeed generates a new story, precisely as Marina Warner’s tale represents an alternative to the Shakespearean original one. As the author herself states, as a matter of fact,

With *Indigo* I chose to rework *The Tempest*, a *locus classicus* in current re-visionings of imperial encounters; I felt presumptuous in doing so, but my reason – my excuse – was that it seems to me that if people who are descended from the wrong side, as it were – the colonial side – don’t examine what that inheritance holds, that if speaking is left to those who are justified by oppression in the past and in memory, then in one sense one part of the story has been written out of it. It is as important to tell the ugly story as it is to tell the reparatory tale. To sit in judgement on oneself, perhaps, not only on others.¹²

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V, i, 185-87.

¹¹ María José Chivite de León, *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities. Rewriting Alterity in J.M. Coetzee’s Foe and Marina Warner’s Indigo*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 190.

¹² Marina Warner, “The Silence of Sycorax”, in Marina Warner, *Signs and Wonders. Essays on Literature and Culture*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2003, p. 264.

Marina Warner is a descendant from the colonial side and, with *Indigo*, she writes about her ancestor Thomas Warner, who arrived to the island of Liamuiga in 1623, changed its name into St. Kitt's, and there founded the Mother Colony. Feeling almost ridiculously guilty because of her past, Warner has the need to tell the "reparatory tale" and does so by inventing her own Miranda, whose ancestor, the fictional Kit Everard, had conquered Liamuiga and had made a British colony of it. Warner clearly and explicitly rewrites Shakespeare's *Tempest* from a postcolonial perspective, an interpretation which is rendered all the more evident by the novel's double temporal and spatial setting: if the events taking place on seventeenth-century Liamuiga narrate a story of conquest, slavery and exploitation, Miranda's plot unfolding in twentieth-century London tells a tale of guilt and shame:

[...] 'I feel uncomfortable, that's all.'

'About what exactly?'

The look on Xhante's face kept Miranda from replying. She would have said, The slaves, the slaves. The sugar, the Indians who were there, the Indians who were brought there afterwards. Feeny and Feeny's parents and grandparents and... her daughter, the one she had to leave behind. The plantations. The leg-irons and the floggings. Sugar. Sugar.¹³

The above quotation makes patent that Marina Warner's rewriting of Shakespeare's play passes mainly through the renewed character of Miranda: in *Indigo*, she ceases to be the Shakespearean young girl who needs to be guided and protected by her father, nor does she scorn Caliban as "a villain she does not love to look on"¹⁴. On the contrary, and in complete harmony with her name, her very identity is built on her curiosity to look at otherness and to learn from it, to perceive the world through her very eyes and according to her own sensibility, going beyond the culture, the opinions and the way of living of her family or, indeed, of the white Western society in which she has grown up. As a matter of fact, Miranda's whole

¹³ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 278.

¹⁴ See William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, ii, 312.

personality has been shaped by the encounters with otherness that she has experienced throughout her life: Kit, her father, is a Creole and was born in the Caribbean; Serafine, her nanny, was also born on *Enfant-Béate*; her husband George Felix, whom she significantly meets while he is rehearsing the role of Caliban, is a black actor. Their marriage, which takes place at the end of the novel, cannot but call to mind the happy ending of Shakespeare's *Tempest* and the nuptials of Ferdinand and Miranda. The difference between the two texts, however, is clearly and explicitly underlined by the narrator of *Indigo*:

She wasn't living inside one of Shakespeare's sweet-tempered comedies, nor in one of his late plays with their magical reconciliations, their truces appeasement and surcease of pain. [...] In her world, which was the real world of the end of the century, breakage and disconnection were the only possible outcome. [...] Though she had not exactly been joined or possessed, she had experienced severance again and again.¹⁵

If the life of the Shakespearean heroine has been an easy and protected one, the life of Warner's Miranda has instead been marked by a difficult childhood, by the early loss of a cousin that she had always considered a sister, by long periods of abandon and loneliness. By discovering love and by marrying Ferdinand, the Shakespearean Miranda seems to enter, even more, a fairy-tale world of romance; on the contrary Warner's Miranda, by marrying George and having a daughter with him, engages even more deeply with the real world of everyday life, a life of love and tenderness on the one hand, but also of worries, preoccupations, fears.

By greatly developing and transforming the character of Miranda, Marina Warner thus manages to rewrite *The Tempest* not only from a postcolonial perspective, but also as "the daughter's plot, to [...] show how the daughter extricates herself from the father's plot."¹⁶ Following this interpretation, Warner considers the Shakespearean Prospero, already a symbol of white colonialism, also

¹⁵ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 391.

¹⁶ Marina Warner interviewed by Chantal Zabus, "Spinning a Yarn with Marina Warner", cit., p. 524.

as the representative of a suffocating patriarchy: though a good father, who loves and protects her daughter and who 'does nothing but in care of her'¹⁷, he cannot help but plan her future, leaving her free to make her choices because they correspond to his own will. By contrast, *Indigo* describes Miranda's father as deprived of every possible kind of authority and strength; Kit Everard is a weak paternal figure, whose life is a total failure: his father thinks he is "a flop", his marriage is "a total disaster"¹⁸ and, what is more, he is not financially able to sustain his family as he would wish to. This explains why Warner's Miranda, contrarily to her Shakespearean counterpart, becomes the strongest character of the whole novel; loving her father, but also being conscious of his mistakes and his flaws, Miranda's path will in the end completely diverge from his.

Definitely disentangling herself from the father's plot and from an imposing patriarchy, finding a voice that grows stronger and self-assured as the book proceeds, the protagonist of *Indigo* shares with the Shakespearean heroine the name only. Marina Warner not only rewrites her as a completely different character, (she is central in the novel whereas the Shakespearean Miranda was marginal, she is independent while the heroine of Shakespeare's play was somehow submitted), but she also and most importantly dismisses the established convention of the name. If in our collective imagery the name Miranda is associated to a certain innocence and shyness, heritage of *The Tempest*, Marina Warner brings it back to its etymological origin, rediscovering and giving new poignancy to the sense of wonder it reflects.

If Marina Warner explodes the name – and thus the identity – of the Shakespearean Miranda, Gloria Naylor performs a similar operation in her novel, whose protagonist's name is also indebted to the heroine of *The Tempest*. However, differently from Marina Warner, Naylor not only makes her reference to the English playwright explicit, but she also, equally explicitly, distances herself and her novel from Shakespeare's plays. Interestingly, she manages to do so thanks to names and

¹⁷ See William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, ii, 16

¹⁸ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 66.

to a clever act of naming: in her book, as a matter of fact, the Shakespearean name Miranda is accompanied by the nickname Mama Day, a choice that, as Peter Erickson points out, underlines “the force of Naylor’s project” because

If the former [name] suggests the tie to Shakespeare, the latter breaks it by indicating the possibility of escape from Shakespearean entrapment in the subservient daughter role. Not only do the age and experience of Naylor’s Miranda contrast with the youth and innocence of Shakespeare’s Miranda, but also Mama Day’s scope encompasses and outdoes Prospero himself.¹⁹

The fact that a single character is given two different names expresses on the one hand the impossibility of the name itself – particularly when the name in question is a burdensome Shakespearean one – on the other suggests a totally split, ‘hyphenated’ identity. As Michael Ragussis writes

The special feature of fiction that [...] bestows several names on a single person [...] problematizes the idea that a single name fixes a character’s meaning, and begins to suggest how entire plots are organized around a series of renaming. [...] That a characters bear many names suggests that an individual’s history requires a set of names, or a series of renamings that signal the different stages of a life story or fictional plot.²⁰

Indeed, in Naylor’s novel, one name reminds the reader that Miranda is first and foremost a daughter (and Miranda is actually haunted by souvenirs of her father in the course of the novel) while the other transmits the image of a ‘mama’, a mother. What is more, if one name conveys the ideas of youth, innocence and carelessness, the other indicates maturity, experience and a sense of protection; again, if the Shakespearean name – and the Shakespearean Miranda – are connected to the white, Western society, the nickname Mama Day as well as the character of Naylor’s

¹⁹ Peter Erickson, *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 141-2.

²⁰ Michael Ragussis, *Acts of Naming. The Family Plot in Fiction*, cit., p. 10.

homonymous novel are on the contrary the representatives of an African-American civilization: so, somehow, a dominant culture, that strongly believes in progress and rationality as well as in its own superiority, is juxtaposed to the culture of a minority, a culture based on magic, faith and ancient rituals.

In her novel, Naylor develops a discourse on these two different cultures and on their strong opposition; interestingly, she does so by following the same strategy of adoption and rejection that she uses to name her characters and to which, consequently, she has somehow accustomed the reader. As a matter of fact, if she rejects the Shakespearean Prospero as a symbol of the dominant white culture, still she assimilates and transforms him. As Prospero considers himself the ruler of the island where he lives (and that indeed belonged to Sycorax), so Mama Day is recognized as the authority of Willow Spring. What is more, she possesses a kind of power – a “gift”²¹ – as it is defined in the novel, that, although not magical, all the same allows her to have strong premonitions about the future or to reach back with memory until a very distant past, in order to see and know things that had happened before she was even born; she also has healing powers, that permit her to give life and cure sickness. Thus Miranda incorporates and assimilates the powers of Prospero, which however are interestingly perceived in the novel as utterly feminine. Indeed, as Gary Storhoff points out²², if Prospero’s powers are connected to his books (which on the one hand indicate his social status, on the other may also represent the masculine authority derived precisely from education and literacy once denied to women) Miranda’s powers are instead associated with her chickens’ eggs, which are themselves symbols of fertility, renewal of life, and regeneration:

The right hand strokes, the left hand reaches out, the palm wet from the cradled egg, gray and warm. Confusion waits a bit too long. The shell dries and grows cold under the hidden moon. One pair of eyes unblinking, one pair frowns and smashes the egg into the porch steps. Silent, she pleads for another chance. But she must wait – and

²¹ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, London: Vintage, 1993, p. 88.

²² See Gary Storhoff, “‘The only voice is your own’: Gloria Naylor’s Revision of *The Tempest*” in Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris, *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, cit., p. 168.

listen. [...] The left hand reaches back out. Knowing takes the egg while the shell's still pulsing and wet, breaks it, and eats. [...] Pulsing and alive – wet, the egg moves from one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws it in and hold it tight.²³

This long description narrates the operation that Mama Day performs on Bernice so that she may become pregnant: it is an operation in which eggs appear indeed to possess the power to give life, conferring fertility to what seemed to be sterile. Although what she is doing is strange and mysterious, Miranda is not carrying out a magical ritual, nor is she bending nature to her own will, as Prospero managed instead to do. It is Miranda herself that tells the reader so, affirming that she doesn't "truck with that stuff"²⁴, meaning magic, and saying

The past was gone, just as gone as it could be. And only God could change the future. That leaves the rest of us with today, and we mess that up enough as it is. Leave thing be, let'em go their natural course. [...] Yes, spring was coming. And would God forgive her for Bernice? But she wasn't changing the natural course of nothing, she couldn't if she tried. Just using what's there. And couldn't be nothing wrong in helping Bernice to believe that there's something more than there is.²⁵

Miranda does not subdue nature, rather she tries to cooperate with it; like Prospero, she is, in Eleonora Rao's words, "una sorta di demiurgo, la cui parola diventa legge sull'isola"²⁶, yet, unlike him, she clearly recognizes her own limits: she understands that her 'gift' may not be enough, that sometimes progress is necessary while tradition must be abandoned.

Sharing the name with Prospero's daughter, Naylor's Miranda embodies and at the same time reshapes tradition. If she clearly reminds us of the Shakespearean Prospero, it is because she is, still, his daughter and she has acquired his powers,

²³ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., pp. 139-40.

²⁴ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 90.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 138-39.

²⁶ Eleonora Rao, "'This island is mine by Sycorax my mother': *The Tempest* in *Mama Day* di Gloria Naylor", in Grazia Calumi (ed.), *Shakespeare e la sua eredità. Atti del convegno dell'Associazione Italiana di Anglistica* (Parma, 22-24 ottobre 1992), Parma: Edizioni Zara, 1993, p. 275: "a sort of demiurge, whose words are law on the island." (Translation is mine).

although she is now liberated from his influence and she is definitely freed from his patriarchal power, as the nickname Mama Day suggests. "Tradition is fine, but you gotta know when to stop being a fool."²⁷ This sentence, pronounced by Miranda almost at the end of the novel, somehow summarizes her whole transformation and becomes extremely significant both in the context of Naylor's book and in an ampler literary perspective. The Shakespearean Miranda, who was afraid of Caliban and of otherness, has evaded tradition by being turned into Miranda-Mama Day, who is not only the very image of the other, but who is also a symbol of difference, conflict, and of a profoundly split identity. Equally, Gloria Naylor has freed her writing from the burden of Shakespearean tradition; even better, she has succeeded in appropriating this tradition and in transforming it into her own, the African-American one on the one hand and the female one on the other.

In Byatt's *The Children's Book* no character goes under the name of Miranda, but at the very beginning of the story the reader makes acquaintance with Major Prosper Cain, whose name, once again, remembers the paternal figure of *The Tempest*. The name is only the most evident mark of a resemblance which is indeed astonishing: not only Prosper, as Prospero, is a widow, but his personality, too, may be compared to the one of the Shakespearean character (when considered under his most positive light). As a matter of fact the following description of Prospero made by Susan Hamilton in her book entitled *Shakespeare's Daughters* could as well be used to describe Prosper's feelings toward his daughter Florence:

Prospero [...] protects Miranda, both from knowledge that would make her unhappy and from physical and emotional danger. He lavishes affection on her, never hesitating to say how and why he prizes her. At the same time, he respect her individuality. He has acted as Mirada's "schoolmaster", setting high standards and training her mind. Like a good teacher, he encourages her to express herself and to make her own

²⁷ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 307.

choices, even to the extent of countermanding his orders about how she should behave.²⁸

As Prospero, Prosper loves his daughter, who reminds him so much of his lost wife Giulia. Wishing for her a future of happiness, he seems to act precisely as the Shakespearean character, who appears to direct his daughter's life, but who in fact acts for her best. Thus, what Prosper desires for his daughter corresponds, although in a quite unconscious way, to what Florence herself wishes for her own life. When, at the beginning of the novel, adults and children gather together on the lawn, with "the elders asking the young what they meant to do with their lives"²⁹, the following dialogue ensues between father and daughter:

'Well', he said, 'Florence. What will you do?'

'I shall keep house for you,' said Florence, who thought this was understood.

'I hope you won't. I hope you'll have a home of your own, and before that, an education. I hope Julian will go to Cambridge, and I hope you will too. Newnham College offers a great deal. I hope you will want to go there.'

Florence was confused. They had never discussed this, and now firm statements were being made, in the middle of a large party. She did not know anything about Newnham College. It was just a name.

'She doesn't want to be a maiden lady,' said Julian, 'a bluestocking.'

This annoyed Florence, who said she didn't see why she shouldn't learn something. Julian was going to. She would do so.³⁰

Thus Florence follows her father's advice and goes to Cambridge to get an education, although an unexpected pregnancy will somehow oblige her to leave Newnham earlier than she had expected. Even in this case, however, Prosper demonstrates his magnanimity: he is evidently shocked by the status of his daughter, yet he looks for solutions to help her; even when she expresses the wish to marry

²⁸ Sharon Hamilton, *Shakespeare's Daughters*, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, 2003, p. 24.

²⁹ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 52.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 53-4.

Gabriel Goldwasser, whom she has only just met, he understands her choice and approves of it. Prosper seems to embody the stereotype of the good father, the single father who has to raise his children all alone and who does everything in his power to give them the best opportunities, to guarantee them a satisfactory and happy life.

Yet, there is more than meets the eye in A.S. Byatt's clever construction of Prosper. Ann Thompson in her essay "Miranda, Where's Your Sister?"³¹ distinguishes two phases in Shakespearean criticism of Prospero: if before the twentieth century he was seen as an entirely benign character, Freudian and post-Freudian criticism started to analyze darker aspects of his personality and, consequently, of his relationship with his daughter; theories about Prospero's incestuous desire about Miranda, who was now seen both as daughter and mother, indeed began to circulate. I do not wish to suggest that A.S. Byatt intends to endorse such psychoanalytical theories; what I believe, instead, is that in her very personal rewriting of Prospero she mingles the old theory of the good father with the more recent, sometimes too extreme, Freudian criticism: in this way she confers to her character – but indeed to her whole novel – an uncanny, obscure, rather disturbing aspect. The key through which she manages to accomplish this operation is Imogen: the daughter of the potter Benedict Fludd, whose genius is contaminated by madness and perversion, Imogen leaves her house and goes to live in Prosper's household, where she learns the goldsmith's art and where she is treated exactly as Florence:

Afterwards, as the evening drew to a close, fathers danced with daughters. [...] Prosper danced with Florence, lightly, and said he hoped she had enjoyed her ball. She said she loved dancing and had danced every dance, and the museum had been transfigured. Then he danced with Imogen, whose father was absent. She gave a little sigh, and settled into his arms as though she was comfortable there. She said he was a

³¹ Ann Thompson, "Miranda, Where's Your Sister? Reading Shakespeare's *The Tempest*", in Susan Sellers(ed.), *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, pp. 45-55.

magician, who had conjured up a palace, which was, for her, an unexpected flight of fancy. She reported to him, as a daughter might, that Henry Wilson, from Jewellery, had danced with her twice, and had complimented her on her silver-work.³²

Imogen is like another daughter to Prosper Cain. He is the substitute of her absent father, and she repays his generosity with diligence in her study and devotion to his person (indeed, in Imogen's metaphor, Prosper is directly compared to Prospero, the father-magician of Shakespeare's play). However, their relationship comes to a sudden evolution when the daughter, Imogen, changes her role and becomes the wife, the mother. Since the narrator had previously insisted on describing Imogen as a second daughter to Prosper, the sexualization of the relationship between the two characters sounds even more shocking and repellent, disquietingly calling to mind some lines from *Pericles*, one of Shakespeare's plays in which the theme of incest is directly discussed through the relationship between Antiochus and his daughter:

I am no viper, yet I feed
On mother's flesh which did me breed.
I sought a husband, in which labour
I found that kindness in a father.
He's father, son, and husband mild;
I mother, wife, and yet his child:
How they may be, and yet in two,
As you will live, resolve it you.³³

Prosper, the good father, has transformed into the incestuous genitor, making a reality of the otherwise too far-fetched psychoanalytical theories about Prospero and Miranda. What is more, if the reader has all throughout the novel been shocked by Benedict Fludd's morbid attachment to his daughters and by his abnormal incestuous sexual desire, all this shock is now transferred on the character of Prosper who has in fact taken Imogen away from her father making of her his

³² A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., pp. 341-42.

³³ William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, I, i, 65-72.

extremely young, daughter-like wife. The reader's disconcertment finds a voice in Florence's reaction to Prosper and Imogen's engagement:

'As it happens, we have not had time to ask my father, but I also should like to tell you all that I am engaged to be married. I have agreed to marry Geraint. I am telling you myself because I asked him to say nothing. But now, you all need to know, I think. The relationships of the people round this table have suddenly become very confused.'

She gave a sharp little laugh. She went on, staring darkly at her father across the silver and white.

'So Imogen is to become at once my sister and my mother. It is like a Greek myth. Or those things in the Prayer Book you aren't supposed to do.'³⁴

For Florence, his father is doing something prohibited, he is going beyond limits of decency and performing a morally forbidden action. Her explicit reference to Greek myths – and thus, implicitly, to the Oedipal one, directly suggests a Freudian reading of her father's behaviour, and, consequently, prompts to a similar interpretation of the Shakespearean Prospero.

In *The Children's Book*, either the benevolent father is haunted by the monster of incest or on the contrary the perverse middle-aged man is hidden behind the mask of paternal affection. Byatt's Prosper, although constructed more on the basis of scholarly criticism than on the real text of the play, still winks at his Shakespearean progenitor and allows him to live again at his most complete, at his very best as well as in his darkest thoughts, desires, and actions.

³⁴ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 454.

2.1.2. Sycorax, Ariel, Caliban

Miranda is not the only Shakespearean name of Marina Warner's novel. As a matter of fact *Indigo*, that the author herself considers an explicit rewriting of *The Tempest*, also presents the characters of Sycorax, Ariel (who is in this case a woman) and, although disguised under the name of Dulé, of Caliban. Warner aims at revisiting *The Tempest* "from the point of view of these hidden and silenced characters" in order "to reverse the drift of the values"³⁵: this is the reason why her novel manages to give a voice, and a strong one, to characters that in the Shakespearean play were only marginal, indeed re-mapping them and repositioning them not only at the very centre of her story but also of an ampler history of conquest and colonialism. Warner manages to do so by inventing a prologue to the Shakespearean tale of exploitation, showing how the British conquest of Liamuiga has slowly reduced Ariel and Sycorax to silence; she also fills the gaps left by Shakespeare in his play, providing an explanation on the one hand to Sycorax and Ariel's marginal position in *The Tempest*, on the other to Caliban's ill-treatment. From the Shakespearean Prospero we learn that Sycorax had been banished from Algier, that she fornicated with the devil, had a son from him and enslaved Ariel; we know that she died, although the circumstances of her death are not narrated, and that she thus left Ariel and Caliban behind³⁶. From Marina Warner's novel we discover instead that, when there was no English colony on Liamuiga, Sycorax was one of the most important and respected women: she was blessed with *sangai* (preternatural insight and power) and "her magical powers marked her out as an official wisewoman."³⁷ Far from being described as a malignant witch, Sycorax is presented in *Indigo* as a life-giving character: not only she saves Dulé by extracting him from the womb of his dead mother, but she also welcomes a young African girl, Ariel, as a daughter of her own; she is a healer, and her traditional medicine enables her to help all the people of the island who come to her in search of advice and assistance.

³⁵ Marina Warner, "The Silence of Sycorax", cit., p. 268.

³⁶ See William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, ii, 258-94.

³⁷ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 86.

Interestingly, many of the characteristics that Warner attributes to her own Sycorax owe much not to the character of Shakespeare's play but, rather, to the very name of the character itself. If many are the hypothesis concerning the origin and the etymology of the name Sycorax³⁸, the majority of them connects the name – and consequently the Shakespearean witch herself – to two other important witches: Medea and Circe. Marina Warner herself endorses these theories and recognizes the Shakespearean debt to two of the most potent women of classical literature, writing that

As is well known, Prospero's grandiloquent abjuration borrows heavily from the dramatic incantation of the sorceress Medea in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, so Shakespeare put words from one of the most famous witches of antiquity on to the lips of his island magus. In classical myth, Medea is Circe's niece, and the Homeric enchantress also haunts the 'foul witch Sycorax'. The name Sycorax echoes phonetically the English pronunciation of Circe: mistress of transformation, she changes Odysseus' companions into swine and alter men's names so that they forget their duties, their homes, their own nature. Circe and Medea, these two malignant but alluring witches, seem to be standing in the wings of the play and the lights behind them cast their interlaced shadows across the stage, forming the phantom, Sycorax, whispering to Prospero how to command the insubstantial pageant of the action.³⁹

If Marina Warner identifies the presence of Medea and Circe behind the Shakespearean witch, all the more she appropriates the two sorceresses for her novel and for her own character of Sycorax. What is more, she takes of them the most positive aspects – their magic, their potency – and their most benevolent actions, in order to erase the negative image of the evil Sycorax created by Shakespeare. So her own Sycorax, who brews indigo and whose physical appearance continuously changes in the course of the novel, becomes, as Circe before her, the

³⁸ For a detailed account of the possible origins of Sycorax's name see Carla Pomarè, "Some authentic memoir of the witch? Viaggio attorno al personaggio shakespeariano di Sycorax", in Franco Marengo (ed.), *Il personaggio nelle arti della narrazione*, Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007, pp. 57-87.

³⁹ Marina Warner, "Rough Magic and Sweet Lullaby", in *Signs and Wonders*, cit., p. 242.

symbol of metamorphosis and transformation; her tie to Homer's enchantress is twice emphasised in the novel: as animals live around Circe's mansions, so Sycorax is always accompanied by a covey, a guinea pig; as Circe transforms men into swine, so Sycorax says:

"I used to change men into beasts", she'd chuckle to herself, as she walked two rows of indigo seedlings and hoed the weeds that would choke their delicate low branches. "Now I can only turn them blue."⁴⁰

Similarly, as the magic of Medea enables her to rejuvenate Aeson, Jason's father, Sycorax restores Dulé to a life that he would never have had otherwise⁴¹. The operation that Marina Warner conducts on the character of Sycorax is thus extremely fascinating: the author of *Indigo*, as a matter of fact, does not look directly back to the Shakespearean character but, by going at the very origin of her name, retrieves classical myths and gives life to yet another character; the Sycorax that the reader encounters in *Indigo* is, first of all, a powerful woman who wants her story to be told, narrated and remembered, rather than silenced and forgotten:

When Shakespeare took Medea's speech from Ovid and gave it to Prospero, he was silencing the enchantress, swallowing words celebrated in the chronicles of female magic. I took them back, and rewrote them for Sycorax.⁴²

What is more, the character of Warner's novel is not the malignant Shakespearean witch, but a skilled woman who uses her knowledge of herbs and plants to save lives

⁴⁰ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 110.

⁴¹ See Carla Pomarè, "Some authentic memoir of the witch? Viaggio attorno al personaggio shakespeariano di Sycorax", cit., p. 83.

⁴² Marina Warner, "The Silence of Sycorax", cit., p. 268. Warner is here referring to Prospero's abjuration speech in William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V, i, 41-50: "I have bedimm'd/The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,/And twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault/Set roaring war to the dread rattling thunder/Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak/With his own bolt, the strong-bas'd promontory/Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck'd up/The pine and cedar. Graves at my command/Have wak'd their sleepers op'd and let them forth/By my so potent art."

and heal sicknesses. It is only after the British conquest of her island that she will slowly transform, physically and psychologically, into the character of *The Tempest*:

Sycorax's fate at the hand of the British settlers is particularly violent as her body is burnt, broken, and physically contorted into a new shape. The injuries she sustains when she falls from her burning tree house gradually transform her into the shape of Shakespeare's witch.⁴³

Similarly, it is only after the British arrival on the island and the consequent love affair of Ariel with an Englishman, that the relationship between the two women drastically changes, recalling, once again, the situation described in Shakespeare's play: Ariel becomes somehow enslaved to Sycorax, who had always treated her as a daughter and who, now, instead, talks to her only to command or scold her.

The character of Ariel, an androgynous spirit in Shakespeare, is instead given in Marina Warner's novel a fixed gender. Set in femininity, Ariel is thus also deprived of supernatural powers: no more "a master of metamorphosis"⁴⁴, the spirit becomes a woman, whose gender is all the more significant if we take into consideration Marina Warner's intent of giving voice to the voiceless. It is however the author herself who, in an essay following the publication of *Indigo*, seems to provide the explanation of her choice:

But Ariel does not change into a sea-nymph or a harpy simply for the purposes of entertainment; the island domain of Sycorax is also a feminine space, and its aberrations – its rough magic – are implicitly effected by the suppressed witchcraft that is Caliban's inheritance.⁴⁵

⁴³ Caroline Cakebread, "Sycorax Speaks: Marina Warner's *Indigo* and *The Tempest*", in Marianne Novy, *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 227.

⁴⁴ Marina Warner, "Rough Magic and Sweet Lullaby", cit., p. 237.

⁴⁵ Marina Warner, "Circean Mutation in the New World", in Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman (eds.), *The Tempest and its Travels*, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, p. 112.

Sycorax's domain is a feminine, a maternal one as I shall better discuss in the following chapter, but it has been usurped by Prospero's imposed patriarchy. By attributing a gender to Ariel, Warner intends to re-establish the femininity of the island, a femininity that in her novel struggles to remain intact notwithstanding the harm brought about by the British colonization.

Ariel and Sycorax, although both rewritten in order to fit Warner's revision of *The Tempest*, still maintain their Shakespearean original name. Interestingly, the same does not happen with Dulé, a character who corresponds, in *Indigo*, to Shakespeare's Caliban:

Their captain [...] a certain youth who is called Dulay to his people [...] has a mordant wit, 'tis plain, and it diverts me to teach him our language as he serves me. He has already learned how to curse. Some of our men call him 'cannibal', seeking to undo the power of his monstrosity by naming it, like to conjuring. 'Tis to my mind is a false notion, and I prefer the lisping usage of the children, Caliban.⁴⁶

In the novel, the name Caliban comes to be only a Western construction, a name made up by the British settlers and attributed to a character whose real name is instead Dulé. If the name is the most explicit and the most evident aspect of a character's personality, then what the British settlers did by re-naming him was in fact also to give him another identity: their way of looking at him and of perceiving him through their foreign and estranged gaze completely changes him and transforms him from a simple African youth into a savage cannibal. The fact that Marina Warner explicitly evokes the word 'cannibal' as one of the nicknames found by the British settlers for Dulé, underlines, once more, her desire to go beyond Shakespeare in order to openly denounce the crimes of colonialism. As she herself writes

⁴⁶ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., pp. 200-1.

Despite the associations of Caliban's name, Shakespeare seems to have been influenced more by Montaigne's defence of the Indians than by conquistador or planter attitudes. He doesn't represent his 'monster' as a consumer of human flesh at all, but rather of 'pig-nuts' and 'filberts' on an island which, like Montaigne's Mexico and Peru, was 'all naked, simply-pure, in Natures lappe'. [...] *The Tempest* explores the possibilities of just such 'education', and part of its contemporary fascination springs from its open-eyed understanding of the approach's limit.⁴⁷

Shakespeare's Caliban as Warner's Dulé are not cannibals, yet the fear of otherness and the incapacity to accept difference may generate a falsified, misconstrued image of reality. Prospero, as well as the British conquerors of Liamuiga, look at Caliban-Dulé from a white, Western point of view, thus failing to recognize him as a man, vilifying him and taking his dignity away. However, if in Shakespeare's play this process of offense culminates in Caliban's failed attempt of rebellion, which is trivial and undignified, indeed reduced to a mere drunkard dream, in Warner the plot that Dulé organizes to retake control of Liamuiga and fight-off the British settlers is presented as a battle accompanied by strong ideological reasons, a battle that becomes all the more meaningful because explicitly collocated in the historical context of colonialism. Thus, although Caliban's famous words, "the island's mine by Sycorax my mother"⁴⁸, are never spoken in *Indigo*, still they seem to linger on the whole novel, conferring a sense of injustice and guilt to the adventure of colonialism and definitely reminding the reader that Prospero's narrative is only one version, one side of an altogether more complex, and indeed more painful, story. A pain which is moreover, accorded to the critic Chivite de Léon, evoked precisely in Dulé's name, interpreted as a hidden transliteration of the French word 'douleur'⁴⁹.

In Marina Warner's *Indigo* Sycorax is presented as a positive character. In *Mama Day*, instead, Gloria Naylor seems to be going back to the original, evil

⁴⁷ Marina Warner, "Shakespeare's Caliban", in *Signs and Wonders*, cit., p. 260.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, ii, 334

⁴⁹ See María José Chivite de Léon, *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities. Rewriting Alterity in J.M. Coetzee's Foe and Marina Warner's Indigo*, cit., pp. 126-27.

