

ABSTRACT

Construct and Character: Literary Tropes and Societal Expectations in Shakespeare's Heroines

Heidi Caroline Keck

Director: DeAnna Toten Beard, MFA, PhD

Elizabethan drama heavily features male leads, with female characters often developmentally neglected or presented in constrictive and discriminatory stereotypes. However, William Shakespeare sets himself apart by developing heroines who display features of being whole, round, and interesting characters, significant in their accurate portrayal of elements of the feminine experience that ring true in any era. In *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Beatrice and Juliet defy expectations for female literary constructs by volitionally taking control of their situations while remaining desirable and feminine. In *King Lear* and *Othello*, Cordelia and Desdemona challenge Elizabethan expectations for women, but still fail to save themselves as a result of a constrictive and gendered society. All four plays present women who are complex and interesting as well as literarily and dramatically significant. As both constructs and characters, Shakespeare's women can be seen to break stereotypes and provide a metaphor for the feminine experience that is relevant both in Elizabethan England and today.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. DeAnna Toten Beard, Department of Theatre Arts

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

CONSTRUCT AND CHARACTER:
LITERARY TROPES AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS
IN SHAKESPEARE'S HEROINES

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By
Heidi Caroline Keck

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*“There are three things men can do with women: love them, suffer for them, or
turn them into literature.”*

— Stephen Stills

*“We cannot help but notice that Shakespeare is paying an indirect tribute to
the importance of women, for in chess the most versatile, powerful, and
treasured piece is the queen.”*

— Angela Pitt, Shakespeare’s Women

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Traditional literary analysts tend to treat Shakespeare's female characters only as dramatic constructions, focusing on their function as symbols, foils, and generalizations included in the plays in order to emphasize the stories of the men. This reading of them is certainly consistent with Elizabethan sensibilities considering women's social stature and the prominence of the male narrative in Shakespeare's plays. However, Shakespeare's women are also meant to be performed live on a stage, and it is impossible to perform the idea of a dramatic construction without losing important and useful elements of storytelling and theatrical honesty. Shakespeare's women are at once dramatic constructs, who contribute to the literary value of a piece, and characters who exist in a society metaphorically sharing truth applicable to real women. In both these identities they are simultaneously individualistic portraits of humanity and metaphors for real feminine experience.

Anne Bogart, contemporary director, writer, developer, and theatre practitioner, describes theatre in *And Then, You Act* as essentially a metaphor. Her use of metaphor differs in some ways from the concept of a metaphor as a literary device— a comparison between two ideas or entities without a specific linking word— but draws its meaning from the term nevertheless. Bogart's idea

that theatre is metaphor refers to the truth that the people and event of a play are never “really” the topic of discussion. “A production can simultaneously function on the linear, temporal level — through story— and the timeless associative level—through metaphor.”¹ Theatre is always at least one degree removed from its subject, but is the “container...transporting meaning and associations.”² A play about a historical figure, for instance Shakespeare’s *King John*, does not feature the actual King John appearing on stage and performing actions; we know it is an actor playing the character, though we delight to observe him and identify recognizable ideas in the portrayal. All theatre functions in this way— by watching an entity on stage which we know not to be literal or authentic, but which we are able to associate with something true, we learn about a subject in ways that we might not from simply reading about it in a book. The theatrical production is a metaphor for the real world. In addition, its function as a metaphor removed from the real means that the work can also be applied to our own lives or any contemporary situation to which we might draw parallels from the play and associations with experiences. In other words, a work of theatre can also be a metaphor for our own lives. This dual nature of theatrical metaphor is a powerful vehicle for meaningful change. As Bogart writes, theatre “has the exceptional capacity to activate wide-ranging mental

¹ Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art In An Unpredictable World* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2007), 121.

² Ibid.

activity by stimulating the understanding of one element through the experience of another.”³

The dramatic form of a work has great impact on theatre’s metaphorical nature. Until the movement towards (and then away from) naturalism in the nineteenth century, every play written was crafted to achieve a specifically dramatic purpose other than faithfully representing the surface details of human behavior and circumstance. A playwright like William Shakespeare could use the relationship between a father and his children to metaphorically describe the relationship between kings and their subjects. A play like *King Lear*, then, is obviously not meant to show exactly what life for a king and his court was precisely like, but to display for us in an entertaining way and with a heightened sense of drama and urgency some larger truths about families, kingdoms, and humanity. Careful dramatic crafting results in plays that are able to be applied to the lives of contemporary individuals who themselves possess no relation to the original dramatic subjects.

While a character- and performance-only reading adds life and interest to female characters’ metaphorical truth and depth to their individuality and relationships, it can provoke a loss of accuracy and lack of awareness of what the play was originally meant to convey through theatrical metaphor. In the introduction to *Shakespeare’s Women: Performance and Conception*, entitled “The Significance of the Performer,” David Mann sums up the struggle for feminine-oriented Shakespearean scholars—

³ Anne Bogart, *What’s the Story: Essays About Art, Theatre, and Storytelling* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2014), 11.

It suits neither side in the application of sexual politics to Shakespeare's female characters to treat them as anything less than real three-dimensional people, and hence in need of condemnation or defense, but in the process their purpose as dramatic constructs disappears from view, as do the circumstances of performance which might reasonably be said to have a bearing on what the plays originally communicated.⁴

Therefore, in my analysis and evaluation of Shakespeare's women, I intend to pair my Mann-informed scholarly reading of the heroines of *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing* with techniques of literary and performance analysis, with an eye toward exploring characters that live not just on the page but in live, interesting, honest performance. I recognize that the nature of female characters in Elizabethan drama can be seen as that of dichotomous, flat individuals to be either defeated or won. To preserve accuracy and, to a degree, authorial intent, it will be important to take the nature of the characters as dramatic constructions created in a patriarchal society for the purpose of a male-centric narrative into account. It is equally vital to acknowledge each woman's original form as a character meant to be portrayed on a stage, in order to recognize each's potential to convey truth through theatrical metaphor about femininity, love, volition, and vice in the life of women in history and today.

In Chapter Two of this thesis, I outline the main academic concepts that relate to my analysis of Shakespeare's women, focusing on genre-based examination of theatrical stereotypes and performance-based review of the characters' historical significance. In Chapter Three, I discuss Beatrice, from

⁴ David Mann, *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14.

Much Ado About Nothing, and Juliet, from *Romeo and Juliet*, who are both dramatic constructs of women who defy the limits of character stereotypes by being volitional and desirable in tandem. I am examining these characters primarily in the context of literary form and genre, to ultimately show how they are metaphorically significant for women today because they step outside the lines. In Chapter Four, I use Desdemona, from *Othello*, and Cordelia, from *King Lear*, to examine how both are tragic women in a patriarchal society who are constrained by Elizabethan expectations for women's behavior in that they are unable to speak up for themselves. I am examining them primarily in the context of Elizabethan society and expectation for women, and hope to show how I have found them metaphorically significant for women today because they are restricted by gendered forgiveness for outspokenness, even in self-defense. Finally, Chapter Five offers a consideration of William Shakespeare's identity as a political playwright and the possibility that his use of theatre as a metaphor has grounding in true English history.

CHAPTER TWO

Considering Shakespeare's Women

Analyzing Shakespeare's Women: Genre

While dramatic characters need to be understood by actors and readers as whole, rounded individuals intended for performance, it is important to also recognize the nature of characters as integral components of a greater work — the play — intended to have a certain effect and to convey a specific idea. To this end, genre is a valuable lens through which to explore a play, its characters, and their interactions with each other and the world around them.

The idea of genre as a governing structure for a play or other literary work is not unfamiliar. Our postmodern society is somewhat suspicious of strict genre distinctions, but guidelines for form, structure, plot, and message have been embraced throughout most of literary history, including the time in which William Shakespeare wrote his plays. To read and study his works requires not only an understanding of performance theory and technique but a familiarity with the structures of dramatic genre and an accompanying knowledge of how Shakespeare's characters work in, through, and in spite of them. To analyze women, in particular, requires an understanding and interest in the traditional role of women as plot devices in Elizabethan and earlier comedy coupled with a realization of the influence of genre-driven form. Understanding Shakespeare's women as other than whole and individualized would misunderstand the fullness of the plays, but to read and play them without any recognition of their

function as predetermined stereotypes and plot devices would also sell them short. It is possible to see Shakespeare's women in totality: written from tropes in keeping with the predefined genre, stereotypes intended to be interpreted by the performer, and whole characters with discernible desires, wills, and emotions, existing in a realistic society that impacts their actions. Broadly speaking, women are shoved to the sides in histories to make way for the male heroes because they have limited power, permitted to share the spotlight with the ones they love in tragedies, and take hold of the plot in comedies because of their self-knowledge and witty engagement with the society in which they live.

Tragedy

Tragedy as a genre of performance literature has existed since Classical Greece, its original tenets detectable in part or in whole within each of Shakespeare's tragic works. An Aristotelian tragedy is distinct in its treatment of upper-class woes, purposed to be a result of either a fatal missing the mark or a misplaced desire or intention on the part of the main tragic figure. Shakespeare's idea of tragedy accepts this framework for a plot, focusing on a main tragic figure who can be seen to be responsible for his own downfall, but marries it with Shakespeare's own interest in "the way in which men and women influence each other and the whole complex sphere of human relationships."⁵

An important aspect of Shakespeare's use of the tragic genre is the overarching framework for how men and women interact. Most of

⁵ Angela Pitt, *Shakespeare's Women*, (David and Charles, 1981), 33.

Shakespeare's tragedies, with the possible exception of examples such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, focus on a single male protagonist who experiences the bulk of the tragic downfall. For example, *King Lear* treats the titular character as a high-ranking tragic hero, who experiences a catastrophic downfall because of *hamartia*-like excess. The women in the story function mainly as dramatic constructs demonstrating the totality of Lear's loss. However, Shakespeare is distinct in that he often treats the female characters, who might usually be entirely generic, as whole, round, dynamic people. "Many of [Shakespeare's] contemporaries either consistently idealized women in romantic tales and poems, or satirized them as harridans, fools, or whores, but Shakespeare scrupulously avoids such two-dimensional stereotyping" writes Angela Pitt.⁶ Analyzing Shakespeare's tragic women involves looking deeply into what makes his characters real and the ways in which they interact with and affect their male counterparts in meaningful ways beyond just acting as symbols or heightening suspense.

