



HAL
open science

Shakespeare's 'Forfended Place(s)': Women and the City

Sophie Chiari

► **To cite this version:**

Sophie Chiari. Shakespeare's 'Forfended Place(s)': Women and the City . Per Sivefors. Urban Encounters: Experience and Representation in the Early Modern City, Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2013. hal-01720066

HAL Id: hal-01720066

<https://hal.science/hal-01720066>

Submitted on 28 Feb 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

SHAKESPEARE’S “FORFENDED PLACE(S)”: WOMEN AND THE CITY¹

SOPHIE CHIARI

In the early 17th century, Tommaso Campanella imagined a utopian city, *The City of the Sun* (1602), in which Love rules over a compulsory system of training and education, and attends to the implementation of political eugenics.² Daughters under the age of 19 and sons under 21 must be sexually restrained and amorous feelings prohibited. However, a few brothels remain accessible to those individuals incapable of controlling their sexual drives. Generally speaking, sexual relationships are just tolerated in the city as far as the imperatives of reproduction are concerned. In order to beget perfectly sane and vigorous children, partners will mate only after digestion and prayers.

Sexuality in the city had already been banned by his predecessor Thomas More, for the expression of an individual passion was regarded as an act of transgression: either a girl or a boy guilty of clandestine love affairs was severely punished and she or he was forbidden to marry afterwards, “unless the prince, by his pardon, alleviates the sentence”.³ The parents were also harshly condemned for neglecting their duties. Eventually, all subsequent misdemeanors led to a condemnation to death.⁴

Desire in general—and feminine desire in particular—is considered as a threat by most Renaissance writers, who tend to identify women with ill-defended cities through a series of misogynistic metaphors. In a patriarchal society, the feminine body is often regarded as an unwatched citadel, and the violence of rape downplayed, mocked, or transfigured into some sort of aesthetic posture. Contrary to most of his contemporaries, Shakespeare adopts a much more nuanced or careful point of view on female “forfended places”. If he relies on the same clichés, he abstains from passing judgment on women’s reluctance against or silent

¹ The expression “forfended place(s)” is quoted from WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare, (1997), 2005, 5, 1, 11. When not stated otherwise, references to Shakespeare will be taken from WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988. This article was first presented in French, in a slightly different, shorter version at the conference on “Shakespeare and the city” (11-13 March 2010) organized in Paris by Dominique Goy-Blanquet, President of the French Shakespeare Society (SFS).

² TOMASSO CAMPANELLA, *The City of the Sun in New Atlantis and The City of the Sun: Two Classic Utopias*, Mineola, NY, Dover edition, 2003.

³ THOMAS MORE, *Utopia*, A Revised Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism, Translated and edited by Robert M. Adams, New York and London, Norton, 1992 (1975), Book Two, p. 60.

⁴ THOMAS MORE, op. cit., p. 62: “But a second conviction of adultery is punished by death”.

acceptance of male sexual assaults. He simply turns bodies into metaphorical cities and cities into ladies. The male lover's physical build is compared to a building threatening to collapse as soon as his love becomes uncertain. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* for instance, Valentine wishes the absent Silvia to come back to him, "lest, growing ruinous, the building fall" (5, 4, 7-10). A similar image can be found in *The Comedy of Errors*.⁵ As to the woman's body, it is either assimilated to an entire city or to whole countries. Everyone keeps in mind Dromio of Syracuse's description which parodies the genre of the blazon and metamorphoses Nell, the plump cook, into an erotic map of the world.⁶

This paper addresses the issue of the Shakespearian city through his feminine characters, first exploring the town and its temptations before examining the somewhat ambiguous nature of the relationship between city and chastity. Finally, this should lead me to analyzing the role played by the city for those women who, far from being victims, take pleasure in arousing men's lust.

1. THE CITY AND ITS TEMPTATIONS

In the 16th and the 17th centuries, the city acquires a new importance. In London, the population increases tenfold as the town becomes one of the great occidental metropolises. In 1599, Thomas Dekker goes as far as to give his native town pride of place in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, a play staging the rise of Simon Eyre, an honest shoemaker whose personal success is epitomized by his election as Lord Mayor of London, and which also proves to be "one of the first English comedies to set up its scenery in the very heart of the City".⁷ Curiously enough, the city is depicted as a sexualized body, and "the evocation of a phallic church making pregnant a feminized fountain" makes the city space both grotesque and worrying.⁸ As a result, Elizabethan spectators must have been eager to contemplate Dekker's half realistic, half imaginary London, in order to rediscover the true opportunities offered by the real town.

⁵ "Shall love in building grow so ruinous?" (3, 2, 4) Luciana exclaims about Antipholus of Syracuse.

⁶ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Comedy of Errors* 3, 2, 111-152. For another, quite different erotic map of the word, see for instance JOHN DONNE, Elegy 19: "To his Mistress Going to Bed" in *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C.A. Patrides, London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1985, pp. 183-85: "O my America! my new-found-land, / My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned, / My mine of precious stones, my empery, / How blest am I in this discovering thee!"

⁷ FRANÇOIS LAROQUE, "Le Londres en fête de Thomas Dekker dans *The Shoemaker's Holiday*", in *Les représentations de Londres (2)*, Proceedings of the two-day conference held at the Université de Bordeaux III on the 9th and 10th of March 1984, Annals of the GERB, eds. Michel Jouve and Marie-Claire Rouyer, Bordeaux, 1984, p. 1. My translation.

⁸ FRANÇOIS LAROQUE, art. cit., p. 21.

The attractive power of the city was therefore at its height and, according to Francis Bacon, it was part and parcel of what travelers had to know:

The things to be seen and observed are: the courts of princes, especially when they give audience to ambassadors; the courts of justice, while they sit and hear causes; and so of consistories ecclesiastic; the churches and monasteries, with the monuments which are therein extant; the walls and fortifications of cities, and towns, and so the heavens and harbors; [...] houses and gardens of state and pleasure, near great cities; [...] and, to conclude, whatsoever is memorable, in the places where they go.⁹

However, if one has to be acquainted with great European towns, one should not linger in such places:

Let him not stay long, in one city or town; more or less as the place deserveth, but not long; nay, when he stayeth in one city or town, let him change his lodging from one end and part of the town, to another; which is a great adamant of acquaintance.

Ben Jonson's Shalton and Heyden, in a poem entitled "On the Famous Voyage" (1612), do nothing but follow the advice poured out in the *Essays*.¹⁰ In this satirical text, the heroes intend to visit all of the big European cities and, of course, London is one of them. They set forth

in worthy scorne
Of those, that put out moneyes, on returne
From *Venice*, Paris, or some in-land passage
Of sixe times to, and fro, without embassage,
Or him that backward went to *Berwicke*, or which
Did dance the famous *Morrisse*, unto *Norwich*.
(31-6)

Such pilgrimages were famous at the time. In 1589, Sir Robert Carey won no less than £2,000 by walking from London to Berwick in 12 days. Ten years later, William Kempe, one of

⁹ FRANCIS BACON, "Of Travel", *Essays*, 1601. The text is available online. See the Internet site: http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/bacon/bacon_essays.html

¹⁰ BEN JONSON, "On the Famous Voyage", in *Ben Jonson*, eds. C. H. Herford, Percy, Evelyn Simpson, VIII, Oxford, Clarendon, 1954-70. "On the Famous Voyage" is the final poem in Jonson's book of Epigrammes.

