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Susan Jane Primmer

Female Power in Shakespeare's Plays

This thesis examines the existence and extent of female power in a range of Shakespeare's plays, discussing the meaning of 'female' and of 'power'. The author argues that the representation of female characters both endorses and challenges the construction of gender. Gender is defined within the thesis as the sexed-stereotyping of certain ways of speaking, thinking and behaving which are thought appropriate to the male or female sex. This creates the world of femininity and masculinity. The author argues that these are false concepts which the plays variously uphold or deny. This argument is explored within four specific areas: language, action, dress and sexuality. Where the plays show that the elision of female and feminine is false, the author argues that they demonstrate that power could exist unaffected by gendered ideals. The author also demonstrates that there are points where the plays themselves elide these two concepts, and thus do not transcend the circumstances and period of their own creation. The author concludes that, throughout the plays, contradictory versions of the female gender are simultaneously constructed. She argues that male characters are also subject to the construction of gender. Although this construction has a more negative effect for women than men, it can mean that men are victims too. The thesis demonstrates that the potency of power is affected by the gender of its possessor and that gender is a false, culturally-created construct. Seeing this observation not only as part of feminist Shakespearean criticism but also as relevant to the lives of real men and women, the author finally argues that understanding how misogyny works in literature, which is one aim of this thesis, is essential to changing why it works in life.

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**Female Power in Shakespeare's Plays**

**1 Volume**

**Susan Jane Primmer**

**Master of Letters**

**University of Durham**

**School of English Studies**

**September 1993**



**30 JUN 1994**

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## Citations & Abbreviations

Citations of and quotations from Shakespeare's plays are all as in Stanley Wells, and Gary Taylor (eds.), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, Compact Edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988.

The titles and abbreviated titles used of works by Shakespeare are as follows:

<i>All's Well</i>	<i>All's Well that Ends Well</i>
<i>A &amp; C</i>	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>
<i>AYLI</i>	<i>As You Like It</i>
<i>Corio</i>	<i>Coriolanus</i>
<i>1 Henry VI</i>	<i>Henry VI Part 1</i>
<i>2 Henry VI</i>	<i>Henry VI Part 2</i>
<i>3 Henry VI</i>	<i>Henry VI Part 3</i>
<i>Measure</i>	<i>Measure for Measure</i>
<i>Merchant</i>	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
<i>Much Ado</i>	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>
<i>Lear</i>	<i>King Lear</i>
<i>Oth</i>	<i>Othello</i>
<i>R III</i>	<i>Richard III</i>
<i>R &amp; J</i>	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
<i>Taming</i>	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>
<i>Tempest</i>	<i>The Tempest</i>
<i>TA</i>	<i>Titus Andronicus</i>
<i>T &amp; C</i>	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>
<i>TN</i>	<i>Twelfth Night</i>
<i>Wint</i>	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>

## Preface

When I say I am a feminist literary critic, what do I mean? I call myself a feminist because I believe that for centuries women have been treated and perceived as men's inferiors and because I wish this to change. This desire is both selfish and altruistic. As a woman living at this particular time I am subject to many influences outside my direct control which are specifically related to my sex. They affect the way I live and behave, what I look like and even what I eat, in a way that would not be true, or would be different, were I a man. My individuality is constrained by social and cultural reactions to my sex - and I object. I also wish to be part of the process that changes this for others. I believe that women are neither better nor worse human beings than men, no more in tune with nature or their bodies, no gentler, no more violent, neither more nor less intelligent. Where such differences are apparent, I argue that they are the product of cultural and social conditioning. I see the divisions of feminine and masculine as spurious complications of human relationships. I call the effects of such conditioning 'gender'.

For me as for many others, a feminist approach to literary criticism stems from a personal philosophy which attaches great importance to literature. The ideological and cultural force of its distilled perception of life is enormous. Literature has access to the imagination, the ground on which ideas of change should be sown. Feminist literary criticism creates new interpretations of works which have centre-stage in our culture. It also brings to our attention previously obscured authors and new writers. Feminist literary critics have a vital part to play in changing how and what we think about real women through a greater understanding of women in literature.