In addition, it is often the tragedies instead of the romantic comedies in which we see the most constructive romantic love in Shakespeare's plays, especially with regards to his female characters. While comedic heroines like Beatrice and Isabella take focus with their deviousness and wit, in tragedies, ill-fated lovers like Juliet and Cleopatra are the only female characters allowed to share the spotlight equally, narratively and emotionally, with their male counterparts. Other women who gain prominence in tragedies are defamed as

⁶ Angela Pitt, *Shakespeare's Women*, (David and Charles, 1981), 33.

disordered or unfeminine— like Lady Macbeth, or Regan and Goneril— and only the lovers escape this disparagement. Even in a romantic pair, however, women usually lack the privileged status afforded to male tragic heroes. Their power comes from the emotional connection they have with their romantic partner; they have indirect control over whatever their partner influences. When analyzing Shakespeare's women through the tenets of the tragic genre, we see that power afforded to tragic women by their romantic connection with men is indirect and intimate, but nevertheless has the potential to change the course of a plot.

Comedy

In her book *Shakespeare's Women*, Angela Pitt highlights the difference between tragedy and comedy as being the difference between permanence and impermanence. In tragedy the audience feels a sense of inevitability as we watch the male hero's slow demise as a result of some tragic circumstance; in comedy, Pitt writes, "until the final scene makes everything clear, no decision is incapable of being changed or reversed."⁷ Part of the delight of the Elizabethan comic genre is the sense of carnivalesque disorder present in the society and the plot: the idea that no situation is fixed and the wild circumstances could change or be misunderstood at any moment. This element of genre contributes to our perception of lovers in the comedies as seeming not to belong in their societies at the beginning of the play.

⁷ Angela Pitt, *Shakespeare's Women*, (David and Charles, 1981), 76.

A good portion of the conflict in a Shakespearean comedy comes from the problem of how the heroines of the plays will ultimately fit into the traditional, male-defined social conventions and linguistic system.⁸ Women like Beatrice and Katharina (from *The Taming of the Shrew*) are problematic for the men in the story because their assertiveness, though not always misplaced, makes them hard to fit into the mold of the demure, submissive helpmeet that had been the functioning model for male-female relationships for centuries. Comedy can be seen, as Gay remarks in the introduction to *As She Likes It*, as “the ultimate triumph of the idea of the community.”⁹ Shakespeare’s comedies often center on women who do not fit into the communal expectations but take control of their own destinies, wooing and winning with witty banter and distinctive self-assurance. Linda Bamber, in *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, writes: “In the comedies the world is manifestly reliable, orderly, a source of pleasure rather than a threat— and so is the nature of the feminine.”¹⁰ Female interests are central to comedy because women fit the pleasant engaging mold of the comedic genre.

In contrast to tragedies which usually focus on men, comedies often highlight the interests and activities of women. Pitt speculates that this fact is related to the “traditional attributes of modesty, intuition, and high-

⁸ Penny Gay, *As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women*, (Routledge Press, 1994), 3

⁹ Penny Gay, *As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women*, (Routledge Press, 1994), 2

¹⁰ Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 20.

spiritedness [which were] highly suitable material”¹¹ for comedic plays. While Shakespeare still uses traditional stereotypical tropes, especially early on, to form his female characters, he typically chooses in comedy to show women in a more positive light. Shakespeare’s comedies often introduce a traditional plot, which is soon overtaken by the personality, dialogue, and wit of an interesting heroine, such as in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Hero’s disgrace should be the main plot of the play, but Beatrice quickly becomes the more interesting character and in the end Beatrice is the one the audience remembers. By highlighting their wit and self-assurance, and writing them as complex, interesting, and enticing, Shakespeare creates characters who take over the audience’s hearts even if their personal affairs are not immediately seen as central to the plot.

Two main female character tropes reflected in Shakespeare’s early comedies, handed down from centuries of patriarchal legislature and literature, are especially familiar to contemporary readers. In such early works as *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare’s women were written dichotomously either as spiteful viragoes or demure virgins. However, as Shakespeare’s understanding of the feminine grew greater, possibly due to various relationships with women over the course of his life,¹² so did his interest in portraying women as whole, deep, soulful individuals with an understanding of power and a sense of fun. This is not to say that stereotypical portrayals are

¹¹ Angela Pitt, *Shakespeare’s Women*, (David and Charles, 1981), 75.

¹² Tina Packer, *The Women of Will*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

absent from his writing in later years, but instead to suggest that in his later comedies Shakespeare does the excellent work of suggesting a trope for a particular heroine and then using the poetry and her relationships with others to say something different altogether about the role of women in a relationship, in a marriage, and in society. For example, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, which is treated more thoroughly later in this analysis, Beatrice starts out the play as nearly a virago-type character. She is contrasted with her cousin Hero, who is about to be married to Claudio, and who occupies the perfect, desirable virgin trope. Beatrice, conversely, proclaims that she does not ever want to get married, and engages in good-natured but caustic banter with the men in the beginning of the play. Were this a work like *The Taming of the Shrew*, we would expect the play to center on Beatrice's finding a husband who is able to control her temper and wit and to see her finally matched with someone who can handle her spirit better than most. Beatrice would be a two-dimensional character who, even though the focus of much of the play, would find herself to be treated as mostly comic effect and to be matched intentionally against a male character. Instead, in one of Shakespeare's most beloved romantic comedies, Beatrice finds herself attracted to her sworn enemy, who turns out to treat her as an equal. Their witty banter serves for romantic interplay as they profess their love and unite against Hero's disgracer, Don John. We are left with a vibrant couple whose relationship intentionally does not fit the box of the typical he and she, but whose passion and wit will clearly serve their life together well.

History

Despite the traditional focus on a male hero in Shakespearean tragedy, it is in the history plays that it is hardest to analyze Shakespeare's women as whole and complex individuals. Shakespeare's histories, like much of Western history itself, focus on the leaders, generals, and kings of England's heritage, dramatizing the rise and fall of family lines amidst the capers of princes and wives. Women in the history plays are often confined to one section of significant action and sometimes to only one scene. Their characters can be seen as valuable primarily because of what their interactions with the male heroes of the story are able to convey about the central characters' personality and development. It is rare to find a woman in a Shakespeare history whose notable scene and conflict does not specifically reveal important information about the psyche or characterization of her male counterpart. For example, Queen Isabel in *Richard II*, though she is an interesting and well-spoken character, is only featured prominently in two scenes, both of which emphasize Richard's concern for family and homeland by the tender way he interacts with his wife. Isabel, though a well-developed individual, has a specific function in the play: to elevate a male character.

Women in the histories who are not characterized for the sake of communicating about men frequently take on the character of a scheming or even villainous woman. Such characters do not emulate the virgin on a pedestal that is desirable in the comedies and honored in the tragedies, nor do they fit the mold of a virago wife who must be made to submit. Characters like Joan la

Pucelle and Queen Margaret from the Henry cycle (plays written very early in Shakespeare's career, which is perhaps significant) are perceived as unnatural and bad, morally depraved and relationally inept. This is, in a large part, because they are written not to portray any of the characteristics of traditional demure womanhood. They are not kind and submissive, and they are more than shrewish and annoying; Margaret and Joan are perceived as devilish and horrifying because the strength they show is a strength that seems to the Elizabethans out of place in a woman, who is meant to support and uplift a man.

The men in the histories, reacting in part to this phenomenon, are seen as the naive, guileless ones reacting to their circumstances and to the schemes and plans of the women around them. Although this sounds drastic, in almost every history play can be found a male hero who, though often in a place of power, seems to act in a way that can be seen to be dictated by the circumstances he finds himself in. Complementing this, even the women who are not perceived as villains are often those who are doing the scheming and decision making, even if their decisions do not directly give them power over others. A good example of both qualities above can be found in *Coriolanus*: while the titular character makes the important decisions in the play, it is obvious to readers and watchers that he acts the way he does because of the way he has been raised by his mother, Volumnia, and that her intentions are the more suspect. In *Coriolanus* Shakespeare makes the female connection to Coriolanus' actions hard to miss, but it is present in other plays as well, such as

Richard II which sees Richard reacting over and over to the circumstances thrown at him by his political enemies, and Isabel by contrast making radical decisions that will bring her to his side. The cleverness and deviousness of women, which in a variant form has a prominent positive function in the comedies, has a different effect on the histories, one of elevating the men and their interests.

At different periods in history, influenced by theatrical trends and political activism, scholars and artists have been more or less inclined to view Shakespeare's heroines as well-rounded characters as opposed to male dramatic constructs, and their effect on the actors and the audience has been diverse depending on the contemporary climate. For example, women's roles played by boys originally fueled negative stereotyping of women to some degree. Any attempt to use boys to play serious female roles in Shakespeare productions in the last couple of centuries, notably the venture at Stephen Orgel's school in the 1960s, reflected negatively on the men and boys involved because of the poor opinions of homosexuality and effeminacy which the productions were thought to encourage.¹³ In Elizabethan England, the women's roles were played by boys as a function of societal trends and restrictions on women's behavior.

Patriarchal values inherited from ancient Rome dictated that women could not appear on the stage, and the young men who replaced them were apt to be directed to play what would turn out to be the "idea" of women instead of

¹³ David Mann, *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 15.

theatrical honesty. This explains, at least in part, the reasons behind the traditionally dichotomous stereotyping of women in literary drama— it would be easy for an untrained and inexperienced boy to play the generally accepted idea of desirable femininity, appearing as the perfect virgin. Women who did not seem to fit into the mold of ideal womanhood when dramatized on stage would appear as disordered or in excess and be derided as viragoes, witches, and monsters, such as Lady Macbeth or Regan and Goneril as discussed above. Neither of these broad generalizations of women was interested in viewing women as round, whole, or individual, but only as playable plot devices. While this dichotomy was not always embraced by Shakespeare in constructing female characters, the reality of boys playing a shallow, male-devised form of femininity is relevant to literary interpretation of their function as dramatic constructs.

Equally if not more important to our understanding of Shakespeare's women, as dramatic constructs as well as realistic characters, is our understanding of the morality surrounding women in performance in the Elizabethan period. David Mann's book discusses an Elizabethan idea of feminine morality that might play into how female characters in the seventeenth century were written and read. He notes the seeming existence of a dichotomy between *literary morality* and *actual morality* with regards to men's perception of women, focusing on the idea that authors of Elizabethan England may have written their fictional female characters to act differently than was actually expected of women in their societies. For example, in

Shakespeare's canon, characters who openly work in the sex industry, like Doll Tearsheet and Mistress Overdone, add color and interest to the plays in which they are featured. Nevertheless, their behavior is in stark contrast to the demureness, obedience, and fidelity expected of the women whose husbands would have gone to see Shakespeare's plays when they were first produced. Playwrights and audiences in Elizabethan England could appreciate and enjoy a woman's portrayal as independent, bawdy, or controlling, while retaining expectations for the actual moral behavior of their wives and daughters that bore little resemblance to their expectations for the characters onstage.