Shakespearean witch when creating one of the characters of her novel, whose name is, significantly, not the Shakespearean one. As in *The Tempest* Sycorax's magic contrasts with Prospero's, so in *Mama Day* Ruby's magic constitutes the malign counterpart to Miranda's benevolent gift. Such a difference can be however traced back to Shakespeare's times and to the debate that aimed – and I am here oversimplifying since I am not an expert of Renaissance occult philosophy – at juxtaposing two different kinds of magic: black magic on the one hand and white magic on the other. In the Shakespearean text, Sycorax is definitely interpreted as a black magician, whose son Caliban was born as a matter of fact from her fornication with the devil and who is described as a “foul witch”⁵⁰. Similarly, the magic practiced by Ruby is manufactured out of hate and enmity and may thus have fatal, indeed lethal effects:

The flannel bag was holding about a tablespoon of dirt mixed up with a few white specks of something , little purplish flowers and a dried sprig. [...] Getting up off her knees, she examines the stuff in her hand a little closer. She spits on some of the white grains. They dissolve between her fingers and she licks them real quick – salt. It don't take but a minute to see that the dried sprig is a piece of dill and the purplish flowers is from verbena. And she'd lays her life that the rest is graveyard dust [...]. Miranda's about to throw it on the ground so she can rake it up with the rest of her litter when she remember what verbena's called by some folks: herb of grace. She stands there so quiet at first it would be hard to tell she was breathing. And what better concoction to use if you've singled out the child of Grace?⁵¹

The witch Sycorax has passed her powers to the witch-like character of Ruby, yet their different names point at the distance existing between the one and the other. If it is true that Ruby's spells look back at Sycorax's black magic, it is even truer that they have the characteristics of some specific voodoo rites: indeed, the flannel bag Miranda finds in her garden and that is as a matter of fact destined to Cocoa

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, ii, 392.

⁵¹ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., pp. 171-72.

disquietingly recalls the voodoo dolls used to perform either hatred or love rituals.⁵² By giving her character another name and not the Shakespearean one, Gloria Naylor appropriates the Shakespearean tradition, transforming it into her own, the African-American one.

2.1.3. Ophelia

“That’s just it, Abigail – she ain’t a baby. She’s a grown woman and her *real* name is Ophelia. We don’t like to think on it, but that’s her name. Not Baby Girl, not Cocoa – Ophelia.”

“I regret the day she got it.”

“No, Sister, please. Don’t ever say that. She fought to stay here – remember, Abigail?”⁵³

In Gloria Naylor’s novel, precisely as Miranda has got the nickname Mama Day, so her niece Ophelia is best known as Cocoa, even if Abigail, her grandmother, and Miranda herself prefer to call her Baby Girl. Thus, as it was for Miranda, if the character’s real name suggests a link to tradition, her two nicknames seem to defy and mark the distance from it. Indeed, the shy obedience and submissiveness of the Shakespearean character are juxtaposed to the strong will and the independent personality of Naylor’s Ophelia; similarly, the personality of the play’s heroine – apparently reserved in front of Hamlet – clashes with Baby Girl’s sensuality, a characteristic emphasized and underlined by her other nickname, Cocoa, which refers to the particular, seducing colour of her skin. As the nickname Mama Day is particularly appropriate for a character such as Miranda, so the two nicknames that Gloria Naylor attributes to her own Ophelia seem to defy the heavy burden of Shakespearean tradition and to annihilate all the clichés, the received ideas, the stereotyped images that have been too long connected to the name of Shakespeare’s

⁵² On voodoo rites see Roberts, John W., “Folklore”, in Jack Salzman, David Lionel Smith, Cornel West (eds.), *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, in 5 volumes, New York: Simon & Shuster MacMillan, 1996, vol. 2, pp. 994-1002.

⁵³ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 116.

heroine. The author, precisely through an act of naming, or, I should say, of re-naming, manages to dismantle the name itself, bringing it back to its very essence and freeing it from its unfortunate and onerous inheritance.

It is all the same an inheritance on which Naylor heavily draws: in her novel as in Shakespeare, as a matter of fact, the name Ophelia is associated to death by water. Cocoa bears the name of her great grandmother (Miranda and Abigail's mother), who broke her husband's heart by going mad after the death of one of her daughters and by drowning herself in The Sound, a deep water channel dividing Willow Spring from the coasts of the United States. Grace, Abigail's daughter and Cocoa's mother, chose for her own child the name Ophelia for a specific reason:

Grace Samantha Day: I gave the first and only baby my grandmother's name: Ophelia. I did it out of vengeance. Let this be another one, I told God, who could break a man's heart. Didn't women suffer enough? Eight months heavy with his child and he went off to chase horizons.⁵⁴

If Cocoa, as well as her grandmother and her aunt, prefers her nicknames to her name, it is because her real name, Ophelia, keeps echoing destroyed familial bonds, evokes long periods of suffering and grieving, joins madness and revenge. Through something as simple as a name, Gloria Naylor manages to mingle and fuse the Days' family roots and their familial history with Shakespearean tradition, thus adding, as James R. Saunders writes, "a certain power to the message of repeated loss"⁵⁵. However, if the past cannot be undone, traditions can be changed; forgetting the history of one's family would be as wrong as remaining too attached to it, or as living in the past without trying to modify the future. The symbol of such a way of thinking is the quilt that Miranda and Abigail are preparing as a gift for Ophelia's wedding: precisely as a family is constituted of different persons, and as all the

⁵⁴ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 151.

⁵⁵ James Robert Saunders, "The Ornamentation of Old Ideas: Naylor's First Three Novels", in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah (eds.), *Gloria Naylor. Critical Perspective Past and Present*, New York: Amistad, 1993, p. 261.

people that are part of one's family tree have somehow contributed to create and shape the present of a single individual, so the bits of cloth from old clothes become, once they have been stitched together, something different, with a meaning and a utility on its own and with a new, different pattern:

A bit of her daddy's Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail's lace slip, the collar from Hope graduation dress, the palm of Grace baptismal gloves. Trunks and boxes from the other place gave up enough for twenty quilts: corduroy from her uncles, broadcloth from her great-uncles. Her needle fastens the satin trim of Peace's receiving blanket to Cocoa's baby jumper to a pocket from her own gardening apron. Gold into oranges into reds into blues... She concentrates on the tiny stitches as the clock ticks away. The front of Mother's gingham shirtwaist – it would go right nice into the curve between these two little patches of apricot towelling, but Abigail would have a fit. Maybe she won't remember. And maybe the sun won't come up tomorrow, either. I'll just use a sliver, no longer than the joint of my thumb. Put a little piece of her in here somewhere. [...] But the last boy to show up in their family would be no mystery; he had cherished another woman who could not find peace: Ophelia. It was too late to take it out of the quilt, and it didn't matter no way. Could she take herself out? Could she take out Abigail? Could she take 'em all out and start again? With what?⁵⁶

Leaving out of the quilt the piece of cloth belonging to Ophelia's grandmother would be meaningless. Cocoa has to learn to accept her real name and, more importantly still, she needs to make peace with the history of her family, with her very own past. History, precisely as literary tradition, cannot be changed, but can be reshaped in the present; the past, either personal or literary, must be known and appropriated, because only in this way it can be rewritten as a first person narration. This is why, when George dies of a heart attack, Cocoa leaves on:

I thought my world had come to an end. And I wasn't really wrong – one of my worlds had. But being so young, I didn't understand that every hour we keep living is

⁵⁶ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., pp. 137-38.

building material for a new world, of some sort. [...] Yes, I thought often about suicide and once made the mistake of voicing it. I had never seen Mama Day so furious – never. George, there was actually hatred in her eyes. There ain't no pain – no pain – that you could be having worse than what that boy went through for your life. And you wold throw it back in his face, heifer?⁵⁷

The choice of suicide, which is the one of Shakespeare's Ophelia and of Miranda's mother, is not also the choice Cocoa makes. Her real name, although significant and so rich of painful remembrances, has not predetermined her destiny. On the contrary, it has finally abandoned its disturbing, intrusive and somehow frozen inheritance, the one evoked by the painful identity of the Shakespearean Ophelia.

Indeed, by making the name Ophelia burst ad collapse, Gloria Naylor has also managed to defy, in some ways, the Shakespearean tradition, to which she has given, thanks to her appropriating and rewriting, a new identity. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes,

When we insist on telling over and over again, we insist on repetition in re-creation (and vice versa). [...] Each story is at once a fragment and a whole; a whole within a whole. And the same story has always been changing, for things which do not shift and grow cannot continue to circulate.⁵⁸

By giving her character the name of one of Shakespeare's tragic heroines but by shaping for her a new, different destiny the author at the same time embraces and rejects the drama of the English playwright, changing it and thus, evidently, letting it circulate under a new shape. Shakespeare, as one of the most important fathers of Western tradition, cannot be repudiated nor forgotten; his influence has been so significant and so strong in the course of the past centuries and for contemporary writers as well, that it would be foolish to deny it. All the same, it is necessary to go beyond Shakespeare, to tell other tales and to narrate other lives that, as Naylor's

⁵⁷ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 302.

⁵⁸ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other. Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 123.

work seems to affirm, do not necessarily belong to Western culture. In Peter Erickson's words:

[...] Naylor demonstrates the degree to which Shakespeare does not author us, the extent to which that role has irreversibly passed to others. New problems indeed arise, but they are not Shakespeare's problems nor does his work contain the materials needed for exploring all the possible options.⁵⁹

As the world changes, stories need to change as well, epilogues need to be rewritten and characters who were once voiceless need to find a voice and a place of their own.

Thus, if Gloria Naylor recognizes her debt to Shakespeare and emphasizes it through the names she gives to some of her characters, at the same time she stresses her desire to completely rewrite and renovate his plays by creating new, original nicknames. Angela Carter's operation with names is instead of a different kind yet. Indeed, in her *Wise Children*, Shakespeare is so omnipresent that it would be impossible to deny the author's fascination with his plays. However, when it comes to names, only one – Imogen – is directly Shakespearean, while many others are taken from various authors and works of the Western literary canon as if Carter, in her last novel, wanted to pay a homage to a literary world she esteemed and to which she belonged herself. So, for example, the name Saskia reminds Sasha, the Russian princess of Woolf's *Orlando*, Estella cannot but recall Dickens and his *Great Expectations*, while Tristram inevitably brings the reader back to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*; what is more, in the novel there is even a children photographer whose name is, obviously enough, Lewis Carroll and finally, as Ali Smith writes,

⁵⁹ Peter Erickson, *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves*, cit., p. 144.

'The unofficial chronicler' [Dora] is the more literary sister in a duo whose names summon connections with twentieth-century male giants of thoughts and literature, Freud and Joyce, and whose characters escape the fates of their inferred namesakes.⁶⁰

Interestingly, however, the one character whose plot is marked by a series of strong Shakespearean allusions does not carry a literary name and definitely not a Shakespearean one. Tiffany – this is the name of the character I am talking about – indeed bears a strong resemblance to Shakespeare's Ophelia: as it was in *Hamlet*, even in *Wise Children* the reader does not directly witness the character's disappearance (certain death in Ophelia's case, doubts concerning suicide in Tiffany's one); if in the Shakespearean play it was Queen Gertrude who reported the news of Ophelia's death, in *Wise Children* the already nebulous events are related by a plurality of confused and puzzled voices: since it is only Tristram who knows the whole story but his state of shock prevents him from depicting it, Carter chooses to leave the role of "messenger" to a television recording that Nora, Dora and Wheelchair will slowly decipher, making a sense of it and thus finally explaining the whole situation to the reader. Carter's choice is indeed structurally significant: as there is no truth about Tiffany, so there is not a single, reliable narration; rather, there is a number of unreliable narrators, each of them speaking their own truth without really knowing it. Even the tape-recording, with its high degree of objectivity, fails to reveal the one detail that would clarify everything: as a matter of fact, it does not show that Tiffany is pregnant and that Tristram, the father of the future child, has refused to take any responsibility. On the contrary, what the recording perfectly manages to do, is to transform Tiffany into a contemporary version of the Shakespearean Ophelia:

There was a bit of wallflower stuck in her hair, over her ear, and her hands were full of flowers, daffs, bluebells, narcissi, she must have picked them out of the front gardens and the window boxes and the public parks that she'd passed by on her way

⁶⁰ Ali Smith, "Introduction" to Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, London: Vintage, 2006, p. xxv.

to the studio during the long walk from Bermondsey. [...] But she just went on singing.
La, la, la.⁶¹

Although no explicit comparison is made by the narrator and although the name Ophelia is never uttered, still Tiffany, out of her wits, with flowers in her hair and in her hands, singing all along, resembles the mad Shakespearean heroine, a comparison that becomes all the more patent when the body of a young girl is found in the river.

However, names do not lie: Tiffany is not Ophelia and Carter invents for her a future which has nothing to do with death, madness and oblivion. Believed to be dead for the whole 23rd April (the day in which, notwithstanding the many flashbacks, the novel takes place), Tiffany reappears again, with a grand *coup de théâtre*, at Melchior's 100 birthday party:

Tristram was stunned. He sat back on his heels.

'But, Tiffany, I'll marry you!'

'Not on your life, you bastard,' she said, right out in front of all those people. God, I was proud of her at that moment! 'Not after what you did to me in public. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in the world.' [...]

'My baby! Think of my baby!' He tore his hair, he gnashed his teeth.

'Pull yourself together and be a man, or try to,' said Tiffany sharply. 'You've not got what it takes to be a father. There's more to fathering than fucking, you know.'⁶²

The scene of Tiffany's reappearance is interesting in its relationship to the Shakespearean corpus, both evoked and discarded. On the one hand, Tiffany's unexpected "return to life" and her consequent reunion with family and friends breaks away from the tragic denouement of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, recalling, instead, the conclusion of Shakespearean comedies or romances, when disguises fall, doubts are clarified and tricks explained; on the other hand, Carter's solution to Tiffany's

⁶¹ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 43.

⁶² Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 211.

plot lacks an important detail that prevents it from being completely Shakespearean: marriage. Indeed, in line with Carter's personal feminist engagement, Tiffany reappears not as a shy girl scared by an unexpected pregnancy, but as a strong woman, determined to be a single mother and consequently scorning Tristram's sudden repentance.

Choosing to write such an ending to Tiffany's plot, Carter implicitly states the impossibility of the name Ophelia. If the name Tiffany, literally meaning 'apparition', underlines the strong will of such a character, her desire not to disappear but to face life with the strength of independence, the name Ophelia is instead still associated to death, negation, resignation. Although recognizing, through her whole novel, her immense debt to Shakespeare, still Angela Carter rewrites his plays in her own chords, changing what she believes has now become stiff and somehow updating some old received ideas which cannot function in the contemporary world. Re-naming a character, re-baptizing it, is indeed her most extreme gesture, the most evident sign of her personal reading of Shakespeare: a new name implies a totally new identity, and thus a completely different way, for the events, to unfold.

2.1.4. Imogen

A name definitely less exploited by literature and attached to a character with which criticism has dealt less than with others, still the name Imogen is present in two of the novels I am investigating, *Wise Children* and *The Children's Book*. It is indeed the only Shakespearean name in Angela Carter's text: here Imogen is the daughter of the great Shakespearean actor Melchior Hazard and, with her twin sister Saskia, she constitutes a duo that journalists love to call – with evident allusion to Sonnet 18 – 'the darling buds of May'⁶³. Loving to play with stereotypes and conventions, turning them upside down and finally destroying them, Angela Carter transforms Shakespeare's tragic heroine into a comic figure, what is more a definitely marginal

⁶³ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 74.

one. Indeed, the very few times Imogen appears in the novel, the narrator always delights in making fun of her:

Our half-sisters responded to the show in ways already characteristic of their future personalities. [...] Imogen fell asleep and left her mouth open through the entire performance, in preparation for her career as a fish.⁶⁴

A career which is as a matter of fact explained at the very end of the novel, where the image of the fish once again surfaces:

As for Imogen, she's gone right over the top. She'd got a fishbowl on her head with a fish in it. I kid you not. A live fish. [...] I furiously pondered the significance of the fish, then it clicked: *Goldie the Goldfish* – her kiddies' programme. She had come to the party as a commercial for herself. She had on a bronze shift sequined in scales and she greeted her father in a manner appropriate to her heroine, she opened and shut her mouth a lot, and it was just as well she'd come along in costume and mimed her birthday greeting to him as a goldfish because it lightened up the mood.⁶⁵

Dora's ridicule portray of Imogen dressed as a goldfish not only contributes to create the carnivalesque atmosphere of the novel but also points to the manner Carter transforms Shakespearean names. There is indeed more than a hint of irony, on the author's part, in attributing such a pompous, tragic and ostentatious name to someone who is in fact simply playing the character of a fish in a television programme for children.

As a matter of fact, although the name Imogen evokes situations of familial distress to which also *Wise Children* alludes (in the last chapter Saskia and Imogen accuse their father of never having loved them), it first and foremost hints at another, much more developed aspects of the novel: Imogen, "So rich. So well-connected. So legitimate"⁶⁶, is unable to exploit either her richness or her

⁶⁴ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 77.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

connections or her legitimacy to work in what Carter defines as the legitimate domain of Shakespearean drama; the daughter of a Shakespearean actor, bearing, what is more, a Shakespearean name, she ends up as nothing more than an insignificant small fish in the ocean of television sharks. Split between the tragic role her name would suggest and the comic role she truly plays, divided between a theatrical family and a television “career”, Imogen truly embodies the melting of legitimacy and illegitimacy on which Carter builds her whole novel.

The name Imogen acquires instead much darker nuances in Antonia Byatt’s novel, being directly connected to a difficult – definitely tragic – familial situation and evoking incestuous relationships. I have previously discussed how Prosper’s marriage with Imogen may be read in incestuous terms, following a pattern of interpretation which goes back to the Shakespearean *Tempest*. However, Byatt’s Prosper commits no incest towards Imogen, while it is Imogen’s father, Benedict Fludd, who does not hide his desire for his daughters Imogen and Pomona. At first, such an unnatural behaviour is only hinted at, suggested on the one hand by Imogen and Pomona’s strange attitudes, on the other by Imogen’s repeatedly and strongly expressed wish, once she has been living independently, not to go back to her father’s house:

‘I can’t,’ she said. ‘I can’t...’

She wept. Prosper offered his own perfectly folded handkerchief.

‘What can you not do?’ he asked.

‘I can’t go there. I can’t go back there.’ She paused and sobbed, and was more explicit.

‘I can’t sleep in that house. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.’⁶⁷

Imogen’s words, expressing her impossibility, indeed her inability to go back to a place evidently painful to her, somehow echo one of the cues of her homonymous Shakespearean ancestor:

⁶⁷ A.S. Byatt, *The Children’s Book*, cit., p. 421.

Pisanio:

If You'll back to th' court—

Imogen:

No court, no father, nor no more ado

With that harsh, noble, simple nothing,

That Cloten, whose love-suit hath been to me

As fearful as a siege.⁶⁸

Both characters are resolute, firm in their decisions not to go back to their original home. Far from seeing in their fathers two protective figures, they are instead afraid of them; similarly, far from showing filial affection and respect, they display a certain malevolence, resentment, and rancour. Going back to the court would mean, for the Shakespearean heroine, returning to a condition of imposed seclusion; although Cymbeline, his father, claims to love her, still he does not approve of her marriage with the man she loves and wants to force her in the arms of another man, the one he has chosen for her. Some critics have seen, in this strange paternal behaviour, which is however astonishingly common among Shakespeare's fathers, the sign of a repressed incestuous desire:

Herein lies the rub. It is frequently one aspect of the incest motif that the father so involved can cope with the daughter's marriage only when her object-choice is a man other than the one she finds sexually attractive. The implication here is that although the father accepts the fact that he cannot retain her, he can only tolerate renunciation with the knowledge that she will not be happy or sexually satisfied.⁶⁹

However, if the spectre of incest somehow lingers on *Cymbeline* but the real incestuous act is never committed, in *The Children's Book* this spectral presence is instead transformed into a tangible and evidently disturbing reality:

⁶⁸ William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, 3, iv, 130-133.

⁶⁹ Jane M. Ford, *Patriarchy and Incest from Shakespeare to Joyce*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998, p. 40.

On the shelves were pots. Elsie had expected something secret and different. One or two were largish plump jars, but most were small, and glimmered white in the shadows, white-glazed china, unglazed biscuit. When Elsie went near to make them out better her feet crunched on broken shards, as though someone had dropped, or thrown, a whole carpet of fragments on the ground. The pots were obscene chimeras, half vessel, half human. They had a purity and clarity of line, and were contorted into every shape of human sexual display and congress. Slender girls clutched and displayed case-like, intricate modelling of their own lower lips and canals. They lay in their back, thrusting their pelvis up to be viewed. They sat in mute despair on the lips of towering jars, clutching their nipples with defensiveness, their long hair falling over their cast-down faces. There were also clinical anatomical models – always elegant, always precise and economical, of the male and female sexual organs, separate and conjoined. There were pairs of figures, in strenuous possible and impossible embraces, gentle and terrible. Some of them had Imogen's long face and drooping shoulders: some of them were plump Pomona.⁷⁰

The narrator's insistence on describing the details of the obscene pots underlines the abomination and the dirtiness of Fludd's behaviour and makes the readers feel disgusted and shocked at such a discovery.

Precisely as she does with Prosper Cain, even in the case of Imogen Antonia Byatt adopts a Shakespearean name which remains, however, only a pretext. As a matter of fact, rather than going back to the original Shakespearean play or rather than exploring the name's etymology as a way to shape the characters of her novel, Byatt digs in Shakespearean criticism and charge her characters – as well as the Shakespearean ones – with new nuances of sense and meaning.

⁷⁰ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 279.

2.2. Play-acting in the novel

2.2.1. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is definitely a recurrent presence in Antonia Byatt's novel. Somehow, the play itself originates the whole story, which would not have existed if Olive and Humphry Wellwood had not fallen in love while staging a school performance of it. Having such a significant place in the couple's life, a performance of the play is repeated every year, during the Midsummer party that Olive organizes at Todefright, the house where she lives with her husband, her sister, and her always increasing number of sons and daughters. Shakespeare's *Midsummer* thus marks the passage of time, accompanying the children towards adulthood, and the adults towards old age:

Finally, it was Midsummer. In England, Olive presided as usual over a depleted gathering on the lawn. It was a grey day. The fairy queen wore a velvet opera cloak over her floating robes. The absent Toby Youlgrave was replaced, as Bottom, by Herbert Methley, who had finished his novel and resumed his social and amorous dealings. Florian was Cobweb instead of Dorothy. Tom was still Puck. Humphry was still handsome, but there was grey at his temple.⁷¹

Year after year, the actors change: some of them bear the marks of the inevitable flowing of time, some are absent, some others are too grown up to play. Tom alone remains the same, the only one who refuses to grow up and to accept the possibility of a future, adult, life. "Time is cyclical. Time is linear. Time is biological"⁷² writes the narrator of *The Children's Book*: as such, the Shakespearean play, repeating itself every year, yet every year different and every year mercilessly showing the actors' biological transformations, becomes in the novel a metaphor for time itself.

More importantly still, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reflects, I believe, the very nature of Byatt's book, with its innumerable stratifications and its many interpretative levels. A play of magic, fairies and love, the *Dream* seems nothing

⁷¹ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 387.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 414.

more than an innocent and amusing fairy-tale; in fact, such a festive atmosphere is a mere façade that hides erotic fantasies and an incredible amount of violence. In Shakespeare's play, as a matter of fact, everything seems to be doubled or to exist only in relation to its opposite: the high degree of civilization, rationality and order that characterizes the Athenian setting is for example juxtaposed to the wilderness, unruliness and irrationality of the forest; the character bringing together the characteristics of both settings is indeed Hyppolita, Theseus' future wife. Being an Amazon, and consequently possessing the strength, independence, fierceness and definitely, the wilderness, typical of these female warriors, she is somehow tamed by her future husband and limited in her freedom by the strictness of the court of Athens: inevitably, her identity becomes split between a desire of rebellion and an unavoidable submissiveness. As irrationality stands to rationality and freedom to captivity, so, in the duplicity of Shakespeare's *Midsummer*, love and tenderness stand to discordance and violence: Oberon and Titania's fight doubles the disputes of the two couples of lovers, whose marriages are not based on mutual understanding and renewed affection, but are on the contrary the result of a magic spell (precisely as the nuptials of Theseus and Hyppolyta are shadowed by the circumstances of their courtship, since the bride has been wooed with the sword, not with the force of love). If these three weddings are haunted by the disturbing truth of the events that have preceded them, even more disquieting is Shakespeare's representation of sexuality. Although the mechanicals' rehearsal in the wood is probably the funniest scene of the play, its enjoyment is spoiled not only by Bottom's metamorphosis, but, even more, by Titania's perverse, abominable desire for him; even though the sexual act between the two – and thus between human and beast – is never explicit, still the many allusions to it confer to the play a definitely grotesque and repulsive tone.

Duality does not belong only to Shakespeare's *Midsummer* but is equally to be found in the world of *The Children's Book*. As Byatt herself revealed in an interview,

duplicity and uneasiness actually constituted the very reason behind the writing of her novel:

This one [*The Children's Book*] came with my realization that the children of children's book-writers tend to be very unhappy. You know, you have this image of the wonderful children's book-writer like mother goose, by the fire telling stories to her children, and how privileged these children are. But actually they seem to wander around rather lost in the dark, and frequently commit suicide. It seems to be very unsettling.⁷³

Indeed, such a sense of uneasiness is immediately conveyed by the name of the place where Olive Wellwood lives with her family:

She lives in the perfect house for a writer at once so enchanting and so down to earth. I suggested to her that there was something witchy about the name Todefright and she immediately put me right. Todefright comes from the amphibian and an old Kentish word for 'meadow'. No death or spectres!⁷⁴

Yet, even if the name Todefright, so witchy in its appearance, bear in fact no reference to mysterious realities and even if Olive's home looks like one of those cosy houses in fairy-tales, still things are not so bright as they seem at a first glance. The apparent perfection of a place where children are left free to run in the woods and have fun in their tree-house hides a series of secrets and lies, which constitute an important feature in a novel where betrayals and doubts about parenthood follow one another, influencing on the one hand the relationship between characters, on the other raising questions in the children about their unstable and growing identity. Tranquillity, in the world of *The Children's Book*, appears thus more a façade than a reality, a façade what is more extremely fragile and constantly menaced. Significantly, when Olive discovers Humphry's umpteenth betrayal and, almost

⁷³ A.S. Byatt interviewed by professor Paula Marantz Cohen for *The Drexel InterView* in December 2010 (<http://www.drexel.edu/thedrexelinterview>).

⁷⁴ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 527.

simultaneously, the children come to know that their father and mother may in fact not be their real parents, the word “threat” starts to appear, with insistence, in the novel:

Olive felt threatened – she should be *earning money* with her little prince and her sinister fat rat, not standing here waiting to discuss peccadilloes, or worse. Todefright was threatened. Olive said Damn.⁷⁵

And, after a few lines:

Dorothy did feel threatened. Whose child was or wasn't she? Almost unconsciously, she detached herself a little from love. [...] Tom did not think clearly. He felt his world was threatened, and his world was Todefright.⁷⁶

It is the same menace that Byatt finds in Shakespeare, even in the fairies that inhabit Shakespeare's *Midsummer*: indeed, if Puck's other name is Hobgoblin and if Hobgoblin is “another name for threat”⁷⁷, the fairies, “anarchic, unpredictable, now dangerous, now beneficent [...] offer a way of naming otherwise unnameable desires and fears.”⁷⁸

The theme of love as it is treated in *The Children's Book* looks directly back to Shakespeare's *Dream*, too, since tenderness as well as a controlled and measured sexuality leave indeed room to a perverse, violent and scary lust. This double soul of the novel is somehow symbolized by the two scenes from Shakespeare's *Midsummer* that Olive and Humphry perform every year in the evening of their midsummer party: on the one hand there is the blessing of the house, spoken by Puck, Oberon and Titania at the end of the play, on the other there is the very scene in which Bottom lays with the queen of fairies. Thus the portrayal of a happy, contented

⁷⁵ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 148.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

⁷⁷ Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 99.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

family, asking protection for their loved house goes hand in hand with the representation of suppressed animal instincts:

Toby [...] lay in Olive's lap, his modern legs in flannel looking both thick and vulnerable. Olive stroked the mask. Toby could feel her heartbeat, somewhere lower in her body. He snuggled up to her, as a child might, empowered by the drama, remembering with regret the earlier performances, in which he had been in a torment of erotic pricking and pulsing. Just there, under her skirt, was the desired place.⁷⁹

In this case it is Toby Youlgreave who plays the role of Bottom, but it is, I believe, extremely interesting that this same role should be played, in another performance taking place later on in the text, by another character: Herbert Methley. A writer like Olive, Herbert spends his time writing, preaching women's sexual freedom and repeatedly betraying his wife. All along the novel, he is significantly described by the narrator with animal similes and metaphors: compared to "a snake, a salamander"⁸⁰, the reader for the first time makes his acquaintance while he is sunbathing, in his garden, totally naked, "dark, with flopping hair"⁸¹. His animality thus perfectly fits the role of the Shakespearean Bottom, who is not only transformed into an ass, but whose animal instincts and appetites – sexual as well – are particularly emphasised in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Indeed, according to Jan Kott,

It is this passing through animality that seems to us the midsummer night's dream, or at least this aspect of the *Dream* is the most modern and revealing. [...] Titania and Bottom will pass through animal eroticism in a quite literal, even visual sense.⁸²

The Children's Book masterfully adopts one of the most intriguing among Shakespeare's plays, of which it reflects the many nuances. Byatt, without neglecting the magic that still characterizes the Shakespearean comedy and that she recreates in

⁷⁹ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 64.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 224.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 121.

⁸² Jan Kott, "Titania and the Ass's Head", in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, London: Methuen, 1967, pp. 180-81.

the fascinating atmosphere of Todefright or of Olive's fairy-tales, does not forget to emphasise the play's darkest aspects: its uncontrolled instincts and its unnameable desires.

If Shakespeare's *Midsummer* stages a play within the play, it becomes so itself – or better to say, it becomes the film within the novel – in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*. The greatest adventure of Sir Melchior Hazard and the only Hollywood experience of Nora and Dora Chance, the making of the movie indeed occupies the third, central chapter of a novel, which, like a Shakespearean play, is divided into five “acts”. As it was in the case of *The Children's Book*, Shakespeare's play can be said to work as a metaphor also of Carter's text. Precisely as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* continuously shifts between two opposite worlds – authenticity and illusion, rationality and irrationality, dream and reality – so *Wise Children* is constantly on the edge between verisimilitude and absurdity, theatre and real life, seriousness and playfulness:

This slippery equivocation concerning reality and illusion, whereby the nature of the illusion is simultaneously both celebrated and known, extends beyond the formal arrangement of the text to become one of the novel's main themes. It achieves this most obviously through its persistent theatrical references, for both branches of Nora's and Dora's family tree are in showbusiness, although on opposite sides of the track.⁸³

If it comes therefore as no surprise that Shakespeare's *Midsummer* should be given such a relevant place in a novel which is already packed with Shakespearean allusions, quotations and references, what may sound bizarre is the striking contrast between the illusory, dreamy nature of the play and the excess of realism that Angela Carter chooses as the main characteristic of the movie she invents. Realism, however, would probably be the wrong term. The Hollywoodian set, that Dora

⁸³ Sara Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997, p. 172.

defines as “too literal”⁸⁴, is indeed a collection of horrible, huge and almost scary fakes: the enormous wood (enormous for everything is built twice as larger as life, so that fairies may seem tiny in it) is disseminated with similarly enormous pearls – to imitate dewdrops, and is filled with clockwork birds; the whole is stirred, on request, by an inevitably artificial wind.⁸⁵ Leaving nothing to imagination and hazard, but instead perfectly controlled by machines, the cinematic *Midsummer* of Carter’s novel is the opposite of a theatrical performance, where the audience’s imagination plays a fundamental role:

What I missed most was illusion. That wood near Athens was too, too solid for me. Peregrine, who specialised in magic tricks, loved it just because it was so concrete. ‘You always pull a live rabbit out of a hat,’ he said. But there wasn’t the merest whiff about of the kind of magic that comes when the theatre darkens, the bottom of the curtains glows, the punters settle down, you take a deep breath...none of the person-to-person magic we put together with spit and glue and willpower. This wood, this entire dream, in fact, was custom-made and hand-built, it left nothing to the imagination.⁸⁶

If Dora’s reaction to the film setting sounds like a defence of theatre as human art, Angela Carter’s operation behind the choice of giving such importance to the *Midsummer*’s movie probably corresponds to the whole “aim” of her novel: debunking Shakespeare, taking him down from the pedestal of high-brow culture and legitimate theatre in order to bring him, and his plays, on the “wrong side of the

⁸⁴ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 125.