This does not mean that I see Shakespeare's plays and criticism of them as reflections of real sixteenth or twentieth century women. These are plays, not



historical data. It is the plays' exploration of the bases and consequences of specific actions and attitudes which is significant. The plays do not necessarily transcend the expectations of gender and the philosophical horizons of Shakespeare's age. This should not surprise us, since we still live with misogynies that were hackneyed in his day. What we can hope for in looking at these plays and the role of the female characters within them is a detailed working-out of the bases, consequences and possible subversion of, patriarchal misogyny.

I have chosen to write about Shakespeare because of his worldwide significance. People who have never studied Shakespeare know his name, lines from his plays, the names of some of his characters. He is part of the Canon; he is taught as part of the Core Curriculum. His plays still have much to say to us, specifically about the workings of patriarchy and misogyny in his day, and in our own. In undertaking this study as a feminist, I have also tried to understand the point of view from which I read as a white, Western, twenty-seven year old professional woman with a degree of educational and economic privilege. I have attempted to be aware of critical opinions I have which may be an imposition on, rather than an exposition of, a text.

The combination of feminism and literary criticism is exciting not only as a critical practice but also as a social force. Criticism offers feminism the challenge of new directions as well as vice-versa. Feminist criticism today appears preoccupied with present problems. I hope that soon our most pressing problem will be deciding how to reshape feminist ideas when there are ever fewer battles to be fought. This is far off, but not inconceivable. As critics and as members of society I believe we should anticipate progress and explore possible reactions to it. Shakespeare 'the man' is dead. But by examining the significance of his female characters to his contemporaries and to ourselves, we can open-up new avenues of approach to relationships between women, men and our cultural heritage. This can be our contribution to progress.



The preparation of this thesis would not have been possible without the help of the staff of Cambridge University Library, Michael Saunders (who produced the typescript), Tom Pyke (who spent many hours checking references and proof-reading), and my supervisor David Fuller, for whose sustained support and encouragement I am particularly grateful.

## Introduction

My title of *Female Power in Shakespeare's Plays* presupposes that it is possible for power to be female and that such power is different from male power. It may seem strange in a feminist discussion to suggest that power can be divided along the lines of biological sex. While I argue that such divisions are false, I also argue that they are perceived to be true, both within the cultural contexts of the plays, and outside the plays, in real life. By showing how and when such false assumptions about the nature of female and male are constructed within the plays, I intend to indicate that they are equally false in our own lives. I shall examine whether female power exists; what it is; and what its existence, or non-existence and its nature prove.

It is my contention that female power does exist in these plays, both as power wielded by women and as the power of simply being a woman. The scope of this field is wide, and I have therefore concentrated on four specific areas: language, dress, action and sexuality. In each I argue that the amount of power which female characters may wield may be quite different from what is expected. Shakespearean heroines are often thought robust cross-dressers, witty speakers and supremely sensuous. While I have not intended to deny any of these abilities, I have sought to demonstrate how they are qualified by the cultural expectations and constructions of behaviour which is acceptable for female and also for male characters. The context of the play worlds is vital in this. While there is a complex background of deliberate and insidiously incidental misogyny throughout all genres, there is also a weight of positive moral good which is attributed to the female. I shall argue that even this positive moral weight, because a cultural construction, is a qualified attribution of power. I also argue that feminist critics need to beware of a desire to find evidence of female power, *before* it is clearly visible.

In 'The Power of Language' I examine female speech and male lies, the manipulation of meaning, truth-telling, prophecy, misogynistic myth and metaphor. Noting the frequent dismissal of the importance of the boy-player in female roles, I address issues of transvestism, cross-dressing and dress as the determinant of gender in my chapter on 'Power Dressing'. In 'The Power of Action' I aim to clarify the power of female characters who choose to fight in war and politics, or assert themselves in love. Finally, in my discussion of 'The Power of Sexuality & Desire', I explore the cultural construction of female sexuality, in which frequently, but not exclusively, to be female is to be desirable but to be possessed is to be devalued.

There has been much feminist criticism already written on the gender divide in Shakespeare. Feminists have largely agreed that female power exists particularly in Shakespeare's comedies: that the power of gender is affected by genre. Thus female power diminishes in correlation with the size of the female role. I suggest that the matter is more complex. Concurring with Foucault's ideas of power as a free-floating radical rather than a constant attribute in the hands of particular individuals or groups (although not with his ideas of power as an effect, rather than a cause, of gendered behaviour),<sup>1</sup> I discuss groups of female characters who appear to have power, discuss where it comes from, whether and why they have it, what they do with it and what the significance of these factors is for any investigation of gender politics in Shakespeare - and Shakespearean feminist criticism.