Analyzing Shakespeare's Women: Performance

Each actor, director, and designer who spends time with a work by William Shakespeare does his or her part to shape the meaning and message of the play. Unlike a canvas painting that is complete when the original artist puts down his brush, Shakespeare's plays are written to be performed and are not fully realized until the words are spoken aloud to a crowd of people and the characters and their decisions and inner life embodied by a sympathetic actor. Performance of Shakespeare's plays gives them their fullest vitality and impact, and morphs and changes the message of the plays into a final product that is unique to its time and specially developed to fit the heart and mind of the particular actors that stand on the stage.

In *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*, author and researcher Penny Gay writes of staging plays that, "Performance is always potentially disruptive of received readings, because in order to hold an audience's attention

it must respond in subtle (or not-so-subtle) ways to the changing zeitgeist.”¹⁴ In other words, actually staging a play has a much greater potential to have a real disruptive effect on its audience than reading it does. The concreteness of live performance as opposed to the imaginative exercise of reading literature from the past or present calls an audience to a different, more active kind of artistic experience. When reading a play, no matter how interesting it is or how invested the reader feels herself to be, it is much easier for her to relegate her perception of the characters and their effect on her to a circumstance or situation that may seem distant, whether because the play was written in the past or because she finds the characters to be very different from herself. By contrast, when real human bodies are onstage performing, the characters that seemed so abstract take on a much more personal context. It is impossible for the characters’ performance and conception not to be seen completely in the light of the current time and the values and opinions held by the artistic leadership and the people watching. In performance, the actors and director are forced to make distinct choices about the nature and actions of the character. These choices necessarily exclude some possibilities for the character and concept in favor of others.

Shakespeare’s plays, though the language and poetry may seem unfamiliar and archaic, are no different. To balance a genre-based analysis of Shakespeare’s female characters with a look into what they are like when

¹⁴ Penny Gay, *As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women*, (Routledge Press, 1994), 3.

portrayed onstage is to see into not just the patriarchal, stereotypical view of women espoused at the time of their writing, but the vibrant life of each's story as well and the ways in which it intersects with the social and political structures of the period. Many of Shakespeare's heroines, even in the histories and tragedies, have a depth of interest and agency not widely seen in Elizabethan drama that belies the playwright's interest in portraying real people and real emotional connections and relationships.

At different points in history, socio-political context, recent historical events, and social acceptance and rejection of various groups have dramatic effects on the presentation and reception of Shakespeare's canon, and his female characters as well. Penny Gay writes, "...there is no such thing as the text itself, unmediated by cultural assumptions."¹⁵ No matter how often Shakespeare in particular is held up as a poet for the ages, the reality is that the performance of a play is a fleeting historical event, its message in some cases affected far more by the political climate and presentation of the actors than by the text of the script itself. "The play will in every production, at every performance, be retextualised according to what is available, or fashionable, at the time of its presentation— and this includes the actors and actresses."¹⁶ This means that each audience who attends a live theatre event, no matter how many times the play has been produced or analyzed in the past, has no choice but to view the

¹⁵ Penny Gay, *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*, (Routledge Press, 1994), 4.

¹⁶ Ibid.

play and its message completely within the context of the cultural, social, political, and artistic climate at the moment the curtain goes up.

In the Spring of 2017, Delacorte Theatre in New York staged a production of *Julius Caesar*, in which the lead actor's performance and design choices heavily suggested President Donald Trump. Conservative theatregoers were outraged by the portrayal of Mr. Trump as a Julius Caesar figure being stabbed by his attendants. Director Oskar Eustis stated openly that his production blatantly intended to reveal "disturbing things" about the United States' political affairs. That same summer, I worked at an outdoor Shakespeare festival in Louisville, Kentucky, a thousand miles from the "Trump Caesar" production in New York state. The Kentucky Shakespeare season included a production of *Julius Caesar*, set in the classical Roman period with actors dressed in togas and featuring lute and harp music, and with absolutely no intentional references to the American political climate. Nevertheless, the director came backstage one day to read to the crew an email he had received from a recent audience member, intending to shame him for such a "disgusting" and "offensive" portrayal of President Trump in the production. As a conservative audience member, the writer was completely appalled by what she had interpreted to be a political commentary like to the one at Delacorte Theatre. Even though Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* has been in print for hundreds of years, she could not help but see Kentucky Shakespeare's production completely in the light of her own political beliefs and the current state of affairs. When Julius Caesar was portrayed by a live actor on the stage,

the fact that the actor was dressed in a toga and carrying a short sword could not prevent the theatergoer from interpreting the play's political commentary as an attack on her self. The potential of live, onstage theatre to communicate to the people watching is not restricted to intentional metaphor.

CHAPTER THREE

Virgins and Viragoes:
Volition and Desirability in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Romeo and Juliet*

Women as Dramatic Constructs

Shakespeare's women often fall into the genre-driven framework of character tropes interacting to convey a standard story outline. They also break the Elizabethan mold and display more volition, agency, and depth of thought and complexity than other individual characters of Shakespeare's time and place. In comedies and tragedies alike, Shakespeare's heroines walk the line between feminine dramatic constructs existent for the purpose of fulfilling a male-centric story and real, interesting individuals showing truth through metaphor about the female experience. Fully realized when embodied by an actor on stage, Shakespeare's women show audiences an angle on Elizabethan womanhood previously unexplored and, through their comedic wit and tragic futility, display both typical femininity and relatable volition.

Playwriting throughout history has often worked within a defined form or genre to tell a story, convey truth, and develop a desired reaction in the audience. Classical Greek and Roman tragedies, comedies of manners, and melodramas are all examples of dramatic form with highly specific plot, character, and circumstance qualities, created to achieve a set of preconceived goals. Character archetypes define the specific roles needed to progress the plot in the desired direction. Tragic heroes and comedic sidekicks, charming

ingenues and tricky servants are all meticulously placed in the story of the play, fulfilling certain functions and remaining easy to detect as dramatic constructs. Shakespeare's plays, known to have narrative and structural roots in various Roman comedies and classical works, contain many of the archetypal characters and typical plot structures and devices we would expect from any similarly influenced Elizabethan drama.

Shakespeare's canon incorporates character types ranging from Aristotelian heroes to *commedia*-derived servants and fools. With some examination and background knowledge, it is easy to detect that Lear's downfall and Hamlet's tragic ending are prefigured in their identities as dramatic constructs of tragic heroes, written, at least in part, to convey a certain idea or display a metaphorical object lesson about a negative trait. In the still-patriarchal Elizabethan era, when fathers ruled families and literary form ruled function, for female characters it was even easier to be seen and portrayed as constructs only, with no depth of character and few truly distinguishing character traits. Existing to serve the interests of the male-centric narrative, female characters live up a plot, share information about or act as foil to male heroes, and serve as symbols of virtue or desire. A close reading of Shakespeare's famous heroines, however, reveals more individuality and interest than typically seen in characters of classical tragedies and comedies.

Shakespeare's tragedies, woven and crafted of Elizabethan dramatic tropes and Aristotelian traditions, belong to the men. Since tragedies, according to Aristotelian tradition, focus on the lives of the upper-classes and royals, it

makes sense that Shakespeare's tragedies would be built around characters of kings and princes who possess influence over a court and a country, which will make their downfall more tragic when the kingdom suffers with them. The death of *Hamlet*'s titular character leaves Denmark to be overtaken by Fortinbras, and Othello's arrest means that the safety of Cyprus will be jeopardized. Tragic heroes must have somewhere from which to fall. Women in tragedies hold less influence than their male counterparts. Speaking generally, a woman in a Shakespearean tragedy, in contrast to comedy, usually has a stronger presence as a dramatic construct in relation to a tragic hero than as a fully realized individual character. Women, still largely considered subordinate to men in the narrative environment of Shakespeare's tragedies, lack the high level of influence over other people that would make them worthy of tragic hero status. Lear, a king whose actions control a court as well as a kingdom, has somewhere high from which to fall by tragic effect of a *hamartia*; Cordelia, in the first scene disinherited and banished from the kingdom, has no such sway over the lives of others. Women in tragedies seem largely powerless except by association with a husband or father. Tragic women, while they may carry meaning as symbols or signifiers, rarely exist on stage except when necessary to help expose specific knowledge about the tragic hero. For example, in *Richard II*, even though the king's wife is a strong and interesting character, we can detect that each of her scenes and speaking lines does help us particularly learn something about King Richard even if he is not on stage. Desdemona's

interactions with Othello, while they inform her character and goodness, give us an even greater sense of Othello's harshness through juxtaposition.

In tragedy, there is only one way in which a woman can be raised to the level of prominence of her husband or partner, exemplified by *Romeo and Juliet*: romantic love embraced and pursued to the level of total parity between parties. Pitt writes: "it is only where tragedy arises from mutual passionate love that the position of the heroine begins to approach the same significance as that of the hero...By its very nature, such love exerts a powerful force over the destinies of both parties, thus elevating the woman's position."¹⁷ In other words, a woman in a tragedy can reach the level of significance of the hero if she loves the hero enough that the force of their romance changes the course of the play for both individuals by driving every choice made by either party. In romantic drama like *Romeo and Juliet*, the woman's love elevates her to prominence realized through marital union. A woman like Lady Macbeth is equally elevated by her romantic connections, but her own dark and twisted agenda prevents her from being embraced by audiences in the same way. By gaining narrative power through romantic connection with a male, a heroine gains the audience's interest in her own fate, and is able to be seen as an equally complex and deliberative character alongside the male.

If tragedies belong to the men, writes Angela Pitt, the "comedies must surely belong to the women."¹⁸ Even higher class women like Beatrice (*Much*

¹⁷ Angela Pitt, *Shakespeare's Women*, (David and Charles, 1981), 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

Ado About Nothing) and Katherine (*The Taming of the Shrew*) hold less influence than their fathers and husbands and fit into the comedic mold. Elizabethan comedies rely on exaggerated characters, chaos and misrule, subterfuge and trickery, and passionate love to keep the (often repetitive) plots exciting. Women, as understood in the Elizabethan period, possess just the right characteristics to drive a comic plot forward. The difficulties that come from running a household, maintaining personal control in the face of unrequited love, or retaining modesty and decorum when being pursued are traditional feminine struggles which play well in plots based on tangling attractions and humorous blocking characters. Elizabethan society expects women to be scheming, clever, modest, and witty. Elizabethan comedy allows them to do just that.