Shakespeare's most famous clowns, danced the morris all the way from London to Norwich, publishing an account of his feat in *Nine Daies Wonder* (1600).¹¹

By threading their way through London's darkest places, Jonson's protagonists actually uncover the most repugnant aspects of the female body, and this allows the poet to condemn both the vices of the city as well as those of women. In the words of Andrew McRae,

[i]n the "wombe" of the city-whore, conventional images of generation and familial identity undergo a sea-change. The "mother" of "stench" and "diseases" is merely "old filth;" "famine, wants, and sorrowes" are "cosen(s)" to the plague. At the end of the section, Jonson exploits a pun on "sink," which is a receptacle for waste or sewage, and in the body an organ of digestion and excretion. In the female body, the signification of "a place where things are swallowed up or lost" extends to the vagina (a sense exploited in *The Faerie Queene*); and this usage aligns with instances of "sink" denoting a whore or brothel. An implicit threat throughout the journey is the pox, which was itself perceived as "flowing matter" which could move around the body.¹²

As a consequence, the city can sometimes be nothing but a gigantic trap where idle young men fall all too easily. This theme is endlessly exploited in Robert Greene's cony-catching pamphlets published in the early 1590s, and in which devious citizens mock gullible peasants and try to con vulnerable new-comers. In *Twelfth Night*, as Antonio wants to meet Sebastian "In the south suburbs at the Elephant" (3, 3, 39), Shakespeare had a real inn sign in mind and Londoners undoubtedly recognized the Bankside. There, debauchery was favoured by the presence of brothels or so-called "nunneries" close to the theatres.¹³ In such a place, the ambiguous, homoerotic relationships existing between the two friends might well have prospered. Incidentally, Antonio paints the gift he would like to give Sebastian in glowing colors:

Haply your eye shall light upon some toy
You have desire to purchase [.]¹⁴

¹¹ WILLIAM KEMP, *Kemps Nine Daies Wonder: Performed in a Daunce*, ed. Alexander Dyce, London, 1839.

¹² ANDREW MCRAE, "'On the Famous Voyage': Ben Jonson and Civic Space", *EMLS*, Special issue 3, September 1998, 8.1-31. See the Internet site: [HTTP://EXTRA.SHU.AC.UK/EMLS/04-2/MCRAONTH.HTM](http://EXTRA.SHU.AC.UK/EMLS/04-2/MCRAONTH.HTM)

¹³ See WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, 3, 1, 123: "Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?"

¹⁴ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Twelfth Night*, 3, 3, 44-45.

Shakespeare merely suggests this possibility, which is never actualized on stage, since Sebastian eventually hesitates to give up his masculine love to be wooed and seduced by Olivia, far away from the temptations of the city.

Indeed, the city generally proves more a centripetal place than centrifugal one. In other terms, people are anxious to know what it is like before they leave it, in the same way as Timon of Athens who, in encouraging Alcibiades to wipe out Athens, does not only condemn the blatant corruption of the sex and the city (4, 3), but the universe as a whole, which he regards as doomed to destruction.¹⁵ A lighter example can be found in Thomas Nashe's *Choise of Valentines*, where the protagonist, Tomalin, comes to town to visit the brothel where his girlfriend, Frances, has found employment. Having paid ten gold pieces for her favors, the young man is embarrassed to find that the mere lifting of her skirts causes his premature ejaculation. He soon realizes how insatiable feminine pleasure can be, and is then forced to acknowledge his own limits when faced with the inventiveness of his partner.¹⁶

No wonder then, if the various misfortunes of those credulous young men fostered the inspiration of Elizabethan poets and playwrights. When the London barrister Thomas Peend published an epyllion entitled *The Pleasant Fable of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis* (1565), he was quite aware of the recurring vices of Londoners, be they male or female.¹⁷ Consequently, his rewriting of a famous mythological episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is much more than a simple translation. It is also a didactic presentation of a gullible, though handsome, boy, Hermaphroditus, who decides to leave his native country to discover the city. A city where the lecherous Salmacis will promptly commit the sin of flesh with her new prey, who is rather inexperienced with women:

[T]hear, full fyftene yeres
hys lyfe also hee led.
And then desyrous for to know
the state of countreys straunge,

¹⁵ On Timon's misanthropy, see PIERRE BRUNEL, *Claudiel et Shakespeare*, Librairie Armand Colin, Paris, 1971, p. 69. See, too, FRANÇOIS LAROQUE, "Entropie et misanthropie dans *Timon d'Athènes*", *Méthode !*, n°13 (Autumn 2007), pp. 353-363.

¹⁶ See also KATHERINE DUNCAN-JONES, "City Limits: Nashe's 'Choise of Valentines' and Jonson's 'Famous Voyage'", *The Review of English Studies*, n° 56, 2005, p. 247-262. Interestingly enough, the rural world where Tomalin comes from is not really presented as an alternative to the corruption of the city since it also seems to be parodic. On this particular point, see the discussion of Nashe's poem in IAN FREDERICK MOULTON, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 171

¹⁷ THOMAS PEEND, *The Pleasant Fable of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis* (1565) in *Renaissance Tales of Desire. Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, Theseus and Ariadne, Ceyx and Alcione*, ed. Sophie Chiari, CSP, 2009, pp. 34-69. On the links between Peend's text and Arthur Golding's translation of the same tale, see A. B. TAYLOR, "Thomas Peend and Arthur Golding", *N&Q*, 214 (1969), pp. 16-20.

All *Licia* land, by trauayle great
to *Caria* he dyd range.¹⁸

Caria is in fact a transparent substitute for the city of London.¹⁹ There, Hermaphroditus meets the Ovidian nymph now turned into a prostitute. The moralizing aspect of Peend's fable that is clearly meant to warn young men against the dangers of the city is underlined by James Richard Ellis:

Bearing in mind the Inns of Court milieu, the poem's moral becomes only too obvious and appropriate: Hermaphroditus is the naïve youth from the country, newly arrived at the Inns, to become a lawyer or a courtier, and in danger of being overwhelmed by the alluring vices of the great city, "the world where all temptations be".²⁰

In the second part of his text, Peend provides the key of his rewriting, and explains what he means by *Caria*, without naming London explicitly:

By *Caria*, sygnfyfe the worlde
where all temptations be.
Wheras the good and il, alwayes
together we may see.²¹

Hermaphroditus can also be regarded as the author's alter ego, as Peend seems to have drawn on his own background to represent himself in a fable already translated by Arthur Golding a few months before: "[l]ike the young Inns of Court gallant, Hermaphroditus is insufficiently guarded against his own desires, and his masculinity becomes hopelessly compromised or metamorphosed".²² The city appears to be the place of all seductions, easy pleasures and long-lasting troubles, where debauched women lead innocent boys to their doom.