For the sake of brevity, and because I believe it informative about feminist literary criticism, as well as about the plays, I have concentrated upon two periods of reception: that contemporary with the plays and our own. To avoid confusion I have used 'contemporary' only to denote the sixteenth century. When discussing

<sup>1</sup>. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972 - 1977*, trans. Colin Gordon (et al); Colin Gordon (ed.), Pantheon, New York, 1980, p. 98; and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Vintage, New York, 1980, pp. 91 - 3.

the characters or indeed the actors I have used the following terminology: 'sex' to indicate biological sex, male or female, and 'gender' to indicate the social and cultural expectations which are overlaid onto these sexes to create the world of femininity and masculinity, the sexed-stereotyping of certain ways of thinking or manners of behaviour. It is notable that critics themselves elide concepts of female and femininity, male and masculinity. This is further complicated by the fact that 'female' is frequently used to mean 'women's' and 'male' to mean 'men's'. To illuminate these differences and distinguish between these divisions, I have used 'women' and 'men', and 'feminine' and 'masculine', as often as possible and appropriate. This reflects my belief that whether or not the plays or characters realise it, what they are suggesting is 'female' or 'male' *nature* is in face 'feminine' or 'masculine' *gender*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Throughout many centuries and most cultures, humankind has divided access to privilege, power and language unequally on the grounds of biological sex. Men have, largely, acquired the major share. Dominating the action of the world, they have also dominated culture, spirituality and religion. There was no single moment at which women decided that this must change. However that is what happened. Particularly over the last century, feminism has set out to expose and eliminate systems of subjugation: to redress the balance.

Until the mid to late 1980s, feminist criticism tended to focus largely on female characters and women writers, analysing patriarchal influences in and on a text, whose significance has remained dormant either for a deliberate and specific end (the continued suppression of the female voice) or because of a kind of unconscious, communal and cultural ignorance (which has the same effect). Over the last few years, this concentration on the female has begun to change. By 1989, Lisa Jardine noted that her former "tide of personal irritation at the

apparent inability of [feminist] critics to break with the conventions of orthodox Shakespeare criticism, except in their single-minded preoccupation with the female characters in the plays, and their hostility to the chauvinistic attitudes the plays incorporate"<sup>2</sup> had become "entirely inadequate as a verdict".<sup>3</sup> In particular, a great deal of feminist work has now been done on the wider historical context of feminist issues within Shakespeare's plays.

Tackling problems which are not only textual but also concerned with the particular context of the actual creative act, whether writing or reading, feminist criticism has a great deal to offer the wider field of literary criticism. Specifically within the range of Shakespearean criticism, the study of these influences upon the author-reader-text relationship encourages challenging new interpretations of these most discussed texts. Practising feminist literary critics are creating a rich diversity of opinion and approaches to literature, its relationship to history and to economic, social, and above all gender politics.

Consciousness of underlying patriarchal attitudes and expectations in works of literature is of extreme importance in feminist criticism. This means more than 'reading between the lines', although feminist literary criticism has an acknowledged debt to New Criticism and to close textual analysis. In common with Marxist literary criticism, feminist literary criticism has realised the need to bring into the reader's foreground the economic, cultural and political context of creation and reception. By doing this, feminist literary critics have initiated new approaches to the examination of female characters and women writers, as well as to a range of historical, cultural, social and political factors influencing authors, readers and audiences. Such emphasis on the context of production and reception is particularly relevant when the texts in question are plays: already one step

2. Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1983, p. 1.

3. Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, second edn., Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1989, p. vii.

removed from a definitive version, like music they exist both in individual performances and also as written texts, each subject to different cultural and political forces at every moment of production.