Pitt goes on to describe women in comedies as “vivacious” and full of “force and charm,” citing heroines like Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing* who use their wit and moral code, if not to move the action forward, then to make it worth watching. It may be that Petruchio, from *The Taming of the Shrew*, is the one who incites the action of the plot by agreeing to court Kate, but it is Kate’s personality, wit, and intrigue that keep the action interesting. Katherine of *The Taming of the Shrew* serves as the precise model of an Elizabethan comic woman— she is easy to identify as a dramatic construct of quintessential shrewish female and antagonizes the central male figure in just such a way as to keep the play interesting, keep the audience rooting for her, and keep the action comedic.

Women in comedies drive the plot and keep the play interesting, but they still conform largely to character stereotypes. David Mann discusses the propensity of Elizabethan and earlier playwrights to see women as a series of types in order to make the character easily recognizable and actually give the actor playing the character more opportunity to individualize and elaborate.¹⁹ Mann writes of women in comedy that “stereotyping aids narrative compression and allows instant character recognition, for a performance, especially a humorous one, is a joint enterprise in which the audience and its reactions play an important part in its success.”²⁰ By this reasoning, stereotyping in order to aid dramatic construction and function of female characters is a positive thing because of how easily it enables the audience to be brought into the fold of the story and understand the characters and plot. Mann points out that this stereotyping also aided in recognizability and interest of characters when they had to be played by a less-than-proficient performer, such as a student or apprentice. Since these individuals often played the female roles, it makes some sense that this practical concern about staging could have a meaningful effect on playwriting. Stereotyping female characters can regardless be beneficial to full realization of the characters by actors on the stage. Scantly developed, easy to understand tropes leave a lot of room for directorial and actor-motivated interpretation and creativity. At the same time, flattening and simplifying the portrayals of women on the stage can allow for troubled understandings of the

¹⁹ Angela Pitt, “Women in the Histories: in *Shakespeare’s Women*, (David and Charles, 1981), 122.

²⁰ Ibid., 123.

feminine experience and an incomplete sense of the world of the play and its impact on the individuals in it.

The two main unhelpful stereotypes for women, fueled by moral dualism, picture a female character as either a beautiful, meek, and desirable virgin, or a harsh, crafty, and disobedient virago, the first intended to be honored and wooed and the second to be dominated and won. Kate and Bianca, from *The Taming of the Shrew*, are apt examples: Bianca is featured as the perfect virgin daughter, desired by men, and Katherine as the antagonist to anyone who tries to cross her, who needs to be dominated before she can be desirable. Women like Bianca and Kate, who fit these molds, are usually paired against each other for definition and comparison, and not against the play's men, since each's identity is specifically anti-masculine, either in its demureness and femininity or open scorn of male control. In comedies and tragedies alike, women are expected to fall into one of these two categories.

While stereotypes of women in either comedies or tragedies may seem beneficial for analyzing characters, putting together performances, and conveying a message that the audience will understand, they also cause problems in Shakespeare's time and today for those attempting to see each character as not just independent but justifiable as an individual. Like any negative or positive assumption about a group of people, stereotyping dramatic females into the tropes of innocent virgin, entertaining virago, and symbolic victim leaves characters who do not fit smoothly into one of the molds vulnerable to derision and misunderstanding. Often women who exhibit

leadership, agency in decision-making, or any kind of desire for power are seen as disordered and foul. For example, Joan of Arc in *Henry VI* is made impossible to empathize with. The men who try and convict her portray her as completely evil and irredeemable, leaving no possibility that any of her characteristics are positive. The male characters, written as the “right” ones, can only see Joan as criminal because she does not portray any of the feminine stereotypes in the way they expect from her. The audience too, seeing her contrasted with other women in the play who seem to be acting the correct part, see her in the same light of disorder and rebellion simply because she is not playing into any expectations that the audience has for a female character in a play.

In addition, inherited Christian misogyny causes any woman taking control of her sexuality in a drama to be considered a temptress and seductress, unfit to be wooed or victimized. Audiences will see her as a fallen woman who deserves what she gets because she rebelled against authority, even if there is not any real tangible authority in the play for her to be obeying by remaining pure and chaste. Women who are *not* promiscuous may also die at the end of a play, but their deaths are mourned because they were seen by male characters and audiences as spotless victims. The issue of whether women should use their bodies to attract men intentionally has become, as David Mann says, an issue of morality and not just of expectation for subservience.²¹ Women should not be promiscuous because, according to Elizabethan Christian sensibilities, it is

²¹ David Mann, “Dramatic Empathy and Moral Ambiguity” in *Shakespeare’s Women: Performance and Conception*, (Cambridge, 2008).

immoral if they use their sexuality with any kind of volition. A woman who keeps herself pure, remains inside the stereotypes in which the male-centric narrative wants to place her, and respects authority is seen as good and can be mourned when she dies as a tragic result of the action of the play. A woman who does not remain inside the lines cannot be tragically mourned, regardless of whether or not her actions were justified or whether there is any practical or belief-based reason for her to remain chaste within the world of the actual narrative. For example, Lady Macbeth is incapable of being mourned by the characters or the audience, because her actions are seen as sadistic and manipulative. We would probably judge any male character who acted as she does in a similar way— like Richard from *Richard III*. The issue of feminine morality arises when a woman who does not fit constrictive stereotypes or who uses her sexuality and skills for her own benefit is seen as just as immoral, evil, and “fallen” as Lady Macbeth is, her only crime being that she disrupted the male-focused social order by using volition to control her own life. Mann describes this misaligned morality when applied to women as “an aesthetic dualism that associates [rebellion] with darkness, ugliness, discord, and chaos, and [authority] with light, beauty, musical harmony, and all the terpsichorean symmetry the Court’s dancing masters could produce.”²² A man in the same situation as Lady Macbeth would have at least a chance to explain himself or be empathized and sympathized with.

²² David Mann, “Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping” in *Shakespeare’s Women: Performance and Conception*, (Cambridge, 2008), 126.

A Desirable Virago: Beatrice from Much Ado About Nothing

Beatrice exhibits agency and does her best to take control of her own circumstances in a vaguely unfeminine way at the very beginning of the play. The opening scene of *Much Ado About Nothing* finds Leonato, Governor of Messina, conversing with a Messenger about the recent battle. The twelfth line of dialogue sees Beatrice interjecting to ask if the Messenger has any news of Benedick, interrupting the older men in their conversation:

BEATRICE I pray you, is Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?

MESSENGER I know none of that name, lady. There was none such in the army of any sort.

LEONATO What is he that you ask for, niece?

HERO My cousin means Signior Benedick of Padua.

MESSENGER O, he's returned, and as pleasant as ever he was.

BEATRICE He set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid at the flight, and my uncle's Fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the bird-bolt. I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? For indeed I promised to eat all of his killing.

LEONATO Faith, niece, you tax Signior Benedick too much, but he'll be meet with you, I doubt it not. (I.i.30-46)

After several lines of back-and-forth between Beatrice and the Messenger, Leonato feels the need to apologize for his niece's forwardness: "You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them" (I.i. 59-61). From the beginning of the play, Beatrice is too self-assured to fit into the first of the dichotomous comedic stereotypes of women, the meek and demure

virgin, and therefore must be apologized for. Her willingness to speak up in front of the older males is a serious enough breach of conduct that governor Leonato feels the need to make excuses for her to a lower-class messenger.

The exchange with Leonato is reminiscent of the opening lines pertaining to Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, who is introduced as “stark mad” and “devilish” in the opening scene, in which she similarly interrupts her father and the men with whom he is talking, albeit with more aggressive language. Despite this comparability, Beatrice does not read to us as a shrew, the second of the primary dichotomous comedic stereotypes. Her motivation to interrupt the conversation is not to attack or prove anything about herself, but to ask a relevant question about the welfare of another person. In addition, despite Leonato’s feeling the need to make excuses, the Messenger to whom Beatrice is talking seems receptive to her interruption and cheerfully gives her the information she is looking for in addition to asking why she is interested in Benedick.

In this first scene, Beatrice does not fit quite right into either of the primary comedic woman molds. She is too forward to be considered an idealized virgin, but she doesn’t seem to put people off as the uncontrollable shrew does. Beatrice takes relational agency for herself. She wants information about Benedick, so she speaks up in order to get it. She makes no attempt either to apologize or to try to excuse her outburst by insinuation of attraction or romantic love towards Benedick, which might justify her boldness to the males. Beatrice makes it clear that she is not interested in being an idealized, desirable

virgin: “I would rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me” (I.i.129-30). She would much rather enjoy her “merry war” with Benedick but remain unwed.

In subsequent scenes of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice cements her identity as an independent and complex individual with no desire to fall into either comedic stereotype, virgin or virago. Although she achieves her purpose of keeping the play interesting through wit and cunning, she exhibits too much willfulness and depth of thought to be considered either a perfect virgin or a devilish shrew. Her forwardness and independence, centering around the idea that she professes not to want to marry, keep her from exemplifying the stereotype of the perfect virgin— innocent, pure, virtuous and the ideal feminine wife. She describes women in the process of being wooed as being “troubled with a pernicious suitor” (I.i.126), and willfully declares herself not to be ruled completely by her father’s will with regards to her marriage, explaining that while it is her “duty to make curtsy and say ‘Father, as it please you,’” if he is not a “handsome fellow” she will cheerfully “make another curtsy and say ‘Father, as it please me’” (II.i.53-56). However, despite her willfulness and sometimes troublesome and apology-worthy volition, she is still portrayed as a desirable character— the Prince, upon discussing her with Benedick, quickly comes to the conclusion that “She were an excellent wife for Benedick” (II.ii. 343) and hatches a comedic plan with other of the characters to trick them into declaring love for each other. She is described as beautiful, fair, wise, and virtuous (II.ii), and when Benedick overhears the Prince and his cohorts talking

about her he quickly agrees: “I will be horribly in love with her” (II.ii.237)! Therefore Beatrice’s wit and projected spitefulness do not, in her case, negate her beauty and desirability as a wife, as they do with other lively female characters like *The Taming of the Shrew*’s Katherine. Beatrice is not portrayed as an individual one should “tame” (*The Taming of the Shrew* II.i.290) but as one to be “wooed” (*Much Ado* II.iii.181) even though other areas of her personality would seem to mark her as the former by Elizabethan standards.