⁸⁵ See Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 124: “The concept of this wood was scaled to the size of fairy folks, so all was twice as large as life. Larger. Daisies big as your head and white as spooks, foxgloves as tall as the tower of Pisa that chimed like bells if shook. Gnarled, fissured tree-trunks; sprays on enormous leaves – oak, ash, thorn, like parasols, or glided planes, or awnings. Bindweed in streamer and conkers, deposited at intervals in heaps on the ground. Yes, conkers. All spikes. And rolling around at random underfoot, or stuck on buds, or hanging in mid-air as if they’d just rolled off a wild rose or out of a cowslip, imitation dewdrops, that is, big *faux* pearls, suspended on threads. And clockwork birds, as well – thrushes, finches, sparrows, larks – that lifted up their wings and lowered their heads and sang out soprano, mezzo soprano, contralto, joining in the fairy song. Because no wind blew of its own accord in this wood, they’d got in a wind machine.”

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

tracks”⁸⁷. It is the same “wrong side” to which Dora and Nora Chance belongs, being not only illegitimate daughters but also actresses of music-hall, a kind of theatre that, if compared to Shakespearean drama, sounds indeed illegitimate and definitely low-brow. As a matter of fact, although Dora stresses her illegitimacy many times in the novel, she also recounts that, the very first time she and her sister realized how illegitimate they were, they did so because directly compared to Shakespeare:

And here he was, trading the boards like billy-oh, in Shakespeare, and weren't we fresh from singing and dancing in the streets? We' d never felt quite so illegitimate in our lives as we did that day we were thirteen, looking at the glossy photos of Father togged up in a kilt.⁸⁸

Carter's operation of bringing together legitimate and illegitimate, Shakespeare and the music-hall starts precisely with the Hollywood production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that, together with the West End musical revue *What You Will*⁸⁹, she imagines as the result of a collaboration between Sir Melchior Hazard, an acclaimed Shakespearean actor, and his illegitimate daughters Dora and Nora Chance (it is indeed significant to notice how both surnames, although different, should have in fact a similar meaning, as to suggest that the difference between what is legitimate and what is not is only a superficial, apparent one). To further emphasize her intention of demystifying Shakespeare, Angela Carter also fills the description of the making of the film with small accidents, laughable events and farcical dialogues or cues that on the one hand denigrate Shakespeare's genius, on the other show how much he has become part of the popular, low-brow culture: so, in a TV advert,

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁸⁸ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 69.

⁸⁹ In the novel, less spaces is dedicated to this revue, while more than a whole chapter concentrates on the making of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, it is interesting to note that Carter repeats the title *What You Will* six times in the novel, writing it each time with a different punctuation. As Julie Sander suggests, this would enact “the carnivalesque refusal of this performance to be categorized or epistemologically defined.” In Julie Sanders, *Novel Shakespeares. Twentieth-century Women Novelists and Appropriation*, cit., p. 44)

Hamlet's most famous line "to be or not to be" becomes "to butter or not to butter"⁹⁰ and a luxury hotel is called The Forest of Arden, calling to mind the Shakespearean setting of *As You Like It*; what is more, a cat irreverently defecates on earth from Stratford-upon-Avon, taking the last remnants of mythical aura away from the immortal Bard. As Sara Gamble writes:

What Carter is charting here is the process by which objects of cultural value lose their ability to participate within a dominant aesthetic. In this way, theatrical institutions, once enshrined in high-culture, become appropriated by contemporary, popular cultural forms. [...] Shakespeare, then, enjoys a renaissance but it is a camp renaissance, which involves a deliberately parodic reassertion of his old cultural position.⁹¹

By transforming Shakespeare's *Dream* into a film – and one that, significantly, involves so much "singing and dancing" and such an amount of bad taste to the point that it will be later defined as a "masterpiece of kitsch"⁹² – Angela Carter makes evident her desire and her intent to popularize Shakespeare. Her comical, even farcical appropriation of the Bard, however, does not have its roots in contemporary culture only, in the film or in the advertising industries that have discovered Shakespeare as a means to attract audiences and make money, but finds its primary reason and legitimization in Shakespeare's plays themselves, in their daring and innovative fusion of comedy and tragedy, high and low art. Thus, the movie of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – but indeed the whole novel *Wise Children* – are far from rejecting Shakespeare or from making of him the object of a merely parodic, disparaging attention; on the contrary, they re-establish the very essence of his plays and restore them to the attention of a vaster audience.

⁹⁰ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 38.

⁹¹ Sara Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line*, cit., p. 179.

⁹² Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 111.

2.2.2. *King Lear*

If Angela Carter indulges in describing the set and the atmosphere of the making of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, scantier are instead her references to *King Lear*, a play which, nonetheless, has a certain importance for the novel. First of all because it was while playing the role of Lear that Ranulph Hazard fell in love with the actress playing Cordelia, thus starting “the imperial Hazard dynasty that bestrode the British theatre like a colossus for a century and a half.”⁹³ Then because one of the recurrent images of the text comes precisely from Ranulph Hazard's Lear:

One night, in a bar at Tucson, Arizona, he gamble away his crown from Lear and Estella put together a new one for him out of a bit of cardboard. She dabbed on some goldpaint. ‘Here you are.’⁹⁴

This improvised crown will come up two times more in the novel, during two parties given by the Hazard family, and will become on the one hand a symbol of conflict, on the other a positive image of final reconciliation. After the fire at Lynde Court, the guests at the Hazard's party witness the disquieting scene of a jumping Melchior, who runs after his brother Peregrine trying to get hold of the crown that has been saved from the flames and that is, for him, a symbol of the position he has reached in society thanks to his shining career in the theatre; transformed, as Dora remarks, in a tragicomic version of Richard III, Melchior does not care about “fame, or wealth, or women, or children...”⁹⁵, but only wants his crown back, he wants to put his hands on a symbol of power and royalty that he, as a Shakespearean actor, has managed to obtain. Indeed, when Peregrine cries out ‘Now, God, stand up for bastards!’ quoting Edmund's soliloquy in *King Lear*, the crown also becomes a divide between legitimacy and illegitimacy, refocusing the novel around one of its main themes which, incidentally, is a central one in Shakespeare's *Lear*, too. Peregrine may steal the crown from his brother's hands, but power and money will never belong to

⁹³ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 10.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

the bastard side of theatre; equally, although Peregrine has saved, together with the crown, one of Melchior's illegitimate daughters, Melchior does not care about her: all he can think about is his crown, the symbol of his ascent, while Nora, who does not belong to his family and who is only a music-hall actress, counts less than nothing. Indeed, as Aiden Day writes

Melchior's attachment to legitimacy and 'high' culture is part of dominant, imperial, masculine culture's attempt to repress the kind of 'low' culture with which Dora and Nora are associated. In *Wise Children* the central metaphorical vehicle for exploring this repression, at once personal and cultural, is Shakespeare. Legitimate, imperial, patriarchal Shakespeare as propounded by Ranulph and Melchior represses something that, *Wise Children* suggests, can be found in Shakespeare's work itself. Dora and Nora, as participants in 'low', popular culture, are tokens of that repressed something. A part of Carter's allegory is to insist that the illegitimate, 'low' cultural reality inhabited by Dora and Nora possesses a line of descent from Shakespeare just as much as a line of descent from Shakespeare can be claimed by the elitist Melchior.⁹⁶

That Dora and Nora – and with them the whole tradition of what is considered 'illegitimate' theatre (music-hall, vaudeville, pantomime, ...) – share Melchior's Shakespearean inheritance will be finally made clear and will be openly recognized at the very end of the novel, when all the characters are reunited to celebrate Melchior's 100 birthday. On this occasion the old, cardboard crown of *King Lear* appears for the last time and, significantly, it is Dora who finds it:

But when I said:

'Father, look what I've found!'

And processed towards him bearing aloft my cushion, Perry began to imitate a drumroll to perfection: 'Rub-a-dub-a-dub-a-dub.' [...] Everybody sat with drumstick suspended halfway to their mouths as Perry brought the imaginary drumroll to a

⁹⁶ Aiden Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, p. 204.

magnificent conclusion and said, in a round, rich, mahogany-coloured voice well-suited to the occasion:

‘Prince of players! Reclaim your crown!’

I stood up on tiptoe. I placed the crown on his long, grey hair. Sometimes you know it’s sentimental and sometimes you just don’t care. I was a touch too long in the tooth for Cordelia but there you are.

‘My princesses,’ he said. ‘My two dancing princesses.’⁹⁷

Melchior, the father, the prince, has finally recognized his illegitimate daughters and, by calling them princesses, he has admitted them into his legitimate family. In fact, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate does not exist anymore: rancour is forgotten, enmity is won and the family is, for the very first time in the novel, completely reunited. Clearly, the reunification also has an evident symbolic meaning: as Dora and Nora are admitted into the Hazard family, so the kind of theatre they represent has been finally recognized as peer to Shakespeare’s drama.

If, in *King Lear*, the crown engenders tragedy and discordance, in *Wise Children* it leads, on the contrary, to appeasement and comedy. Indeed, as Nora notices, the border between tragedy and comedy is a very fragile one, as is the one between legitimacy and illegitimacy:

‘Don’t worry, darlin’, ’e’s not your father!’

What if Horatio had whispered that to Hamlet in Act I, Scene i? And think what difference it would have made to Cordelia. On the other hand, those last comedies would darken considerably in tone, don’t you think, if Marina and, especially, Perdita weren’t really the daughters of...

Comedy is tragedy that happens to other people.⁹⁸

Carter, rejecting the tragic ending of Shakespeare’s *Lear* and adopting, instead, the play’s happy versions that circulated in Restoration England⁹⁹, somehow underlines

⁹⁷ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., pp. 225-26.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 213.

her desire to depict life in its comic, joyful side and manages to transform Shakespeare according to her own view of the world and of life.

As in *Wise Children* Shakespeare's *King Lear* is connected to the question of fatherhood, so it is, somehow, in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. In Naylor's novel, however, *King Lear* is not presented as a theatrical performance, but as a text to read. The Shakespearean play is indeed George's favourite book, the one he wants Cocoa to discover:

It had a special poignancy for me, reading about the rage of a bastard son, my own father having disappeared long before I was born. [...] It came as a shock when you opened up and told me that you cried when you first read through the play. It seemed that although your parents were married, your father had taken off before you were born, too.¹⁰⁰

Both George and Cocoa openly identify with Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son, and both of them interpret the play in a very personal way, sometimes misreading it: if George sees in *Lear's* plot the demonstration that Shakespeare's sympathy lies with bastards, Ophelia is instead convinced of the playwright's wish to show equality between men and women. Interestingly, by appropriating the playwright for illegitimate children on the one hand and for women on the other, George and Cocoa seem to perceive Shakespeare as the writer of minorities, something which is confirmed by the fact that Ophelia, thinking about Shakespeare for the very first time and without much reflection, establishes a link between the Bard and his black characters only:

⁹⁹ Indeed, the version of *King Lear* that was represented in Restoration England was Nahum Tate's one. In his adaptation, the role of the Fool completely disappeared, Lear and Cordelia did not die and, what is more, the play ended with the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar.

¹⁰⁰ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 106.

[...] I don't care if he did write about Othello, Cleopatra, and some slaves on a Caribbean island. If he had been in touch with our culture, he would have written somewhere "Nigger, are you out of your mind?"¹⁰¹

If Cocoa's negritude inevitably leads her to associate Shakespeare with the black characters he has penned and the black cultures he has tried to portray, it is precisely her same negritude that prompts her to somehow reject him: Shakespeare is a white, Western author and, as such, he cannot be incorporated into a black culture, of which he does not share the traditions, the cultural heritage, the insider knowledge. As Valerie Traub writes,

Her [Cocoa's] interpretative gesture enacts a strategy of reading across plays, across genre, with an eye toward transcultural connection, on the basis of a shared history of conflictual relations to white Western cultures."¹⁰²

As the novel proceeds, this "conflictual relation" emerges more and more: as a matter of fact, it becomes clear that Naylor does not want to confirm Cocoa's and George's initial assertions that seemed to portray Shakespeare as a universal author, in whose plays everyone can identify, but, rather, to correct them, stressing the difference between two cultures which in fact have very little, if nothing, in common. Indeed, according to Peter Erickson,

The presence of Shakespeare allows Naylor to explore the relation between these two traditions, which she experiences not only as distinct, but also as split, divided, opposed.¹⁰³

Gloria Naylor thus plays with tradition and with Shakespeare's reputation, carrying out an operation which is opposite to the one adopted by Angela Carter: the

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

¹⁰² Valerie Traub, "Rainbow of Darkness: Deconstructing Shakespeare in the work of Gloria Naylor and Zora Neale Hurston", in Marianne Novy. (ed.), *Cross-Cultural Performances. Differences in Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993, p. 159.

¹⁰³ Peter Erickson, *Rewriting Shakespeare. Rewriting Ourselves*, cit., p. 125.

beginning of *Wise Children* seems to make of Shakespeare the icon of legitimate theatre only, but, as the novel develops, Shakespeare becomes instead the celebrated symbol of a theatre and, even more, of a humanity, transcending barriers of gender, class, and race; on the contrary, George and Cocoa's personal readings of *King Lear* in *Mama Day* let the whole of Naylor's text look like a celebration of the playwright's power to depict human beings in all their difference and variety, but the novel itself is in fact a denial of this assertion. As stated by Valerie Traub, "If Shakespearean drama names and fixes 'black' characters from the outside, *Mama Day* reconstitutes them in the name of a diverse African-American subjectivity."¹⁰⁴ Naylor does not entirely reject Shakespeare, but wants to rewrite his plays in order to shed on them another point of view, one that is neither white, nor Western. The issue of rewriting from a female and a black perspective is indeed explicitly approached by Gloria Naylor while she describes the beginning of her career:

The writers I had been taught to love were either male or white. And who was I to argue that Ellison, Austen, Dickens, the Brontes, Baldwin and Faulkner weren't masters? They were and are. But inside there was still the faintest whisper. Was there no one telling my story? And since it appeared there was not how could I presume to? [...] And it [reading Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*] said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth in this society, not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song.¹⁰⁵

The evocation of authors belonging to the Western canon of literature highlights the importance that these writers have for Naylor and their consequent influence on her writing. All the same, their point of view remains white and Western, precisely as Shakespeare's one. It is a point of view that cannot explore nor understand her black culture, and that, as such, cannot be shared by the author of *Mama Day*. Her appropriation of *King Lear*, and her demonstration, with her very novel, that Cocoa

¹⁰⁴ Valerie Traub, "Rainbow of Darkness: Deconstructing Shakespeare in the Work of Gloria Naylor and Zora Neale Hurston", cit., p. 159.

¹⁰⁵ Gloria Naylor in Danille Taylor-Guthrie (ed.), *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1994, p. 189.

and George's interpretations of it are in fact wrong, stresses her desire to distance herself from the idea of Shakespeare as an author embracing and representing all cultures, all genres, all humanity.

2.3. Conclusion

This second chapter of my thesis had the intent of mapping Shakespeare's traces in *Mama Day*, *Indigo*, *Wise Children* and *The Children's Book*, looking at the ways through which Shakespeare is transformed by the novelists into a tangible, almost physical presence. A presence which is delineated in the use of Shakespearean proper names one the one hand and in the allusions to some Shakespearean plays, either staged or watched or read by the characters on the other. Conducting such an operation has allowed me to realize how there is, underlying the four novels, a pattern of repeated names, characters and plays.

In the novels of Naylor, Warner, Carter and Byatt new nicknames are occasionally placed side by side Shakespearean proper names while Shakespearean characters are deeply rewritten and are sometimes even given new names to stress the difference from their Shakespearean predecessors. Through names and characters, the four novelists truly play with a literary tradition that seems to change and modify according to their very culture. So, for example, if Antonia Byatt rethinks Shakespearean names in the light of literary criticism, Marina Warner – repeatedly stressing her lineage and her consequent sense of guilt – looks at them from a postcolonial point of view; similarly, if Angela Carter exploits Shakespearean names and characters to turn the Shakespearean tradition upside down and to stress her feminism, Gloria Naylor filters proper names through the lens of her African-American culture. Precisely as proper names are used to appropriate and at the same time outpace Shakespeare, so the plays the characters in the novels read, watch or perform are either exploited by the writers to compare the main themes of their narratives with the main topics of the Shakespearean plays, or on the contrary to emphasise the difference between specific situations in their novels and specific

situations in Shakespearean dramas: tragedy is thus turned to comedy while Shakespearean happy endings are toned down by melancholic atmospheres.

The acts of naming, re-naming, and including Shakespeare's plays in their novels thus constitute for the writers the first and most patent way to recognize their debt to Shakespeare, without becoming too dependent from him but, on the contrary, stressing their independence, originality and freedom.

CHAPTER 3

Towards a matriarchal utopia

3.1. From fathers to mothers

From Lear to Leontes, from Egeus to Prospero, the gallery of Shakespeare's fathers is undoubtedly a very rich one. Their presence, and sometimes even their absence, is a powerful and commanding one: fathers in Shakespeare demand to be loved, respected, and obeyed. Their strictness and severity are often intimidating and fearful, as shown, for example, in the very first scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Hermia's father, Egeus, asks Theseus for the death of his own daughter in case she refuses to accept the husband he has chosen for her; this unnatural cruelty and this unjust exercise of paternal power are all the more disconcerting because they point to the possibility of another, definitely tragic end to what is instead one of Shakespeare's most famous comedies. The character of Egeus, although making a very short appearance on stage, nonetheless represents a patriarchal society, whose potency is reinforced by Theseus's fast-approaching marriage with Hyppolita, conquered, as he says, with the sword. If Egeus is a secondary character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Portia's father is completely absent from the scene of *The*

Merchant of Venice. Yet, his presence remains a daunting one because his last will must be respected: by devising the stratagem of the three caskets, as a matter of fact, he secures his daughter's submission even after his death.

If paternal authority thus hovers on Shakespearean drama and if fathers, either alive or dead, are always to the fore in Shakespeare's plays, mothers are instead often relegated to secondary roles or completely absent: Miranda's mother is dead and Prospero names her only once in the whole play, while Lear's wife (but the same also happens, for example, with Portia's and Hermia's mothers) is not even mentioned. The main reason for the marginal role of women, or, more precisely, of mothers, in Shakespeare's plays, obviously has its roots in the structure of Elizabethan drama itself: as no women could act, and young boys already played the part of young heroines, it became indeed much more difficult to represent on stage middle-aged women: thus, although mothers have sometimes important, even fundamental roles in Shakespeare's plays (let us think for example of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* or of the prophetic maternal figures of *Richard III* or again of the powerful Lady Macbeth) still their actual presence on stage is limited and their number of cues remains quite small. This is why feminist criticism, sometimes too focused on women and their conditions in history, has attached so much importance to the issues on the one hand of the numerical unbalance between Shakespeare's fathers and mothers, on the other to the important role that fathers play in Shakespearean drama, what is more connecting paternal figures to the question of authorship. As Kate Webb writes,

It is this forever unresolved uncertainty about their role in biological creativity that has led men to create a mystique around artistic, and especially literary, creativity: as critics like Gilbert and Gubar have shown, the anxiety of paternity is translated into the anxiety of authorship.¹

¹ Kate Webb, "Seriously Funny: Wise Children" in Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, London: Virago, 1994, p. 300.

If mothers, and women more in general, have always been linked to their capacity of giving life, men somehow discovered this same capacity in the possibility of writing, of freely expressing their opinions through the works they published, thus also managing, by spreading their words and ideas, to maintain their power. According to Linda Anderson, “[...] women’s writing has always existed illegitimately; the official story – the version that passes into history – is the one written by male writers.”²

The position of feminist criticism sometimes sounds partial: it is true that in Renaissance England wives were still submitted to their husbands’ authority and they lacked economical independence; yet it must not be forgotten that it was precisely during the Renaissance that women started, to a certain extent, their process of emancipation. The Reformation played an important and ambivalent role in this process because, if on the one hand it contributed to spread the stereotype of the silent and docile woman, whose virtues would guarantee the honour and the stability of the family, on the other it promoted feminine literacy and it supported some sort of egalitarianism between the two sexes, who were, as a matter of a fact, both given the right to read and interpret the Scriptures. According to Tina Krontiris,

Women did apparently exploit the contradictions in Protestant ideologies as well as the unsettlement of the religious situation itself. First, religion could be used by women as a permission to speak. [...] In the name of the word of God, women could and did claim their right to speak independently from men. They wrote, translated and published many religious works. [...] religion gave them a legitimate voice and an opportunity to be heard. Telling about God’s word became a sign of breaking the silence and often of disagreeing with men.³

² Linda Anderson (ed.), “Preface” to *Plotting Change. Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, London: Edward Arnold, 1990, p. viii.

³ Tina Krontiris, *Oppositional Voices. Women Writers and Translators of Literature in the English Renaissance*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 10.

English women thus began to publish their works, what is more in an age during which, it must not be forgotten, political power was largely in the hands of a woman, Queen Elizabeth I. If we look at the condition of women, we thus realize that Renaissance England was an extremely paradoxical and ambiguous period, whose contradictions could not but be reflected in Shakespearean drama and in its characters. It is true that the space Shakespeare dedicated to mothers in his plays is inferior to the space he gave men, yet it is also important to recognize that

Strong, attractive, intelligent, and human women come to life in Shakespeare's plays. They not only have a clear sense of themselves as individuals, but they challenge accepted patterns for women's behaviour. Compliance, self-sacrifice for a male, dependence, nurturance, and emotionalism are the expected norms. Yet independence, self-control and, frequently, defiance characterize these women. Hermione disdains tears although unjustly imprisoned; her husband, Leontes, weeps in self-pity. In *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, women, exercising their independence, defy their fathers as well as the mores of their society. Shakespeare's women characters testify to his genius. They are drawn with neither anger nor condescension. In personality they vary. Some are warm, delightful, friendly; other cold, aloof, and scornful. Some speak with confidence; others with diffidence. They range in age from youthful Juliet to the wizened, bitter Margaret. But most have a vitality; they grow and develop during the course of drama. Their actions spring from a realistic confrontation with life as they learn the meaning of self-sovereignty for a woman in a patriarchal society.⁴

In Shakespeare's plays, women are not only much present, but their presence is also astonishing in its variety.

If there is a motive not to be found in Shakespeare, it is rather related to the exploration of the mother-daughter relationship: we read about the generational conflict between Lear and his daughters; we discover Prospero's attentions, and at the same time his severity, towards Miranda; we know the preoccupation of Kate's

⁴ Irene G. Dash, *Wooing, Wedding, and Power. Women in Shakespeare's Plays*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 1.

father for his untamed daughter. On the contrary, Juliet's mother is only a ridiculous sketch, Lady Macbeth is mostly unnatural in her maternity⁵ and, as said before, many daughters (let us think for example of Kate, Rosalind, Miranda, Hermia, Portia, Viola, Desdemona) are left without mothers. The main reason that has led contemporary women writers to return to Shakespeare is thus to fill the gaps he had left, appropriating those characters that remain on the margins of his plays. So, if one of the three epigraphs preceding Angela Carter's *Wise Children* is a statement made by the actress Ellen Terry ("How many times Shakespeare draws fathers and daughters, never mothers and daughters"⁶) that hints at the necessity of creating maternal roles and mother-daughter relationship when rewriting Shakespeare, Marina Warner seems to share the same line of thought: "Shakespeare was writing the father's plot. Prospero works out the plot for his daughter. Prospero's wife is conspicuously absent, the only woman is Miranda, the others are off-scene but also obscene (like Sycorax)"⁷. Even though less explicit about their novels and about the influence of Shakespeare on them, Gloria Naylor and Antonia Byatt all the same portray in their works strong maternal figures who, liberated from the threat of patriarchy, play a fundamental role in their family. In the novels, mothers are considered first of all as independent characters, capable of raising children even when alone and able to take upon themselves roles and activities which have long been considered as men's prerogatives only. Mothers thus occupy a central position in the four novels I am investigating: their strong presence, the setting given to their households – always situated in significant literary spaces – and their relationship with their daughters have led me to talk about the construction, in contemporary women rewriting of Shakespeare, of matriarchal, utopian societies.

⁵ See William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I, vii, 54-59: "[...] I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:/I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,/And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you/Have done to this."

⁶ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. vi.

⁷ Marina Warner interviewed by Chantal Zabus, in "Spinning a Yarn with Marina Warner", cit., p. 524.

3.2. The mother as breadwinner

While appropriating and rewriting Shakespeare, Angela Carter, Marina Warner, Gloria Naylor and Antonia Byatt have chosen to put women at the very centre of their novels; significantly all these women, most of them mothers, are also portrayed as the ones who have taken upon themselves a task which has too long been considered only as a man's responsibility, that is providing the family with the necessary financial support. If in *Indigo* and *Mama Day* women are associated to typically feminine activities, in *Wise Children* and *The Children's Book* they are instead given a profession that in the past – and definitely in Shakespeare's times – was perceived as a man's privilege. It is precisely from these novels that I intend to start my investigation on the role of women and mothers as breadwinners, showing how the fact of having jobs that may be considered anti-conventional stresses on the one hand the women's pride and independence, on the other also strongly shapes their very identity and connects them with a larger historical context.

Being music-hall singers and dancers, the twins of *Wise Children* somehow make a job out of their young bodies, not so much exploiting their beauty and their fresh attractiveness, but more taking advantage of their being, as a matter of fact, double: “[...]neither of us anything special on our own [...] but, put us together, we turned heads.”⁸ Similarly, Olive earns her living thanks to her own capacities only: in her case, however, it is not her body to be exposed, but it is her intelligence and creativity that allow her to pen successful tales for children. Interestingly, Angela Carter's and Antonia Byatt's novels are also the ones that most explicitly deal with the issue of single mothers, or, more in general, of women, having to financially sustain their own families. In both narratives the matter is not treated as a problem, but rather as a source of initiative, resourcefulness, imagination, and in both novels, one explicitly feminist while the other more softly so, women who manage to earn their own money and be the real breadwinners of the family are positively regarded as intelligent, independent, courageous. It is definitely not by chance that both *Wise*

⁸ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 63.

Children and *The Children's Book* should be set in two extremely significant historical moments, both of which marked important steps on the road towards women emancipation.

The events narrated in Angela Carter's novel take place between the First World War ("You must remember that there was a war on, when we were born"⁹) and Dora and Nora's 75th birthday, thus somewhere around the Nineties. In these seventy-five years the condition of women completely changed: if the Suffragette Movement and with it the struggle for women emancipation had started well before the first world war, it was precisely during the war, when men were sent to the front, that the role played by women became crucial and that women's economic importance was for the first time openly recognized; the war thus probably accelerated a process of emancipation which finally culminated with the universal suffrage of 1928. From that moment on, the condition of women began to change at a faster pace: women started to work, and not only in the extraordinary event of a war; the female branch of the British Army was formed; even fashion started to change, bringing about shorter skirts and bikinis. In less than thirty years, the condition of women had gone through a huge evolution; however, although women were definitely starting to feel liberated and were becoming new agents in the British economy, their struggle for equality was not over; thus, in the Sixties and the Seventies, a new feminist wave spread throughout the United Kingdom and the United States of America thanks to the Women's Liberation Movement: its members wanted to obtain equal pays, equal education and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion and free 24-hours nurseries; they founded the Women's Liberation Workshop and they published feminist magazines whose aim was to inform women and to provide an alternative to other and more frivolous magazines. In the United Kingdom, the movement was not unsuccessful: the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975 and the Domestic Violence

⁹ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 28.

Act in 1976; in 1974, what is more, the Women's Aid Federation was formed in order to support women and children suffering from domestic violence.¹⁰

Angela Carter's novel somehow accompanies, through Dora and Nora's lives and careers, a century that, as far as the condition of women is concerned, can be considered extraordinary. The twin sisters, proud of their economical independence and of their profession, open-minded about love and sexual relations, not ashamed of displaying their bodies but on the contrary using them to state their freedom and their liberation from a male-dominated society, definitely embody the emancipation of women. With them, Angela Carter ironically and lightly brings back to life years of struggles and conquests, a whole historical period that she herself lived as an engaged feminist intellectual.

Although much present, the reflection on the condition of women remains implicit in *Wise Children*, hidden behind the humorous tone which characterizes the whole novel. Antonia Byatt goes instead much deeper into the problem, developing it throughout her whole book and carrying it out first of all through the character of Olive Wellwood. Indeed, she is the real breadwinner of the family, managing to sustain her husband, sister, and children even when Humphry decides to abandon his job at the bank. As the narrator easily makes clear, Olive is extremely proud of her condition:

Olive resumed her unbuttoning. She stepped out of her underwear. "I shall write harder. I am doing better than adequately. I shall work harder."

"You like that idea. The woman as breadwinner."

"I do like it, yes. We both do, I think."¹¹

She is all the more so when she discovers that her husband has had an affair with a woman from Manchester, Marianne, whom he got pregnant and who consequently

¹⁰ For the condition of women between the wars and after the Second World War see Angela Kershaw and Angela Kimyongür (eds.), *Women in Europe between the Wars: Politics, Culture and Society*, Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2007 and Joni Lovenduski, *Women and European Politics: Contemporary Feminism and Public Policy*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

¹¹ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 67.

expects to receive financial help for the baby. Since Humphry's few newspaper articles do not allow him to do so, it is once again Olive who has to take control of the situation, giving her husband the money he needs and thus powerfully asserting, somehow, her own superiority over him:

She took a curious pleasure in the power of independence when she gave him a cheque to meet the Manchester bills. You did not so much mind being – conventionally – betrayed, if you were not to be kept in the dark, which was humiliating, or defined only as a wife and dependent person, which was annihilating.¹²

Associating a strong derogatory meaning to the word “wife”, Olive defines herself as an independent person, who earns her own money and chooses what to do with it. In this way, she is neither submitted to nor financially dependent from a husband who brings the salary home and who administers the economy of the whole family. Thus, for Olive Wellwood, having a job is not only a matter of pride or superiority, but something that defines her whole identity: she is not simply a wife, nor is she merely the “angel of the house”; her presence is not a silent one, nor does she spend her days confined in the nursery; indeed, if she did not have her profession, she would not feel realized, complete, full: she is a wife and a mother, but she is first of all the author of tales for children. What is more, her profession is extremely significant and symbolical: she is a writer, a job that not only has long been seen as a masculine prerogative, but that also consents her to express her feelings and ideas. Thus, a correspondence between freedom of thoughts and economical independence seems to be established:

“I sometimes feel, stories are the inner life of this house. A kind of spinning energy: I am the spinning fairy in the attic, I am Mother Goose quacking away what sounds like comforting chatter but is really – is really what holds it all together.” She gave a little laugh, and said, “Well, it makes money, it does hold it all together.”¹³

¹² A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 178.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 358.