Some feminist critics, notably Juliet Dusinberre, claim Shakespeare as a proto-feminist, and see the age within which he wrote these plays as one of new liberties for women.<sup>4</sup> This is much to the annoyance of critics like Linda Bamber, who is "in reaction against a tendency for feminist critics to interpret Shakespeare as if his work directly supports and develops feminist ideas."<sup>5</sup> Others interpret his characters as a reinforcement of tradition. Some feminists argue that Shakespeare applies universal theories of gender differently in different genres and sub-genres. The most common thesis has been that the distinct groups of comedies, romance or problem plays, and tragedies constitute different studies of the importance of gender, and that female parts and power are supreme in the first, equal in the second, and subordinate to the male in the third. Surprisingly, perhaps, feminists have not tried to dislodge Shakespeare from his central place in the canon of Western literature. Most have treated his plays with considerable respect.

Feminist critics divide between those who argue for remaining within the mainstream of society, and those who argue for a separate history, society and even language - some of the more extreme positions among gynocriticism and French linguistics. Except in moments of extreme irritation with current issues, I class myself in the first group. We must change the way things are from within. In doing this, I hope that we constantly discover new sources for productions, discussion and interpretation, imaginative expansion and rethinking. While I do not wish to see feminist criticism become bogged down in the revisionist

4. Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Macmillan, London, 1975, p. 1 & passim.

5. Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1982, p. 1.

imperative, seeking only to redress old grievances or challenge former misogynistic misinterpretations, there is nevertheless a need to re-evaluate much former critical thought and practice. I should be saddened, as well as surprised, if women's studies and feminist criticism became redundant. I do not believe in the Utopia of gender irrelevance: it would be a mistake to forge a new myth to replace the old.

## Feminist Criticism: Critical Paths

The following outlines are a simplified version of the most important branches of feminist criticism. The task of summary is made more difficult by the inter-relationship of the theories, and the fact that geographical boundaries commonly used to differentiate between French and Anglo-American theorists are misleading: there are similarities between, and differences within, all these positions. I have cause to thank all of them for their guidance and insight, as I have indicated within each section.

Some feminist critics are worried by the lack of a central feminist creed. This, they feel, makes it all the easier to divide us and ignore our work, or to relegate us to the margins of literary study. Either we should decide that any creed would be a relic from outdated modes of study, or we should agree to construct one. I disagree with both arguments. With its adherents' deep personal and political commitment, feminist literary criticism becomes apparent through many individual positions. The importance of such individual commitment, coupled with the freedom to break from established trains of thought, is the common goal: in our heteroglossia lies our strength.

As Gary Taylor points out in his impressive study, *Reinventing Shakespeare*, women "had read Shakespeare from the beginning".<sup>1</sup> They have done much more since. As audience, readers, actresses and critics (although clearly not all feminists), women have been intimately connected with the cultural survival of Shakespeare. While it risks the charge of both sexism and selectivity, I have compiled a brief resumé of women's connections with Shakespeare as a background against which to think of twentieth century Shakespearean feminist criticism.

1. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*, Vintage, London, 1991, p. 91.



Shakespeare wrote the majority of his plays during the reign of one of the world's most notable female monarchs: Elizabeth I. Some of his plays may even have benefited from her direct intervention. Few today give credence to the idea that the sovereign was Shakespeare, but S. H. Burton recounts the rumours that she had a hand in the renaming of Sir John Oldcastle as Falstaff, and in the speedy composition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.<sup>2</sup> Among Shakespeare's first readers and critics were such women as the Duchess of Marlborough and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, wrote one of the earliest critical essays on Shakespeare. In 1660 the first English actresses, Mrs Hughes and Mrs Rutter, appeared in Sir Thomas Killigrew's production of *Othello* at Drury Lane<sup>3</sup> where, a century later, three actresses, Kitty Clive, Hanna Pritchard and Susanna Cibber were vital in the success of Garrick's management and thus of Shakespeare's continuing cultural dominance.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1730s a female Shakespeare supporters' group, The Shakespeare Ladies Club, encouraged revivals and new productions of the plays. Female critics grew in number: Charlotte Lennox's *Shakespeare Illustrated* (in three volumes, 1753 - 54) and Elizabeth Montagu's *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* (1769) were widely read and frequently republished in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In 1775 Elizabeth Griffith published *The Morality of Shakespeare's Drama* while Henrietta Maria Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare* (1807) and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespear* (1807) were highly edited versions suitable for young readers, although not acknowledged as the productions of female authors for many years.<sup>5</sup> Similarly circumspect nineteenth century school editions were mostly written by women, among them Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (in three volumes, 1850 - 51) which, like

2. S. H. Burton, *Shakespeare's Life and Stage*, Chambers, Edinburgh, 1989, pp. 7 & 103 - 105.

3. Judith Cook, *At the Sign of the Swan: An Introduction to Shakespeare's Contemporaries*, Harrap, London, 1986, p. 192.