Beatrice’s unexpected volition is further displayed in her own agency regarding her love for Benedick. Even though she has been so vocal in her dislike of him and disdain for marriage in general, when it is insinuated that he might love her in secret, she seems to turn on a dime and voices her own intent to pursue her feelings for him in a soliloquy to the audience in Act III, Scene 1, in a rhyming verse form previously little-used in the play that here better projects her emotion:

Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!
No glory lives behind the back of such.
And Benedick, love on; I will requite thee,
Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.
If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee
To bind our loves up in a holy band. (III.ii.115-20)

The language of this soliloquy, though it does picture a woman excited to be wooed and to marry, does not present Beatrice as submissive or meek in any way that would contradict her characterization in the first half of the play.

Contrarily, Beatrice voices strong personal intent and volition, leaving us in little doubt that should Benedick not specifically please her, she would not allow him to woo her. Her dramatic change of heart from derision to love is attributed

to strong, true feeling for Benedick, equal to what he feels for her, and does not reflect weakness.

In addition, when Beatrice finally declares her love for and desire to marry Benedick, she does so conditionally. Even though we have just seen in the above quote that Beatrice feels deeply for Benedick and truly wants to be his wife, the chance to marry him is not worth more than her desire to help and support Hero by asking Benedick to kill her accuser:

BEATRICE I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to
protest.

BENEDICK Come, bid me do anything for thee.

BEATRICE Kill Claudio.

BENEDICK Ha! Not for the wide world.

BEATRICE You kill me to deny it. Farewell.
[She begins to exit.]

BENEDICK Tarry, sweet Beatrice.

BEATRICE I am gone, though I am here. There is no love in you. Nay, I
pray you let me go.

BENEDICK Beatrice—

BEATRICE In faith, I will go.

BENEDICK We'll be friends first.

BEATRICE You dare easier be friends with me than fight with mine
enemy. (IV.i.300-12)

Even when faced with the opportunity to have her most desired wish realized, her priority is not to marry Benedick at any cost, but to protect and support her cousin. Marrying Benedick would be, in the context of the play and Elizabethan

society, the most desirable end for Beatrice. She would be guaranteed protection and status that she cannot possess as a single woman. Her volition and strength of will are displayed in that she is willing to turn all this down, as well as deny her own love for Benedick, if she is not able to have her wishes respected.

Beatrice's characterization crosses into new territory for comedic heroines by having an identity that is both relational and independent, outspoken and desirable, worthy of being both apologized for and eagerly courted. She is not obsessed with marriage and she has an agenda of her own, all without immodesty or shrewishness. In addition to being a dramatic construct of a comic heroine to drive a humorous plot, when realized by an actor on the stage she takes on the life of an interesting and endearing individual with motivations and desires unrelated to stark dualities of virtue and vice.

A Volitional Virgin: Juliet from Romeo and Juliet

Juliet is perceived as valuable for her virtue and virginity. As a pure and virtuous daughter, she is a credit to the power of her father, who wants to marry her to high-ranking Paris. Instead, Juliet takes agency to pursue a courtship and an actual marriage with Romeo completely behind her family's back. She accomplishes this with the help of outsiders like the Nurse and Friar, but the decisions are all her own. At her first meeting with Romeo, she takes initiative to find out more about him instead of waiting to be courted as would be expected: "Come hither, Nurse. What is yond gentleman?...Go ask his name. If

he be married,/My grave is like to be my wedding bed” (I.v.141-2). Juliet risks her parents’ ill opinion very early on in the play by getting to know Romeo with the help of the Nurse even though she already knows of her family’s wish that she marry Paris.

Juliet fits the romantic mold much like Lady Macbeth does, in her identity as the female counterpart to a male hero who receives nearly equivalent importance in the play because of her intimate relationship with a male figure. However, when it comes to the ideal tragic heroine, who exists mainly to symbolize morally dual qualities like purity or promiscuity, Juliet, much like Beatrice, is an oxymoron in that she does not fade into the background, but also does not stand out as “monstrous,” disordered, or evil. Having taken significance by connection with Romeo, Juliet is seen as a tragic figure in her own right, and not just an innocent casualty of the tragic hero’s complex. Juliet takes agency for herself. She is given an “out” from the very beginning— she could deny Romeo and choose to marry Paris; it would be simple, easy, and by many accounts the more proper thing to do. She defies our expectations for a tragic woman by choosing her own way, disobeying the wishes of her father, and covertly scheming to enact her own marriage. In a lot of ways, Juliet becomes more of a comic woman than a tragic— her wit and planning make her interesting and more vital to the story than a symbolic victim would be. She is able to function as a romantic heroine, pursuing love for a man at any cost with the help of tricky servants and older individuals, with her deliberative

soliloquies demonstrating a depth of thought and interest in planning not typically attributed to tragic women:

I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins
That almost freezes up the heat of life.
I'll call them back again to comfort me.—
Nurse!—What should she do here?
My dismal scene I needs must act alone.
Come, vial.
What if this mixture do not work at all?
Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?
No, no, this shall forbid it. (IV.iii.16-24)

Juliet, about to take the tincture which will cause her to sleep until she can see Romeo again, is shown in deep deliberation, but still not giving in to her fears or allowing anyone else to save her. Her deliberation and planning concern a situation of the highest stakes in which she is willing to die for her honor, and yet she is still the one to make the choice.

Her willingness to intentionally deliberate and take control of a situation that involves her is displayed further when she and Romeo meet privately for the first time in her family's garden. Juliet's monologue shows audiences as well as Romeo her thought process:

Thou knowest the mask of night is on my face,
Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek
For that which thou hast heard me speak tonight.
Fain would I dwell on form; fain, fain deny
What I have spoke. But farewell compliment.
Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say "Ay,"
And I will take thy word. Yet, if thou swear'st,
Thou mayst prove false. At lovers' perjuries,
They say, Jove laughs. (II.ii.90-98)

Juliet takes control of the conversation and makes her own judgements about the situation and what Romeo is doing. Her deliberations, while often more

rash than cautious, still display her volition and willful autonomy. Even though she plays the role of the virtuous daughter to her family, when she is faced with a situation that requires action she does not shy away from taking control herself.

While Juliet is shown to be acting the part of sweet and virtuous daughter, she is also portrayed early on as an independent and deep thinker, willing to deliberate and take strong action— by the end of act II, scene 2, she has arranged for Romeo to meet her and proposed on her own that they marry. She makes a plan to effect the marriage without the input of the Nurse or any older mentor, or even Romeo, saying to Romeo when they part “If that thy bent of love be honorable,/Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow,/By one that I’ll procure to come to thee,/Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite” (II.ii.149-53)... Her willingness to move forward with her own plans and with confidence in herself sets her apart from tragic women who need the constant support of their male hero to be able to take meaningful action that affects the plot of the play. For example, her suggestion of marriage to Romeo displays a far more forceful spirit than we see in someone like *Hamlet’s* Ophelia, who consults her father and brother and listens to their council instead of making a rash decision about how to address Hamlet’s madness. However, though she is more willing than Ophelia to take control, Juliet does not in this instance resemble the drastic domination of Lady Macbeth, whose domineering manipulation of her husband and hunger for power for herself and her family change her in the eyes of the audience from a tragic woman to a disordered

martinet, exhibiting more masculine characteristics than feminine, presented as evil and unworthy of desire.

Despite this independence and scheming, Juliet still plays the role of the amiable and obedient daughter throughout acts II and III of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because the audience has been privy to her interactions with Romeo in act II, there is dramatic irony in the fact that we perceive that the “virtuous daughter” is to Juliet a role to be played and not a fact of her personality, inasmuch as the characters in the play expect an obedient daughter to act. Juliet is still pure-hearted, but she has more volition and willfulness in her interactions with Romeo than she lets the Nurse and her parents see. She maintains this obedient persona, coming when the Nurse calls her and interacting blithely with her mother, until her intentions to marry come into conflict with her father’s in act III, scene 5, in which he orders her to marry Paris. Unwilling to effect a second marriage and thus commit a sin, Juliet tearfully but firmly beseeches her father to delay the marriage, intending to figure out a way to get around it: “...Delay this marriage for a month, a week, /Or, if you do not, make the bridal bed/In that dim monument where Tybalt lies” (III.v.211-13). What seems like Juliet’s blatant disregard for her father’s wishes causes Lord Capulet’s anger, since he expects her to listen to him and obey as a dutiful daughter, fulfilling as well the innocent virgin stereotype for a woman in drama. Juliet’s love for Romeo is now proven to be strong enough to force her out of the societal norms for virtuous daughters both in private and in public, as well as to drive her actions in the play, and ultimately to cause her to gain significance equalling that of Romeo.

Unlike other tragic women elevated to prominence through romantic connection with men, however, Juliet does not cross the line into monstrous. Lady Macbeth is a tragic heroine who at first appears similarly situated: she is a high-ranking, independent woman, whose role in the play initially seems to be to draw attention to certain aspects or failings of Macbeth's character. However, where Lady Macbeth's lust for power and domineering personality cause her to overpower Macbeth in decision-making, Juliet's deliberations and cunning never leave her own romantic territory. While Lady Macbeth takes on masculine characteristics of coercion and domination as she manipulates Macbeth and others, Juliet remains motivated by the desire to pursue virtue and a pure, passionate love for Romeo— to remain an "unstain'd wife" (IV.i.90) is her main priority. Both Lady Macbeth and Juliet are tragic women who step outside their bonds to take agency as individual characters, but they generate different audience response because of how they are motivated. We experience empathy (and lack thereof) for their respective goals— Lady Macbeth's being to rule Scotland, and Juliet's being to live safely and happily with Romeo.