Olive is definitely an emblematic character in *The Children's Book* and her position as a writer helps the reader reflect on the role of women and on the importance of their work for the economy of a family. However, in Byatt's novel, the gallery of working women is a rich one: from Philip's mother, who dies because of the unhealthy condition in which she had to work, to Marianne Oakwood, who earns her living by teaching in schools, to Elsie Warren, who slowly becomes conscious of the importance of getting an education, many are the figures of women whose salary is very often the sole income of the family. What is more, since the ideals of the Fabian Society are discussed in the novel, themes such as the equality between man and woman, the importance for women to get a proper education and the necessity to guarantee equal rights to all social classes, often come to the fore. They do so more specifically in chapter 25, which is all dedicated to the description of a series of lectures "on the general theme of "The Women of the Future"¹⁴. Many are indeed the issues discussed during this fictional debate of Byatt's novel: the right for women to vote; the right to take care of their children even if, for whatever reasons, they are separated from their husbands; the problem of prostitution and of the diseases connected to it; the matter of "fallen women"; the necessity of women's education; the need to consider women as equal to men. In this chapter, by alternating the narrator's voice with the voice of the speakers giving their speech at the conference, Byatt manages to let her readers participate in the late-Victorian debate about the condition of women, a debate which becomes even more explicit and urgent when the acts of the Women's Social and Political Union are described and when Hedda, one of Olive's daughters and herself a member of the WSPU is imprisoned for damaging the Gloucester Candlestick in the Victoria and Albert Museum. History thus violently bursts into the world of *The Children's Book*, allowing Antonia Byatt to thoroughly reflect on the condition of women, investigating their role in the house and showing how their work and profession constituted for them not only the means to feel independent and emancipated, but also the way to fully

¹⁴ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 290.

realize their identity. Byatt, on the one hand presenting various portraits of working women, all belonging to different social classes and each having to deal with different kind of problems, on the other discussing the matter from a merely theoretical point of view, moves from the particular to the general and from real life to abstraction, indeed offering the detailed picture of an age whose ideas and ideological fights contributed to shape the contemporary world.

The women of *Wise Children* and *The Children's Book* working in domains that are, if I may say so, quite unconventional and definitely modern, allow Carter and Byatt to enlarge the limits of their novels, reflecting on the role of women in a given historical period. On the contrary, the women of *Indigo* and *Mama Day* work in domains which are strictly traditional: their professions have always existed throughout the ages and, what is more, they have always been strongly connected to femininity. As a consequence, general considerations on women and on the role they should play in society are left behind in these two novels; instead, both Marina Warner and Gloria Naylor have chosen to privilege a reflection on the way Sycorax's and Miranda's everyday activities definitely contribute to fix and determine their identities, what is more strongly emphasising the utopian aspect of the economy in *Liamuiga* and *Willow Spring*.

The title of Marina Warner's novel, *Indigo*, comes precisely from Sycorax's activity, that is making indigo and dyeing cloths, a craft which has caused a kind of metamorphosis of her own body:

Over a decade of dyeing, the indigo stained Sycorax blue; she couldn't wash it from the palms of her hands any more, not from the cuticles and beds of her nails. A blueish bloom lay on her dark skin [...]. Her tongue, too, was blue, from tasting the grain of the indigo [...]. It was easy to mistake her grey eyes for blue as well, for the whites were the colour of the noonday sky, especially when she twisted to look up from a cistern where she was busy steeping the new cloth [...].¹⁵

¹⁵ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., pp. 90-1.

Sycorax's work has thus transformed her: her face and hands have changed and her whole body slowly turns blue; her appearance, and thus, in a way, her very self, are modified by the profession she has. Moreover, Warner's attention to the colour of Sycorax's eyes allows her to create a close bond between the character of her novel and the witch-like figure of Shakespeare's play (who is indeed called "blue-eyed hag"): becoming blue, Sycorax is not only the dyer of indigo and the adoptive mother of Ariel and Dulé, but she is also, to foreign eyes, a disquieting figure, perceived as malign and evil precisely because of her physical appearance; the unnatural colour of her skin transforms Sycorax into a witch, her identity completely distorted and mistaken. If Sycorax's identity is to a certain extent shaped by a colour, so colours indeed shape the whole novel:

I called the novel *Indigo*, with a subtitle, 'Mapping the Waters', because I wanted to introduce a pattern of many colours, and suggest their mingling. The light I was trying to shed on history was made up as light is from strands of different colours – themes and moods, not races or flash tones. The book moves through indigo to maroon, the point being that indigo sounds related to 'indigenous' (though it isn't so) and is the original colour used in 'blueprints'. It's the colour of the ink used for the first pattern. I wanted the novel to look for the story or scheme that lay beneath the visible layers. That is not to suggest that an original truth exist which could be retrieved and retraced. But there is always another story beyond the story, there is always as it were another deeper blueprint. I was writing about change from the beginnings, as far as they could be disclosed.¹⁶

And indeed Sycorax changes: with the arrival of the British settlers, not only she has to accept a new condition – from being the most potent women of Liamuiga she is reduced to a silent, suffering and defenceless old woman – but she also, somehow, physically changes. As her body shrinks, even her skin transforms and, following the titles of the parts in which the novel is divided, it goes from indigo/blue to orange/red:

¹⁶ Marina Warner, "The Silence of Sycorax", cit., p. 265.

Red was close to blue, Sycorax thought. When you looked up too long without blinking on a day when the sun was high and the blue saturated the sky evenly and deeply from the horizon to the zenith, and closed your eyes, what you saw then was fire, crisscrossed with rivulets of blood. These were the veins in your lids, she knew that, though now, in the darkness of her pain, she remembered that Adesangé, lord of the volcano, the power that leapt in the crater and had leapt to set her on fire, moved along fissures in the earth that forked like those veins in her eyes. The sky – the aether, the immaterial arch of blue above her – had led her to neglect the material presence of anger in fire. [...] The emptiness in which all things revolve is blue, she went on, in her half-waking state. Time was no other colour but blue, since distances were blue and water too. [...] The people who are seizing and occupying the present time cannot belong in my colour, they're like the bits that leap out of a spinning bowl, too heavy, too separate and distinct to be blended in with the other substances; red-hot stones, flung out and setting on fire the place where they land.¹⁷

Although Sycorax's body metamorphoses, her inner identity remains the same; although her skin becomes red, her soul remains blue, unaffected by colonization and untouched by the colonizers, who are guided by their significantly red-haired chief. If blue is the colour of 'moods' rather than of 'flash tones', then it is the colour of royalty, of power, of authority. As Caroline Patey writes, "[...] in the new order of things chromatic, blue is the king of colours as well as the colour of kings and gods; it tinges equally the cloak of King Arthur and the dress of the Virgin."¹⁸ Thus Sycorax maintains her inner strength, her supernatural power that will as a matter of fact allow her to keep living, forever transforming yet forever present and venerated in the island of Liamuiga. Blue, however, is also the colour of melancholy, of "unrequited love and nostalgia"¹⁹. It is Sycorax's inevitable nostalgia for her past, it is the sufferance for her condition, not only during the British colonization but

¹⁷ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., pp. 147-48.

¹⁸ Caroline Patey, "Into the Blue. A Short Excursion into the Semantic of Colours", in *Philament. An Online Journal of the Arts and Cultures*, January 2004. Previously published in *Il gioco dei cerchi concentrici. Saggi sulla letteratura inglese da Shakespeare al Novecento*, a cura di Carlo Pagetti e Francesca Orestano, Milano, Unicopli 2003, pp. 161-173.

(http://sydney.edu.au/arts/publications/philament/issue2_Critique_Patey.htm)

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

also when later on, in the future, she will somehow be condemned to be alive and alert, incapable of resting and of being, finally, silent. Thus, if Sycorax's activity on the island of Liamuiga has a visible effect on her body, it also deeply affects her mind and her way of thinking, transforming her very identity. It is an identity that is marked as specifically feminine – the job of dying and weaving having always been carried out by women – and that definitely allows her to feel realized, satisfied, content. Indeed, as the reader learns from the narrator of *Indigo*,

It was working with indigo, however, that gave her most pleasure and made her prosper; she developed a lively trade in bricks of the dyestuff as well as the cloths she took in from weavers and tinted the desired depth of blue.²⁰

Although Sycorax is alone, exiled from her community, still she manages to prosper and to sustain not only herself, but also her adoptive children Ariel and Dulé. Her profession becomes thus, precisely as it was in Carter's and Byatt's novels, her reason of pride and her mark of independence.

An independent woman is also Miranda – Mama Day – in Gloria Naylor's homonymous novel. As it was in the case of Sycorax, even her profession belongs to the sphere of femininity: she is a midwife, thus having to do with the exquisitely feminine act of giving birth and of helping life to be born; she is also a healer, exploiting her antique knowledge of herbs and plants to cure people, thus another activity strongly connected to life. It is precisely thanks to these activities that she manages to live, but also by growing plants in her garden and by breeding chickens (animals once again connected to fertility). Her whole life thus revolves around her garden, her chickens and the thousands of babies that she has helped coming to life: her identity is completely shaped by what she does as a living and is significantly fixed by her very nickname, Mama Day, which indeed suggests a maternal role. In the case of Mama Day, the word 'job' sounds however inappropriate: as a matter of fact, Miranda does not get paid for what she does, but accepts the gifts that the

²⁰ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 94.

inhabitants of Willow Spring spontaneously offer her. For this reason, but also because the activities she does are all strongly connected to the land and to ancient traditions, it is possible to glimpse, both in Willow Spring and in Liamuiga, the desire to build utopian societies. As Raymond Trousson writes,

L'utopiste professe le mépris de l'or et de l'argent. [...] En conséquence, ils préfèrent une économie fermée, parfaitement autarcique, qui permette d'exclure l'argent par un « faire-valoir » direct. [...] Cet ostracisme d'une économie monétaire et du commerce entraîne le culte d'un système exclusivement agricole.²¹

This same agricultural system is also seen as a constant of what Bakhtin calls the idyllic chronotope (a concept to which I will return in the following paragraphs):

This form comes closest to achieving folkloric time, here the ancient matrices are revealed most fully and with the greatest possible actuality. This is explained by the fact that this form of the idyll uses as its model not the conventional pastoral life [...] but rather draws upon the real life of the agricultural labourer [...] although this life is to one degree or another idealized and sublimated.²²

So, if the professions of Dora and Nora in *Wise Children* and of Olive Wellwood in *The Children's Book* allow a discussion on the condition of women in significant historical moments, the traditional activities of Sycorax and Mama Day suggest a discourse on utopian communities as linked to tradition, folklore and, as I am about to explain, to matriarchal families.

²¹ Raymond Trousson, *Voyages aux pays de nulle part. Histoire littéraire de la pensée utopique*, Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1979, p. 20. "The utopists profess a disdain of gold and silver; [...] Consequently, they prefer a closed economy, perfectly autarchic, that allows them to substitute money with a direct "to do-to be worth". [...] This ostracism of a monetary economy and of commerce leads to the cult of an exclusively agricultural system." (Translation is mine).

²² Michail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 226-27.

3.3. Utopian geographies

3.3.1. Entering the woods: a dangerous pastoral

In Western literature, the wood has always had a strongly double significance: if it is conceived, on the one hand, as a place of luxuriant beauty, pure and unpolluted by the presence of men, on the other it is inevitably seen as dangerous, dark and hostile, full of obstacles and perils. Something very similar happens indeed in Shakespeare. As Jan Kott writes in the chapter “Bitter Arcadia” of his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*,

Shakespearean forests are real and enchanted, tragic and grotesque; pathetic and lyrical scenes are performed in them. In Shakespeare’s forest, life is speeded up, becomes more intense, violent, and at the same time, as it were, clearer. Everything acquires a double significance: the literal and the metaphorical.²³

A Midsummer Night’s Dream and *As You Like It* are two patent examples of the forest’s double nature. In both cases, the wood is presented either as a place of magic, a secure hiding-place and an idyllic reality where to find love, or as the reign of irrationality and fear; an Arcadian corner when flooded by daylight, the wood indeed turns into a scary site at night, when savage beasts and robbers often wait in ambush. In “Bitter Arcadia”, Kott at first emphasises the pastoral side of the Forest of Arden, then reveals however how such a seemingly pastoral, edenic space hides a more dangerous, obscure facet:

Tall oaks grow in it [The Forest of Arden], there are many glades and clearings, streams flow down mossy stones. People wander among briars and thorns. In this forest birds sing, does, hares and deer (‘poor dappled fools’) run about. [...] But from the very first scene the idyll is blurred. As in *Twelfth Night*, the instruments are in discord. The music of the Forest of Arden in all in disharmony.²⁴

²³ Jan Kott, “Shakespeare’s Bitter Arcadia”, in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, cit., p. 222.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 223-24.

The darker side of the wood is similarly highlighted by Marcello Pagnini: in his preface to an Italian edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he not only establishes an opposition between Athens and the wood, seeing the one as the place of rationality and order, illuminated by sunlight, and the other as the reign of spells and mistakes illuminated by moonlight, but he also goes on saying that:

Che la “selva” è, per tradizione, simbolo dello smarrimento e dell'errore non c'è bisogno di ricordarlo. V'è anche qui, nel Sogno, una “selva selvaggia”. E il topos torna frequentemente in Shakespeare. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona* Valentino, capo dei fuorilegge, ha come suo spazio congeniale la foresta; in *As You Like It* il duca bandito si è ritirato nella foresta delle Ardenne; in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* tutti gli incantesimi e le beffe hanno luogo nella foresta di Windsor. Fra l'altro *wood* nell'inglese medievale ed elisabettiano significava, come sostantivo, “bosco”, ma, come attributo, “pazzo”, “lunatico”; e la locuzione *to be in a wood* significa “trovarsi smarriti, in difficoltà, in imbarazzo.”²⁵

In *The Children's Book* more specifically but somehow also in Carter's *Wise Children*, the wood is considered precisely as an expression of this dichotomy: apparently a truly utopian place, it hides instead, in both cases, a more uncanny or at least a completely different reality.

To underline the significance of the wood, both as a real place and as a literary *topos*, Antonia Byatt has chosen to incorporate the word itself, ‘wood’, in Humprhy and Olive's surname: their names thus immediately point at a healthy life, lived in communion with and in respect of nature. What is more, the description of their dwelling, which cannot but utterly fascinate the reader, also seems to hint on the

²⁵ William Shakespeare, *Sogno d'una notte di mezza estate*, Milano: Garzanti, 1991, p. xlii. “There is no need to remember that the forest, the ‘wilderness’, traditionally symbolizes dismay and mistake. Even here, in the Dream, there is, a ‘wild wilderness’. And this *topos* is recurrent in Shakespeare. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentino, leader of the outlaws, finds in the forest a congenial place; in *As You Like It* the banned duke lives in the forest of Arden; in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* all the spells and the jokes take place in Windsor forest. What is more, in mediaeval and Elizabethan English, wood meant ‘forest’ as a name, but, as an attribute, it meant ‘crazy’, ‘lunatic’; and the idiomatic expression *to be in a wood* means ‘to be at a loss, embarrassed’. (Translation is mine).

one hand at a pastoral, rural lifestyle and on the other at a life completely plunged in the magic atmosphere of Olive's tales:

They took the train to Andreden, in the Kentish Weald, and took a fly at the station. [...] Andred was the old British name for forest. Their house was called Todefright. In fact they had changed it from Todsfrith, but the change was etymologically sound. Fryth, in the old language of the Weald, was a word for scrubland on the edge of a forest. [...] They drove between hawthorn and hazel hedges, along curling lanes between overhanging woods of beech, and birch, and yew. [...] Todefright was an old Kentish farmhouse, built of stone and timber. It had meadows and a river before it, woods rising uphill behind it, and a wide view to the high edge of the Weald across the river.²⁶

Indeed, the narrator's depiction of Todefright contains many elements that recall, in our collective imagery, a quiet pastoral landscape: rivers, meadows and old cottages cannot but let the reader dream of an edenic reality, an enchanted place rendered even more so by the presence of Olive herself and by the many fairy-tales she keeps inventing there. Also, the more the reader discovers details about the life at Todefright, the more the impression of being conducted into a utopian world is reinforced: the Wellwood children lead a healthy and happy existence, carelessly spent between rides in the woods and meetings in the tree-house; Olive and Humphry themselves once a year disguise as king and queen of fairies, thus somehow asserting their control and their sense of belonging to a place, the forest, that they really feel as their own. At the same time, however, the name Todefright itself cannot but evoke the idea of something frightening, dangerous, uncomfortable. A house lost in the woods appears somehow as a fragile, unsafe place where to live and grow. Similarly the wood, usually a space of freedom and independence, a playground for the children, becomes for Tom a real obsession, a prison from which he refuses to escape, a sort of second home where he feels at ease, incapable, however, of understanding his parents' preoccupations for him;

²⁶ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 17.

unluckily the same woods, whose geography he knew by heart, will also be the cause of his death: hospitable and welcoming during the day, they become a labyrinth at night, and Tom gets lost, never finding his way back to his house and deciding to surrender, finally, to the potency of the sea he has reached. Thus, the woods around Olive and Humphry's household disquietingly recall the wood described by Propp in his study on the historical roots of fairy-tales:

There is a close connection between the forest of fairy tales and the one in rites of passage. Rites of passages always take place in the forest. It is a characteristics which is everywhere constant and unchanged. [...] The wood of the fairy tale mirrors the wood on the one hand as the place where rites took place, on the other as the access to the realm of the dead.²⁷

In Byatt's novel, entering, exploring and even living in the wood seems indeed to be perceived as a rite of passage: not only the Wellwood children are portrayed while running free in the woods, but the reader also witnesses them organizing, with some friends, relatives and a few tutors to guide them, what they call the "Forest Camp": a period during which they live in tents, healthfully walk for miles, read, sunbathe, flirt but also learn, for example, to cook, to become independent, to enter adulthood. From one camp to another, however, everyone changes except Tom:

Spirits were lowered, in the group as a whole. It was possible that the camp might have restored them, but in the event, they were overwhelmed with rain, in what turned out to be the wettest summer ever recorded. [...] Tom proposed a mud fight, but the others could work up no real enthusiasm. They were clammy and uncomfortable. Then one night the wind got up, and the guy-ropes tore loose and the tents slopped and slapped over the grass. They crawled, soaked, from under. [...] A figure went past them in the opposite direction, racing and whirling. It was Tom, half-visible through the ropes of driving rain. He ran along the jetty, and dived into the pond, and came up again, blowing like a triton, his hair plastered to his face. 'Come

²⁷ Vladimir J. Propp, *Morfologia della fiaba e Radici storiche dei racconti di magia*, Roma: Newton Compton, 1992, pp. 178-79. (Translation is mine).

on,' he cried. The rain beat in polka dots around him, and vicious whip-lashes of wet wind stirred up the pond's surface into crowns and ridges. 'Come on,' cried Tom, but no one came [...].²⁸

The narrator emphasises Tom's difference and his uniqueness in the group: in the woods, the other children somehow live their rite of passage, becoming young adults conscious of their future, of their responsibilities, and preoccupied with their education. Tom, instead, remains a child: he does not see his future as clearly as the others, nor he desires a 'normal' adulthood, which would socially determine his identity; for him, the wood is not the place of the rite of passage, rather, the door to the realm of the dead: being so at ease in the forest, he will somehow forget its labyrinthine nature and its dangerousness; the forest thus swallows him, forever fixing him in the purity and the freedom of his adolescence.

Interestingly, the duality of the wood presented as a pastoral space on the one hand, as a dangerous one on the other, seems to extend even to Olive's household itself. When the book begins, the reader interprets it as the ideal location to raise children, a place completely plunged in nature and in magic, where parties were often held, and where the adults discussed politics while the young were left free to play, run and have fun; Todefright seems to be a stimulating reality, rendered even more so because it is imbued by the utopian ideals of the Fabian society and by discussions about the Fabian dream of a utopian world without class or gender distinctions. Yet, the reader cannot suppress the sensation that something is wrong: are the Wellwoods, with their curious lifestyle, really trying to put the Fabian ideals into practice or are they just pretending to be something that, in fact, they are not?

The Wellwoods' parties were not Fabian teas with solid cups and saucers and a frigid absence of entertainment. Nor were they political meetings, to discuss the London County Council, *Free Russia* and Russian starvation. They were frivolous, lantern-lit, silk and velvet fancy-dress parties, with masques, and dancing to flute and fiddle.²⁹

²⁸ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 415.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

At the beginning of the novel, this light-hearted atmosphere is indeed charming and attractive, helping the reader to better understand the peculiar character of the protagonists. As the narrative proceeds, however, and as strange, disturbing pieces of information begin to crop up, the frivolous parties seem indeed to become darker, a mere means to conceal and sweeten a much bitter truth. How can two parents who believe so strongly in the principles of the Fabian society ever doubt about the necessity, for their daughter, of getting a proper education? And how can a considerate father, Dorothy asks herself, all of a sudden try to abuse her? What seemed to be a utopian place suddenly changes into something unknown, much darker and disquieting; what the reader perceived, at the beginning of the novel, as the familiar, hospitable wood around Todefright, indeed becomes dangerous, strange and hostile. The utopia cracks, reveals its imperfections and its problems.

Woods and forests feature as the setting of quite an important part of the novel even in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, but in this case their presence, their role and the narrator's description of them are far from being traditional. Interestingly, the wood becomes the protagonist of that same, central third chapter previously discussed: it is the chapter where Dora and Nora travel to, significantly, Hollywood, sleep in a motel called The Forest of Arden and act as fairies in the film production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* whose setting is nothing else but a huge, fake, wood. Thus, as it is quite evident, Carter immediately wishes to link her idea of the wood to Shakespeare and his plays; however, the image of Shakespeare that is in this way conveyed is the one of a globalized, mass-industry Shakespeare; transformed into the icon of Englishness and of drama, he is seen as a literary myth to safely exploit in order to make easy money:

Nora and I put up at the Forest of Arden. The legendary Forest of Arden, the residential motel of the stars, with its Old English motif. What could have been more appropriate, in the circumstances? All the little bungalows, half-timbered, thatched – replicas of Anne Hathaway's cottage – each one nestled under clematis, set in wee

herbaceous gardens, tended with loving care by Japanese gardeners, and there were Warwickshire apple trees, imported oaks, you name it. [...] But the Forest of Arden was a lovely, flimsy, fantastic place, where you could live in grand, two-dimensional style among the hissing lawns – those incessant sprinklers! – and there was a pool, shaped like an acorn leaf, of bright turquoise, planted with shocking pink flamingos, ever so *As You Like It* even if out of period [...].³⁰

Always aiming at transforming Shakespeare into the image of a dramatist whose work is and must be accessible to everyone, Angela Carter does not hesitate to demystify him, somehow destroying the sacred aura that has always existed around his name and his work. In doing so, however, she ironically points at the risks of such an operation: Shakespeare should not become only a commercial product to be bought and sold, nor his plays and characters should be transformed into some stereotyped *clichés* or his words merely used as effective quotations. Thus, what Carter makes of the Forest of Arden is a ridiculous and improbable transformation: from being one of the most captivating settings of Shakespeare's plays and one of the better rooted in our imagination, it becomes a luxury motel and a prosaic replica of Shakespeare's home place. Also, if we look at the sentence quoted above, the attribute "legendary" is no more connected to Shakespeare's Forest of Arden, but is instead associated to the five-star motel: the replica, the fake, has completely replaced the original.

Thus the Forest of Arden, a fictional 'place' in Shakespeare's comedy, has been transformed by Carter into a fictional 'non-place', according to the anthropological meaning that Marc Augé attributes to these two words:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical or concerned with identity will be a non-place.³¹

³⁰ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., pp. 120-21.

³¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London and New York: Verso, 1995, pp. 77-8.

Although fictional, Shakespeare's Forest of Arden possesses the three anthropological characteristics of a 'place': it is relational, because it is here that Rosalind is reunited with her father and finds a husband, thus discovering the joy of truthful and genuine relationships; it is historical, not only because of its critical and literary longevity, but also and most importantly because Shakespeare attributed to the setting of *As You Like It* the name of a real forest, significantly the one close to his native village; finally, it is a place concerned with identity: here Rosalind disguises as a boy, wearing a mask that will in the end fall to reveal her real self, as daughter and as bride. Evidently, the hotel that Carter chooses to name The Forest of Arden is instead deprived of these characteristics: it is a space with no history, where relations are strictly commercial and where people – clients – are reduced to numbers. The allusion to Shakespeare, what is more, is not there for a specific reason – be it historical or cultural – but only represents an element of spectacle:

The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude; there is no room there for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle, usually in allusive texts.³²

Carter's choice of giving the motel of her novel such an allusive, rich and significant name, yet devoid of any possible meaning, aims at revealing the individualism and the capitalistic tendency of the contemporary, Western society. Far from being a real wood, The Forest of Arden becomes the impersonal non-place of Augé's supermodernity, a space of luxury and "solitary contractuality"³³, which symbolizes the effects of globalization, of mass-industry and mass-tourism on something that is instead often considered as exclusively literary. Shakespeare himself is thus somehow exposed to the risk of becoming a 'non-place': entering the dangerous forest of mass culture he is transformed into a touristic destination and an easy product both of the souvenir trade and of the film industry.

³² Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, cit, pp. 103-4.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

The Forest of Arden, however, is not the only wood in *Wise Children*: another wood, that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, makes indeed its appearance in the novel: once again, to underline how much Shakespeare has been nowadays exploited, copied and abused, Angela Carter does not imagine a real forest as the setting of Melchior Hazard's film, but a fake, plastic one. It is a wood that on the one hand, as already written in the previous chapter, underlines the difference between cinema and theatre but that, on the other, also points to the myth of yet another wood, Hollywood:

And I no longer remember the set as a set but as a real wood, dangerous, uncomfortable, with real, steep spines on the conkers and thorns on the bushes, but looking as if it were unreal and painted, and the bewildering moonlight spilled like milk in this wood, as if Hollywood was the name of the enchanted forest where you lose yourself and you find yourself, again; the wood that changes you; the wood where you go mad; the wood where the shadows live longer than you do. These days, half a century and more later, I might think I did not live but dream that night, if it wasn't for the photos, see?³⁴

Paraphrasing one of Demetrio's last cues (Are you sure/That we are awake? It seems to me/that yet we sleep, we dream)³⁵, Angela Carter manages to juxtapose Hollywood, with its dreams of glory, fame and prosperity, and the disturbed dreams of love in Shakespeare's *Midsummer*. In her witty and unusual comparison, Carter attributes the double meaning that the wood generally acquires in literature to the Hollywood environment: if it is on one side definitely a utopian place, where everyone's dream of reaching popularity and affluence may come true and where a kind of eternal life is guaranteed by the magic of the cinema industry, on the other it clearly represents a dangerous reality in which it is only too easy, as Dora says, to get lost, to forget what the real values are, thus transforming the utopia into a nightmare.

³⁴ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., pp. 157-58.

³⁵ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV, i, 189-90.

However, although all the woods described in Carter's *Wise Children* may, to a certain extent, be considered as utopian places (The Forest of Arden being the edenic, lavish motel where life is enjoyed in full tranquillity and amusement, while the set of Shakespeare's *Midsummer* and thus, as a consequence, Hollywood, being, in Carter's words "Dreamland"³⁶), still I believe that there is another, truly utopian place in *Wise Children* and one that is, what is more, strictly associated both to matriarchy and to Shakespeare:

What would have become of us, if Grandma hadn't left us this house? 49 Bard Road, Brixton, London, South West Two. Bless this house. If it wasn't for this house, Nora and I would be on the streets by now.³⁷

The house situated in the evocative Bard Road is the place to which Dora and Nora entirely belong: it is the house where they were born, where they have spent their whole lives and to which, consequently, the greatest part of their souvenirs is attached. If the hotel The Forest of Arden can be considered as a 'non-place', then Dora and Nora's house is a 'place': "Place becomes a refuge to the habitué of non-places (who may dream, for example, of owning a second house rooted in the depths of the countryside)."³⁸ Although situated in London and not lost somewhere in the green British countryside, still the sisters' house, their home, is the place of which they think in a nostalgic mood after having spent too much time in dreamy, rapturous Hollywood:

But I was pining away for home – for the whirr and rattle of the trams, the lights of Electric Avenue glowing like bad fish through a good old London fog, longing for rain and weather and bacon sandwiches, for the healthy chill of 49 Bard Road on a frosty morning, for the smell of home, the damp, the cabbage, the tea, the gin.³⁹

³⁶ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 120.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

³⁸ Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, cit., p. 107.

³⁹ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 143.

Indeed, if 49 Bard Road is the place from where the twins occasionally leave, it is also their refuge, the utopian space to which they always return, significantly going back both to their adoptive mother and to Shakespeare. The house that Dora and Nora have inherited from Grandma Chance thus comes to represent on the one hand the power of matriarchy and the strength of maternal love, on the other, because of its address, it is also inevitably and explicitly connected to the immortal playwright. *Wise Children* can thus be read as an hymn to mothers and to Shakespeare, or, to say it differently and more appropriately, it definitely can be interpreted as a celebration of Shakespeare who ceases to be the symbol of a restrictive, suffocating patriarchy and who becomes, instead, Carter's literary mother.

3.3.2. Exploring the island: utopia and heterotopia

Precisely as the wood, the island too is an important and long-lasting literary *topos*, that has acquired, because of its peculiar geographical conformation, a strongly symbolic meaning. As Adriana Corrado writes,

[...] la lontananza, la separatezza e la difficoltà dell'approdo faccia dell'isola la terra in cui tendere in cerca del riposo e dell'amore, del perdono e dell'accoglienza, nel calore della famiglia che è anche modello ideale di società, e per la società. E la separatezza dell'isola consente poi anche l'oblio, la dimenticanza del dolore e delle prove affrontate e superate, o che almeno ci si è lasciati alle spalle, insieme al mondo reale, premessa questa per una nuova partenza verso il bene, il bello, la giustizia, nella lunga quest che segna l'uomo e il suo vivere terreno. L'isola è apparsa, pertanto, sempre spazio privilegiato per collocarvi modelli di armonia e perfezione sociale che, nati da mente umana, abbiano riprodotto, o tentato di riprodurre in qualche misura il modello edenico.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Adriana Corrado, "L'isola", in Vita Fortunati, Raymond Trousson, Adriana Corrado (eds.), *Dall'utopia all'utopismo. Percorsi tematici*, Napoli: CUEN, 2003, p. 243: "[...] the distance, the separateness and the difficulty in landing transform the island into the land towards which to tend in search of rest and of love, of forgiveness and of hospitality, in the warm-heartedness of the family which is the ideal model of the society and for the society. And the separateness of the island also allows oblivion, oblivion of pain and of the many trials which have been faced and overcome,

Thus, if the island on the one hand calls to mind the setting of Shakespeare's *Tempest* (Prospero's island truly is a space completely separate from the rest of the world, a place which follows its own rules and that is consequently particularly fit for Prospero's magic achievements), on the other it is inevitably connected to utopian literature. Indeed, Raymond Trousson states that:

La caractéristique extérieure la plus évidente et la plus commune de l'utopie est sans doute son *insularisme*. Que d'îles, en effet, dans la tradition utopique, de Thomas More à Moutonnet de Clarifons en passant par Gilbert, Lesconvel ou Morelly ! Et quand, par hasard, il ne s'agit pas d'une île isolée au milieu de l'océan, l'insularisme fondamental n'est pas moins évident : la Cité du Soleil se replie dans « une vaste plaine située sous l'Equateur » ; le royaume de Butrol, chez Tyssot de Patot, est coupé de l'extérieur par le rempart de la savane et de la forêt ; la Mezzoranie de Berington est oubliée au cœur de l'Afrique et l'utopie de Butler est tapie au creux des montagnes. [...] L'insularisme utopique est avant tout une attitude mentale, dont l'île classique n'est que la représentation naïve. Il relève de la conviction que seule une communauté à l'abri des influences dissolvantes de l'extérieur peut atteindre la perfection de son développement.⁴¹

Trousson's idea of the island as a close community tending to perfection somehow underlies two of the novels I am dealing with – *Mama Day* and *Indigo*. Interestingly, when foreign elements enter the community, mining the island's impregnability,

or that have at least been left behind together with the real world; these are the premises for a new start towards what is good, beautiful, and just, in the long quest that marks men's earthly life. The island, thus, has always been seen as the privileged space where to locate models of harmony and social perfection that have reproduced, or have tried to reproduce, somehow, the edenic model.” (Translation is mine)

⁴¹ Raymond Trousson, *Voyages aux pays de nulle part. Histoire Littéraire de la pensée utopique*, cit., pp. 19-20. “The most evident and most common characteristic of utopia is definitely its insularism. As a matter of facts, islands are everywhere in the utopian literary tradition, from Thomas More to Moutonnet de Clarifons, passing by Gilbert, Lesconvel or Morelly! And when, by accident, insularism is not represent by an island lost in the middle of the ocean, still it is not less evident: the City of the Sun is situated ‘on a large plain immediately under the equator’; the Kingdom of Butrol, in Tyssot de Patot, is closed off from the exterior by the savannah and the forest; Berington's Mezzorania is forgotten in the heart of Africa and Butler's utopia is nestled on the mountains. [...] Utopian insularism is first of all a mental attitude, of which the classical island is only a naïve representation. It comes from the firm belief that only a community protected by exterior influences can reach perfection in its development.”(Translation is mine).

negative consequences are to be expected: in *Mama Day*, the arrival of George and the consequent clash of two cultures will lead to his death; in *Indigo*, the landing of the British settlers provokes the enslavement of a whole community and the exploitations of their lands. Islands are thus utopian communities insofar as they remain virgin territories untouched by other cultures, other ways of living and thinking, other realities.