¹⁸ THOMAS PEEND, op. cit., ll. 77-82, pp. 39-40

¹⁹ See the editorial note in the *Renaissance Tales of Desire*, ed. cit., note 16, p. 40: "In ancient times the coast and the hinterland of Asia Minor were divided into provinces that owed their origins to the indigenous population or to the peoples who had colonized them. In many cases it is difficult to determine whether an area took its name from the indigenous population or from the colonists or, as is often the case, from a combination of the two. *Caria* is one of those regions whose origins are uncertain since contradictory evidence and ancient commentaries give us no definitive answer. Herodotus (484-425 BC) tells us that the Carians were originally from the Greek Islands, subjects of King Minos of Crete, that they were great seafarers and fighters who manned the Minoan fleets".

²⁰ JAMES RICHARD ELLIS, *Sexuality and Citizenship: Metamorphosis in Elizabethan Erotic Verse*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003, p. 50.

²¹ THOMAS PEEND, op. cit., ll. 361-364, p. 50.

²² JAMES RICHARD ELLIS, op. cit., p. 50.

In 16th century London, women are rarely portrayed in a favourable way and they remain subject to the prejudices of their time in a patriarchal society. Either seen as predators (turning the city paradise into a hell) or reduced to the role of simple foils for men, their place within the limits of city was as uncertain as precarious. However, early modern literature also depicts ladies defending their freedom in an active way. To face men's animosity, they sometimes gather their strengths. This is made clear in *A Letter sent by the Maydens of London*, a pamphlet published in 1567 and which allow six (fictitious) young and rather poor girls to express themselves.²³ While advocating their rights, Rose, Jane, Rachell, Sara, Philumias and Dorothy are eager to make fun of the conservative strictures of a certain Edward Hake, a translator of Erasmus and author of a diatribe against female Londoners. Their letter must be read as a humorous reply to Hake's unfortunately lost *Mery Meeting of Maydens in London* (1567) published just a few months before. Apparently, this earlier work strongly criticized the lasciviousness and the idleness of city housewives. On the face of it, the maids' letter, produced in reaction against Hake's misogynous attack, seems to be written by a woman possessing a detailed knowledge of early modern domesticity. However, the text is fraught with precise allusions to legal customs which, in all likelihood, were the province of men working at the Inns of Court. The author of *A Letter*, then, is probably a man who was able to deal both with the public sphere of law and the private sphere of maid-servants and matrimony. He can sometimes be deeply ironical when seeing right through the true goals of the right-thinking Hake who apparently spends his time leering at female Londoners, even in the church, while pretending to uncover women's loose morality:

And where he alleageth that we doe mispend our time in the Church in gazing and looking about us, and that our comming thither is not to pray: surely he himself was not very well occupied in the Church, and prayed but little (as it seemeth) when he stood gazing and looking about him at us, to marke what we didde. (A6)

The author, who writes in the defense of the maids, goes as far as asserting that parents should not force their daughters to marry against their will and that love should rule over Hymen (sig. B2).

But, in those days, no one really seemed to care about such feminine *desiderata*, except Shakespeare, maybe, for he reflects such carelessness in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the heroine is abused by her father precisely because she dares to choose the man who will share her

²³ KIRBY FARRELL, ELIZABETH H. HAGEMAN, ARTHUR F. KINNEY, *Women in the Renaissance. Selections from English Literary Renaissance*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, (1971) 1988, pp. 36-47 (the letter is commented upon by R. J. Fehrenbach).

life.²⁴ “[H]ang, beg, starve, die in the streets!” (3, 5, 192), the old Capulet tells his daughter after she has refused to comply with his orders. The paternal injunction is rendered in crude terms by Pauline Kiernan in *Filthy Shakespeare*: “Whore, starve, have sexual orgasms like a whore in the street!”²⁵ This gloss gives us an idea of the extent of the unbearable violence Juliet has to go through as her father actually reduces her to wandering and begging in the slummiest parts of Verona. For women, the streets all too easily become synonymous with decay and prostitution.

If Shakespeare occasionally points out the cruelty of a father using sexual puns which, because they concern his own daughter, are particularly inappropriate, he also hunts out those women guilty of coquetry. More often than not, the weaker sex in the city is characterized by its frivolity, as shown by Jaques who, in *As You Like It*, muses upon the gorgeous dresses worn by city-women:

What woman in the city do I name
When that I say the city-woman bears
The cost of princes on unworthy shoulders?²⁶

Jaques’ observation, somewhat reminiscent of Philip Stubbe’s virulent attack on women in his *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), actually echoes Thomas Platter’s amazement. The German traveler, who visited London in 1599, noticed the extravagance of feminine clothes while sumptuary laws were meant to restrict men’s and women’s apparel.²⁷

All women did not wish to emulate the chaste Penelope who remained at home, weaving a shroud all day long and tearing it up at night. By doing so, they exposed themselves to open criticism while claiming an identity of their own, without necessarily having loose manners or being dishonest. Because their city was “girded round with innumerable towers” and

²⁴ This, of course, is also true for other Shakespearean heroines such as Hermia, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or Desdemona, in *Othello*.

²⁵ PAULINE KIERNAN, *Filthy Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s Most Outrageous Sexual Puns*, New York, Gotham Books, p. 216.

²⁶ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*, 2, 7, 74-76.

²⁷ See Michael Hattaway’s observations in WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*, ed. Michael Hattaway, Cambridge, CUP, 2000, p. 120. See too THOMAS PLATTER, *Thomas Platter’s Travels in England* (1599), ed. Clare Williams, 1937, p. 183. For a study on Renaissance sumptuary laws, see WILFRID HOOPER, “The Tudor Sumptuary Laws”, *The English Historical Review*, XXX, n° 119, Jul. 1915, pp. 433-449 (p. 444): “Fashion [...] was stronger than law, and apparel continued to overstep its appointed bounds in a manner that alarmed the government into further action. In 1574 another proclamation appeared which was repeated with some variations in 1577, 1580, 1588, and 1597. Two schedules are appended, the first of which [...] gives the gist of the statutory restrictions on men’s apparel; while the second imposes analogous restrictions on the apparel of their wives. This extension to women indicates the growing license of feminine attire.” See, too, ANN ROSALIND JONES, PETER STALLYBRASS, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

surrounded by thick walls omnipresent in Elizabethan representations, they felt safe and allowed themselves a certain degree of freedom.²⁸

2. CITY AND CHASTITY

In Shakespeare's plays, quite a few scenes take place at the gates of the city.²⁹ Onstage, these gates were not just painted curtains but were part and parcel of the scenery, thus immediately allowing the spectator to distinguish the sometimes tenuous borderline between inside and outside. Here is how Irwin Smith analyzes *Henry V*:

Henry V is yet another battle play which calls for city gates. In Act 3, scene 3, Henry and his army stand before the Gates of Harfleur. The Governor of the town appears, presumably upon the walls. [...] The entry of the victorious English troops through the opened gates demands the emphasis and pageantry which only centrally-placed gates could give.³⁰