Juliet's willfulness and strength as a female character do not negate her value to the formidable men in the play as a symbol of purity and also of male power. Similar in this quality is tragic Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, who is a signifier throughout the play of the power and ownership of the men above her. Lavinia as a character is scantily developed and even mute for much of the play. She is most important to the plot of *Titus Andronicus* when she is being discussed as a conquest by her father and future husband, and the scene in

which she is most vocal functions to pit her against the other female character, Tamora, such that her rape and dishonor may be treated as a personal slight against her father. Lavinia mirrors Juliet in her identity as a virtuous daughter figure whom the characters in the play view as signifiers of the influence of the patriarchal head of house over them. Where Lavinia remains silent in the scenes in which her future is being discussed, however—first by choice and then by force—Juliet takes hold of her own future, to the point of threatening her own death should her original plan not come to fruition and she be dishonored by a second marriage: “If all else fail, myself have power to die” (III.v.225). She threatens her father’s power over her by telling him she doesn’t want to marry Paris, which results in his violent reaction, but resolves to consult the Friar and, if no other solution appeared, to take her own life. This kind of subterfuge and forethought is exactly what would be expected of a romantic lead, but not a demure, objectified female symbol.

This volitional identity of Juliet allows *Romeo and Juliet* to read more similarly to comic form than tragic. Northrop Frye’s genre theory, the Mythos of Spring, describes comedy as having a plot in which the main movement of the play is from an old society, in which lovers are oppressed, to a new society, in which everyone is included. Frye writes: “At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters in are in charge of the play’s society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers.”²³ The usurpers in *Romeo and Juliet* we find to be the feuding families, including the Prince and his court, who impose on

²³ Northrop Frye, “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy” in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 163.

Juliet and Romeo their conflicting values and disallow them to be together. Later on in the play, “the device in the plot...brings hero and heroine together [and] causes a new society to crystallize around the hero...as the final society reached by comedy is the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs, an act of communion with the audience is in order.”²⁴ Even though Romeo and Juliet both die, we are able to recognize that they do so in order to be together. The society in which they live is not one in which they can be together in life, but they are able to manipulate their circumstances and be together in death. When he finds Juliet apparently dead, Romeo says “I still will stay with thee/And never from this palace of dim night/Depart again” (V.iii.106-8)... It is not a happy ending to the story, but it is a comic resolution according to Northrop Frye in that the two lovers are brought together. The new society that crystallizes is that established by the parents, Capulet and Montague, in which they will get along. Although the characters perish at the end of the play, the play truly closes with reconciliation between the families and a sense of the society of the play moving forward in forgiveness instead of tragically ending and being taken over by an outside conqueror:

CAPULET O brother Montague, give me thy hand.
This is my daughter's jointure, for no more
Can I demand.

MONTAGUE But I can give thee more,
For I will raise her statue in pure gold,
That while Verona by that name is known,
There shall no figure at such rate be set
As that of true and faithful Juliet. (V.iii.306-13)

²⁴ Northrop Frye, “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy” in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 163.

This reconciliation on the part of the tragic couple's families demonstrates to the audience that the society of the play will move forward but in a more positive direction (and without the influence of the feud). Finally, the play closes with a monologue by the Prince that addresses, as Frye discusses, the closure needed by both the characters and the audience:

A glooming peace this morning with it brings.
The sun for sorrow will not show his head.
Go hence to have more talk of these sad things.
Some shall be pardoned, and some punished.
For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo. (V.iii.316-21)

This final monologue, with its précis of the state of the characters and the plot, functions as Frye's moment of "communion with the audience" and further cements the final moments of the play as comedic in their reconciliatory focus and positive direction for the society of Verona.

Metaphor: Mutual Parity and Mutual Love

As a theatrical metaphor according to Anne Bogart, Beatrice and Juliet explore what it means to gain equality in a relationship, and to be appreciated as an individual independent of constrictive expectations for relational behavior. Beatrice represents an individual worthy of love because of, and not in spite of, her volition. Her "merry war" with Benedick demonstrates in the end not animosity, but parity. Beatrice and Benedick's relationship provides for us a metaphor displaying two individuals whose mutual love arises from genuine parity between parties, fueled by appreciation of each's unrepentant individuality. Beatrice, as a volitional, non-stereotypical woman is appreciated

by Benedick for those particular character qualities which alienate her from the mainstream social order and set her at odds with other men. Their witty repartee represents the kind of equity needed to sustain a long-term loving relationship, with their language acting both romantically and practically to bring them together and demonstrate their equal skills and complementary goals.

Juliet's volition contributes to our view of the play as comedic. Had Juliet not "forced herself," by her independence and volition, to be as heavily influential to the play as Romeo, the parity between the two families that ends the play would have either not appeared or would have been less impactful. Romeo and Juliet are evenly matched and therefore suited for each other in a way that Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are not. Their metaphorical demonstration of parity and mutual love and acceptance allows the Capulets and Montagues to close the play with the suggestion of a new society in which individuals can live and love how they themselves wish.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fair Treatment and the Fairer Sex: Cordelia from *King Lear* and Desdemona from *Othello*

The Plight of Tragic Women

Desdemona, wife to Othello, and Cordelia, daughter to Lear, are typical of many of Shakespeare's women in their double identities as dramatic constructs, meant to show us something about the plot and the male lead, and individual characters, existing in a realistic society, meant to provide a metaphor for the experience of being human and female that transcends time and circumstance and applies to many of us today. Desdemona and Cordelia are both truthful, intelligent women with knowledge to share that would be crucial to the plot if discovered. The expectations placed on them by society and their families, with regards to the female ability (or lack thereof) to speak up against power, ultimately keep them from sharing their perspective and result in their deaths as well as the downfall of the tragic hero. Their negative treatment in the tragedies in which they are featured reflects truth about the perception and experience of women, whose deviation from social expectations causes them to be discounted, both in Shakespeare's time and today.

Even accounting for the low status of women in Elizabethan England, Desdemona and Cordelia each seem to experience serious oppression and unjust treatment on the part of the male tragic hero of the respective plays. While women were expected to provide loyalty and, to a large degree,

submission and service, research of the time and examples of healthy relationships in literature and drama prove that an equal amount of support, trust, and care should be an expectation of the male head of a house. A husband or father should be expected to provide love and trust in addition housing and subsistence, as aligns with a Christian understanding of treatment of others. Desdemona and Cordelia are each connected with a male in power in her immediate family, who is the tragic hero of the story, and who throughout the play deviates further and further from the Elizabethan understanding of healthy family life in interactions with his family in such a way that each heroine is unable to act rightly and according to her conscience without stepping out of line of the rash and unattainable expectations of the father or husband. Furthermore, each character's attempt to step outside the expectations placed on her by speaking up about her situation leaves her completely vulnerable to repercussion by the male-centric society, whose forgiveness of outspokenness seems to occur along gendered lines of definition.

Familial Loyalty and Filial Love in Elizabethan England

Gender expectations in Elizabethan England often centered around sexual conduct and reputation, which, for a woman, comprised "the whole of her reputation, for a man it was only one part."²⁵ David Mann's "dual morality" inherited from Christian misogyny, discussed in the previous chapter, had the effect of villainizing any woman openly embracing her sexuality both inside and

²⁵ Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (Avon: Bath Press, 1995), 104.

outside her marital covenant. As Anthony Fletcher notes, “chastity before marriage and fidelity within it was the heart of a code of female honor...”²⁶ In addition, both in marriage and outside it, in Early Modern England “the female gender role was one of submission and obedience.”²⁷ Literature of the time gives advice to men on how to “tame” wives who ignore their directives, but also exhorts men that their wives should be loved at all times. Men are encouraged to use the virtues of “justice, wisdom, and mildness”²⁸ in their dealings with their wives. Writers like William Whately and John Wing condemned rough or cruel treatment of husbands towards wives, but found that in treating a woman as “yokefellow and companion” while still ruling her, “just anger” might warrant admonishment in the form of depriving her for a while of “some favors and kindness which she formerly hath more freely enjoyed.”²⁹

Shakespeare’s plays in general provide us with an inside take on the family unit and filial relationships in Elizabethan England. Scholarship on the Elizabethan family has traditionally discussed the family unit as “patrilinear, primogenitural, and patriarchal,”³⁰ revealing a penchant to focus on the passage of property through the male line; in this view second and third sons and, to an even greater degree, daughters are unnecessary and overlooked within the

²⁶ Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (Avon: Bath Press, 1995), 101.

²⁷ Ibid., 112.

²⁸ William Whately, *The Bride Bush*, (London, 1623), 112.

²⁹ J. Wing, *The Crown Conjugal or Spouse Royal* (London, 1620), 47-8.

³⁰ Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 591.

(especially high-status) family unit.³¹ Because women were less important to the family line, their views were even less important to society. Expectations of daughters in Elizabethan England generally followed the example set by William Tyndall in his *The Obedience of a Christian Man*: “Our fathers and mothers are to us in God’s stead.”³² It follows that “the proper attitude of children to their parents should be very like religious veneration,”³³ notes Fred Tromly in a dialogue on filial relationships in Shakespeare’s England. Daughters and sons alike were required to obey every aspect of their parent’s will.

While children may have been required to demonstrate absolute obedience, parents’ responsibilities toward their children in Elizabethan England were not devoid of charity or completely bleak and unemotional, as some have suggested. Historical data itself suggests that “intimacy and harmony within the family were not only ideals, but often realities;”³⁴ this hypothesis is supported by art and literature of the time which portrays close familial relationships. Many now judge this more positive and tender view of medieval and renaissance family life to be much closer to the truth. Emotional ties aside, however, there remains woven into the fabric of Elizabethan

³¹ Lynda E. Boose. “The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare,” *PMLA* 97, no. 3 (1982): 325

³² William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, (1528).

³³ Fred B. Tromly, “Paternal Authority and Filial Autonomy in Shakespeare’s England,” in *Fathers and Sons in Shakespeare: The Debt Never Promised*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2010), 18.

³⁴ Bruce W. Young, “King Lear and the Calamity of Fatherhood,” *Shakespearean Criticism*, 93. Ed. Michele Lee. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From *Literature Resource Center*.

England's patriarchal and feudal culture a dynamic of filial and familial piety and loyalty that is visible not only in historical documents, but in the same cultural art and literature that preserves accounts of filial love.

In "King Lear and the Calamity of Fatherhood," Bruce Young finds that "fathers were seen by Shakespeare's contemporaries mainly as nurturing figures."³⁵ Young cites recent research by Debora Shuger and coeval writings by Thomas Pritchard and John Newnham to point out evidence of the expectation for support, honor, and "mutual help and comfort" ³⁶ from *both* parent and child. According to Young, while children were expected to be obedient to their fathers and mothers, parents were likewise exhorted not to command "that which is not virtuous."³⁷ Young quotes Elizabethan teacher John Bradford as instructing that children were to honor their parents only "so long as they [the parents] pass not their bounds."³⁸ Pamphlets and sermons that were actually circulated in Elizabethan England to instruct parents and families appear more reliably indicative of societal expectation for family loyalty in the Elizabethan

³⁵ Bruce W. Young, "King Lear and the Calamity of Fatherhood," *Shakespearean Criticism*, 93. Ed. Michele Lee. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From *Literature Resource Center*.