Since their geographical independence is the guarantee of their purity, it is no surprise that both Marina Warner and Gloria Naylor should insist on this aspect, choosing to insert in their novels the drawing of the maps of Lياميغا on the one hand, of Willow Spring on the other. The map is the visual representation of the island's separateness, and, what is more, it helps the reader know and explore the physical space of the novel. In Isabella Pezzini's words,

[...] la mappa di un testo immaginario non è né pura decorazione, né pura ostensione, ma dovrebbe permettere al lettore di acquisire la competenza necessaria a padroneggiare lo spazio del testo come – o quasi come – l'Autore che lo ha immaginato [...].⁴²

Interestingly, in the case of Marina Warner's novel, the concept of mapping is rendered explicit by the very subtitle of the book, *Mapping the Waters*. The writer, however, is here probably not referring to a geographical map, but to a literary one: her novel is indeed re-mapping Shakespeare's play, its characters, its situations. As Caroline Cakebread suggests,

The idea of mapping is important in terms of Warner's relationship with Shakespeare for, in many ways, cartography is also an act of negotiation, an attempt to find a system of names, signs, and signals through which to mediate one's experience of any given landscape. [...] Through Warner's negotiation between her own work and

⁴² Isabella Pezzini, "Geografia", in Vita Fortunati, Raymond Trousson, Adriana Corrado (eds), *Dall'utopia all'utopismo. Percorsi tematici*, cit., p. 238: "The map of an imaginary text is neither pure decoration nor pure ostentation, but should allow the reader to acquire the competences necessary to master the space of the text as – or almost as – the author has imagined it [...]." (Translation is mine).

Shakespeare's, the reader can see a new territory taking form, one that is both bound to the past and yet distinctly her own.⁴³

Going back to geographical maps, it is, I believe, important to point out how the readers' expectations are likely to be stimulated by the position of the island on the globe. Marina Warner and Gloria Naylor, dealing with places that really exist, easily allow the readers to locate the islands on a world map, inducing them to fantasize about such places thanks, also, to their stereotypical ideas of them. So Lianuiga, situated in the Caribbean Sea, easily suggests idyllic images of brilliant colours and intriguing smells, and so Willow Spring, whose name already seems to hint at an Edenic but somehow melancholic reality, is rendered even more unique by the narrator's brief description of its peculiarity: the fact that it belongs to no state.

[...] 'cause Willow Spring ain't in no state. Georgia and South Carolina done tried, though – been trying since right after the Civil War to prove that Willow Spring belong to one or the other of them. Look on any of them old maps they hurried and drew up soon as the Union soldiers pulled out and you can see that the only thing connects us to the mainland is a bridge – and even that gotta be rebuilt after every big storm. [...] So who it belong to? It belongs to us – clean and simple.⁴⁴

If we look on an atlas, Willow Spring is indeed an unincorporated community in North Carolina but, interestingly enough, it is not an island. The operation that Gloria Naylor conducts, transforming an existing and specific reality into an island, thus becomes doubly significant: in the novel, Willow Spring reinforces, through its own geography, its sense of independence and freedom, its difference and uniqueness, truly becoming a literary space that cannot but call to mind other important, symbolic, indeed utopian islands of Western literature. According to Julie Sanders,

⁴³ Caroline Cakebread, "Sycorax Speaks: Marina Warner's *Indigo* and *The Tempest*", cit., p. 218.

⁴⁴ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 4-5.

Willow Spring as a location evokes Edenic and paradisiacal association in the novel. [...] it is a kind of black Utopia, quite literally Thomas More's "no-place", since it lies outside the law, outside the political and geographical domain of the United States.⁴⁵

The conformation and the geographical position of Willow Spring and of Liamuiga are extremely eloquent because they suggest, to the reader's mind, the image of two uncontaminated spaces, well protected by the sea that surrounds them, safe and secure in their isolation, two Edenic places where to rest and forget ordinary life. Far from betraying these first but strong impressions, the descriptions that follow cannot but confirm them, leaving all the more the sensation that the two islands, with their matriarchal organization, their luxuriant nature which is loved and respected, their significant traditions, should somehow be seen as idealistic, utopian spaces. In both novels, what is more, it is not the narrator who describes the island, but one of the characters, namely Kit Everard in *Indigo*, George in *Mama Day*: the two writers thus manage to create a correspondence between character and reader, who both look at the newly discovered islands with fresh, enthralled, and amazed gazes:

Dear cousin,

How should I begin to describe the many enchantments of this isle? [...] How have I longed to have you in my arms to show you its marvellous bounty, its plentiful springs and well-watered pastures, its salt ponds and forest arbours where gay birds fly and the trees bear abundantly!⁴⁶

Kit's admiring words indeed portray a seemingly Arcadian place, an idyllic reality very much alike to the one that George finds in Willow Spring:

[...] you had not prepared me for paradise. And to be fair, I realized that there was nothing you could have said that would have made any sense to me. I had to be there and see – no, feel – that I was entering another world. Even the word *paradise* failed

⁴⁵ Julie Sanders, *Novel Shakespeares. Twentieth-century Women Novelists and Appropriation*, cit., p. 182.

⁴⁶ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 151.

once I crossed over The Sound. Sure, I can describe what I saw: a sleepy little section of wooden storefronts, then sporadic houses of stucco, brick, and clapboard all framed by palmettos, live oaks, and flowering bushes; every now and then a span of marshland, a parch of woods. But how do I describe the air that thickens so that it seemed as solid as water, causing colours and textures to actually float in it? [...] And if someone had asked me about the fragrance from the whisperings of the palmettos, or the distant rush of the surf, I would have said that it all smelled like forever.⁴⁷

Paradise is the word whose meaning is the closest to illustrate what George is seeing and feeling. As it was for Warner's *Indigo*, even in this case the characteristics of the garden of Eden seem to be implied: George is entering a world of unparalleled beauty, a reality whose magnificence is ineffable; he is becoming part of a dream landscape, exceptional for its colours, its perfumes and its marvellous atmosphere. Furthermore, since George's description of the island clearly focuses on colours, smell and on the quality of the air, Gloria Naylor is, I believe, establishing a subtle comparison with the island of *The Tempest*, whose same characteristics have famously been praised by Gonzalo⁴⁸.

If Willow Spring and Liamuiga can thus be interpreted as utopian spaces, and also, using Augé's words, as 'places' strongly connected to history and traditions, where relations with the others are held in high consideration and where everyone's identity is respected and accepted, it is also possible to interpret them through the lenses of the Bakhtinian idyllic chronotope:

[These types of idylls are] all determined by their general relationship to the immanent unity of folkloric time. This finds expression predominantly in the special relationship that time has to space in the idyll: an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home. Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the

⁴⁷ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 175.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, II, i, 46-53. The island is praised three times, the first one by Adrian ("The air breathes upon us here most sweetly"), then by Gonzalo ("Here is everything advantageous to life"/[...]/How lush and lusty the grass looks! How green!").

fathers and grandfathers lived and where one's children and their children will live. This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world. But in this little spatially limited world a sequence of generations is localized that is potentially without limit. [...] the unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave (the same little corner, the same earth), and brings together as well childhood and old age (the same grove, stream, the same line trees, the same house) [...]. This blurring of all the temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place also contributes in an essential way to the creation of the cyclic rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll.⁴⁹

Not only Bakhtin's physical description of space in the idyllic chronotope calls to mind the beauty of the islands of Liamuiga and Willow Spring, each with its own valleys and mountains and fields and forests; but also his delineating the cyclic nature of a time that brings together old and young generations cannot but let the reader think about the intricate family tree of the Days or about Sycorax's long lineage that, with Atala Seacole, reaches into the contemporary era.

Marina Warner and Gloria Naylor, articulating the Bakhtinian concept of the idyllic chronotope and giving their novels a significant and evocative insular setting, definitely aim at portraying communities that tend towards the realization of utopian projects. All the same, every utopia hides uncanny aspects and the search for perfection reveals inevitable flaws:

Qu'un tel ensemble fonctionne avec régularité n'est possible qu'au prix d'une étroite surveillance : c'est pourquoi les utopistes recourent toujours à un strict *dirigisme*. [...] L'utopie est par nature contraignante. [...] Partout, l'individu est esclave. [...] Rien d'étonnant si, dans ces conditions, l'utopiste préconise volontiers le *collectivisme* le plus absolu. La plupart du temps, la famille a disparu du royaume d'Utopie ; la cellule familiale, en effet, constitue aisément un noyau réfractaire à l'ordre social et fait préférer les intérêts particuliers à ceux de la cité. [...] La propriété a disparu.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Michail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, cit., p. 225.

⁵⁰ Raymond Trousson, *Voyages aux pays de nulle part. Histoire Littéraire de la pensée utopique*, cit, p. 23. "Such an *ensemble* regularly functions only because of a strict surveillance: this is why the utopists always recur to a harsh *government control* [...] Utopia is, for its own nature, constraining. [...] Everywhere, the individual is a slave. [...] No surprise if, in these conditions, the utopist encourages

Collectivism is definitely a characteristic of the community of Willow Spring, but it is seen as a positive one, since many of its inhabitants act for the others' well-being; to tell the truth, this collectivism, together with traditions such as Candle Walk and with Miranda's practice of an ancestral medicine, indeed contribute to render life at Willow Spring more intriguing still to the eyes of the readers: rooted in the past, Willow Spring appears to have conserved the authenticity, the simplicity and the collaborative spirit of such an epoch. Government control, which is the other negative characteristic listed by Trousson, does not exist in Mama Day's world; on the contrary, individual liberty is maintained and, as everywhere else, it can be badly used; similarly, jealousy and rancour are not, nor can they be, eliminated, as well as antipathies and hate. So Ruby, jealous of Cocoa, manages to cast an evil spell on her, bringing about her illness which will consequently cause George's death. No one, not even the powerful Mama Day will be able to save him: George's mentality is too different, too rational, too modern for a community like Willow Spring; also, as a critic suggested, his role as Cocoa's husband could threaten the prosecution of the matriarchal society so well established on the island; instead,

As a ghost, George has now shed the encumberments of his masculinity: in this way un-gendered – the only way possible – he can stay in Willow Spring and in the life of its next mother. [...] The ghost love story suggests in various ways that mother love and patriarchy are not compatible.⁵¹

Although tending towards the realization of a utopian project, although definitely embodying the idyllic chronotope, still Willow Spring is not a perfect society; on the contrary it often reveals cruel, even disquieting aspects.

As patriarchy can be perceived as a menace to the matriarchal utopia of Willow Spring, so another kind of threat disturbs the tranquil flow of life on the

the most absolute *collectivism*. Very often, family has disappeared from the kingdom of Utopia; the family unit, as a matter of fact, easily constitutes a group resistant to social order and privileges the individual interest to those of the city. [...] Private property has disappeared.” (Translation is mine).⁵¹ Suzanne Juhasz, “The Magic Circle: Fictions of the Good Mother in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*”, in Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris, *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, cit., p. 142.

island of *Indigo*. Similarly, however, it is a threat that comes from a typically white, western way of thinking and that has a disastrous impact on black or, as it is in Warner's novel, on the Caribbean populations. As already seen, the first threat to the small utopian community constituted by Sycorax, Ariel and Dulé comes precisely from the English conquest of Liamuiga: it is a conquest that not only annihilates the kind of maternal relation existing between Sycorax and Ariel but that also completely changes and re-maps the geography of the places where they used to live: the plantations of indigo become bigger and bigger, new houses are built, new borders are defined. Inevitably, as the British soldiers reinforce their authority on the island, the matriarchal power of Sycorax seems to live its last days. If Western people contributed, in the seventeenth century, to the destruction of a utopian community, in the twenty-first century they intend precisely to do the opposite: building a dream space and creating an idyllic – although definitely fake – reality, is indeed what Sy and Xanthe are hoping to obtain thanks to their two, attractive luxury hotels: Xanadu and The Spice of Life with its charming spa, the Hotel des Bains. Interestingly, hotels are among the places that Michel Foucault describes as heterotopias: they are not utopias, but they strongly resemble them, being “real, actual places, places which are delineated in the institution of society itself, and that somehow constitute a sort of space-against, a sort of utopia truly realized [...]”⁵² Indeed, in Marina Warner's novel, hotels really symbolize, for Western tourists, a dreamy reality out of time, far from the preoccupations and the constant haste of everyday life; plunged in a luxuriant nature, caressed by the sun and the sea, life in the Caribbean hotels seems to slowly pass in a world outside time, undisturbed and eternally unproblematic. As Sy himself says:

It was easy at the hotel to overlook the events altogether. The breeze blew from the sea, lifting the steamy lid that bore down on the town further inland in high summer; the cottages or units scattered in the garden, were abloom with allamanda and hibiscus, shaded by the nodding feathers of the royal palms and the broad hands of

⁵² Michel Foucault, *Spazi altri. I luoghi delle eterotopie*, Milano: Mimesis, 2001, p. 23. (Translation is mine).

the shimmering breadfruit trees. They belonged in the nowhere place of idyllic and romance, as he had wished; history and politics were erased from the grounds [...]. Xanthe had encouraged him to dream up an imaginary past at The Spice of Life: ‘Tradition is a lie,’ she had said. ‘It’s always a selective process, whatever you do – the dominant class picks its tradition to suit.[...]’⁵³

Definitely, there is a sort of carelessness and brutality in Xanthe’s words: belonging to the dominant class, she is the one who chooses the tradition her guests should believe in; unmindful of the natives, of their culture and their habits, she imposes a past that has never truly existed. The hotels, paradise of Westerners, have indeed a high price to pay: a whole population is obliterated, its existence and cultural baggage forgotten and sacrificed on the altar of money, profit and lavishness. If the two hotels are heterotopias, ideal places whose “aim is not to accumulate time, but on the contrary to erase it, going back to the original nudity and to the innocence of the original sin”⁵⁴, they are also what Augé has defined as ‘non-places’, because they completely ignore a whole population’s history and identity. Indeed, behind a façade of luxury, efficiency and well-being, they hide a much more miserable, distressing reality of exploitation, arrogance, and disdain:

Sy and Xanthe prove to be blind to the maps of poverty and environmental contamination, of labour and forestry exploitation, which they displace – abject – from the visible, brochure-like realities they offer the tourists. However, [...] the island somatises the Calibanic anger and resistance to Western expropriation: the repressed otherness blasts open once again, and the violent tempests it plots expose and dismantle Prospero’s authority, and bring to the surface the island’s most monstrous face – landscape and social fracture, misery lurking in the near distance of tourist luxury.⁵⁵

⁵³ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 357.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Utopie Eterotopie*, Napoli: Cronopio, 2006, p. 22. (Translation is mine).

⁵⁵ María José Chivite de León, *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities. Rewriting Alterity in J.M. Coetzee’s Foe and Marina Warner’s Indigo*, cit., p. 161.

In Shakespeare's play, Prospero himself conjures up the tempest that will bring his brother on the island, the tempest that is thus, at the same time, culmination and conclusion of all "his charms"⁵⁶. In *Indigo*, instead, Hurricane Margaret unexpectedly hits and damages the hotels, also uprooting the oyster beds so carefully cultivated by Sy Nebris. The tempest is in this case only a prelude to what will come after: the assault of a group of rebels, Shining Purity, to the Liamuigan Parliament, a series of disorders which brought about a few casualties – Xanthe among them – and, finally, the restoration of order thanks to the new Minister for Economic, Atala Seacole, whose politics may be resumed in the following words: "We will not go on ravaging our beautiful land, our beautiful sea. We honour the coral reef, we treasure the rainforest where the hot springs rise to give us health."⁵⁷ A descendant of Sycorax's, Atala Seacole is the character who somehow intends to restore the matriarchal utopia which once existed on Liamuiga, when people were respected and nature loved and cherished; her aim is not bringing the island back to its ancient traditions, but envisaging for it and for its people a better future, based on intelligent progress and autonomy. In this way, the island can slowly retrieve its original, symbolical status: a land of freedom and independence, an utopian community built on egalitarianism and respect.

Mama Day and *Indigo*, each significantly set on idyllic islands, evoke two utopian realities in the reader's mind, at the same time discussing and problematizing them: the perfection of utopian societies is represented as an extremely fragile one, which often hides flaws and weakness; similarly, the dream of heterotopias shifts towards the construction of fake realities and impersonal 'non-places'.

⁵⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V, epilogue, 1.

⁵⁷ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 375.

3.4. Inventing the (matriarchal) family

Olive Wellwood, Grandma Chance, Sycorax and Mama Day: it is easy to see how the four utopian communities I have just described revolve around these strong and independent maternal figures. Sometimes at the centre of vaster communities, yet it is first of all in the microcosm of the family that these women exercise their maternal role. However, it is important to understand how the term family is not to be intended in its traditional meaning: on the contrary, in the case of the four novels I am analyzing it refers to peculiar realities. In *The Children's Book* the reader meets an apparently big, happy and normal family of Fabian intellectuals, kept together by a busy mother and writer, Olive; the Wellwood family hides however a much more obscure reality: some of Olive and Humphry's children are not their own sons and daughters, but children conceived in extra-marital affairs. Hiding nothing but still differing from the traditional stereotype of the family unit is, in *Mama Day*, Cocoa's original family: being an orphan, Cocoa spent her childhood with her grandmother Abigail and her aunt Miranda, two figures that, for her, constitute the perfect mother:

But if grandma had raised me alone, I would have been ruined for any fit company. It seemed I could no wrong with her, while with Mama Day I could no right. I guess, in a funny kind of way, together they were the perfect mother.⁵⁸

Also acting as substitute mothers are the characters of Grandma Chance in *Wise Children* and of Sycorax in *Indigo*: the first adopted Nora and Dora after the death of their natural mother – or supposed death, since the novel raises doubts about the real existence of the twins' mum; the second, banned from her village, lives with a boy she saved from certain death and with a girl, a foreign one, left behind on Liamuiga by her original community: as an old woman, Sycorax becomes mother again, taking care of two, and not her own, children.

⁵⁸ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 58.

Of all the four novels, it is the one of Angela Carter that truly gives voice to the important role of women in the creation of the family, either the “normal”, nuclear family constituted by the canonical figures of father, mother and children, or the definitely more unusual, patchwork families that all these four narratives present:

‘Family’, I say. Grandma *invented* this family. She *put it together* out of whatever came to hand – a stray pair of orphaned babes, a ragamuffin in a flat cap. She *created* it by sheer force of personality.⁵⁹

Carter insists on verbs that are explicitly connected to the act of creation: her book suggests that family is a reality that can be invented by whoever wants to and feels like doing so: Grandma Chance does not have any biological connection with the twins, yet she builds, on them and with them, her own family; although she does not have a husband who may act as a father, she manages to become a mother and is considered, as her nickname suggests, a grandmother. Many others are the maternal figures in *Wise Children*, while, differently from what happens in Shakespeare’s plays, fathers are absent: Melchior Hazard forsook Dora and Nora, Tiffany decides to raise her baby all alone and, at the very end of the book, Nora and Dora themselves become adoptive mothers, choosing to take care of Gareth’s twins and thus closing the circle that had somehow started the day they were born. Through the twins’ words, “We’re both of us mothers and both of us fathers”⁶⁰ Carter explicitly proffers a new idea of family, seen as a microcosm built on the basis of love only and that can thus exist independently from the gender or the age of its members. As Sara Gamble writes,

Indeed, the whole concept of ‘family’ is de-naturalised in the course of this text, no longer an automatic given, but something constructed out of affection and a sense of responsibility towards others. [...] While, under the rule of the patriarchy, the supposedly legitimate Hazard family is riven with jealousy and Oedipal tension, Nora

⁵⁹ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 35. (Emphasis mine).

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

and Dora exemplify the matriarchal generosity of spirit which makes the 'found' family thrive.⁶¹

It seems only too logical that Carter's reflection on the nature of the family (and a matriarchal one) should go hand in hand with a reflection on the role of maternal figures: who is a mother? If *Wise Children* offers an implicit answer – a mother is someone like Grandma Chance, who takes care of her adopted daughters out of pure love, although she has no blood connections with them – Byatt's novel provides instead the explicit answer. In Violet's words:

“Who is a child's real mother? The one who feeds it, and cleans it, and knows its little ways, or the one who leaves it in the nest to do as best it can...”⁶²

In *The Children's Book*, Olive is the one whom children call “mum” and whose maternal role is recognised and institutionalised by society (journalists even talk of her as “A Modern Mother Goose”⁶³), while Violet is the one who truly behaves as a mother, taking daily care of the children while their mother – or supposed one – is too busy writing. However, in Byatt's novel, the discourse on maternity is not left to Violet only and, thus, is not expressed merely by the characters' or the narrator's voices, but is developed on different levels and through different narratives, as it is typical of Antonia Byatt's writing. In the case of *The Children's Book*, the principal narration is interrupted by Olive's tales: the long one she is writing for her son Tom and the ones destined to publication. It is precisely one of these tales, *The Shrubbery*, that implicitly carries Olive's point of view on mothers, thus emphasizing the centrality of such a matter for the whole novel: indeed, the discourse on maternal roles is looked at from various perspectives and becomes all the more stratified since it is developed both at a narrative and at a meta-narrative level, through a powerful *mise en abyme*. I believe it is interesting to report here the beginning of *The*

⁶¹ Sara Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line*, cit., p. 180-81.

⁶² A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 92.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 301.

Shrubbery, a tale which acquires a particular poignancy because it is inserted in a chapter where discussions on mothers have been going on, raised by the children's first doubts about Olive and Humphry's parenthood:

There was once a mother, whose husband had gone on a long voyage, and had never come back, nor sent any news, for a long time. Consequently, the family had fallen upon hard times, though they lived in a pleasant house in the country, with gardens and orchards. Mothers in stories, in general, are of two kinds. There are mothers who are warm, and devoted, and self-sacrificing, and resourceful and endlessly good-tempered and loving. Then there are the other kind, who are often not mothers, but only stepmothers, who are unkind, and proud, and love some children (their own) better than others, and treat children like kitchen-servants and will not let them play, or dream. If you had to choose, the mother in this story is a good mother, but she is not perfect, as real human beings are not perfect. She has so many children that they call her Mother Goose, or Old Shoe-Woman, when they are teasing. She does her very best for them. She darns their clothes and turns sheets sides-to-middle, and makes nourishing food out of inexpensive – no, let us say honestly – out of downright cheap things, carefully simmered, made tasty with herbs that cost nothing. [...] ⁶⁴

Since Olive is at the same time a mother and a stepmother, it is no surprise that her portrayal of good mothers and stepmothers should, to a certain extent, resemble her. Olive takes care of her children, she earns money to guarantee a safe future to all of them and she even writes for each one a personal story; all the same, precisely as stepmothers do in fairy-tales, she cannot but prefer her own children to the ones that she has had to adopt because born out of her husband's love affair with her sister Violet. This last one seems what is more to possess all the characteristics of the good mother Olive describes in her tale: she truly attends to the children, either her own or not, she mends their clothes, she cooks for them, and she spends most of her time with them. If the world of fairy-tales, in which Olive as a writer seems to be plunged, is all black or all white, Olive's reality is definitely different and much more complicated: it is a reality whose borders are blurred and hazy and in which

⁶⁴ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 95.

relationships are neither so easily nor so well defined; on the contrary, they often overlap, sometimes bringing about dangerous or unexpected consequences, like the boredom of married life, the problems of raising children and the scandal of betrayal. According to Raffaella Baccolini,

Molto spesso, nell'utopia letteraria, la sessualità è un elemento di disturbo e quando eguaglia la passione e l'amore deve incanalarsi verso la famiglia e la riproduzione e/o essere repressa. Il potere riproduttivo delle donne viene perciò neutralizzato attraverso la costruzione della famiglia patriarcale e mantenuto tramite l'idealizzazione della figura materna.⁶⁵

In the case of *The Children's Book*, Olive is definitely an idealized maternal figure, portrayed as Mother Goose while, in fact, she is a completely different person. Strong and independent, she however remains the one who organizes life in her family, she is the one who earns money leaving to her sister the role of taking care of the children: as some sort of collective motherhood is thus envisaged, Olive's family, far from being patriarchal, is indeed a matriarchal one and Olive, either willingly or not, slowly turns into "a matriarch"⁶⁶.

If Olive can be considered the matriarchal figure at the centre of a family she has herself founded, Mama Day is, in Naylor's homonymous novel, a member of a long-lived matriarchal family:

Most all of the boys had thrived: her own daddy being the youngest of seven boys, and his daddy the youngest of seven. But coming on down to them, it was just her, Abigail and Peace. And out of them just another three girls, and out of them, two.

⁶⁵ Raffaella Baccolini, "Il ruolo della donna in utopia", in Vita Fortunati, Raymond Trousson, Adriana Corrado (eds.), *Dall'utopia all'utopismo. Percorsi tematici*, cit.: "Very often, in literary utopias, sexuality is a disturbing element and when it equals passion and love it has to be channelled into family and reproduction and/or be repressed. The reproductive power of women is thus neutralized thanks to the construction of the patriarchal family and it is maintained thanks to the idealization of the maternal figure." (Translation is mine).

⁶⁶ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 301.

Three generations of nothing but girls, and only one left alive in this last generation to keep the Days going – the child of Grace.⁶⁷

To this very short description of Cocoa's family tree, corresponds, printed before the beginning of the novel, a visual family tree, on top of which towers the name of Sapphira Wade, a slave sold to Bascombe Wade, whom she married and killed leaving to their sons the land she inherited. The seventh of her sons, as a footnote to the family tree also shows, is the one from whom every descendant takes the surname: his name is Jonah Day, because "God rested on the seventh day and so would she"⁶⁸. The name Day is indeed an important, significant one; it is a name that, although originally belonging to a man, still points to the story of the mother, Sapphira, and to her feminine powers. Thus, transformed in surname and passed from one generation to the next, it has become the most evident mark of matriarchy and, as such, it cannot be changed:

The tombstones – some granite, some limestone – were of varying heights with no dates and only one name. You explained that they were all Days so there was no need for a surname. But what, as in your case, if a woman married? You live a Day and you die a Day. Early women's lib, I said with a smile. A bit more than that, you answered.⁶⁹

Definitely, the surname is not a sign of early women's liberation, or at least, not only. It is instead, first and foremost, a symbol of the power that a woman possesses: it represents the power of Sapphira, who fought for her liberty and whose gift to her sons – the land – still guarantees the independence of Willow Spring. According to Annamaria Lamarra,

⁶⁷ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 39.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 218.

Principio organizzatore della scrittura utopica femminile è, infatti, il mito della *lost mother*, della madre a cui il maschile ha sottratto potere e forza [...].⁷⁰

Sapphira is indeed the lost mother, the one who is remembered almost as a goddess and whose name Mama Day will try to evoke in order to save Cocoa from her illness; however, far from being weak, passive and submitted to masculine authority, Sapphira took power and strength away from her husband, thus originating a matriarchal society and allowing her descendants to prosper in it. The name she gave to her last son, Jonah Day, consequently also represents the power to give life, something which potentially belongs to every woman and that, in this novel, makes of Miranda, Mama Day, the matriarchal figure, indeed the guide, of her community. Although a matriarch, Miranda is not, biologically, a mother; yet, her maternal role is undeniable and her nickname, which is not by chance also the title of the novel, clearly points to an identification between Miranda and the image of the mother. Even though she has no children of her own, Mama Day is conscious of the importance of her gift for the whole community: as a midwife, she feels responsible for the many sons and the many daughters to whom she has given life and for whom she is, unmistakably, a mum:

Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands, folks say. You have a gift, Little Mama. John-Paul's eyes so sad. It ain't fair that it came with a high price, but it did. [...] Gifted hands, folks said. Gave to everybody but myself. Caught babies till it was too late to have one my own. Saw so much heartbreak, maybe I never wanted my own. [...] Why, even Abigail called me Little Mama till she knew what it was to be one in her own right. Abigail's had three and I've had – Lord, can't count 'em – into the hundreds. Everybody's mama now.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Annamaria Lamarra, “Madri e figlie in Utopia”, in Vita Fortunati, Raymond Trousson, Adriana Corrado (eds.), *Dall'utopia all'utopismo. Percorsi tematici*, cit., p. 691: “The organizing principle of the utopian feminine writing is the myth of the *lost mother*, of the mother whose power and strength have been taken away by the masculine [...]” (Translation is mine).

⁷¹ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., pp. 88-9.

Motherhood seems thus to be severed from the mere physiological act, allowing the reader to interpret Mama Day as the embodiment of a universal mother: reminding on the one hand Angela Carter's Grandma Chance who does not need to have children of her own to consider herself an accomplished mother, on the other she also calls to mind Bachoffen's theories on matriarchal societies. According to the anthropologist, as a matter of fact, maternal love is "not only more intense, but also more universal"⁷²: exactly so, Miranda, as well as Grandma Chance or Sycorax, does not restrain her affection but cares for other children and other people, never remaining alone and thus letting her matriarchal microcosm survive. This is also the element that distinguishes matriarchal societies from patriarchal ones. As Bachoffen writes,

As the paternal principle is limited, so the maternal one is universal; while the first is restraint to well-defined groups, the other knows no limits, or the few limits of natural life. [...] A family founded on paternal law defines itself as a closed, individual organism, the matriarchal one, on the contrary, has the typical general character with which every development starts, and that distinguishes the material life from the superior life of the spirit.⁷³

It is therefore not an accident, I believe, that *King Lear* should be the only Shakespearean play explicitly alluded to in the whole novel. Apart from serving the purpose of opening a reflection on illegitimate children, it also implicitly gives life to a comparison between the two societies that the play on the one hand and the novel on the other present. Lear, the patriarch, not only demands to her daughters to express their love for him, but also insists on wanting them to quantify their love, something which is all the more wrong and unnatural; possessing such a limited and narrow-minded way of thinking, Lear somehow condemns himself to death and his reign to total ruin. On the contrary Mama Day, the matriarch, never asks to be

⁷² Johann Jakob Bachoffen, *Introduzione al diritto materno*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1983, p. 52. (Translation is mine).

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

loved; she takes care of other people out of generosity, and not because she wants to be paid back; at Candle Walk she accepts everyone's gifts, appreciating them not for their quantity, but for the affection and the esteem they represent. As a consequence, she is trusted, respected, loved, and her society, the community of Willow Spring, prospers and keeps living, still following its ancient tradition, still resisting modernity and still safeguarding its fragile independence.