The walls girdle the town as a belt girdles a woman's waist.³¹ They were meant as a protection against attacks but let the victorious army in, like the famous chastity belt thought to have been designed to reinforce women's chastity, and which gradually became an enticing tool to excite male desire. The chastity belt as such is absent from the Shakespearian canon even though a metaphorical one can be detected in *Hamlet*.³² As Laertes thinks that his sister's honor might be threatened and confesses his worries, she replies that she intends to remain chaste: "'Tis in my memory locked, / And you yourself shall keep the key of it".³³ The brother will thus be the only one to keep the key of Ophelia's "treasure".³⁴ Such a key has not

²⁸ GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, London, Penguin, 1966, p. 106, iii.20: "[Lud] rebuilt the walls of the town of Trinovantum (or Troynovant) and girded it round with innumerable towers. He ordered the citizens to construct their homes and buildings here in such a style that no other city in the most far-flung of kingdoms could boast of palaces more fair [...]". The chronicler (1100-1154) had become extremely popular in the Elizabethan period, in spite of Polydore Vergil's skepticism.

²⁹ IRWIN SMITH, "'Gates' on Shakespeare's Stage", in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, VII, n° 2 (Spring, 1956), pp. 159-176 (p. 161).

³⁰ IRWIN SMITH, art. cit., p. 166.

³¹ Throughout the Renaissance, the word *belt* applied to bodies as well as to buildings. See for instance Jean Nicot's definition of the French word *chasteau* ("castle") in 1606: "*Castrum*. Et est proprement ainsi appelé celui qui a fermeture de tours et donjon au milieu, et ceinture de fossez, autrement est appelé maison plate. Mais quant aux maisons de Roy, le François courtisan les appelle toutes Chasteaux, ores que la suite des tours, donjon et fossez ne y soit". See Claude Blum's electronic edition of JEAN NICOT, *Le Trésor de la langue française*, 1606, [HTTP://PORTAIL.ATILF.FR/CGI-BIN/DICO1LOOK.PL?STRIPPEDHW=CHASTEAU](http://portail.atilf.fr/cgi-bin/dico1look.pl?strippedhw=chasteau)

³² See GORDON WILLIAMS, *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language*, London, Athlone, 2009, p. 192.

³³ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, 1, 3, 85.

³⁴ See VALERIE TRAUB, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, Taylor & Francis, 1992, p. 31: "Ophelia's reply [...] suggests not only that Laertes' advice is 'locke'd' in her memory, but

much power, however, for eager assailants easily do without to get access to their jewel, as can be seen in *The Rape of Lucrece*: “The locks between her chamber and his will, / Each one by him enforced retires his ward” (ll. 302-03).³⁵ The notion of closing or bolting a lock as in a safe which is present both in *Hamlet* and in *The Rape of Lucrece* also permeates *The Merchant of Venice*. Indeed, in spite of the opposition of Portia’s father, Bassanio wins the heart of his beloved by putting the key in the right lock, that of the lead casket containing her portrait—a casket which is but the symbolical double of Portia’s chastity belt.³⁶ This is also echoed in the subplot where *Shylock* reveals an obsession with closed doors and bolted locks:

Hear you me, Jessica,
 Lock up my doors;
 [...]
 Do as I bid you. Shut doors after you.
 Fast bind, fast find—
 A proverb never stale in thrifty mind.³⁷

Once again, the allusion remains implicit and, generally speaking, while Shakespeare uses the terms “belt” and chastity” separately, it seems that they do not match.³⁸

The story of this intriguing object, often found at the core of an amorous triangle, starts with courtly literature. More precisely with Marie de France’s *Lais*³⁹ written in the 12th century, at the time of the crusades. The poem deals with a lady unhappily married to an old husband and in love with the young knight Guigemar. As she ties a knot in his shirt as a sign of her devotion, the young man ties a knot in return in her belt that only himself will be able to undo. The myth of the medieval chastity belt was born, even though the belt evoked in the *Lais* did not protect the lady’s genitalia and had nothing to do with a chastity belt.

also that Laërtes alone possesses the key to her properly immured ‘chaste treasure’”. See also WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Rape of Lucrece*, l. 16, for another similar allusion to women’s treasure.

³⁵ For a detailed commentary see GEORGIANNA ZIEGLER, “My lady’s chamber: Female space, female chastity in Shakespeare” in *Textual Practice*, 1470-1308, IV, Issue 1, Spring 1990, pp. 73- 90.

³⁶ See the Introduction to WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Le Marchand de Venise*, in the French translation/edition of François Laroque, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, Hachette Classique, 2008, p. 24.

³⁷ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2, 5, 29-54.

³⁸ In *Measure for Measure* the phrase “a strange picklock” (3, 1, 285) was seen by Joseph Ritson as a reference to the chastity belt as early as 1793, but such a reading has been refuted by recent critics since the “picklock” actually refers to a dildo. See Gordon Williams, op. cit. p. 234.

³⁹ MARIE, *The Lais of Marie de France*, translated with an introduction by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, London, Penguin, 1986.

If one believes Rabelais, who alludes to such a girdle in *Pantagruel*, or Brantôme in *Les Vies des Dames galantes*, the chastity belt might well be a Renaissance invention.⁴⁰ According to Brantôme, under the reign of King Henry II, a jeweler imported and sold belts to jealous husbands in Saint Germain. A wife soon got the idea to duplicate her key, to the great delight of the local locksmith. Of course, Brantôme's story is not to be taken for granted. One could also add that in his writings, the chastity belt is far from being an instrument of torture since it is more mocked at than really feared. Renaissance girdles, it seems, were part of public mentalities but were generally discarded. Sometimes known as Venus or Florentine belts, they probably originated in Italian cities, but there is no evidence whatsoever to affirm that they were really used by husbands who were afraid of being cuckolded. An engraving by Heinrich Vogtherr the younger (ca 1540) and based on the standard device of *ungleiche Liebe* (or the union of old age and youth), shows that a chastity belt did not impose any kind of restriction on the weaker sex. The woodcut represents a woman facing the spectator. She stands side by side with a young and an older man.⁴¹ Some have seen here a young wife dipping into the bag of money which her old husband is offering to give in order to encourage her to remain in her chastity belt so that she may not enjoy her handsome lover. However, it seems that what the woodcut actually depicts is a street prostitute who, having just received a sum of money from the young man, gives it to her pimp so that her client may be allowed to sleep with her.

In a 16th century Welsh poem written by Sir Hywel of Builth, Alice, a young lady, is wooed both by the singer and a hermit named Morgan. The jealous narrator then describes a frightening apparatus to a blacksmith. The singer's amorous, misogynous and parodic discourse altogether has recently been translated by Albrecht Classen:

Fix against violence under a girl's smock
 A case about the fettered chamber;
 Firm and low where it's not to be seen,
 Strong craft of long iron;
 A new curtain over her public hair,
 There will be a big strip over her bush.
 Fix right over the lap
 And make on the spot a fine shield.