³⁶ Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 20, qtd. in Bruce W. Young, "King Lear and the Calamity of Fatherhood," *Shakespearean Criticism*, 93. Ed. Michele Lee. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From *Literature Resource Center*.

³⁷ Thomas Pritchard, *The Schoole of Honest and Vertuous Lyfe: Profitable and Necessary for All Estates and Degrees, to be Trayned In* (1579), 31, qtd. in Bruce W. Young, "King Lear and the Calamity of Fatherhood," *Shakespearean Criticism*, 93. Ed. Michele Lee. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From *Literature Resource Center*.

³⁸ John Bradford, *The Writings of John Bradford, M.A.*, 2 vols., ed. Aubrey Townsend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848-53), 1:162, qtd. in Bruce W. Young, "King Lear and the Calamity of Fatherhood," *Shakespearean Criticism*, 93. Ed. Michele Lee. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From *Literature Resource Center*.

period than Stone's research which relies on political documents (and is thus a degree removed from actual familial life).

An Honest Daughter: Cordelia in King Lear

In the opening scene of *King Lear*, the king's three daughters have a collective, specific function in the life of their father, the tragic hero. Lear needs each of them to say that they love him the most, so that he can justify his ill-conceived intent to demand care and welcome from each of them. In this scene, the daughters are each meant to "play a part;" this they know from the very beginning of the dialogue. Regan and Goneril each portray the effusive, deferential daughter as best she is able. The audience perceives that they are not sincere, but that they are fulfilling societal and filial expectations inimitably. Cordelia's asides let the audience know that she does not consider Goneril's and Regan's verboseness to be honest and upright: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I.i.68). She is determined not to be so false.

Instead of a fawning monologue, Cordelia responds to Lear's demand by rationally stating, "I love your majesty/According to my bond, no more nor less" (I.i.92). By denying to give her father what he is asking, Cordelia is being undaughterly. Lear has an expectation for her that is in line with what Elizabethan society requires of women: that she give up her own will in favor of what her patriarchal figure desires of her. Regan and Goneril, despite their ulterior motives, are willing to fulfill Lear's expectations. Cordelia, by attempting to be the most honest, is acting counter to what society expects of a

daughter. However, she is doing it in a way that is open and guileless, and does her best to explain to Lear that she is not trying to offend him.

Cordelia does not at first believe her response will disqualify her from Lear's game and her inheritance. She is surprised when Lear reacts angrily to her speech and tries to defend herself:

I yet beseech your majesty—
If for I want that glib and oily art
To speak and purpose not,
Since what I well intend
I'll do't before I speak: That you make known
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,
No unchaste action or dishonored step
That hath deprived me of your grace and favor,
But even for want of that for which I am richer... (I.i.257-65)

According to Young's research, Lear's drastic banishment of his daughter is frighteningly unfatherly. Shakespeare's testimony, too, suggests that Lear's anger and Cordelia's subsequent banishment are to be seen as unjust— Lear is chided immediately by his advisor, Kent, in an act I, scene i exchange³⁹ reminiscent of several other parent-child conflicts in Shakespeare's canon, perhaps most recognizably Lord Capulet in act I, scene v of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which he is rebuked by his wife for being "too hot" in his anger and unjust in his treatment of Juliet.⁴⁰

Lear does not live up to our expectations of a loving and dutiful father. His method to determine his daughters' inheritance puts substantial pressure on his daughters to fuel his own ego. However, because of his power and place

³⁹ *King Lear*, I.i.140-64

⁴⁰ *Romeo and Juliet* III.v.160-76

in society, he is able to act drastically against our expectations and the expectations of those around him without repercussion in a way that Cordelia cannot. Those in his court and his family immediately perceive that Lear's expectations for his daughters and the way he is dividing their inheritance are unjust and unreasonable, but both Cordelia and Kent who try to speak rationally to him are banished from the kingdom, while Lear's word is still taken as law. We see almost immediately in this scene that certain individuals have the power to act against or change our expectations, while others experience more pressure to acquiesce. King Lear, because of both his social place as the monarch and his familial status as patriarch, is able to have his edicts be unquestioningly obeyed, even if they do not represent the most wise or most correct behavior.

When Cordelia steps outside Lear's expectations for her, she faces immediate repercussions. Conversely, while we are perturbed by Lear when he sends Cordelia away, we do not see Lear's decision as a very hazardous one to himself. Lear, as king, in a way represents both society and state and so does not at this point appear vulnerable to serious harm by either institution. Cordelia's willingness to speak up to her father seems far more perilous for both her personal safety and the preservation of her status. We understand the dynamic of the court to be such that Lear's opinion is more important than the standards of familial loyalty that should be present in his relationship with his daughter Cordelia.

A Helpless Wife: Desdemona in Othello

Desdemona and Othello are a demonstration of the failure of the Elizabethan institution of marriage to provide a safe, just, supportive environment for either husband or wife. In contrast to Cordelia, who is bold when her honesty is threatened by Lear's succession game, Desdemona in *Othello* provides for most of the play an example of the model wife. Desdemona defends Othello to the court in Venice in the opening scene of the play, when Brabantio accuses him of kidnapping and bewitching her:

That I love the Moor to live with him
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord. (I.iii.283-6)

Once in Cypress, Desdemona's interactions with Othello are in line with the aforementioned expectations for women in the Early Modern Era. She professes her love for him in public and in private, defers to his judgement ("Be as your fancies teach you./Whate'er you be, I am obedient" [III.iii.98-99]), and even though they are with the army and not at court, she does her best to take care of him in wifely ways throughout the first several acts:

DESDEMONA Why do you speak so faintly? Are you not well?
OTHELLO I have a pain upon my forehead, here.
DESDEMONA Faith, that's with watching. 'Twill away again.
Let me but bind it hard; within this hour
It will be well. (III.iii.25-29)

Desdemona, even when brushed aside by Othello and his men, shows herself to truly be the innocent and desirable young wife she was in Venice.

Nevertheless, even though Desdemona acts fairly and amiably towards Othello, Iago's machinations cause him to doubt her loyalty, since he cannot

know her thoughts absolutely: “O curse of marriage!/That we can call these delicate creatures ours/And not their appetites” (III.iii.265-67)! Within days of marrying her, Othello steps outside the bounds of what would be considered a good husband by striking her in act IV, scene 1 and calling her “Devil!” (IV.i.270) Wives were expected to be treated as a “yokefellow and companion,”⁴¹ but Othello does not once address the possibility of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness with her as an equal, instead ridiculing and deriding her in front of other officers and her cousin:

OTHELLO Ay, you did wish that I would make her turn.
Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on,
And turn again. And she can weep, sir, weep.
And she’s obedient, as you say, obedient.
Very obedient.—Proceed you in your tears. (IV.i.286-90)

Othello shows a total lack of consideration for Desdemona who, according to Elizabethan Christian values, should be treated with justice and mildness. Even the oppressive patriarchal society of Early Modern England did not endorse husbands to disregard or physically abuse their wives without cause.

Desdemona, a model wife and a symbol of purity, comes into conflict with Othello through no fault of her own, and her society affords her no way to defend herself. Ruth Vanita notes that in Cypress, her community would accept the fact that “disinherited by her father, she henceforth would be wholly at the disposal of Othello.”⁴² Desdemona may seem much more meek and passive than Cordelia, but Vanita finds that in “Desdemona’s extreme situation, cut off

⁴¹ J. Wing, *The Crown Conjugal or Spouse Royal* (London, 1620), 47-8.

⁴² Ruth Vanita, “*Proper*” Men and “*Fallen*” Women: *The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello* (Proquest: 1994), 345.

from her father and countrymen, a compulsion which renders her powerless, the myth of her passivity dies hard.”⁴³ Even though no character ever produces evidence for her guilt, *Othello’s* nature as a domestic tragedy means that her death is somehow constructed as both a tragedy and a form of justice.⁴⁴ With no sympathetic male relative on hand to take her part in defense of her honor, for Desdemona to try and defend herself alone to the male-dominated, military society would be pointless. Othello may be acting unhusbandly, but similar to Lear, his status as the husband and as a high-ranking official means that he will not be challenged by other members of society. “...The death blow is struck by one particular individual, but it is made possible by the collusion of a number of others.”⁴⁵ Desdemona’s lives does not allow her the luxury of defending her own life, because she is an unprivileged woman.

Societal Expectations for Women, And Who Can Overcome Them

In their relationships with their respective tragic heroes and the disordering of their family lives, Desdemona and Cordelia point out something interesting to us about our perception of societal expectation for individuals and the feminine ability or lack thereof to overcome it as a constriction of truth and justice. Every society provides its members with a set of expectations for behavior; however, the experiences of the heroines of *King Lear* and *Othello* direct attention to specifically constrictive expectations for women in a way that

⁴³ Ruth Vanita, “Proper” Men and “Fallen” Women: *The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello* (Proquest: 1994), 343.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 341.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 342.

seems particularly relevant to the feminine experience. Desdemona and Cordelia are each an example of a woman who, though she has valuable knowledge to share about her own innocence, is foiled by societal expectations of women and an inequality that disallows her to proclaim what she knows even to save her own life. This conflict between fulfilling societal expectations and stepping outside the bounds of perceived loyalty and right relationship is an experience potentially applicable to individuals in any society and in any time, but seems particularly descriptive of the female experience in Shakespeare's works and in society both then and today.

Metaphor: Expectations for the Feminine in Elizabethan Society

Eventually, Shakespeare uses *King Lear* to show that there exists a higher moral code than society's expectations which controls more of destiny than the state is able. Lear ultimately experiences tragic downfall because the expectations he establishes for the people around him using his power over society and state are not aligned with common code of decency reflected in research about Elizabethan familial loyalty and love. Shakespeare presents Cordelia's rebellion as right and good because it displays her standing up for both herself as an individual with beliefs and convictions and general standards of morality against a state that is corrupt, incorrect, and dangerous. Cordelia does her best to modify Lear's expectations for her by stepping outside her bounds, but she is defeated by pressure to comply with the standards arbitrarily established by a male monarch who has power over both the actions and expectations of the state and those around him.