The very same discourse could work also for Marina Warner's *Indigo*, in which Sycorax, sent away both from her father's and from her brother's communities, finds help and comfort in her two adopted children, Dulé and Ariel. It is her maternal, open and consequently, according to Bachoffen, matriarchal mentality that actually saves her from a lonely life. What is more, precisely as Mama Day, Sycorax is a gifted woman: she is a healer, she helps life thrive, and she managed to extract Dulé from his dead mother's womb. These characteristics of hers, as Chantal Zabus writes, defines her as a mother and a matriarch:

Significantly, Sycorax brews Indigo in huge vats. These capacious vats are more than receptacles; they are works of art where Sycorax's magic stems. Her vat is the vessel of life. [...] The woman-potter, like the weaver, seems to find a common origin in pre-patriarchal, gynocentric societies in which, Adrienne Rich argues, motherhood precedes wifehood.⁷⁴

In *Indigo*, Rich's statement about motherhood seems to be true also for another feminine character, Serafine: she is not a wife, but she has been, from generation to generation, the nanny of the Everards. When the book opens, in 1948, she is the governess of Miranda and Xanthe: she feeds them, washes them, and lulls them to sleep; she is the one who tells them the many tales she has herself learnt, thus

⁷⁴ Chantal Zabus, "The Power of 'the Blue-Eyed Hag'. A Note on Gynocracy in Marina Warner's *Indigo*", in Hena Maes-Jelinek, Gordon Collier, Geoffrey V. Davies (eds.), *A Talented Digger. Creations, Cameos, and Essays in Honour of Anna Rutherford*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996, p. 219. See also Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976): according to Rich, under the matriarchal system women's primal power was connected to her cosmically transformative capacity of procreating; with the advent of patriarchy, and with men's understanding of their role in procreation, the female, sacred dimension was repressed, women lost their power and autonomy becoming men's property.

teaching them everything she knows. She is, together with Atala Seacole, a heir of Sycorax's. Thus, as Chantal Zabus writes:

Sycorax's powers as a healer and nurturer are revived in Serafine, who passes on her stories of the islands to Miranda, who will then pass them on to her daughter Fenny. Sycorax's powers as an abeah-woman and native preacher are transmitted to the Prime Minister, Atala Seacole, who leads her people to freedom and plans to restore the island to psychic wholeness through the oyster-trade and the ancestral worship of the coral reef – thereby returning the island to female leadership and asserting the novel's femiocentric thrust.⁷⁵

Sycorax's matriarchal utopia, whose end seemed indeed inevitable with the English conquest of the island, becomes vital once again and, what is more, extends in space and time. The old woman's voice (as well as her project of living independently in the complete respect of the resources of the island) reaches the present time and prospers in those women, like Atala, Serafine and even Miranda, who are able to hear and understand it.

Sycorax, Mama Day, Grandma Chance and Olive are all peculiar figures of mothers. Natural mothers, adoptive mothers, grandmothers, aunts: the gallery of maternal characters in the four novels is indeed very long, and, evidently, in strong contrast with Shakespeare's scarceness of maternal roles. To such an elevated number and variety of mothers corresponds a high number of daughters, so that it becomes possible to paraphrase a sentence that Zabus wrote about *Indigo* only:

[Marina Warner's *Indigo*, Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*] provide what Adrienne Rich has called "the great unwritten story", i.e., "the cathexis between mother and daughter" so absent in Shakespeare.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Chantal Zabus, "The Power of 'the Blue-Eyed Hag'. A Note on Gynocracy in Marina Warner's *Indigo*", cit., p. 220.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 218.

3.5. Conclusion

The novels of Angela Carter, Gloria Naylor and Marina Warner all fill some gaps, some spaces that Shakespeare indeed left void in his drama: they thus give voice and relevance to characters that in Shakespeare's plays only had secondary roles and they concentrate on mother-daughter relationships rather than, as Shakespeare often did, on father-daughter ones. Mothers are thus at the very centre of the four contemporary narratives I am analysing: described as taking upon themselves roles and activities – like providing for the economical sustainment of the family – that had long been seen as masculine, not only they are portrayed as independent, strong, courageous, but they also give the authors the opportunity to reflect on particularly significant periods of women's history (as it is in Byatt's and Carter's novels) or to show how matriarchal societies, more than patriarchal ones, are strongly connected to an idyllic way of life, rooted in folklore and in past traditions (as it is in Naylor's and Warner's works). Interestingly, these utopian societies find their realization in places which are poignant not only for Shakespearean drama, but for Western literature in general: set in woods or on islands, the four novels open the way to some considerations on the spaces of pastoral and utopia, at the same time revealing the flaws of such literary constructions. As woods show their darker side, so the characters of *The Children's Book* and of *Wise Children* get lost, or risk to get lost, in the seemingly edenic, ideal place where they found themselves; similarly, as islands, separated from the rest of the world, appear to be perfect spaces where to build utopian societies, their separateness may lead to a too closed and consequently dangerous mentality or the construction of protected 'places' which in fact are nothing else than impersonal, sterile 'non-places'. If utopian societies are described in their most positive aspects as well as in their imperfections, so it is for the microcosm of the family: sometimes an ideal place where to live and grow, sometimes instead as a constrictive reality hiding uncanny truths, still families are significantly built around matriarchal figures and are, what is more, definitely unconventional. The four women writers not only have managed to rewrite

Shakespeare by stressing an aspect that was absent from his drama, but have also succeeded in bringing his plays and his characters to the core of a much contemporary debate not only about the condition of women, but also about the role of the family.

CHAPTER IV

New linguistic territories

As the previous chapters wished to demonstrate, Shakespeare's presence is unquestionably a pervasive one in the novels of Carter, Warner, Naylor and Byatt. Shakespearean names, characters and situations indeed permeate the narratives, contributing to shape their topography and definitely informing their main themes. If a web of quotations and allusions thus pervades the four novels I am analyzing, truly infusing them with references – both explicit and implicit – to Shakespeare and his plays, it is also important to recognize another, significant pattern at work behind every novel. It is a pattern that finds in Shakespeare its starting point but that in fact aims at going beyond him, his works and the main themes of his plays. Shakespeare is the driving force behind each of the narratives I am investigating, but it is not the only one: for Carter, Naylor, Warner and Byatt, appropriating him also means wrestling with him, going towards and at the same time against him; the whole Shakespearean corpus is present in the four novels, but it is looked at through a series of lenses, all of them conferring to each narrative a strong dynamism and vitality. Every novel, far from being limited and closed, truly

opens towards something else: rhetorical tropes and Shakespearean images are recycled and renovated, while Shakespearean themes are manipulated and given a new life; furthermore, the barriers between one genre and another break down while narrative voices multiply and continuously intersect. This last chapter intends to focus precisely on these more strictly linguistic and diegetic aspects of the four novels, exploring the many and innovative means of interrelation between Shakespearean drama and contemporary narrative.

4.1. Playing with diegesis

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, Marina Warner's *Indigo* and A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* all have an interesting and unconventional narrative structure. In all of them, the principal narrative is intersected by a number of secondary ones, voices multiply and, what is more, narrators are often homo-diegetic and thus, unreliable. Such diegetic variety to a certain extent hints at Shakespeare, in whose plays the dialogic structure typical of drama often makes room for other and more unexpected modes of describing the action: in Shakespearean drama, for example, letter-writing or letter-reading is adopted as a strategy to let the audience know something that would have otherwise remained unsaid; similarly, long oral narrations are used to describe events that cannot be staged; and again, last but not least, the principal plot is doubled by a similar subplot or by frequent meta-theatrical moments.

Probably, it is the dialogic construction of drama that has mostly inspired Gloria Naylor, who has created a complicated diegetic structure, indeed the most complex one of the four novels I am investigating. There are as a matter of fact several narrative voices in *Mama Day*, in constant mutual dialogue; each voice expresses a precise and unique point of view, so that every event happening in the novel can be read and analyzed from different angles and perspectives. The very first voice that the reader encounters – and that is as a matter of fact present only in the few pages that function as a prologue, as a frame-narrative to the whole novel –

is a first person plural narrator. This voice, although speaking for no more than an extremely limited period of time, has nonetheless a huge importance: not only it briefly recounts the story of Willow Spring and the legend behind its foundation, but it also manages to directly involve the reader:

Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs, and *you're* God-knows-where. It's August 1999 – ain't but a slim chance it's the same season where you are. Uh, huh, *listen*. *Really listen* this time: *the only voice is your own*.¹

The readers are, as a matter of fact, listeners, and the first person plural narrator talking to them is no one else but a voice embodying the whole community of Willow Spring, longing to tell a tale to which the reader alone, however, can attribute an interpretation. Orality thus truly breaks into the written dimension of the novel, revealing a form of narration that shows its debt not only to Shakespearean drama, but also and most evidently to a whole African-American tradition. In African and African-American communities, the figure of the storyteller is held in high consideration and the moment of storytelling is perceived as a ritual one, a moment to which the whole community participates and which aims at answering questions, transmitting histories and teaching the youngest the important values of life². Thus, even in Willow Spring, old legends as well as more recent stories are recounted and the reader, as a foreign guest, is expected to join such a rite. Predictably, the real moment of storytelling begins after the short frame-narrative: the story is told by the same, collective voice that has already spoken but that now shifts from the first person plural to the third person singular. It is an omniscient voice, but such omniscience evidently functions only as long as the events narrated took place on Willow Spring. Two other narrative voices thus intervene in the novel, to fill the gaps left by the principal narration; they are homo-

¹ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 10. (Emphasis mine).

² On storytelling as part of African-American culture see Roberts, John W., "Folklore", in Jack Salzman, David Lionel Smith, Cornel West (eds.), *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 994-1002.

diegetic, internal narrators, whose voices belong to Ophelia Day and George Andrews, the very protagonists of the story that is being told. Both of them want to offer their own explanation, their own version of the tale: the same event is thus often told twice, the first time from the point of view of Cocoa, the second from George's one. As the reader immediately understands, Ophelia's and George's ways of perceiving the world and of responding to reality are extremely different. George has spent all his life in New York, so his culture is deeply Western: he looks at whatever happens around him with a rational, analytical eye; he is always ready to find a realistic explanation to whatever he sees and hears; he does not accept the possibility of a supernatural, magic dimension that can intrude in the course of one's life. On the contrary, Cocoa was born on the island of Willow Spring: although having spent a part of her life in New York, still her roots are the very same as her grandmother Abigail and aunt Miranda; she respects the traditions of her community, she believes in the legend of Sapphira Wade even if she does not fully understand it, she is ready to accept that reason and rationality are not the only keys to interpret reality. The three voices alternating one another in *Mama Day* and creating its complex but extremely interesting diegetic structure are thus the representatives of different gazes on reality; their connection to orality roots the whole novel in the African-American background of its author, who has once again managed to establish a dialogue between the tradition of Shakespearean drama and the culture of the non-Western world. It is a dialogue reinforced also by the fact that, at the moment of the narration, George is in fact dead:

She [Cocoa] stops and puts a bit of moss in her open-toe sandal, then goes on past those graves to a spot just down the rise towards the Sound, a little bit south of that circle of oaks. And if he was patient and stayed off a little ways, he'd realize she was there to meet up with her first husband so they could talk about that summer fourteen years ago when she left, but he stayed. And as her and George are there together for a

good two hours or so – neither one saying a word – Reema’s boy coulda hear from them everything there was to tell about 18 & 23.³

George’s voice is thus the one of a ghost who keeps dialoguing with those who are still alive, remaining an essential part of their lives. The dialogue with the dead, which once again shows the influence of a non-western culture in Naylor’s novel⁴, also definitely connects it to Shakespeare and, quite evidently, to *Hamlet*. Precisely as the ghost of Hamlet’s father, Cocoa’s husband has come back to tell his story and to narrate his own truth, although having learned, at the very end of his life, that the concept of truth is an extremely frail one and that every story is nothing else but a point of view on something which is in fact unknowable. Yet, George’s ghostly voice is not only the one of Hamlet’s father. It must not be forgotten, as a matter of fact, that the real name of George’s wife is not Cocoa, but Ophelia, and that if Abigail and Miranda have always preferred the nickname, George has instead never used it. As Cocoa points out the very first – and last – time she finds herself in Willow Spring with her husband:

[...] I became a child again in that house. You respected Ophelia’s anger just as she respected yours. How would you react seeing that Cocoa’s anger, whether coddled or dismissed, was never taken seriously here? [...] It hit me then that I had absolutely nothing to worry about. I was a very fortunate woman, belonging to you and belonging to them. Ophelia and Cocoa could both live in that house with you.⁵

Ophelia’s nicknames signal the strong difference existing between herself and the Shakespearean Ophelia; thus, the fact that George should insist on calling her Ophelia and Ophelia only, somehow authorises the reader to interpret him as a new

³ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 10.

⁴ I do not possess the anthropological competence to talk of the role of the dead in African and African-American culture, nor do I think it is relevant, in the context of my study, to expand on the matter. For more information on the subject see Yvonne P. Chireau, “Folk Religion”, in Jack Salzman, David Lionel Smith, Cornel West (eds.), *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 1006-07.

⁵ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 177.

version of prince Hamlet whose tragic destiny he shares. As Hamlet sees himself as the hero who has to vindicate his father, so George thinks he is the hero in the tragedy of Ophelia's illness; also, precisely as Hamlet keeps deferring the right moment for his vengeance, so George has to postpone his plans to transport Cocoa out of Willow Spring due to a series of unforeseen accidents; a last and fundamental element that authorizes a comparison between George and Hamlet is the fact that, notwithstanding their deaths, their stories are eventually narrated:

O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity a while,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.⁶

If Hamlet entrusts Horatio with the responsibility of living to tell his story, George takes this responsibility on himself. It is his very voice, his very version that the novel presents, creating a dialogue between husband and wife capable of continuing even after death.

The complex diegetic structure of Gloria Naylor's novel thus re-invents Shakespeare for a culture which is definitely not Shakespeare's; *Mama Day* has indeed more than once stressed, precisely through Shakespeare, the huge difference existing between the Western, European culture and the non-Western one. Yet, it is in the dimension of an oral tradition and in the beliefs in ghosts and magic that a common background is found, joining Shakespeare's Elizabethan culture and Naylor's African-American one.

As George and Cocoa are homo-diegetic narrators, so a homo-diegetic, first person narrator characterizes Angela Carter's novel: "[...] I, Dora Chance, in the course of

⁶ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V, ii, 286-91.

assembling notes towards my own autobiography, have inadvertently become the chronicler of all the Hazards [...]”⁷ Similarly, as George and Cocoa offer their own, partial perspective on the story they contribute to narrate, Dora immediately reveals her unreliability: from the very beginning of the book, for example, she makes clear who are the people she likes and who are those she dislikes; furthermore, she contradicts herself, creating not only a lot of confusion, but also suggesting that the reader will never get to know the real, true, correct version of the story she is telling. When the novel begins, Dora says – and writes: “Born in this house, indeed, this very attic, just seventy-five years ago, today”⁸, thus indicating that her bedroom is the place where she composes her own memoir, starting to do so on the significant date of the 23rd April; however, at the end of the book, the following words are to be found:

Well, you might have known what you were about to let yourself in for when you let Dora Chance in her ratty old fur and poster paint, her orange (Persian Melon) toenails sticking out of her snakeskin peep-toes, reeking of liquor, accost you in the Coach and Horses and let her tell you a tale.⁹

The “notes towards my autobiography” have transformed into an oral tale, narrated not in a house but in a pub, what is more by an old lady whose memory, for obvious reasons, cannot be trusted¹⁰ and who appears to be even a little – or a lot – drunk. Dora is moreover an actress, an artist, whose voice seems to encompass all the voices she has given life to in her career and who is conscious of writing not for herself, but for an audience; her voice becomes thus a literary one and one that takes evident pleasure in displaying and at the same time mocking such literacy and fictitiousness:

⁷ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 11.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 227.

¹⁰ Dora explicitly says so: “At my age, memory becomes exquisitely selective”, in *Ibidem*, p. 195.

Poor old Irish. I gave him all a girl can give – a little pleasure, a little pain, a carillon of laughter, a kerchief full of tears. And, as for him, it was he who gave me the ability to compose such a sentence as the last one. Don't knock it. That's lyricism.¹¹

Interestingly, Dora's fiancé during her stay in Hollywood, the one who teaches her something about English literature and who, consequently, also educates her in writing, is a writer called Irish. His name, bringing the reader back to Samuel and to William-Henry Ireland and to the 1790 scandal of the Shakespeare forgeries, indeed hints at the idea of the whole narration being a Shakespearean forgery as well: a novel disseminated with *coups de théâtre*, disappearances and agnitions, coincidences, metamorphoses, wondrous events and twins (just to cite a few of its features), *Wise Children* indeed resembles a *summa* of the whole Shakespearean corpus. Its narrator, unreliable and, to tell the truth, even a bit crazy, indeed makes the reader doubt everything she tells: is her tale a real or an invented one? Is it a memoir or a fantastic Shakespearean rewriting?

Differently from *Wise Children* and *Mama Day*, both *Indigo* and *The Children's Book* are characterized by third person singular, omniscient and hetero-diegetic narrators. Their narrative structures, which are indeed very much alike, are however far from being traditional but reveal, on the contrary, an incredible richness and an amazing variety of perspectives and points of view. In Marina Warner's *Indigo*, such a variety is given primarily by the continuous shift from a spatial setting to another, from a temporal moment to another: if a part of the novel takes place in contemporary London, following Miranda's life from childhood to adulthood, another part instead describes events unfolding on the island of Liamuiga in the Seventeenth century; finally, a small portion of the novel is constituted by Serafine's tales: somehow stuck in the very moment in which they are narrated – that is to say Miranda's childhood – still they manage to open to other worlds and other realities, suspended in time

¹¹ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 119.

and space. Something similar happens in Antonia Byatt's *The Children's Book*: in this case the omniscient narrator tells its story in a strictly chronological order, accompanying the Wellwood children in their paths towards adulthood; however, its voice is more than once interrupted by other narrations, namely by tales for children written by one of the characters, Olive Wellwood.

Interestingly, Serafine's and Olive's tales contribute to transform *Indigo* and *The Children's Book* into contemporary mirrors of Shakespearean drama: Shakespeare's plays are often centred around meta-theatre and incorporate the so-called plays within the plays in order to make the audience reflect on the very nature, role and structure of drama, letting theatregoers peep behind the curtains; similarly, the two novels offer insights into a writer's mind, showing the way plots are invented or adapted and characters delineated. Elizabethan drama can be thus compared to contemporary fiction: both of them, presenting either to audiences or readers their structures and mechanisms, seem to be highly conscious of their artificiality and of their status of works of art, a status that consequently they do not hesitate to put on display.

Tales for children, however, are not the only elements that intervene to interrupt the principal narrations. In the case of *Indigo*, other voices and other broken narratives come indeed to the surface: there are extracts from Kit Everard's seventeenth-century diary, there are letters that Miranda exchanged with her father or that Xanthe received from her parents, there is Miranda's interview to the French film director Jean-Paul Meursault as it was published in a London magazine, there are even epitaphs to member of the Everard families or to other English families who had spent their whole lives on Liamuiga and who are thus buried in the small graveyard of the island. Likewise, extracts from newspaper articles are disseminated here and there in *The Children's Book*, together with excerpts from conferences and lectures or with letters that Humprhy and Olive received from and wrote to children, lovers, and friends. All these elements, stitched together in Marina Warner's and A.S. Byatt's texts constitute a patchwork of points of view that cannot

but enhance the two narratives: the voices of the omniscient narrators, although dominant, are not the only ones the readers hear, but find a counterpart in a series of other voices and gazes on reality, that truly confer to the two novels an intricate pattern of nuances and tones.

4.2. The dance of genres

As all the novels are rich in references to Shakespeare's plays, it seems only too evident that all of them should somehow weave a Shakespearean pattern, thus establishing a series of interrelations and contaminations between fiction and drama. Yet, each novel also seems to endorse other influences and to incorporate other literary genres and narrative modes: indeed *Mama Day*, *Wise Children*, *Indigo*, and *The Children's Book* interestingly pass not only from narrative to drama, but also from fiction to folk and wonder tales, myths and legends, and even literary fairy-tales. What is more, they all appear to go beyond realism – in which they are nonetheless strongly rooted – in order to fluctuate towards magical realism and carnivalesque.

The principal narrative of Marina Warner's *Indigo* is at times interrupted by the narration of tales for children, which, because of their themes and structure, seem to correspond to the definition that Jack Zipes offers of folk and wonder tales. Folk tales are as a matter of fact exclusively oral,

part of communal property and told with original and fantastic insights by gifted storytellers who gave vent to the frustration of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes in the folk narratives. Not only did the tales serve to unite the people of a community and help bridge a gap in their understanding of social problems in a language and narrative mode familiar to the listeners' experiences, but their aura illuminated the possible fulfilment of utopian longings and wishes [...].¹²

¹² Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell. Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, London: Heinemann, 1979, p. 4.

In Marina Warner's novel the gifted storyteller whose tales collaborate to promulgate ideas of a better, utopian world is the character of Serafine: she is Xanthe and Miranda's nanny and, as such, she often entertains the two of them with stories and legends from her native island, Liamuiga. Her stories interrupt and intersect the principle narration, creating an intertext that, according to the critic Chivite de Léon, is juxtaposed to the one of *The Tempest*:

Itself a tale of alterity, metamorphosis and female authorship, *Indigo* sets out for a dialogical encounter with another recurrent intertext in the novel which, eventually, will stand for the contrary other of fairy-tales: *The Tempest*, another tale of magic, authorship, representation and fantasies of difference. However, if Shakespeare constructs the other forever exiled in the margins of Prospero's authoritarian representation, *Indigo*'s fairy tales combat Prospero's magic with another type of enchantment, which frees and normalises the authority of alterity. [...] Feeny's authority [...] comes from her *acting* of authorship, which brings to the surface and back to legitimacy what otherwise lay othered in the canon: bastardised histories, gender and racial difference or the discourse of fantasy, which now help retell the past.¹³

It is true that Feeny is somehow Prospero's opposite: she embodies a traditional female role while Prospero – according to feminist criticism and thus to Warner herself – represents the patriarchal ideology; she is the colonized islander while Prospero is the colonizer and, finally and most importantly, her tales, which are the source of her “teaching”, are all rooted in an ancient oral traditions, while Prospero's power is entirely connected to his books. However, if Feeny is the opposite of Shakespeare's Prospero, she is also, somehow, his alter-ego: as the Shakespearean character, with his potent use of magic, manages to transform his destiny as well as his daughter's one, so Serafine, with her tales of magic and her ancient legends to a certain extent instructs Miranda: she shapes her mind and she

¹³ María José Chivite de Léon, *Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities. Rewriting Alterity in J.M. Coetzee's Foe and Marina Warner's Indigo*, cit., p. 167; pp. 171-72.

teaches her to have strong ideals and dreams to believe in; in short, she prepares the little girl to face her future. As Marina Warner herself writes,

In a way, what the novel perhaps suggests is that Feeny weaves another story within the story [...]. She teaches Miranda to rethink the world; she herself can't do it because she is a colonized subject: she loves the Everard family, she has been their nurse, she loves Anthony. In a sense she has been incorporated and colonized; she's an island that has been taken over. But at the same time, through her possibilities of rethinking her lot and distributing rewards and punishments, she stands for me as the exemplary fiction writer who can be colonized and still speak.¹⁴

Feeny truly weaves another story within the story, because the folk tales she tells contribute to shape a new discourse within the narrative, one that what is more looks back at the very sources of Shakespearean drama. As a matter of fact, the tale that opens Marina Warner's novel is nothing else but a re-elaboration of the myth of King Midas. Interestingly, one of the very first versions of this myth is part of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work that, together with Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, constituted for Shakespeare a huge repository of motifs, ideas, characters and plots; it is a repertoire that fascinated Shakespeare's contemporaries and that still fascinates contemporary writers and readers. As Marina Warner maintains:

Shakespeare drew on the magical and metamorphic tradition in the late plays especially, where he pieced and patched many different motifs and instances, with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* threading bright strands throughout the fabric. His polichromy, at the level of language of course and of psychology and plot – offers a reassuring indication of romance and mythological devices to someone writing fiction today, such as myself.¹⁵

¹⁴ Marina Warner interviewed by Chantal Zabus: "Spinning a Yarn with Marina Warner", cit., p. 521.

¹⁵ Marina Warner, "Castaway on the Ocean of Story", in Marina Warner, *Signs and Wonders*, cit., p. 275.

In *The Golden Ass* the narration of Lucius's adventures is interrupted by digressions that enlarge the limits of the novel, allowing it to stray towards epics and mythology and to easily shift from a tragic to a comic tone; similarly, in Marina Warner's work, the principal narration is intersected on the one hand by the Shakespearean intertext of *The Tempest* – which brings back to life characters like Ariel, Caliban and Sycorax – on the other by a series of other tales. All of them interestingly seem to gravitate around the themes of magic, wonder and metamorphoses, themes that have stemmed in Greek and Latin literature and that have been modified by Shakespearean drama as well as by wonder and folk tales, where they have indeed flourished. According to Jack Zipes, in wonder and folk tales:

The characters, settings, and motifs are combined and varied according to specific functions to induce *wonder*. [...] In fact, most heroes need some kind of wondrous transformation to survive, and they indicate how to take advantage of the unexpected opportunities that come their way. The tales seek to awaken our regard for the marvellous *changing* condition of life and to evoke in a religious sense profound feelings of awe and respect for life as a miraculous process which can be altered and changed [...]. It is the celebration of wondrous change and how the protagonist reacts to wondrous occurrences that account for its major appeal. In addition, these tales nurture the imagination with alternative possibilities to life at 'home', from which the protagonist is often banished to find his or her true 'home'. This pursuit of home accounts for the utopian spirit of the tales, for the miraculous transformation does not only involve the transformation of the protagonist but also the realization of a more ideal setting in which the hero/heroine can fulfil his or her potential.¹⁶

It is undoubtedly this sense of wonder, evoked by the very name of Miranda, that Marina Warner aims at showing, retrieving it from old oral tales and from Shakespearean drama; it is the wonder for a life whose course continuously and inevitably changes and evolves and whose metamorphic power is revealed in Sycorax's transformations, in Miranda's growth and even in Xanthe's death.

¹⁶ Jack Zipes (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. xviii-xix.

By exploring old myths and tales, Marina Warner concocts a very intricate intertext based on Shakespeare as well as on Shakespeare's sources, thus reinterpreting a long literary tradition that, from Greek and Latin literature passing precisely through Shakespearean drama, reaches the world of contemporary fiction. As in *Indigo*, also Gloria Naylor's novel takes over the dimension of orality, which in this case meddles and fuses even more with the written text. In *Mama Day*, as a matter of fact, the ancient legend connected to the origins of Willow Spring is told for the very first time by the collective voice speaking in the frame-narrative, but is then many times repeated, alluded to, and reflected upon: the omniscient narrator often recalls it, Cocoa, Miranda and George discuss it, and references to it are often present in the characters' dialogues. The role of legends in *Mama Day* is however different from the one of folk and wonder tales in *Indigo*: in Marina Warner's novel, tales are narrated to amuse and at the same time instruct Miranda and Xanthe, who are neither expected nor asked, however, to believe in what they are being told; on the contrary, in Gloria Naylor's novel legends are part of the cultural background of Willow Spring; the story of Sapphira Wade is the expression of the community's history as well as of its values and beliefs:

She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under the medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both of them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge.¹⁷

Such an introduction of the legendary Sapphira Wade makes the reader understand at once how, in Willow Spring, magic is held in high consideration and somehow regarded as part of real, everyday life. This is also why the bridge acquires a strong

¹⁷ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 3.

symbolic meaning: it marks the limit between a Western world, rooted in the type of rationality defined by Enlightenment culture, and the world of the island, where right and wrong, truth and lies somehow coexist in a community which is 'other', different, a community where no one knows what the powers of Sapphira really were, no one even knows who Sapphira truly was, yet everyone believes in her and keeps telling her story, everyone is convinced of Willow Spring's mythical past.

Consequently, the three narrative voices alternating in *Mama Day* not only contribute to give Naylor's text a complicate diegetic structure, but also, being the representatives of different gazes on reality, allow the continuous shifting of the novel from realism to magical realism. If George's voice evidently conducts a realistic narration, giving a verisimilar account of the events, the voice of Cocoa and, even more, the one of the collective hetero-diegetic narrator continuously hint at the presence of a magic, supernatural dimension: the reader is thus lead, in this case, to interpret the novel in terms of magical realism, that "relies upon the presentation of real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real."¹⁸ All the same, it is only thanks to the mingling of the three narrative voices that the whole story is finally crafted, so that privileging one interpretation or another, tending either towards realism or towards magical realism, would in fact be wrong. Evidently, there is not a correct interpretation, as Cocoa's last words in the novel seem to suggest:

But when I see you again, our versions will be different still. [...] Because what really happened to us, George? You see, that's what I mean – *there are just too many sides to the whole story.*¹⁹

Indeed, there are many sides to a story which changes according to how the reader chooses to interpret it, either embracing George's realistic view of facts, or espousing the magical explanation. It is precisely in this ambiguity that a third

¹⁸ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 22.

¹⁹ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 311. (Emphasis mine).

possible interpretation – one which goes in the direction of the fantastic – seems to reside. The fantastic, in Todorov's definition,

[...] oblige le lecteur à considérer le monde des personnages comme un monde de personnes vivantes et à hésiter entre une explication naturelle et une explication surnaturelle des événements évoqués. Ensuite, cette hésitation peut être ressentie également par un personnage.²⁰

Indeed, readers of *Mama Day* find themselves hesitating between a rational and a supernatural explanation; they share this condition with the character of George, who, even though shocked by the strange experiences he is living, still perseveres in attaching to them a rational explanation.

The complex narrative structure of Gloria Naylor's novel thus winks at Shakespeare not only because of its dialogic and oral dimensions, but also because, precisely as plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Winter's Tale*, it leaves the readers questioning themselves about the plausibility of certain events narrated in the story or shown in the play. It is impossible to pin down *Mama Day* as a realistic text, yet it is equally impossible to define it in terms of magical realism or fantastic literature: its plot, its characters and its very structure indeed allow it to defy every possible barrier of genre and narrative mode.