⁴⁰In *Pantagruel*, Panurge, as he is afraid of being cuckolded, simply swears that he will buckle up his would-be wife.

⁴¹CHRISTA GROSSINGER, *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 96. The engraving can be seen on the Internet site: [HTTP://FR.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FICHER:16THC-GERMAN-WOODCUT-CHASTITY-BELT.JPG](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:16thc-german-woodcut-chastity-belt.jpg)

[...]

Make skillfully, with understanding yonder,
Where the pommel is, a channel to piss,
Long does all envy last,
Like pin-prick holes,
So narrow, an intruder is big,
That no more will go in there
Either a furtive one's little finger
To probe the lovely girl, or a man's cock.⁴²

In this erotic satire, it is difficult to imagine Vulcan's avatar creating such an iron net to catch Venus lying with Mars. The feminine sex is here depicted as a room for intimate exchanges—a room where thick curtains (i.e. a chastity belt) hang. Once again, the lady is presented as a forbidden city which ought to repel its undesirable intruders. In literature, erotic desires are not fulfilled that easily.

The absence of any obstacle to the pleasures of the flesh thus generates a palpable anguish amongst husbands, particularly those who married handsome women. In *Othello* Cyprus, a citadel which even the Ottoman fleet fails to reach, is penetrated without apparent efforts by Desdemona's lover, the Moor, who is indirectly presented as Vulcan's double.⁴³ In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes complains about his wife, for he thinks Hermione's doors open much too easily and against his will ("Whiles other men have gates, those gates opened, / As mine, against their will").⁴⁴ He proceeds in a bitter way:

Think it:
From east, west, north, and south, be it concluded,
No barricado for a belly. Know't;
It will let in and out the enemy
With bag and baggage [.]⁴⁵

⁴² ALBRECHT CLASSEN, *The Medieval Chastity Belt. A Myth-Making Process*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 129-30.

⁴³ The word occurs five times throughout the play. See the definition of the term given by the lexicographer Randle Cotgrave in 1611: "A Citadell; a strong Fort, or Castle, that serues both to defend, and to curbe, a citie." See RANDLE COTGRAVE, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611), facs., ed. William S. Woods, Columbia, The University of South Carolina Press, 1950. A similar definition of "citadel" is in JOHN FLORIO's *A New World of Words* (London, 1611), p. 104: "a Citadell or spacious fort built not onely to defend a citie, but also to keepe the same in awe and subiection"

⁴⁴ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Stephen Orgel, Oxford, OUP, 1996, 1, 2, 195-196.

⁴⁵ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, op. cit., 1, 2, 200-204.

The absence of the chastity belt is noticeable in these lines. In his edition of the play, Stephen Orgel explains that historically, the first barricades were made of barrels (called *barricades* in French) and were erected in Paris in 1588 during the day of the barrels (or “journée des barricades”) which led to the flight of Henry III, threatened by the Duke of Guise and his numerous allies.⁴⁶ So, Leontes uses the image of a city-womb protected from the enemy by barricades. In other words, Hermione’s body should be girdled in order to protect her chastity from potential assailants. Nevertheless, because the wife does not wear such a girdle, she is likely to give in to anyone—worst, to his closest friend.

This reading is corroborated by the use of an expression such as “bag and baggage” obviously referring to male attributes.⁴⁷ Furthermore, in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the verb “barricado” appears to be used in an explicit sexual sense. Here is what Helen asks: “Man is enemy to virginity: how may we barricado it against him?”⁴⁸ As Gordon Williams puts it, “barricado” signifies in such a context “throw up defence against (sexual) entry”.⁴⁹ When Shakespeare uses it again in its nominal form in *The Winter’s Tale*, he probably had in mind the erotic connotations of a word which he had used a few years before. Significantly, Hermione and her host Polixenes decide to go to the garden,⁵⁰ which probably raises the suspicion of a husband connecting the green world with a depraved sexuality: his enclosed and highly civilized garden suddenly becomes a perverted *hortus conclusus*.

Indeed, since the Middle Ages, the heroic tradition has been turning rape scenes into aesthetic representations sweetened by the presence of a generous and fruitful Nature.⁵¹ In some cases however, when the rape is not depicted in some lush green world, it is linked to the foundation of a city, as in Livy’s *History of Rome*, one of Shakespeare’s most important sources for *The Rape of Lucrece*. The poem, closely following its source, opens on Tarquin stealing away to Collatine’s home, where Lucrece manages the household in the absence of her husband, and ends on Lucrece’s bloody corpse and the banishment of Tarquin and his family. In 509 B.C., Rome establishes a republic ruled by representatives of the people. From then on, there will be no more kings. Between those two framing events, the heroine is seen spinning like another Penelope hoping for the return of her husband. This traditional feminine

⁴⁶ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, op. cit., p. 106.

⁴⁷ See ERIC PARTRIDGE, *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 134, (1947), 1968.

⁴⁸ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, 1, 1, 114-115.

⁴⁹ GORDON WILLIAMS, ed. cit., p. 36. In her edition of the play, Susan Snyder glosses Parolles’ answer, “Keep him out” (1, 1, 116), as “fortify yourself in a stronghold.” See WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, ed. Susan Snyder, Oxford, OUP, 1998, p. 85

⁵⁰ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Winter’s Tale*, op. cit., 1, 2, 176: “We are yours i’th’ garden”.

⁵¹ DIANE WOLFFHAL, “‘A hue and a cry’: Medieval Rape Imagery and its Transformation”, *The Art Bulletin*, LXV, n° 1, March 1993, pp. 39-64 (p. 39).

activity may be interpreted as the weaving of a metaphoric veil—a counterpart of her protective hymen. Unfortunately, nothing works the way she would. Tarquin does hesitate a little before he proceeds to break her veil and penetrate into the city for some voluptuous and desperate descent into the feminine “hell”. Tormented by the flames of his lust, this is the place where he perishes. As to his victim, she remains curiously ethereal and immaterial, contrary to the Shakespearian Venus whose body perspired, panted, and blushed. Katherine Duncan-Jones even notes that “[f]or a poem whose defining event is the violation of a body, Lucrece is astonishingly unflashy”.⁵² It is as though her body were not made of flesh. It keeps on being metaphorized and seems to refer to an external reality upon which Lucrece muses and ponders. Lucrece herself is but a shadow, “a picture of pure piety”.⁵³ One cannot forget the striking *ekphrasis* of the poem which superimposes Troy (a mythic avatar of London) and the body of Lucrece as she “feelingly” weeps over the city’s woes while in *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare matched the features of the goddess with the circumvolutions of a pleasure garden (“Wishing her cheeks were garden full of flowers”).⁵⁴ Even when Collatine’s wife commits suicide, her body is turned into some insular city both ransacked by the enemy and surrounded by a bloody sea:

And bubbling from her breast, it doth divide
 In two slow rivers, that the crimson blood
 Circles her body in on every side,
 Who like a late-sack’d island vastly stood
 Bare and unpeopled in this fearful flood.⁵⁵

Linda Woodbridge interprets these lines, probably written around 1594, as the depiction of a desolated England conquered by the Spanish enemy just a few years after the Spanish Armada had threatened Elizabeth to invade the island.⁵⁶ Shakespeare’s description might also be read as the negative side of two mythic representations.