Lear's and Othello's prerogative to act against societal bonds without risk of repercussion causes Cordelia's and Desdemona's apparent paralyzation by the constrictions of society to appear in stark relief to the male ease of maneuver. While women in Shakespeare's tragedies sometimes can willfully speak important truth to power, the fact remains that preexistent presumption of distrust causes society to require far more validation of them in order to be deemed credible. For example, Emilia, Desdemona's aide in *Othello*, eventually gets the chance to make public the fact that Desdemona has been unjustly murdered by her husband. At the point at which she finally speaks up and is taken seriously, what she has to share has already been almost proven by circumstance. We are persuaded to believe that fear of her husband, Iago, and social backlash has effected her silence until her story can be nearly absolutely proven. It seems that women in Shakespeare's tragedies are, strictly speaking, usually not forbidden from speaking truth to power, but because of society's expectation for them to remain silent, they have significantly larger and more frequent barriers of effectiveness to overcome. Lear and Othello, as high-ranking male tragic heroes, are able to make rash claims without the same tension with the social structure if they should be proven wrong. The reason each can feasibly speak up is that his status and power is almost certain to overcome society's expectations— it is more likely that society's expectations for him will change than that he will face any social adversity. Again, this happens far more frequently for male characters in Shakespeare's plays than female characters. However, this condition is not universal, and the conflict

between speaking up against society at personal risk would obviously also apply to any men in historical literature or today who feel trapped by constraining expectations that keep them from being heard clearly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Drama Applied: Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth I, and Womanhood Today

Beatrice, Juliet, Desdemona, and Cordelia show the nature of femininity, the complexity of female volition, and the conflict between expectation and truthful action in relationships and can therefore impact how audiences relate the plays to contemporary life and the experience of being members of a family and of a state. There is potential that the plays were intended to have an even greater effect on Shakespeare's own society and era. As English monarch at the time of Shakespeare's birth and early career, Elizabeth Tudor, or Queen Elizabeth I, and her situation as Queen of England in the sixteenth century would likely have had a lot to do with Shakespeare's and his audiences' view of filial piety, loyalty to family and state, and a woman's ability to speak up and effect change. It may be reasonable to examine not only the broad experience of women and families during the Elizabethan era, but in particular at the very people that Shakespeare's plays have the greatest interest in pleasing or memorializing.

Shakespeare as a Political Playwright

Shakespeare was a political playwright—almost all of his plays contain coded judgements and commentary on various political situations in England. His histories obviously trace the narrative of English kings and succession. Even though most other of his plays, and indeed his most celebrated, are set

otherwhere than England and do not seem to deal with contemporary politics directly, individual stances and public sentiments described in the plays set in Rome or Denmark still contain veiled critique of English circumstances and policy. Theory varies regarding the most useful way to read Shakespeare's plays as political commentary. Some choose to liken specific events in Roman plays to certain similar events in English history, such as the plebeians' clamor for grain at the beginning of *Coriolanus* being aligned with the Midlands Insurrection of 1607.⁴⁶ Others worry this will restrict Shakespeare's political theory to particular events in England's biographical history and limit its application to a specific moment in time, without allowing it the potential to comment on large-scale political movements and trends.

Regardless of the scale on which the bard intended future readers to interpret his theory and politics, parallels between the family unit and the state in Shakespeare's writings are too blatant to ignore. One way to read his political commentary, then, is to look at events in the history of England through the lens of the family dynamic as described in Shakespeare's tragedies such as *King Lear* and *Othello*, which feature high-ranking tragic heroes with power over both a nation and a family. Just as a father has responsibilities to protect, provide for, and nurture his nuclear family, a monarch is responsible for the defense and well-being of his country and subjects. The heroes in the tragedies *King Lear* and *Othello* are high-ranking males with duties to their citizens and countries, which already puts us in mind of the potential to liken their moves

⁴⁶ Paul Cantor, "Introduction: Shakespeare and Politics," *The Great Thinkers*, <https://thegreatthinkers.org/shakespeare-and-politics/introduction/>

and motives to those of an existent monarch. However, it is in their relationships with their families and, particularly, their females, that we really are made aware of what Shakespeare has to say about family, succession, and loyalty.

Queen Elizabeth as a Shakespearian Heroine

Both *Othello* and *King Lear* were written shortly after the death of Elizabeth I, the female monarch who reigned as “both queen and king”⁴⁷ over a comparatively loyal and supportive nation, considering the drama associated with her ascension to the throne upon the death of her half-sister Mary. Elizabeth I’s negative experiences throughout her reign— of being plotted against, repeatedly questioned as the legitimate heir, and continuously doubted as being fit to rule a nation (despite her consistent demonstrations of competence and success)— are of particular interest when contrasted with the relative lack of animosity experienced by her father, Henry VIII, who reigned amid complete familial turmoil, which had little effect on his reception by the nation of England.

As king and head of England, Henry VIII consistently failed to produce an heir as expected of him despite his six marriages, more than half of which he ended either by executing his wife or annulling the marital contract. His impetuosity with regards to his family unit and his personal desperation to have a male heir provoking the series of unfortunate marriages was the

⁴⁷ Carole Levin “Elizabeth as King and Queen,” in *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 21.

unquestionable original cause of the confusion and doubt that plagued Elizabeth throughout her reign as his eventual successor. To compare the two monarchs from a simply political standpoint, Henry's departure from the Catholic church and subsequent formation of the Church of England for the sole purpose of annulling his unsatisfying marriages began the conflict between Catholic and Protestant which would be the seminal source of unrest within England and between England and surrounding nations for multiple generations to come. As king, Henry departed from the Roman Catholic religion which had been the basis of English spirituality since the nation's incipience, thereby fracturing the foundation of the divine right of kings in England. He produced no male heir, but instead multiple female heirs who would contest English succession almost to the system's breaking point. He was volatile and rash, in every way failing to provide England with a unified front and positive role model and leader, and a consistently poor example of a dutiful king and father.

Elizabeth as a queen, by contrast, was intelligent, educated, and for the majority of her life, well-spoken and frank. She nurtured relationships with surrounding nations and was not preoccupied with the idea of her succession. She and her secret service foiled multiple attempts on her life throughout the course of her reign. She was a moderate and positive ruler; literature and art flourished under her leadership, as did her military and domestic efforts. For the majority of her reign, she was an effective and capable leader, thus proving wrong the critics who considered her unfit to rule for the sole reason of her sex.

Elizabeth I overturned society's presupposition of women's weakness and emotionality, ruling as both king and queen in the Elizabethan understanding of each term.⁴⁸

Essentially, both Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth I acted distinctly in opposition to the English society's traditionally held expectations for its monarch. Both starkly violate their prescribed familial and stately roles— Henry most significantly by violating the sanctity of the church, and Elizabeth by possessing the temerity to rule a nation as a woman. Truly, Henry's violations of societal expectation should be considered to have far more dire consequences than Elizabeth's, whose chief trespass, it seems, was to be both female and the leader of a nation. All other complaints against her— chiefly that she was unfit to rule and that she did not marry and secure alliances for England⁴⁹— stem from this first perceived offense. Elizabeth as queen and king achieved positive progress for England. By ruling moderately and using her "powerful and subtle rhetoric,"⁵⁰ she secured the loyalty of the vast majority of her subjects. She prevented widespread uprising and tumult over the conflict between the Catholic and Protestant churches. The Spanish Armada was defeated under her rule, which, if not as militarily significant as it is often opined to be, nonetheless represented a huge upsurge in English national identity and pride. However, regardless of her success in the masculine sphere of national leadership, her

⁴⁷ Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 140.

identity as a natural woman confirmed that she would always be treated with suspicion. “[Elizabeth’s] people might regard her body politic as both pure and virginal, and the incarnation of the sacred principle of male monarchy, but the rumors and seditious words to carefully gathered suggest a perception of her body natural as potentially corrupt in a manifestly female way.”⁵¹ Elizabeth’s rule, and not Henry VIII’s, is recorded in history as plagued by questions about legitimacy and threats against her life, even though it would have been in her subjects’ best interest to have such a moderate and popular monarch as head of the nation.

Shakespeare, Elizabeth, and Women Today

We know that Shakespeare was aware of English politics and often saw fit to publish his own appraisal of them through his plays. Elizabeth I in particular was one of Shakespeare’s patrons and referenced in multiple of his scripts, so it is certain that he was acquainted with various aspects of her incumbency as English monarch. The parallels between Elizabeth’s experience, ruling a nation that seemed to be prejudiced against her for her sex, and the lives and deaths of Shakespeare’s tragic heroines are numerous and, I posit, significant. The opposition and questioning she faced during her rule mirror nearly perfectly the questions of legitimacy and truthfulness that aggravate Desdemona and Cordelia and prevent them from speaking against societal expectation even to save their own lives. By contrast, Henry VIII’s ability to rule

⁵¹ Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 147.

with little concern despite his frequent willful trespasses against the trust of and responsibility for his subjects is reflected in Lear's and Othello's power to act against expectation without repercussion due to the power and status that comes to them as high-ranking, male Shakespearean tragic heroes.

Shakespeare's penchant for political commentary, as well as his genius in the use of language and character to convey timeless themes, make the comparison between Elizabeth and some of his tragic women likely. Had Elizabeth's biography been part of a Shakespearean tragedy, she would surely have experienced the same shameful discredit and death as the tragic women Shakespeare crafts. His tragic heroines are presented to us not only as dramatic constructs, intended to characterize their tragic heroes while remaining in the shadows, but as women of will and influence, constrained by society to the point of death, and reflecting truth about the human and the feminine relating a facet of life that still resonates with women today and forges a timeless and fascinating connection with Queen Elizabeth herself.

Shakespeare's twenty-first century audiences stand four centuries removed from Queen Elizabeth and the questions and opinions her reign fomented. Elizabeth can, both in her time and now, be seen to have the aura of a dramatic and literary construct— her identity as a female monarch, beloved for her rulership but derided for her womanhood, converted her, even in her own time, into a kind of symbol of both England's progressivism and its misogyny. As a figure of history, in our contemporary view she takes on the impact of one of Shakespeare's heroines: her actions and opinions are at once predefined by

history and completely open to interpretation and even performance. She represents a society from which the world has moved on, yet reflects elements of humanity and feminism that are still relevant and dynamic to twenty-first century sensibilities. Despite the intervening 400 years of time between Shakespeare's era and now, it seems the desperate need for fair treatment is agreed upon by all members of the fairer sex.

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