With its innumerable number of pages and its multitude of characters, *The Children's Book* is definitely conceived as a realistic novel, which clearly recalls the long Victorian texts of Charles Dickens or George Eliot. Yet, to interrupt such a long narrative, the reader encounters Olive's fairy tales, that not only create a pause in the

²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970, pp. 37-8. " [...] oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character." (Translation by Richard Howard, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, New York: Cornell UP, 1975. All following translations are from this edition).

main story, but that also manage to enlarge the borders of the whole novel. Interestingly, behind A.S. Byatt's character of Olive Wellwood the historical figure of Edith Nesbit is hidden: a Victorian woman (1858-1924), she was a member of the Fabian society; in order to overcome her husband's financial disasters she wrote and published poetry and tales for children, and, again to save her husband from a sexual scandal, she accepted to live with a woman he had seduced and made pregnant, recognizing their illegitimate daughter as her natural one. If biographical similarities can easily be retraced between the two women, the real and the fictional ones, it comes as no surprise that Antonia Byatt, inventing tales to attribute to her character, should indeed to a certain extent imitate Nesbit's style. Indeed, both Edith and Olive's production for children seem to go in the same direction, namely towards the fantasy genre. In Laura Tosi and Elena Paruolo's words,

La fantasy, al contrario della fiaba, non si conclude necessariamente con uno happy ending. [...] Inoltre la fantasy concede al suo protagonista di percorrere un itinerario di maturazione personale, o quantomeno un consolidamento della propria identità. [...]: l'entrata in un altro mondo/tempo decontestualizza i personaggi e il loro ruolo nella società di partenza, portandoli a rapportarsi con una realtà diversa in cui devono riscoprire chi sono veramente – un percorso di autoconoscenza, da cui i protagonisti tornano cambiati. [...] L'eroe della fantasy [...] si trova in genere temporaneamente dislocato in un mondo secondario dopo un passaggio da un'ambientazione realistica e contemporanea (la Oxford di Alice, la Londra di Peter Pan), a un mondo magico (il Paese delle Meraviglie, l'Isola che non c'è). Oppure è il mondo magico, tramite le sue creature, a interferire nella realtà contemporanea.²¹

²¹ Laura Tosi, Elena Paruolo, "Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la fantasy vittoriana", in Alessandra Tosi e Alessandra Petrina (eds.), *Dall'Abc a Harry Potter: storia della letteratura inglese per l'infanzia e la gioventù*, Bologna: Bologna University Press, 2011, pp. 177-78. "Contrarily to fairy tales, the fantasy genre does not necessarily need a happy ending. [...] What is more, it allows its protagonists to walk an itinerary of personal growth, or at least to stabilize their own identity. [...]: the entrance in another space/time de-contextualizes the characters, leading them to face a different reality where they have to rediscover who they really are, in a process of self-knowledge that will eventually change them. [...] Fantasy literature heroes [...] are usually temporarily dislocated in a secondary world, after passing from a realistic and contemporary setting (Alice's Oxford, Peter Pan's London) to a magic world (Wonderland, Neverland). Sometimes, instead, the

It is precisely this passage from reality to other, different worlds that characterizes Nesbit's tales as well as Olive's: so, in the story she is writing for Tom and that will eventually be transformed into a play, the protagonist is conducted from the world where he lives into the imaginary realm of Elfland; in *The Shrubbery* a child called Little Pig disappears from her mother's house and enters an underground world inhabited by tiny creatures; in *The People in the House in the House*, instead, the dimension of magic breaks into reality when a giant child starts playing with the house of a girl called Rosy, who had herself entrapped some insects into her doll house. Significantly, if in Wellwood's tales the dimension of magic coexists with real life, so even her way of perceiving the world, strongly structured on Nesbit's, seems to accept the existence of a hidden, supernatural reality. In *The Enchanted Castle*, Nesbit wrote:

There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs forever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the little weak spots in that curtain which are marked by magic rings, and amulets and the like, almost anything can happen.²²

For Edith Nesbit the border between magic and real world is an almost undetectable one; evidently, Antonia Byatt borrows such a point of view for her character:

She never got used to owning these things, never saw them simply as household stuff. They were still less real than the ashpits of Goldthorpe. They still had the quality Aladdin's palace must have had for him and the princess, when the genie erected it out of nothing. [...] She loved Todefright as much as she loved any living being, including Humphry and Tom. When she thought of it, it had always two aspects, its carved and crafted presence, doors, windows, chimneys, stairs, and the world she had

magic world itself intervenes through its creatures in the contemporary reality." (Translation is mine).

²² Edith Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle*, Ware: Wordsworth, 1998, p. 170.

constructed in, through, and under it, the imagined, interpenetrating world, with its secret doors into tunnels, and caverns, the otherworld under the green fairy hill.²³

Implicitly comparing Olive Wellwood to Edith Nesbit, Antonia Byatt manages to apply to her realistic novel the filter of fairy and fantasy tales. It is a filter that, once again passing through the figure and the production of Edith Nesbit, can also be applied to the Shakespearean pattern of the novel²⁴: as in *The Winter's Tale* the statue coming to life suggests Hermione's liminal state between life and death, so in Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* a young girl, Kathleen, turns into a statue while the statues in the garden of the castle are in fact alive; these same features Byatt inserts in her narrative, sketching on the one hand a familial *mise-en-scène* of the Shakespearean romance, on the other introducing the character of the puppeteer Anselm Stern and describing his various puppet-shows. Similarly, both Nesbit and Byatt appropriate the Shakespearean character of Imogen to portray situations of familial distress: in Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet*, which aims at criticizing the condition of children in the Edwardian Age, Imogen is a young orphan who is about to be sent to a workhouse; however, travelling through time thanks to an amulet, she reaches a distant past where she finds a mother in the queen of the ancient Britons. In Antonia Byatt's novel, as already seen, Imogen is instead one of the abused daughters of Benedict Fludd, who nonetheless manages to escape from her perverse father thanks to Prosper Cain.

If Victorian fairy tales breaks into *The Children's Book* thanks to Olive's writing but also thanks to a series of mirroring effects that can be established between Shakespeare's plays, Nesbit's children's production and Antonia Byatt's novel, it is

²³ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., pp. 141-42.

²⁴ Edith Nesbit is a significant figure in Victorian rewritings of Shakespeare for young readers: she is the author of *The Children's Shakespeare* (1897), *Truly Beautiful Stories from Shakespeare* (1907) and *Children's Stories from Shakespeare* (1910). To further explore the landscape of Victorian adaptations for children see Francesca Orestano, "Il cigno e la bambina: note su Shakespeare, gender e children's literature", in Annalisa Oboe e Anna Secchi (eds.), *A Garland of True Plain Words. Saggi in onore di Paola Bottalla*, Padova: Unipress, 2012, pp. 249-70.

also true that *The Children's Book* itself somehow resembles a Victorian tale for children, of which it incorporates themes, features and characters. As a matter of fact, the real protagonists of Byatt's narrative are, as it was indeed typical of many Victorian fantasy tales, the many children who are described in their whole path from infancy to adulthood; these children, although never leaving the real world for an imagined reality, all the same sometimes actually leave the security of their homes to embark in adventures of self discovery: Dorothy and Griselda travel to Munich where their encounter with Anselm Stern will completely change Dorothy's life and her perception of herself, her family, her past; many of them go to the Great Exposition in Paris, a trip that deeply attaches Charles/Karl to the anarchical milieu and that confirms Philip's desire to become an artist. Philip's own plot is in itself a voyage of discovery and of personal realization and the adventures he lives mirror the ones of children in Victorian narrations, from fairy tales to Dickens's novels: coming from a poor family, from which he had to escape to follow his dreams and from which his sister Elsie will similarly depart after their mother's death, the two children are lucky enough to meet the right people who will help them conduct a respectable, dignified life, thus allowing them to fulfill their wishes and desires. Even the character of Olive Wellwood, apart from being shaped on the person of Edith Nesbit, strongly evokes some feminine characters which started to crop up, as Laura Tosi explains, in Victorian tales:

[...] in un certo senso il mezzo fantastico, infantile e apparentemente innocuo della fiaba costituì un canale privilegiato per proporre immagini femminili che non si conformavano ai modelli passivi dell'ortodossia patriarcale. Riappropriandosi dell'antico ruolo di tessitrici di intrecci, tradizionalmente legato alla figura femminile (da Filomela a Mamma Oca, a Sheherazade), le scrittrici vittoriane di fiabe propongono modelli femminili che non si riconoscono nel ruolo classico della vittima

sacrificale di molte fiabe tradizionali (basti pensare alla Bella Addormentata, vera icona di passività femminile) ma anzi ne suggeriscono versioni aggiornate e parodiche.²⁵

Olive Wellwood, with her independent and strong personality, is far from representing the stereotype of the passive woman that traditional fairy tales often seem to champion, but rather resembles – indeed, embodies – the character of the plot weaver, to the point of being often referred to as “Mother Goose.”

Far from being innocent and insignificant, fairy and fantastic tales managed indeed to portray a society full of contradictions and injustices, a society which still wrongly perceived women as angels of the house, where children had to work and where the poor’s living condition were deplorable. It is such a society that Byatt describes in *The Children’s Book*, first of all by interpreting Shakespearean drama through the lenses of Victorianism, then by forging two intertwined intertexts (the novel itself and fantasy tales) and by allowing Victorian tales for children to truly shape the events narrated.

Differently from what happened in *Indigo*, *Mama Day* and *The Children’s Book*, the principal narrative voice of *Wise Children* is never interrupted: no fairy tales, legends or myths traverse Dora’s chronicle and the very fact that the whole novel is presented as a memoir should be a guarantee of its realism. Yet, a series of wondrous events, bizarre accidents and coincidences allow Carter’s text not only to imitate some Shakespearean comedies in which misunderstanding, agnitions and

²⁵ Laura Tosi, “Mondi incantati e critica sociale: la fiaba dell’Ottocento”, in Laura Tosi e Alessandra Petrina (eds.), *Dall’Aba a Harry Potter: storia della letteratura inglese per l’infanzia e la gioventù*, cit., p. 166. “[...] To a certain extent the fantastic, childish and apparently innocent medium of the fairy tale constituted a privileged means to introduce feminine images that did not conform to the passive models of patriarchal orthodoxy. Re-appropriating the ancient and traditionally female role of plot weaver (from Philomela to Mother Goose, to Sheherazade), Victorian women writers have created feminine models that do not recognize themselves in the classic role of sacrificial victim typical of many traditional fairy tales (an example of which is Sleeping Beauty, true icon of feminine passivity), but that on the contrary suggest new, parodic versions of them.” (Translation is mine).

extraordinary occurrences play a fundamental role, but also to move beyond the realistic mode.

The Chance and the Hazard families are, to start with, utterly Shakespearean and definitely beyond plausibility: they are composed by couples and couples of twins, a few of their members were born on the same day – needless to say that it is also the day of William Shakespeare’s birthday and death – and a few actresses playing the role of Cordelia have become wives to their respective Lear. What is more, although it would be wrong to talk about magic or about supernatural events taking place in the novel, yet some extra-ordinary facts, that escape normality and comprehension, are actually recounted; however, it is too difficult, indeed impossible to understand whether they are really extra-ordinary or whether they are rendered so by Dora’s unusual way of reporting them. The most explicit example of such exceptional events taking place in the novel is definitely given in the last chapter of the book, which sees all the characters reunited to celebrate Melchior’s 100 birthday. On this occasion Peregrine is portrayed almost as a true magician, not only extracting the young Tiffany from a trunk he is carrying with him, but also introducing Gareth’s babies – twins, obviously – to their future adoptive mothers Dora and Nora in a quite peculiar way:

‘Look in my pocket, Nora.’

[...]

‘In your pocket, eh?’ she said, richly. She had a feel. Then her face changed. I’d never seen her look like that before, not in all the years we’ve been together. She looked as if she were about to fall in love, was teetering on the brink – but more so. As if about to fall in love terminally, once and for all, as if she’d met the perfect stranger.

‘Oh, Perry!’ She expelled a sigh and pulled it out.

Brown as a quail, round as an egg, sleepy as a pear. I’ll never know how he got in his pocket.

‘Look in the other one, Dora.’

One each. They were twins, of course, three months old, by the look of them.²⁶

²⁶ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 226.

What should be only a figurative expression – the babies are so small that they could enter one’s pocket – becomes instead a reality in *Wise Children*. Realism is thus completely abandoned and truly replaced by the fantastic and by magical realism. As Ann Bowers states,

The magical realism in the novel is a mixture of excessive acts [...]. The climax of the novel sees the twins attending their father’s one-hundredth birthday celebration where they create havoc by declaring their parentage to the public. This intentionally subversive act reveals the inter-relatedness of the illegitimate to the legitimate, the working-class to the upper-class, the female to the male, and the low culture to the high culture. By placing her emphasis on the female, working class, illegitimate and popular, and revealing the fragility of borders between the two opposing worlds, Carter turns the system of binary oppositions upside down and brings into question the assumption of such patriarchal definitions.²⁷

If Bowers’s brief analysis of *Wise Children* on the one hand emphasises the presence of a series of excessive acts, of extraordinary events and of uncommon coincidences that are implicitly related to Shakespearean drama, it also possesses the quality of highlighting the carnivalesque structure of the whole novel: “by reversing the binary oppositions and allowing her characters to express such a festive exuberance, Carter’s work epitomizes Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque in literature.”²⁸ According to Bakhtin²⁹, the carnival moment was a playful, almost theatrical one; it aimed at abolishing the traditional dualism of the world by overthrowing and refusing every kind of hierarchy and privilege; it was, finally, a universal feast, governed by the principle of equality. It is impossible not to glimpse, among these characteristics, on the one hand some typical features of Shakespearean drama, particularly of Shakespearean comedies, on the other some defining aspects of *Wise Children*, such as the merging of legitimate and illegitimate

²⁷ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, cit., p. 70.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

²⁹ See Mikhail Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World* (1965).

families as well as legitimate and illegitimate theatre and an evident celebration of the joy of living, made patent in Peregrine's statement "Life's a carnival"³⁰. Similarly, the language of carnivalesque literature, characterized by the presence of parodic and comic elements, by a certain bawdiness and vulgarity, by references to everything which is material, corporal, grotesque, earthy, cannot but call to mind both the physical, bodily imagery of Shakespeare's plays and the style of *Wise Children*, always shifting between lyricism and earthiness. It is an earthiness that however acquires a strong symbolic meaning, since the earth is perceived, according to Bakhtin, both as a giver of life and as a burial place. The earth thus resembles in its functions the terracotta statues that Bakhtin describes when talking of grotesque realism:

In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth.³¹

These laughing, pregnant old women indeed resonate with the image of the happy Dora and Nora, returning home, the night of their 75th birthday, with a couple of newborn twins to take care of. At their old age, which should direct their 'every third thought to the grave'³², the two sisters become instead mothers, thus once again subverting the natural order of things and emphasising the carnivalesque nature of Carter's text.

Far from being a realistic novel, as its narrator pretends it to be, *Wise Children* opens its borders towards other dimensions: magical realism as well as fantastic and carnivalesque literature truly infiltrate the novel, all of them finding a common root and an effective catalyst in Shakespearean drama.

³⁰ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 222.

³¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 25.

³² See William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V, i, 360: "Every third thought shall be my grave."

4.3. Fantastic and uncanny tropes: recycling the double

The particular diegetic structure of the four novels as well as their will to go beyond the limits of a single literary genre and of single narrative modes in order to explore new and less conventional territories has already shown, although partially, how Shakespearean drama continuously and deeply contaminates the languages and the narrative strategies of contemporary fiction. What still remains to investigate is the very peculiar way through which contemporary women writers truly appropriate Shakespearean tropes, themes or situations: far from simply exploiting Shakespeare as a repertoire of motifs to pour in their texts, they look at his corpus through lenses and screens that indeed modify and add new meanings both to their narratives and to Shakespeare's plays themselves. Since all of the novels, as I have previously shown, seem to attribute a great importance to the dimension of magic – to the point that, although they are all realistic narratives, they are either intersected by fairy tales, or projected towards magical realism, or both – so it is not accidental that all of them should somehow recycle Shakespeare and some specific motifs of his plays through fantastic and uncanny tropes. Specifically, the four novels all deal, although each in a specific way and through the adoption of different metaphors, with the Shakespearean theme of the double, which is continually transformed into something new and different.

Angela Carter uses, in her novel, two different strategies of appropriation: on the one hand she employs a series of tropes that Todorov perceives as typical of fantastic literature in order to describe events that indeed recall specific situations of Shakespearean drama, on the other she re-interprets the Shakespearean theme of the double in the light of Freud and of his 1919 theory of the uncanny.

Todorov lists hyperbole, exaggeration and the actual realization of a figurative expression³³ as rhetorical devices typical of fantastic literature. In *Wise Children*, a first example of how Carter uses such tropes may indeed be found in the third

³³ See Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., pp. 80-87.

chapter, where, on the setting of the movie *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Dora sees something, someone, coming towards her: "I saw my double. I saw myself, me, in my Peaseblossom costume, large as life, like looking in a mirror."³⁴ If readers may find it impossible that Dora actually saw her double, and immediately think about Dora's twin sister, their conjectures are immediately contradicted:

First off, I thought it was Nora, up to something, but it put its fingers to its lips, to shush me, and I got a whiff of Mitsouko and then I saw it was a replica. A hand-made, custom-built replica, a wonder of the plastic surgeon's art. The trouble she'd gone to! She'd had her nose bobbed, her tits pruned, her bum elevated, she'd starved and grieved away middle-age spread. She'd had her back molars out, giving the illusion of cheekbones. Her face was lifted up so far her ears had ended up on top of her head, but, happily, the wig hid them. And after all she looked very lifelike, I must say, if not, when I looked more closely, not all that much like me, more like a blurred photocopy of an artist's impression, and, poor cow, you could still see the bruises under the Max Factor Pan Stik.³⁵

Angela Carter transforms what seemed to be only a figurative expression into a disquieting reality, since Genghis Khan's first wife has truly undergone a sort of complete metamorphosis: her physical appearance has been entirely changed in order to let her look like Dora, whom Genghis wants to marry. What is more, such a modification significantly takes place on the setting of Shakespeare's *Midsummer*, a play dealing – among other themes – with metamorphosis and bodily transformations: as Puck's magic turns Bottom's face into an ass head, so that Oberon can play a trick on Titania and win her back, so the woman of *Wise Children* chooses another kind of magic, that is to say a very extreme plastic surgery, to have her husband back with her.

Hyperbole is another rhetorical device much used by Angela Carter in *Wise Children*: in the last chapter of the book, during the party for Melchior's 100

³⁴ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 155.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

birthday, Peregrine Hazard – believed to be dead somewhere in Brazil – makes an unexpected appearance. His ‘apparition’ is narrated in patently fantastic tones: he was not only considered dead and he thus somehow resurrects (“[...] Melchior even thought he’d seen a ghost.”³⁶), but also his figure is described with hyperbolic tones (“The size of a warehouse, bigger, the size of a tower block”³⁷) and his entrance, similarly hyperbolic, could not be more theatrical and spectacular:

In on the wind that came with Perry blew dozens and dozens of butterflies, red ones, yellow ones, brown and amber ones, some most mysteriously violet and black, tiny little green ones, huge flapping marbled blue and khaki ones, swirling around the room, settling on women’s bare shoulders, men’s bald spots.³⁸

Butterflies already made their appearance in the novel a few pages before, when Peregrine had offered two unique, newly-discovered exemplars to Imogen and Saskia (Melchior’s daughters to everyone’s eyes, but in fact Peregrine’s real daughters). Although offered with such words that appear to be directly taken out of a Shakespearean sonnet³⁹, the gift is not appreciated and the two girls openly express all their dislike, evidently displeasing and disappointing their uncle-father. It is consequently significant that butterflies should reappear, with such a theatrical strength, in the last chapter, the one that, as I have previously discussed, unifies legitimacy and illegitimacy under the old crown of King Lear, revealing at the same time Melchior’s true and fake paternities: he is the real father of Dora and Nora, not of Saskia and Imogen. Thus Shakespeare’s verses, from *King Lear*’s last act, seem to resonate in the butterflies’ wing beats:

³⁶ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 207.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 206.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 207.

³⁹ Peregrine says: “As long as people love butterflies, your names will be on their lips, you’ll have a kind of beautiful eternity”, (*Wise Children*, p. 175), somehow recalling the rhyming couplet of Shakespeare’s Sonnet XVIII: “So long as men can breath, or eyes can see,/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news;⁴⁰

If Lear, tragically, conducts Cordelia to prison and his words have the bitter taste of desperation and infinite sadness (the image of the gilded butterflies might indeed refer to Cordelia's bloodthirsty sisters), in *Wise Children* butterflies suggest opposite feelings: Peregrine is not about to die but has, in fact, just come back to life; Dora is soon going to conclude her tale, a tale full of singing and dancing and that has turned tragedy into comedy. Butterflies are however not alone in conferring Peregrine's arrival such a theatrical, definitely Shakespearean tone. As a matter of fact, his apparition is anticipated by the following description:

What happened was this: drumroll, flames, hush, uplifted cake knife but, before it could descend, came a tremendous knocking at the front door. TREMENDOUS. Such a knocking that the birthday candles dipped and swayed and dropped wax on the chocolate tiles; the boughs of lilacs tossed, scattering nodes of bloom; the very parquet underneath us seemed to tremble, about to rise up.⁴¹

Not only Dora's way of narrating the chain of events preceding the "tremendous knocking" imitates some detailed stage directions; not only the consequences of such a knocking are described through the rhetorical trope of exaggeration, which opens the boundaries of the novel to the fantastic; but also and most importantly such a knocking calls to mind the famous porter scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In the play, the episode may constitute a moment of comic relief after Duncan's assassination, at the same time establishing a disturbing comparison between Macbeth's castle and hell itself; in *Wise Children* the knocking, without truly being scary or disquieting, still manages to upset and shock the reader in order to create an

⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V, iii, 11-14.

⁴¹ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 206. (Emphasis in the original text).

atmosphere of excited anticipation that prepares the *coup de theatre*, the “unscripted act” of Peregrine’s appearance.

If fantastic literature enters Angela Carter’s novel and crafts some of its most Shakespearean moments, so a theme that definitely characterizes Shakespeare’s plays, the one of the double, is similarly reshaped and recycled. Duality is as a matter of fact also the supporting structure of *Wise Children*, the skeleton around which the whole novel is built. Indeed, as Ali Smith maintains in her Introduction to the 2006 reprinting of the book,

From its sprightly opening riddle onwards, everything in *Wise Children* is about duality – and most immediately, Carter suggests, social duality. The aging birthday girl narrator is one half of a duo: Nora and Dora, ‘the legendary Chance Sisters’. They’re from the ‘wrong side’ of a two-track city (and a two-track family and a two-track art form and a two-track tradition and a two-track world).⁴²

Everything is double, in *Wise Children*, included the very identity of its characters: first of all because, as indeed it happen in Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, most of them are identical twins; indeed in the novel the list of twins is so long that it defies plausibility: Melchior and Peregrine are twins, as well as Dora and Nora, Saskia and Imogen, Tristram and Gareth and even Gareth’s babies. As it happened in Shakespeare’s plays, also in *Wise Children* twins are involved in a plot which deals with misunderstandings, mistaken identities and cross-dressings; however, if Shakespeare’s plays mostly aim at reflecting on the duality between seeming and being, or on the illusory nature of reality, in Carter’s novel the presence of twins acquires other, somehow darker meanings. Adopting precisely the Shakespearean motif of disguise, for example, Angela Carter creates situations in which one twin takes the place of the other, thus giving life to ambiguous incidents that allow the novel to evolve into one direction rather than another. So, when Dora

⁴² Ali Smith, “Introduction” to Angela Carter’s *Wise Children*, cit., p. ix.

meets, after a long time, one of Nora's ex-boyfriends with whom she was in love, she pretends to be her sister, but she also pays the consequences of her act:

I only had to speak, to say: 'Not Nora, my darling, but Dora, who loves you only.'
And there would have been one more happy housewife behind some garden fence in Slough or Cheam, and a bellyful of kids. Those words that would have changed everything were on the tip of my tongue, would you believe;⁴³

Differently from what is common in Shakespeare's comedies, in *Wise Children* there is no final agnition and, consequently, no typically Shakespearean happy ending: Dora does not reveal herself, so there are no nuptials to celebrate. Carter thus seems to distance her novel from Shakespeare's plays, but what she is truly doing is endorsing their most troubling and unsettling features, the ones hidden behind the mirthful appearance of a wedding banquet. Indeed Shakespeare's comedies, notwithstanding their festive dénouements, still often end with an element of discordance, linger on melancholy or hide a truth – too unpleasant to be explicitly revealed. So while Viola marries Orsino who defines her as his “fancy's queen”⁴⁴, as if she existed only in the perfection of dreams and not as a real person, Malvolio kills the joy of their union with his desire of revenge; similarly, as in *The Merchant of Venice* all the couples happily prepare to consume their marriage, Antonio is left painfully alone; and, as previously discussed, the poetic quality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* conceals a disturbing eroticism and a reflection on the uncertain nature of love. Angela Carter does appropriate some of the most evident *topoi* of Shakespeare's plays, yet she recycles them by emphasising meanings and aspects of which the theatregoers often take no notice; darker nuances thus enter the dazzling atmosphere of *Wise Children* at the same time casting a shadow on the luminous world of Shakespearean comedies.

⁴³ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 100.

⁴⁴ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, V, i, 375.

The duality of Carter's novel, however, is not only connected to its being truly crowded with twins, but also to the stage or television professions of many of its characters: almost all of them have a private and a public identity, being at the same time themselves and the innumerable roles they have played and that audiences have learned to love. Each of them constantly wears a mask – a purely figurative one in the case of some characters, almost a real one in the case of Dora and Nora:

We paint an inch thick. We put on our faces before we come down to breakfast, the Max Factor Pan Stick, the false eyelashes with the three coats of mascara, everything. We used to polish our eyelids with Vaseline, when we were girls, but we gave up on that during the war and now use just a simple mushroom shadow for day plus a hint of tobacco brown, to deepen the tone and a charcoal eyeliner. Our fingernails match our toenails match our rouge.⁴⁵

Although 75, the Chance sisters appear to be stuck at the acme of their career; somehow refusing to grow old, they still feel the need to attract people's attention, to appear young, beautiful and physically perfect even when, in fact, they are quite the opposite. As a consequence, they are transformed into caricatures, into clown-like figures that still disquietingly love to display their decaying bodies:

We [...] did another Hollywood ascension up the staircase although I suffered the customary nasty shock when I spotted us both in the gilt mirror at the top – two funny old girls, paint an inch thick, clothes sixty years too young, stars on their stockings and little wee skirts skimming their buttocks. Parodies. [...] We couldn't help it, we had to laugh at the spectacle we'd made of ourselves and, fortified by sisterly affection, strutted our stuff boldly into the ballroom. We could still show a thing or two, even if they couldn't stand the sight.⁴⁶

Dora herself describes her appearance as a parody, a spectacle that no one wants to see anymore and that yet keeps going on, unchanged, out of date. Carter thus all the

⁴⁵ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 197-98.

more emphasises the uncanny nature of twins: if, according to Freud, the very existence of “persons [...] who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike”⁴⁷ arouses the feeling of the uncanny, such a sentiment is all the more reinforced in the presence of characters like Dora and Nora: the two sisters not only delight in exhibiting their resemblance (the brand of the perfume they use being the only element that distinguishes the one from the other), but they also happily parade their old age: their faces, utterly transformed by make-up, and their bodies half-covered by teenage clothes, are disturbing and definitely fake. Nora and Dora, living as two funny parodies of what they used to be, almost monster-like in their artificiality, add yet another layer of uncanny to a novel in which Shakespeare merges with shreds of fantastic literature.

Fantastic tropes as well as the uncanny theme of the double equally inform Antonia Byatt’s novel. Interestingly, what is more, she adopts one of the rhetoric devices that Todorov considers as specific of fantastic literature precisely during one of the meta-narrative moments of the novel, thus immediately establishing a link between her text and Shakespearean drama. According to Todorov,

[...] c’est un troisième emploi de figures rhétorique qui nous intéressera le plus. [...] dans le troisième cas, la relation est synchronique : la figure et le surnaturel sont présents au même niveau et leur relation est fonctionnelle, non « étimologique ». Ici l’apparition de l’élément fantastique est précédé par une série de comparaisons, d’expressions figurées ou simplement idiomatiques, très courantes dans le langage commun, mais qui désignent, si on les prends à la lettre, un événement surnaturel : celui précisément qui surviendra à la fin de l’histoire.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, in David Sadner (ed.), *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2004, p. 85.

⁴⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 84. “But it is a third use of rhetorical figures that will concern us most. [...] In the third case, the relation is synchronic: the figure and the supernatural are present on the same level, and their relation is functional, not ‘etymological.’ Here the appearance of the fantastic element is preceded by a series of comparisons, of figurative or simply idiomatic expressions, quite common in ordinary speech but designating, if taken literally, a supernatural event – the very one that will occur at the end of the story.”

In *The Children's Book*, no supernatural events are prefigured because no supernatural events will take place; yet, the narrator prepares and somehow foreshadows a specific moment, the one of Tom's death, through comparisons and allusions that significantly do not crop up directly in the main narrative but in one of the texts written by Olive Wellwood. Even more poignantly, this text is not one of her usual tales for children, but the script of a play – to be staged in London – whose uncanny title is *Tom Underground* and whose plot is adapted from the very intimate and personal story she is writing for her son Tom. It is the narrator that stresses the main difference between the two texts:

Olive had never reached the end of the tale in Tom's book, which was constructed to be endless. The end was the meeting with the Queen of the Shadows, spinning her complex spider-webs in the deepest pit.⁴⁹

Tom's original tale is supposed to be endless because it is written throughout the years as a way to accompany Tom during all his life; the conclusion, an unplanned one, should thus come with the death of the writer. On the contrary, obviously, the play has to have an end. Such an insistence on the tale's ending definitely seems to announce Tom's destiny, all the more if we interpret it in association with the dialogue chosen to cast the actress who would play the role of Tom:

Olive shut her eyes again. The voice was sexless and silver. It was brave and full of the fear of the dark. She opened her eyes. This upright girl had crept into the skin of the boy she had imagined.

'I fear I shall never get out of here alive.'

Matter-of-fact, dignified, desperate.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 517.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 520.

Indeed Tom, the real one, never gets out alive of a play which utterly upsets him: he dislikes the idea of sharing the protagonist's name (and actually, according to Freud, an extremely unpleasant, uncanny feeling can be generated when meeting someone who has our same name)⁵¹, he does not accept a female actress playing the part of his homonymous protagonist, and he cannot stand the very idea at the basis of drama, pretence:

Tom knew, and didn't know, the story. His skin crawled. [...] He refused grimly to suspend disbelief. The woman-Tom was up to the knees in the bloodlight, and staggered dramatically. Tom cradles his head in his hands. [...] He did not think it out, but *knew* he was undergoing a trial or test. He must not for one moment, not for one second, *believe*. The test was not to be taken in by glamour, by illusion.⁵²

So Tom abandons the theatre, gets lost in London and finally reaches the woods; convinced to be going home, but in fact getting even more lost and reaching the English Channel, he finally accepts, in a way as matter-of-fact and dignified as the voice of the actress, his own death:

He started walking again. He walked down the shingle and on, without hesitating, into the waves and the lashing wind, the flying froth and the sinewy down-draft. He was still walking, in his socks, on the pebbles, soaked to the skin, when he slipped, and the wave threw him into the current. He didn't fight.⁵³

Tom's plot, at moments narrated through a rhetorical device which is considered as a distinctive one of fantastic literature, also introduces in the novel the theme of the double, inventing as a matter of fact a meta-fictional character which becomes the alter-ego of the fictional Tom.

⁵¹ "Or take the case that one is engaged at the time in reading the works of Hering, the famous psychologist, and then receives within the space of a few days two letters from different countries, each from a person called Hering; whereas one has never before had any dealings with anyone of that name." In Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, cit., p. 88.

⁵² A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit, p. 523 (Emphasis in the original text).

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 533.