⁵² KATHERINE DUNCAN-JONES, *Ungentle Shakespeare. Scenes from his Life*, The Arden Shakespeare, 2001, p. 76.

⁵³ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Rape of Lucrece*, l. 542.

⁵⁴ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *op. cit.*, l. 65. Cf. ll. 232-34.

⁵⁵ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *op. cit.*, ll. 1737-41.

⁵⁶ LINDA WOODBRIDGE, “Palisading the Elizabethan body politic” in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, XXXIII, 1991 (p. 1 of the article): “The goriness of those blood rivers, the creepiness of their ‘slow’ movement, even the chilling vision of blood turned black through pollution, might have paled, in those immediately post-Armada days, beside the specter of a sacked island. That the woman is the island provides a clue to the impact of the Lucrece story on Elizabethans. *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Cymbeline* offer vivid testimony to the truth of anthropological theories that treat the human body as an image of society.”

The first one concerns the celestial Aphroditus rising from the sea. According to Hesiod, as Cronos, castrating Uranus

had cut off the members with flint and cast them from the land into the surging sea, they were swept away over the main a long time: and a white foam spread around them from the immortal flesh, and in it there grew a maiden [...] and came forth an awful and lovely goddess, and grass grew up about her beneath her shapely feet. Her gods and men call Aphrodite [...] because she grew amid the foam.⁵⁷

In Shakespeare's poem, Lucrece's bloody death parallels the bloody birth of the goddess of love, while Tarquin's semen is curiously reminiscent of Cronos' generating the foam (*aphros*) around Venus. This also recalls the blurred image of the insular city which permeated several early modern allegorical tales inspired by Plato's Atlantis, like those of Thomas More and Francis Bacon. Utopian Renaissance projections associated the island and the city which seem to coalesce in the strange erotic geography of Lucrece's body.⁵⁸

The married woman is in fact a city within the city, a social body where human beings meet and separate. In the 16th century, as Claude-Gilbert Dubois puts it, "urban space results from a desire for separation and closure which makes citadels and imaginary islands a world of their own".⁵⁹ No wonder then if, in literature, the mere presence of walls in the city often paves the way for the greatest love tragedies. When Tarquin trespasses on Lucrece's private sphere in order to be alone with her, the rape does happen, and the deflowered wife soon wishes to remain in a perpetual darkness allowed by the absence of any "eye," or opening, letting the sunrays in:

Revealing day through every cranny spies,
And seems to point her out where she sits weeping;
To whom she sobbing speaks: 'O eye of eyes,
Why pry'st thou through my window? leave thy peeping:
Mock with thy tickling beams eyes that are sleeping:
Brand not my forehead with thy piercing light,
For day hath nought to do what's done by night.'⁶⁰

⁵⁷ HESIOD, *Theogony*, ll. 185-200. For a detailed analysis of the myth, see GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Ouvrir Vénus*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 45.

⁵⁸ On the subject, see GILLES LAPOUGE, *Utopie et civilisations*, Geneva, Librairie Weber, 1973.

⁵⁹ CLAUDE-GILBERT DUBOIS, *L'imaginaire de la Renaissance*, Paris, PUF, 1985, p. 168. My translation.

⁶⁰ SHAKESPEARE, "The Rape of Lucrece", ll. 1086-1092.

The hole through which the light floods the room is this peeping eye (“O eye of eyes”), this “O” of desire which in most of Shakespeare’s works is metonymically associated with the vagina.⁶¹ When, earlier in the poem, Lucrece “much amazed breaks ope her locked-up eyes” (l. 446), they already symbolically refer to her sexual organs, locked-up in an imaginary chastity belt which, of course, fails to protect the woman’s intimate treasure, for the good reason that chastity belts were more of a myth than a reality as effectively protective devices. In Lucrece’s universe, it is too late to close the breaches, those of the city, those of women, and that foreshadows imminent disasters. “Long upon these terms I held my city, / Till thus he gan besiege me” (ll. 176-177), the woman sighs in *A Lover’s Complaint*. Her own protections are fallen apart, her honor is lost.⁶²

City walls are not always metaphorical, though. Or, at least, not only. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, narrated in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and translated by Arthur Golding in 1567, is a case in point. It is indeed through a crack in one of the walls that they whisper their love for each other and arrange to meet near at Ninus’ tomb under a mulberry tree.⁶³ In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the role of the wall is played by Snout, one of the “mechanicals”, and its cracks is referred to as a “cranny” (3, 1, 62), a term possibly borrowed from Golding. The playwright also uses the word “chink,” already present in one of his probable sources, Thomas Moffet.⁶⁴ Of course, the wall stands for the strict parental law which prevents the children from meeting in the street. But the law actually creates the drive for and the possibility of transgression. Therefore, the wall can both be viewed as an obstacle forbidding the consummation of love, and as the object that allows it to take place precisely because of its hole allowing the unfortunate young lovers to communicate. In other terms, such a hole makes for a metaphorical consummation to take place, replacing the missing sexual union of the two lovers. Incidentally, in the Ovidian story, Pyramus and Thisbe acknowledge their debt and express their gratitude to the hole in the wall. Golding has them

⁶¹ In the Bible, the eye fulfils the same function. “Lascivious eyes were traditionally described as doing what is normally done by sexual organs [...]”, LINDA PHYLLIS AUSTERN writes in “For, Love’s a Good Musician: Performance, Audition, and Erotic Disorders in Early Modern Europe,” *The Musical Quarterly*, LXXXII, n° 3/4, Autumn-Winter 1998, p. 614-653 (p. 622). On the “O” as a mark of desire, see GORDON WILLIAMS, op. cit., p. 3. The author quotes *Romeo and Juliet*, of course, but also Dekker’s *Satiromastix* (1601): “‘tis a O more more more sweet to lye with a woman” (1, 1, 17). See FRANÇOIS LAROQUE, “*Antoine et Cléopâtre* ou l’esthétique du vide,” *Études Anglaises* n° 4, octobre-décembre 2000, pp. 400-12.

⁶² See ERIC PARTRIDGE, *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*, ed. cit., p. 66.

⁶³ OVID, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV, ll. 55-166.

⁶⁴ Cf. the use of the term “crack” in WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Cymbeline* 5, 6, 206-207: “he could not / But think her bond of chastity quite cracked”. As to the influence of Thomas Moffet, it has been rejected by KATHERINE DUNCAN-JONES in “Pyramus and Thisbe: Shakespeare’s debt to Moffet cancelled,” *Review of English Studies*, n° 32, 1981, pp. 296-301.

say: “we think ourselves in debt”.⁶⁵ If, by definition, genuine love is necessarily transgressive, the wall is then a necessary condition for passion to be born. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it begins inside the city of Athens, ruled by Theseus, a notorious rapist, and flourishes in the green world where neither forbidden nor deviant love is hindered or condemned by the law.