Playing with dualities occupies a lot of space in *The Children's Book* and inflects the whole narration. Duality is first of all directly evocative of Shakespearean drama and of its old distinction between appearance and reality. As I have already discussed this issue in chapter 2, underlining the significance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Byatt's novel, I will just remember here that in Olive's family things are definitely not what they seem: the apparent utopian reality of her household hides a much more uncanny reality of adultery and betrayals. If Byatt's text adopts the Shakespearean theme of the double to stress how there is a very fine line dividing appearance from reality, it also develops this same theme through the filter of Victorian culture on the one hand and of Freud's essay on the uncanny on the other. The means through which such relationships grow and expand in the texts are the abundant references to marionettes and automatons. Indeed, one of the characters, Anselm Stern, is a puppeteer whose shows the narrator often describes. Incidentally, one of these puppet-shows is precisely E.T.A Hoffman's *The Sandman*, quoted and analyzed by Freud in his essay as a story generating a "quite unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness"⁵⁴. In Byatt's novel, and in its retelling of *The Sandman*, this atmosphere is moreover amplified. In the tale Olympia is a doll that seems a real woman; in the puppet-show, where suspension of disbelief allows the audience to see every puppet as a real human being, the puppet incarnating Olympia is perceived as the doll Olympia, which appears like a real woman, but that, in fact, is only an automaton. Others are the stories recounted by Stern and by his marionettes but one specific performance acquires, I believe, a particular relevancy for its connections with late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century appropriations of Shakespeare:

Hedda went behind the golden box, and flute music was heard. The puppet Hedda appeared as a shadow on the screen, and then in the centre of the feasting in the castle. With strong gestures of her arms, and swinging of her hair, she refused to taste food, or sip drink, and brandished the knife at the creatures, who hissed loudly and

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, cit., p. 81.

collapsed into dislocated heaps of cloth and tangled limbs. The puppet Hedda bent over the sleeping puppet and took his hand. [...] Tom's big dolls sat in the audience. At the final performance, these creatures rose, and waddled, or rolled, or hopped, or trundled through the barn towards the dark tower.⁵⁵

Performed at the ending a summer camp, the play entitled *The Fairy Castle* is the result of a collaboration between Anselm Stern, August Steyning and Olive Wellwood. Another of Byatt's invention, it deeply plunges the reader in the literary and theatrical production of the time in which events take place. Indeed, if its plot calls to mind Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, its actors, half of them human, half of them puppets or dolls, evoke the theatre of Gordon Craig who wrote in 1908: "The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the über-marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name."⁵⁶

A great Shakespearean interpreter, Craig is somehow hidden behind the pages of *The Children's Books*. Indeed, when August Steyning talks about marionettes he conveys the theories of the German playwright Heinrich von Kleist, whose line of thoughts Craig evidently shared:

Marionettes [...] are figures of the upper air, like elves, like sylphs, who barely touch the ground. They dance in geometric perfection in a world more intense, less hobbledehoy, than our own. Heinrich von Kleist, in a suggestive and mysterious essay, claims daringly that these figures perform more perfectly than human actors. They exhibit the laws of movement; their limbs rise and fall in perfect arcs, according to the laws of physics. They have – unlike human actors – no need to charm, or to exact sympathy.⁵⁷

If Steyning's words hint at the unemotional appearance of marionettes, Philip's attention to the dolls' faces, rigid and fixed in a single expression yet capable of

⁵⁵ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., pp. 450-51.

⁵⁶ Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-marionette", *The Mask*, vol. 1, n. 2, April 1908, in Arnold Rood (ed.), *Gordon Craig on Movement and Dance*, London: Dance Books, 1977, p. 50.

⁵⁷ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 73.

transmitting the whole essence of a character⁵⁸, recalls Craig's reasons for proposing a theatre of the über-marionette, liberated by human actors:

Yet even modern puppets are extraordinary things. The applause may thunder or dribble, their hearts beat no faster, no slower, their signals do not grow hurried or confused; and, through drenched in a torrent of bouquets and love, the face of the leading lady remains as solemn, as beautiful and as remote as ever.⁵⁹

It is however precisely such a lack of sentiments and emotions that transforms marionettes into uncanny creatures: their coldness and the rigidity of their stiff expressions make them disquietingly similar to dead bodies forever fixed in their last posture. Even more disturbingly, the “corpses” of marionettes suddenly pass from being inanimate to being animate, taking on, as Dorothy remarks “a sinister life, which perturbed her.”⁶⁰ Indeed, according to Freud, the uncanny resides in the “uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton”⁶¹. It is the exact situation that audiences experience even at the end of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* with the statue of Hermione suddenly moving and speaking. The play's conclusion has been interestingly analyzed by Catherine Belsey:

If we see Hermione's story as predominantly mimetic, with elements of folk tale (the slandered queen, the ridding oracle) and Perdita's story as predominantly a fireside tale, with elements of realism (the Clown's shopping list, the pedlar's wares, for instance), what are we to make of the moment when the two stories converge? Which of the two narrative logics prevail when the statue moves and speaks in Paulina's

⁵⁸ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 74: “Philip clapped. He had been interested above all by the china faces of the characters. How did you decide, when a character went through so much, and could have only one expression, what that expression should be? He could see how Dr Copelius could do well with a mouth that both smiled and sneered, but Nathanel was exactly right, serious and not strong, delicately thin and not quite smiling.”

⁵⁹ Gordon Craig, “The Actor and the Über-marionette”, cit., p. 86.

⁶⁰ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 49.

⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”, cit., p. 80.

chapel? [...] Should we assume that Hermione has been living in seclusion all along, or is her resurrection legitimately seen as magical?⁶²

The hesitation between a mimetic and a supernatural explanation opens the path towards a fantastic interpretation of the play, definitely underlined by Antonia Byatt's handling of such a *pièce* in her novel. In a familial performance of *The Winter's Tale*, only very briefly described by the narrator, the role of Hermione is played by Olive Wellwood:

And she must move, when she stepped down, like an automaton. As though the force of gravity, not her own will, lifted each foot, bent each knee, held her arms in place. [...] Olive was not very good at gliding like an automaton, and became irritated by the constant repetition.

'You are related to the stone man in Don Giovanni, you are a sister to Pygmalion's ivory Galatea...'

[...]

'You are a fine figure of a woman', said Steyning, who was still thinking in terms of sculpture.⁶³

Although Olive here claims not to like the role of automaton and not to feel like a sculpture, still, later on in the novel, she will be directly and explicitly compared to a statue. It is the moment in which she finds herself alone, in a guest-house room, with Herbert Methley, the man with whom she plans to betray her husband. It is precisely on this occasion, when her gestures should be natural, revealing impatience and desire, that she in fact remains cold and emotionless:

Inside the bedroom, he bent to lock the door, and lifted his hands to remove her hat. She stood awkwardly, *like a statue*. He said

⁶² Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?*, cit., pp. 79-80.

⁶³ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 221.

'You are thinking you have made a mistake, and should go home. You are embarrassed to be committing adultery out of a kind of revengefulness. You feel all this is *mechanical*, not passionate. [...].'⁶⁴

The fact that Byatt uses the very term 'statue' to describe Olive's posture in Herbert's room aims at explicitly creating a connection with her role in the Shakespearean play: it seems indeed natural to interpret such role as an uncanny, fantastic anticipation of what is going to happen next⁶⁵.

Recycling the British playwright and his plays through Freud's theory of the uncanny, through fantastic literature and most of all through the lens of the Victorian Age, of its literature and its own Shakespearean appropriations, Byatt manages to concoct an original and rich novel, adding depth and resonance to the whole Shakespearean corpus.

Motifs related to the theme of the double and thus both to Shakespearean drama and to fantastic literature indeed tread throughout the novels. After Carter's twins and Byatt's marionettes, Naylor's text finds a metaphor of such a theme in the image of mirrors. When Cocoa falls ill, an illness due to Ruby's witchcraft and which also causes her some painful hallucinations, mirrors acquire a significant role. Looking at her reflected image in a glass, Ophelia does not see her real self, but, in her hallucinated reality, glimpses the image of a disfigured face:

I put a dab of powdered rouge on the brush, and when I stroked upward on my cheekbone my flesh gummed on the brush bristles and got pushed up like molten caramel. I brought the brush back down and the image frowning at me had a gouged cheek with the extra flesh pushed up and dangling under the right ear. I moved over;

⁶⁴ A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, cit., p. 223. (Emphasis mine).

⁶⁵ I am here referring to something that I have previously analyzed, in relation to Tom's plot: according to Todorov, a fantastic moment in a text can be foreshadowed by a series of comparisons or figurative expressions.

the image moved and remained the same. Bringing my fingers up to my cheek, I felt it intact and curved while the fingers in the mirror were probing a gross disfigurement.⁶⁶

Mirrors are, according to Todorov, “symboles du regard indirect, faussé, subverti”⁶⁷ and, according to Rosemary Jackson, objects “which see things myopically, or distortedly, as out of focus – to effect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar”⁶⁸. This is precisely what happens to Cocoa, who, in seeing her very own body transformed into something new and different, experiences an uncanny sensation. Indeed, following Freud’s definition: “the uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”⁶⁹ If reality is familiar, mirrors are a falsified image of it; as Todorov states, a mirror “n’offre pas le monde mais une image du monde, [...], bref une contradiction.”⁷⁰ Thus Ophelia can only say “So the mirror was never to be trusted. Trust only your natural eyesight.”⁷¹ And it is only in her grandmother’s eyes, “a mirror that could never lie”⁷² that she finally manages to see her real self. For Rosemary Jackson,

the central thematic concerns of the fantastic [are] problems of visions: knowledge, comprehension, reason, are established through the power of the ‘look’, through the ‘eye’ and the ‘I’ of the human subject whose relation to objects is structured through his field of vision.⁷³

It is through her own ‘eyes’, or through Abigail’s ones, that Cocoa recognizes herself, finding the real ‘I’ that mirrors had instead distorted.

⁶⁶ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 275.

⁶⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 128. “[...] symbols of the indirect, distorted, subverted vision.”

⁶⁸ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London and New York: Methuen, 1981, p. 43.

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, cit., p. 76.

⁷⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 1970, p. 128. “[...] does not reflect the world, but an image of the world, [...] in short, a contradiction.”

⁷¹ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 281.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 287.

⁷³ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, cit., p. 45.

The idea of looking, of seeing is indeed much present in the novel, something that should not come as a surprise if we remember the importance that Naylor accords to *King Lear*, a play in which more than everywhere else Shakespeare engages with the idea of seeing and not seeing, of a sightless wisdom and a sighted folly. In the case of *Mama Day*, seeing is strictly connected to believing; as it was in *Lear*, truly seeing and understanding things means also to become blind, refusing to believe in reality as it appears, but looking much further, in order to go beyond the mere appearance of things; seeing also entails becoming a fool, because it implies abandoning the rational explanation of things in order to explore the irrational, the mysterious, the illogical. As Cocoa thinks, when recalling her childhood,

And from a little girl I had been taught that you don't waste your time telling people things they won't believe. I had seen Mama Day do a lot of things at the other place, and when I told the kids at school they called me a liar. [...] But if I could just bring them here and let them *see*, I'd say. Folks see what they want to see, she told me. And for them to see what's really happening here, they gotta be ready to believe.⁷⁴

The insistence on the verbs 'to see' and 'to believe' is indicative of the difference existing between everyone's way of thinking and the mentality of Willow Spring. People, like George, only see; the community of Willow Spring instead sees and believes, and, actually, even believes without seeing. George's incapacity of believing, his inability to forget his rationality and to look instead further on, in a supernatural, irrational reality, will in the end cost him his entire life. When Cocoa is ill – for inexplicable reasons according to George, for an evil spell according to Mama Day – Miranda asks George to believe in her way of doing things, of trying to cure her niece: this is why she wants him to go to her chicken coop, find a big red hen, search her nest and go back to her, at the other place; once again, this seemingly nonsensical task is verbally connected to the idea of seeing and of losing one's sight: "Now, I'm warning you, she [the hen]'s gonna be evil so watch out for

⁷⁴ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 97. (Emphasis in the original text).

your eyes.”⁷⁵ In fact, figuratively losing his eyes, George gains another kind of sight, an inner one, which allows him to see things differently. It is desperation that brings George to the chicken coop, that leads him to believe, even if for a single moment, in Mama Day’s words and in a reality so different from the one he belongs to; it is however this moment of ‘sighted folly’ that allows him to save Cocoa, although the effort will lead him to an heart attack and consequently to death.

Insisting on the importance of the gaze, Gloria Naylor makes *Mama Day* resonate with a variety of Shakespearean themes, like the duplicity of human beings, the illusory nature of reality, and the always existing conflict between seeming and being. Moreover, the importance she attributes to the image of mirrors and to their way of reflecting an envisioned, strange, twisted reality, permits her to filter all these themes through the screens of the fantastic and the uncanny, adding a series of much disturbing layers to a novel that naturally flows towards the supernatural and the magic.

Marina Warner’s *Indigo* also plays with the theme of the double, but in a more subtle, hidden, almost implicit way. Its author once again takes her cue from the Shakespearean *Tempest*, a play that only lightly hints at the motif of duality in its meta-theatrical moment. Similarly, it is thanks to the meta-narrative intertext of Serafine’s tales that Warner develops in her novel a discourse on the double, what is more showing how Feeny’s myths seem to fantastically foresee and anticipate the future, disturbingly suggesting an intrusion of the magic and the supernatural in everyday life. In the initial re-elaboration of the myth of King Midas as told by Serafine, there is a king who captures a fat man who has been surprised while having fun in the royal gardens; recognizing him as an old friend, the king offers him eating and drinking; when the fat man’s master arrives and sees his friend so well looked after, he offers the king a reward. The king chooses richness, he wants

⁷⁵ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, cit., p. 295.

“everything [he has] really worth something”⁷⁶: so, from that moment on, everything he touches turns to gold, included his own, precious daughter. Uncannily, the king’s daughter can be considered as Xanthe’s double: Xanthe’s nickname happens as a matter of fact to be “Goldie” and her husband Sy Nebris is often called, in the novel, “the fat man”; also, when rereading the following words taken from Serafine’s adaptation of the Greek myth, the character of Xanthe immediately comes to mind:

[...] his daughter’s got a dream too – a new world, a new life. You know people often dream of being different. Never content with what we are. No, no. She longs – (And Serafine tapped her chest.) – In here, the princess feels a hole she wants to fill up with something, she don’t yet know what it might be. She’ll find out, in time.⁷⁷

Xanthe will indeed have her new world: with her husband she goes to live on *Enfant-Béate* (and this is, what is more, the world the fat man was describing in Serafine’s tale), she helps him manage his hotels, so that the two of them become extremely rich: as Sy says to her, disquietingly, ‘Everything you touch turns to gold’⁷⁸. Xanthe is a golden girl merely in the sense that she is interested in making money and conducting a comfortable life, so that even her marriage with Sy is far from being based on tenderness and affection. As a golden statue, or even as the golden casket in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant Venice*, Xanthe’s beauty captures the eye but hides a cold personality:

‘All that glitters is not gold;
Often have you heard that told:
Many a man his life has sold
But my outside to behold:
Gilded tombs do worms enfold
Had you been as wise as bold,

⁷⁶ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 10.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 362.

Your in limbs, in judgment old,
Your answer had not been in'scroll'd
Fare you well: your suit is cold.⁷⁹

As the king in Feeny's tale has somehow sold his life only for the love of gold, but in doing so has been most unwise, so even Xanthe's father, by treasuring and spoiling her too much, transforms his daughter into a girl which truly seems to be made of gold, with her heart hard and cold as a stone, with her shining appearance hiding the worms of her insensitive soul:

Xanthe had never loved anyone; nobody had been allowed near her at home, and the illicit evenings in jazz clubs she had snatched with Miranda, under pretext they were going to the theatre or some such respectable excuse, had given her a taste for conquest, with no repercussions, no consequences of friendship, let alone love. Her father had seen off many of Xanthe's aspiring boyfriends [...]. Xanthe now had a flat of her own, and her father could only stand guard at the end of the telephone. But something inside her had been stunned by his assiduous rivalry; she did not seem capable of passion.⁸⁰

There is someone else who is responsible for Xanthe's insensibility: a friend of her father's, a Princess as she is referred to in the text, who offers her, for her christening, a wish: "I would wish Xanthe the heartlessness of a statue, utter heartlessness."⁸¹ The princess of Feeny's tale and Xanthe are thus both transformed into statues of gold, the one literally, the other only figuratively. And, if the end of Serafine's tale sees the statue coming back to life and speaking, with the king her father reassuring her and telling her "You're here, at home, with me. Everything will be all right, your life is only just beginning"⁸², so the moment of Xanthe's death is truly a beginning, an epiphany, the moment in which she finds out what she has

⁷⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, II, vii, 69-78.

⁸⁰ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., pp. 273-74.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

⁸² *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

been looking for throughout her whole life and that, dying, she has finally managed to find:

[...] when Xanthe was drowning in the pearl beds which she matched with her barley hair and her nacreous skin and her thin flesh all the way through the springy, tensile skeleton.[...] The Princess' spell was wearing off. [...] Only at the very last minute, when so much was coming apart around Xanthe, did that fairy decree of long ago stop working and Xanthe Everard became vulnerable to love.⁸³

Xanthe's transformation into a pearl is the very last metamorphoses she lives: through her death, she becomes richer, she discovers something that she had never truly experienced before, she is made complete. The girl made of stone, of gold, paradoxically comes back to life only when she dies, breaking Midas's spell, overcoming her father's strictness and forgetting the Princess's wish.

In *Indigo*, tales seem to become reality and ancient myths take on a new poignancy; a supernatural dimension almost imperceptibly threads in the supposed real lives of the characters, who find their double in oral tales that anticipate and foreshadow their own destiny. Looking back at Shakespeare but rewriting his plays in a thoroughly personal manner, Warner makes of her novel a fantastic narrative, informed by the theme of the double and by the uncanny sentiment that this dimension, according to Freud's interpretation, raises.

4.4. Conclusion: incestuous feelings

Incest is definitely a common theme in Shakespearean drama. Some plays openly deal with it: it is the case of *Pericles*, which stages the incestuous relationship between Antiochus and his daughter, or of *Hamlet*, that portrays Gertrude's desire "to post with dexterity through incestuous sheets"⁸⁴. Other plays instead only hint at the possibility of incestuous feelings and it has thus been the role of psychoanalytical criticism to greatly expand on a subject which is in fact only lightly alluded to. This

⁸³ Marina Warner, *Indigo*, cit., p. 373.

⁸⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, ii, 156-57.

is what happens with plays like *The Tempest* or *King Lear*, where Prospero's attachment to Miranda and Lear's love for Cordelia are read in terms of incestuous desire; it is also the case of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where both Hermia's and Juliet's fathers insist on imposing a husband of their choice to their respective daughters, significantly choosing a man which is not sexually attractive in the eyes of the young girls.

Of the four novels I am analyzing, only two are concerned with the subject of incest: A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* and Angela Carter's *Wise Children*. Byatt disturbingly allows incestuous relationship to crawl into her novel thanks to the triangle Prosper Cain-Imogen Fludd-Benedict Fludd that I have already discussed in the second chapter. In *Wise Children*, the theme of incest is blatantly present only at the very end of the novel and it is looked at through the novel's typical light-heartedness:

'How about it, Dora?'

'I don't fancy a foxtrot, Perry', I said. 'But I wouldn't say no to a –'

It slipped out before I thought it twice. I'm not proud of it, I'm not ashamed of it although I thought, there'll be hell to pay with Nora tomorrow morning; even though he *was* my uncle on my father's side.⁸⁵

The incestuous act, far from being perceived as uncanny, disturbing, and discomfoting, is laughed at as the last craziness of an old lady who has always liked to have some fun. What is interesting is instead Carter's way of describing the violence of the sexual act through the image of a house being completely shaken and almost destroyed by it.⁸⁶ "What would have happened if we *had* brought the

⁸⁵ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 218. (Emphasis in the original text).

⁸⁶ See *Ibidem*, p. 220. "Nora told me afterwards how the agitation of the steel bed began to make the chandelier downstairs directly beneath it, shiver, so that the music of the lutes, now plucking away at a selection of show tunes for the delight of the dancing guests, was almost imperceptibly augmented by the tinkle, tinkle, tinkle of all the little lustres as the tiers of glass began to sway from side to side, slopping hot wax on the dancers below, first slowly, then with a more and more determined rhythm until they shook like Josephine Baker's bottom [...]."

house down?"⁸⁷ wonders Dora, but the question is left unanswered because the house remained stable on its foundations. According to Kate Webb, what is more:

[...] although her [Dora's] historical house has sometimes been a painful place to live in, a place from which people have tried to eject her, it is also where her history, her story, lies. Bastard that Dora is, this is a house that she has built, too. (That the house is a metaphor for the literary canon is quite clear. Should those left outside trash the house of fiction, or try to renovate it?)⁸⁸

Indeed, if Dora and Peregrine do not destroy the house, neither does Carter, who not only renovates the house of fiction, but who, with *Wise Children*, indeed rewrites the canon of Western literature.

Incest, in *Wise Children*, *Indigo*, *Mama Day* and *The Children's Book* is not a theme to be literally interpreted and analyzed. More than truly informing the four narratives, it is a dimension that concerns them all from the outside, being somehow a metaphor for the writers' relationship with Shakespeare himself. All the women writers whose novels I have explored in my thesis act towards Shakespeare as rebellious daughters, who feel a generational and cultural gap between themselves and their fathers and who thus plot to disobey, running away from paternal authority. Still, they can never truly escape. Shakespeare remains the father with whom they have an incestuous relationship, a prohibited one because their feminine nature would and yet cannot prevent them from going towards him. His figure, although transformed and filtered through the lenses of fairy tales and legends, through the Greek and Latin cultures as well as through the African-American and the English Victorian ones and finally through a series of different literary genres and narrative modes, still lingers, recognizable, on all the novels. Shakespeare is Naylor, Warner, Carter and Byatt's literary father: those women writers continually go back to him, cross-fertilizing their novels with his plays in a never-ending incestuous but also extremely fruitful relationship.

⁸⁷ Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, cit., p. 221.

⁸⁸ Kate Webb, "Seriously Funny: *Wise Children*", cit., 1994, pp. 305-6.

CONCLUSIONS

Comparing past and present, differences and convergences indeed appear in women's treatment of the Shakespearean corpus. Julie Sanders, in her volume *Adaptation and Appropriation*, distinguishes two different categories in the use of the Shakespearean canon and defines them as the "honorific" and the "iconoclastic" approach¹, meaning on the one hand the attitude of those writers who want to authenticate and give value to their own work by establishing a link with the mythical aura surrounding the playwright, and on the other, instead, the rethinking and rewriting of Shakespeare, considered as an embodiment of old and conservative values, patriarchy among them. However, having investigated the ways women have related to Shakespeare in the course of the centuries, I have come to think that appropriating Shakespeare does not mean only rewriting his works either to endorse or refuse them; actually, I have realized that the whole concept of appropriation has become quite old, obsolete and outdated so that, when analysing women's works as

¹ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 46. (The same distinction is made by Annalisa Castaldo in Richard Burt (ed.), *Shakespeares after Shakespeare: An Encyclopaedia of the Bard in Mass Media and Popular Culture*, Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2007, vol. 2, pp. 408-505. Castaldo employs the terms of cultural authority and cultural reconsideration; she also adds the category of cultural literacy, to indicate authors who draw on Shakespeare expecting readers to recognize their references).

the product of a cross-fertilization with Shakespearean drama, it seems necessary to redefine and go beyond it.

Both in the past and in the present, women have perceived Shakespeare as a friend, a pen-pal, someone to share their writing journey with. A blizzard of considerations have indeed sprang up from this strong feeling of companionship, all of them tending to see Shakespeare in a feminine light: from the eighteenth century, when women writers truly compared him to a woman because of his extraordinary sensibility and sympathy – characteristics that were perceived as exclusively feminine – to the modernist period, when Virginia Woolf shaped her discourse on androgyny precisely on the figure of Shakespeare, the playwright of Stratford has been truly took on by women. He has always been seen as someone who could understand them, and, from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, who could confer legitimacy to their literary activity. Somehow, there is a sort of feminist attitude in women's relation to Shakespeare, not in the sense that they saw him as the representative of a patriarchy to reject, but on the contrary because they interpreted him as the author who could bestow on them – as women – credibility and dignity. Throughout the centuries, the position of women in society has evidently changed, although some feminist critics still persist in considering women literature as a minor one, struggling to enter the literary canon in direct opposition to a major literature written by male, dominant writers. In the Seventies, Adrienne Rich wrote that “women, like black people, are still regarded as inferior in intellectual quality: marginal, guilty victims.”² And, at the beginning of the Nineties, Linda Anderson stated:

[...] Women's writing has always existed illegitimately; the official story – the version that passes into history – is the one written by male writers. [...] What this means for the woman novelist is that, inheriting a plot which is not her own, she must find ways of contesting her own silencing. Feminist re-readings [...] have mapped a complex

² Adrienne Rich, “Disloyal to Civilization”, in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978*, London: Virago, 1980, p. 284.

interplay in women's writing between imitation of the dominant fictions of the day and divergence from them.³

What I believe, instead, is that women have today managed to find their place in the literary tradition: their writing and their intellectual activity do not need to be justified anymore. Also, a certain number of critics still interpret Shakespeare's female characters as weak and subdued, the stereotypical Renaissance women subjugated to a patriarchal, oppressive culture. Robert Weiman has claimed for example that "rejecting any representation of women as some given, universally valid instance of human nature, truth, or meaning, [...] gender identity in Shakespeare's plays is a social construct"⁴ and Laura E. Donaldson, referring to the character of Miranda, has maintained that she is the expression of "women's oppression under the rule of their biological and cultural Fathers"⁵, the biological father being in this case Prospero, the cultural one, obviously, Shakespeare.

Yet, I believe that interpreting Shakespeare's plays from such a feminist perspective means to look at them from an extremely partial, even constraining point of view. Similarly, an analysis of the ways contemporary women's writing portrays and overthrows patriarchal structures does not really offer interesting critical and analytical tools to deeply investigate the works of contemporary women writers in relation to the Shakespearean corpus. It is true that, contrarily to what happened in the past (when women appropriated Shakespeare's strongest heroines, the ones occupying important, central roles in his plays, like Rosalind or Portia) contemporary authors rather rewrite female figures that Shakespeare somehow forgot on the margins of his *pièces*. Thus characters like Miranda or Ophelia are now given much more space and weight. Furthermore, it is true that if Shakespeare tended to stage father-daughter relationships, contemporary women novelists concentrate instead on mother-daughter ones, by portraying their "appropriated"

³ Linda Anderson (ed.), "Preface" to *Plotting Change. Contemporary Women's Fiction*, cit., p. vii.

⁴ Robert Weimann, "Shakespeare (De)Canonized: Conflicting Uses of 'Authority' and 'Representation'", in *New Literary History*, vol. 20, n. 1, Autumn 1988, p. 76.

⁵ Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms. Race, Gender and Empire Building*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 16.

Shakespearean female characters either as maternal figures or as having strong relationships with their mothers. However, the reasons behind such choices should not be retraced, or at least, not only, in a feminist attitude of rebellion against patriarchy, nor should they be attributed to women's desire to rewrite what Shakespeare already wrote. Rather, contemporary women writers aim at telling something new, different, unsaid, something, indeed, that Shakespeare left blank. Shakespearean drama, although offering to the contemporary writer a series of images, plots, tropes and characters, still is not everything and does not include everything. There are still some gaps, some voids to fill and it is exactly in these blank spaces that the production of contemporary women writers can be placed. Byatt's, Carter's, Warner's and Naylor's novels somehow start where Shakespearean drama ended, say what Shakespearean drama did not say, reflect on topics that Shakespearean drama did not or only partially explored. According to Gary Taylor, among the issues Shakespeare omitted from his plays, the theme of maternity is indeed the most relevant one; the theme of prostitution – and of prostitution as linked to the figure of the actor – is similarly quite absent from his drama; also, if the plots of some of his plays are definitely improbable and far from reality, still there seems to be a lack of “fantasy”; in Taylor's own words:

Other writers, by contrast, fantasticize the here and now: actual people, actual conduct, in the actual human world. A man breeds and feeds a giant dung beetle on which to fly to heaven in pursuit of peace; another man awakens to find himself transformed into a cockroach; a third awakens to discover that he has been asleep and over-parked for two hundred years; one woman is buried to her waist in sand, another woman hanging out laundry is translated bodily to heaven, an old man mistakes windmills for giants, a traveller finds himself a giant in one country and a minim in another. Such fantasy is not “unreflective”. The upside down inevitably comments on the right side up. In fact, turning the world upside down may be one of the only ways to make us see it all. It defamiliarizes the familiar, it reveals the arbitrariness of what

had seemed inevitable, the artificiality of what had seemed natural. [...] Shakespeare did many things; turning the world upside down was not one of them.⁶

Fantasy is definitely one of the dimensions stemming from the way contemporary women writers look at Shakespeare: without going so far as to truly turning the world upside down, yet the works of Naylor, Warner, Carter and Byatt all include fantastic tropes, shift from realism to magical realism, embrace myths and fairy tales, so that the generic boundaries of the novel somehow break down and explode. Far from being merely appropriated and rewritten, Shakespeare is adopted as a creative energy. Antonia Byatt, talking about the role of tradition in contemporary literature, said:

[...] the Great Tradition [...] still exerts its power, to produce forms sometimes limp, sometimes innovatory, sometimes paradoxical, occasionally achieved, and sometimes simply puzzling. The state is recognisable; but traditional critical methods for the study of influence and of plagiarism are often distracting here. When Dr. Leavis isolated the ways in which James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is a reworking of part of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, he was pointing to a kind of 'reader's greed' in the writer [...]. Not parody, not pastiche, not plagiarism – but good and greedy reading, by a great writer. The phenomenon, then, is not novel. And yet it inevitably looks different in modern novels – because of the presence of the past, because of the accumulation of literary criticism, and because of the weight of anxiety as it shows itself in modern fiction form.⁷

The 'reader's greed' that Byatt describes is indeed what characterizes contemporary fiction and is something that can and must be associated to Shakespeare as well. Contemporary women novelists, by reading Shakespeare and looking into his works, discover voids, gaps, blank spaces that they manage to fill thanks to their own novels. Writers nowadays go beyond the simple act of appropriation: they read Shakespeare and they continuously interpret him, because they have in mind

⁶ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare. A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*, cit., p. 402.

⁷ A.S. Byatt, *Passions of the Mind. Selected Writings*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1991, pp. 167-68.

thousands of years of Shakespearean criticism. Shakespeare is somehow recycled, truly living a new life in the works of contemporary women novelists: as a matter of fact, the themes and tropes of his plays are looked at from different perspectives and are enhanced by the immense cultural background of the four authors. Thus, for example, the theme of the double is interpreted by the novelists as related to the old Shakespearean dichotomy between seeming and being, illusion and reality, but most importantly in the lights of Freud's 1919 essay on the uncanny: twins, automatons, marionettes and ghosts populate the four texts, conferring to all of them a sense of disquiet and uneasiness. The setting of the novels, very often woods and islands, are clearly evocative of the Shakespearean geography, but also call to mind what Bakhtin defines as the idyllic chronotope as well as the notion of utopia; however, as utopian societies are never fully realized and Arcadian places are often transformed into fake touristic resorts, the narratives seem to trigger a reflection on Foucault's philosophical concept of heterotopia and on Augé's anthropological one of the non-place. Greek and Latin Literature, the Victorian culture as well as the African-American one contribute to shape the four novels, too: if Warner's *Indigo* explores ancient myths and seems to be going back to the classical sources of Shakespearean drama, Byatt's *The Children's Book* and some of its Shakespearean allusions are inspired by the figure of the Victorian writer Edith Nesbit; in Naylor's *Mama Day*, instead, the dimensions of orality and magic reflect both Shakespearean drama and Afro-American culture, religion and folklore. Thus the four novels, so rich in critical references, cannot but themselves mirror the theory of intertextuality as well as the postmodern multiplications of interpretations and the contemporary taste for meta-narrative and meta-criticism.

Analysing the works of Carter, Naylor, Warner and Byatt and comparing them to the works of women of the past, I realized how contemporary women writers see Shakespeare as a source of difference, as a writer to explore in the contradictions, paradoxes, voids and absences of his works. The creative energy that Shakespeare has been able to generate in these novelists has allowed me to understand how old and outdated the concept of appropriation and the concept of influence both

sound. Appropriation means looking back at Shakespeare to rewrite what he already said, in order to originate new possible meanings. Contemporary women writers go instead much beyond: they concentrate on what Shakespeare did not write, composing their own works in the blank spaces of his dramatic production and generating a new language, assembled on the basis of the history of literature and of literary criticism. Shakespeare is the catalyst behind such language, the driving force of a vocabulary of production and never-ending energy.

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