In his *Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure*, George Pettie was the first Renaissance writer to compare the fate of the lovers of Babylon with that of the star-crossed lovers of Verona, since all of them must remain clandestine and even so are doomed to die tragic deaths.⁶⁶ When Shakespeare worked on *Romeo and Juliet* he was already acquainted with Pettie’s story and he naturally made the link between the story he was writing and the fable of Pyramus and Thisbe, as has been demonstrated by Kenneth Muir.⁶⁷ Even though the wall is not materialized in *Romeo and Juliet*, it is present, and its hole, or “O,” permeates Romeo’s language:

O sweet Juliet,
Thy beauty has made me effeminate
And in my temper soften’d valour’s steel!⁶⁸

The lover imagines Juliet’s cracked “bond of chastity,” to paraphrase Giacomo’s words in *Cymbeline*. She is the supreme female “O” that completely submerges Romeo’s will, so that he becomes another Hermaphroditus figure, almost smothered by Juliet’s love.

In Arthur Brooke’s version, Romeo “cast his greedy eyes” on Juliet’s balcony, and makes out all its details, including its cracks: “In often passing so, his busy eyes he threw, / That every pane and tooting hole the wily lover knew”.⁶⁹ Verona is the city where love takes place but which does not allow the lovers to live and lie together. Romeo, like Pyramus, is bound to experience a verbal *jouissance*, not a physical one. This is why he displaces his phallic violence to invest it fully in the fight which opposes him to Tybalt. The sword gives him back his virility.⁷⁰ As Robert N. Watson and Stephen Dickey put it, “Shakespeare’s contemporaries

⁶⁵ ARTHUR GOLDING (trans.), *Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, ed. Madeleine Forey, London, Penguin Books, 2002, I. 95, p. 123.

⁶⁶ Pettie noticed, “such presiness of parents brought Pyramus and Thisbe to a woful end, Romeo and Julietta to untimely death” (I, 168).

⁶⁷ KENNETH MUIR, “A Study in Shakespeare’s Method”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, V, n° 2, Spring 1954, pp. 141-53.

⁶⁸ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*, 3, 1, 118-120.

⁶⁹ ARTHUR BROOKE, *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet*, ll. 440-41 in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, VIII vols., London, 1957.

⁷⁰ Cf. GEORGE GASCOIGNE’s *The Adventures of Master F. J.*, in which the “naked sword” both symbolizes virility and the loss of it. See the edition in *Elizabethan Prose Narratives*, ed. Paul Salzman, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 30-31

did not need Freud to help them recognize stabbing as a version of rape”.⁷¹ In 1614 for instance, Arthur Gorges wrote in his translation of Lucan’s *Pharsalia*: “If they by fight away would scape, / With your sharp blades their bosomes rape”.⁷² Conquering a city with a sword often amounts to raping its women, even though a town such as Verona keeps on defending itself, like a woman denying entrance into her secret parts. Significantly, when Romeo alludes to his first beloved, Rosaline, he implicitly compares her to a besieged city spared by the darts of love, for the girl “[...] will not stay the siege of loving terms”. He is but an awkward Cupid unable to reach the chaste Diana-Rosaline.

3. PERVERSE CITIES

Shakespeare’s heroines are not systematically chaste and virtuous, though. One cannot ignore Cressida, who plays a double game right from the beginning of *Troilus and Cressida*, thus appearing as the very embodiment of what I would call a perverse city. Indeed, she compares herself to a castle which needs to be guarded, seemingly eager to maintain her reputation,⁷³ while asking her uncle to “unbolt the gates”.⁷⁴ When Diomedes eventually demands her “to be secretly open”, she unlocks the gates of her chastity without thinking too much about it.⁷⁵ So, one of the problems of the play comes from the fact that the boundary between the assailants and the besieged is all too easily bypassed.

More generally speaking, the city allows two opposite scenarios to take place. The first consists in turning men into the citadel’s assailants, excited both by the challenge and the reward. The second consists in turning women into active and willing creatures who use the possibilities offered by the town to satisfy their own needs and fulfill their desires.

The first scenario has been abundantly exploited by Shakespeare and his contemporaries and, even though it is merely suggested in a play such as *Henry V*, it functions perfectly since spectators cannot miss the city/maid imagery pervading the dialogue between the title part and the King of France:

⁷¹ ROBERT N. WATSON, STEPHEN DICKEY, “Wherefore Art Thou Tereu? Juliet and the Legacy of Rape”, *Renaissance Quarterly*, LVIII, n° 1, Spring 2005, pp. 127-156 (p. 132).

⁷² ARTHUR GORGES, *Lucan’s Pharsalia*, London, 1614, Book IV, ll. 359-60.

⁷³ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Troilus and Cressida*, 1, 2, 254-260: “Pandarus: One knows not at what ward you lie. / *Cressida*: Upon my back to defend my belly, upon my wit to defend my wiles, upon my secrecy to defend mine honesty, my mask to defend my beauty, and you to defend all these—and at all these wards I lie at a thousand watches”.

⁷⁴ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, op. cit., 4, 2, 3.

⁷⁵ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, op. cit., 5, 2, 25.

King Henry. You may thank love for my blindness, who cannot see many a fair French city for one fair French maid that stands in my way.

King Charles. Yes, my lord, you see them perspectively, the cities turned into a maid—for they are all girded with maiden walls that war hath never entered...⁷⁶

Charles and Henry open a negotiation about the towns left unconquered by Henry—towns which, like Katherine, are still virgin places, but will probably not remain so. For even though cities, like maids, are eager to protect their treasure by defending themselves as much as they can, they can be easily weakened. Women, like citadels, are likely to be conquered at any time, and the intruder always proves merciless.

The second scenario, staging active, sometimes perverted women, is at work in a tragedy like *King Lear*, which depicts a “topsy turvy” universe where women take the place of men. No wonder, then, if military metaphors usually refer to the weaker sex, endowed with male characteristics. The cruel and newly-widowed Regan, in love with Edmund, is prompt to define Goneril’s intimacy as “the forfended place”, an expression designating not only women’s womb (i.e the relevant place for an “act of darkness”) but also the bed of adultery and the crumbling citadel giving in to its conqueror.⁷⁷ Indeed, the doors of Goneril’s castle are easily opened by the bastard, which may have provided further opportunity for what Harvey L. Klevar calls “Goneril’s nuptial breach”.⁷⁸ Further in the play, Regan compares herself to a besieged fortress as her immediate future is compromised. Ironically, whereas the simile usually applies to the victim of a rape, here, it accounts for Regan’s defeat, i.e., the defeat of a torturer:

Take thou my soldiers, prisoners, patrimony;
Dispose of them, of me, the walls is thine.⁷⁹

One finds the same scenario in Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling*, albeit staged quite differently. Throughout what Donald Beecher has called “one of the most mannerist

⁷⁶ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Henry V*, 5, 2, 305-10.

⁷⁷ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, op. cit., p. 358. R. A. Foakes explains “forfended place” as follows: “forbidden bed or body (of Goneril)”.

⁷⁸ HARVEY L. KLEVAR, “*King Lear*: The Unnatural Nuptial Breach” in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XXIII, n° 1 (Winter, 1972), pp. 117-121 (p. 118).

⁷⁹ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, op. cit., 5, 3, 76-77.

plays of the period,” feminine creatures prove much more venturesome than men.⁸⁰ The very willing Isabella thus tells Antonio to enter and tread her private labyrinth:

Stand up, thou son of Cretan Dedalus,
And let us tread the lower labyrinth;
I'll bring thee to the clue.⁸¹

Isabella is the entire city of Cnossos, and in her labyrinthine womb, she aims at confusing her masculine prey.⁸²

In John Marston's *Insatiable Countess*, the heroine is similarly willing to make her wooers err and fall into her net. But she is not the only one and even more benevolent feminine characters show an exacerbated sexuality in the city. For the play's main character is probably Venice, a labyrinthine town already depicted as such by Shakespeare in the *Merchant of Venice*. Indeed, as Gobbo asks his way to “Master Jew's”, Lancelot gives his father rather cryptic indications:

Turn up on your right hand at the next turning, but at the next turning of all on your left, marry at the very next turning, turn of no hand but turn down indirectly to the Jew's house.⁸³

Verbal confusion is at its height, and recreates the complex topography of a city which, at the time, was increasingly associated to Venus through the paronomasia Venice/Venus, common at the time.

Marston toys with the same ideas, and the town, closely related to contemporary London,⁸⁴ allows the playwright to stage either domestic or public scenes, and the audience discovers the city's private areas as well as its narrow alleys. Thais and Abigail, two childhood friends married to Rogero and Claridiana, live there. In a proleptic scene staging a masque and foreshadowing men's inconstancy, they are first implicitly compared to the city's haven, as their husbands are turned into two ships leaving port.⁸⁵ The young wives are not mere victims,

⁸⁰ DONALD BEECHER, “Mannerist Explorations in the English Theatre. A Case Study of *The Changeling*,” in *Spectacle & Image in Renaissance Europe*, ed. André Lascombes, Brill, Leiden, 1993, pp. 177-192 (p. 191)

⁸¹ THOMAS MIDDLETON, *The Collected Works*, Eds. Gary Taylor, John Lavagnino, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 4, 3, 113-115.

⁸² THOMAS MIDDLETON, op. cit., p. 1668.

⁸³ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2, 2, 37-40.

⁸⁴ See Giorgio Melchiori's Introduction in JOHN MARSTON, *The Insatiable Countess* (London, 1613), ed. Giorgio Melchiori, Manchester, Manchester University Press, The Revels Plays, 1984, p. 28.

⁸⁵ JOHN MARSTON, op. cit., 2, 1, 67-69.

however. They love their city and know how to use it in order to play a bed-trick on their jealous husbands:

Thais. But you mean they shall come in at the back-doors.

Abigail. Who, our husbands? Nay, and they come not in at the fore-doors, there will be no pleasure in't. But we two will climb over our garden-pales, and come in that way (the chastest that are in Venice will stray for a good turn) and thus wittily will we be bestowed, you into my house to your husband, and I into your house to my husband and I warrant thee, before a month come to an end, they'll crack louder of this night's lodging than the bedsteads.⁸⁶

This is more than single farce. The free-speaking Abigail intends to forge an obscene labyrinth in which the husbands will err, both mentally and physically, for each of them will be persuaded to lie with the other's wife. Because Thais does not seem to understand the full implications of her friend's plot, sexual allusions are made clear by Abigail. While Thais alludes to what Foucault calls the "utterly confused category"⁸⁷ of sodomy ("back door"), Abigail wants to have pleasure first and advocates vaginal penetration ("at the fore-doors").⁸⁸ As a consequence, the mazy city of Venice, full of rear and front doors, paves the way for a delightful and obscene confusion leading to various sexual experiments, be they legal or not.

4. CONCLUSION : THE POWER OF METAPHOR

Throughout the 16th and the 17th centuries, the body is the mansion of the soul, the fortress of women's chastity, or the city of sexual pleasure.⁸⁹ Shakespeare, by giving pride of place to the motif of the sleeping beauty subject to dishonest wooers (*The Rape of Lucrece*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cymbeline*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*), already uses one of the future *topoi* of the Gothic genre valued by Radcliffe (*The Romance of the Forest*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Italian*) or Lewis (*The Monk*), and permeated by images of female bodies compared to citadels in ruins.

While the Renaissance imagination mapped the body, it allowed the city to expand in a number of different ways, playing with the contrast between an idyllic green world connected with the past, represented in pastorals, and an urban architecture connected with the future,

⁸⁶ JOHN MARSTON, op. cit., 2, 2, 68-76.

⁸⁷ MICHEL FOUCAULT, *History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (1976), trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Vintage, 1980, p. 75.

⁸⁸ See CELIA R. DAILEADER, "Back Door Sex: Renaissance Gynsodomy, Aretino, and the Exotic", *ELH*, LXIX, n°2 (Summer 2002), pp. 303-334. Marston's quote is commented upon p. 312.

⁸⁹ CLAUDE-GILBERT DUBOIS, *L'imaginaire de la Renaissance*, op. cit., p. 158.

represented in “city comedies”. Shakespeare did not write city comedies, and preferred the exoticism of remote places, which does not mean that he neglects the cityscape. His numerous metaphors implying the city prove quite the contrary. I would tend to think that for Shakespeare, real cities are, just like pyramids, “dressings of a former sight” (Sonnet 123).⁹⁰ Paradoxically, they become unreal or ethereal, as is made clear in Antony’s speech:

Sometimes we see a cloud that’s dragonish,
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A towered citadel, a pendent rock,
A forkèd mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon’t that nod unto the world
And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs;
They are black vesper’s pageants.⁹¹

As to metaphoric towns, describing bodies, make cities become real and palpable. As such, they can be conquered, just like maids: “Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed”, he writes in Sonnet 41. The city is a place of war and love, and this is echoed in *Twelfth Night*, when Sir Toby explains Sir Andrew how he should welcome Maria: “‘Accost’ is front her, board her, woo her, assail her”.⁹² The woman is this city which, if not taken by force, may agree to be conquered by pleasure. Almost two centuries later, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, the French author of the epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1762), will write exactly the same thing. Incidentally, he was a military officer, too, and specialized in poliorcetics, i.e. the art of siege warfare, that of conducting or resisting a siege thanks... to fortifications.

⁹⁰ On these pyramids, see KATHERINE DUNCAN-JONES, art. cit., p. 177. See, too, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Sonnets*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Cambridge, CUP, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1996, p. 236.

⁹¹ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 4, 14, 3-9.

⁹² WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Twelfth Night*, 1, 3, 53-54. See *OED*, “Assail”, 10: “To address with offers of love, to woo. *Obs.* c1600 SHAKES. *Sonn.* xli, Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assail’d. 1601. *Twel. N.* I. iii. 60 *Accost*, is, front her, boord her, woe her, assayle her. 1611 *Cymb.* II. iii. 44, I haue assayl’d her with Musickes”.