4. Taylor, op. cit., pp. 116 - 19.

5. Taylor, *ibid.*, p. 206.

Helena Faucit's *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* (1885) and Anna Jameson's turn of the century *Shakespeare's Heroines* (1897), describes what Shakespeare's girls and ladies did when they weren't being fictional.

Thus with a passing glance at the interesting fact that in 1838 the fool in *King Lear* was played by a woman, while in 1899 Sarah Bernhardt played Hamlet, and a fleeting reference to the important Shakespearean scholarship of such women as Muriel St Clare Byrne, Una Ellis Fermor, Muriel (MC) Bradbrook, and Caroline Spurgeon, first general editor of the new Arden series in the late 1940s, we arrive, at last, at Virginia Woolf.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Anglo-American Feminisms

Everything did not begin, therefore, in 1970 with Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. Writing partly in response to Elaine Showalter's attack on Woolf in her derivatively-named *A Literature of Their Own* (1978), Toril Moi's important study *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) provides an impassioned rallying cry in defence of Woolf, "the progressive, feminist writer of genius she undoubtedly was."<sup>6</sup> Woolf's ideas are still pertinent today and have informed several lines of thought in this thesis. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), essays on the importance of economic independence to prospective female authors, are among the most widely-discussed of early feminist texts, while her study of androgyny and gender-swapping, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), has recently been adapted as a film. Although I have discussed concepts of androgyny in relation to transvestism in 'Power Dressing' and assertiveness in 'The Power of Action', in both cases I have found it more a dangerous elision of

6. Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Methuen, London, 1985, p. 18.

gender than a useful definition of a third sex. More useful has been Woolf's understanding that while female characters of wit and power shine in Shakespeare, sixteenth century women were little more than the property of their husbands. This disjunction between literary role-models and real life shows that art does *not* reflect life, and that a society may simultaneously hold contradictory views of the powers of women.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir's dictum has been a point of departure and also of return throughout this thesis. *The Second Sex* (1953) covered a huge field: psychoanalysis, historical materialism, myth, and the inevitable construction of the Other by any culture which endorses the idea of Self. Its sheer scale and range, encompassing much philosophical and psychoanalytical thought, prefigures the work of later French feminists such as Hélène Cixous. As the 'women's movement' gathered pace throughout the 1960s, so more feminist perspectives were to be found in print, seizing on the *zeitgeist* of change. Many argued that women had stayed silent too long; they should now play an active and vocal part in political and social change. Amongst the most influential of these were Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968) and Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1972).

First published in America in 1970, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* remains one of the most provocatively significant feminist texts, for its ground-breaking work on the patriarchal domination of literary convention, the need to subvert ideology's attempt to control 'point of view', and the argument that literary misogyny is a cause of actual female oppression. This has helped form my own understanding of the connections between the construction of gender in literature and life. Works that followed placed a similar emphasis on the real-world

7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, London, 1953, p. 273 (Book II).

significance of literary politics, including Patricia Meyer Spack's *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing* (1975).

A number of separatist collections were also published in this decade, in particular Showalter's discussion of the 'literary subculture' of nineteenth century female British authors, *A Literature of Their Own: from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (1978), one of the first feminist analyses to concentrate exclusively on work by female authors, and Gilbert and Gubar's impressive *The Madwoman in The Attic: the Woman Writer* (1979), which aimed to identify a distinctively literary tradition linking well-established writers: Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Emily Dickinson. Both books were attacked by other feminists, notably in Alice Jardine's *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985) and Mary Jacobus' *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (1986). They were charged with capitulation to the predominantly male-constructed canon by privileging the work of already acknowledged female authors, and with ignoring the growing importance of French literary theories, as well as lacking theoretical direction.

The same decade also saw the publication of some of the most significant works for Shakespearean feminist literary criticism, amongst which I have found particularly helpful Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975), Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely's *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (1980), Coppélia Kahn's *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (1981), Marilyn French's *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* (1982) and Lisa Jardine's *Still Harping on Daughters* (1983; second edition 1989). Recent years have produced equally thought-provoking comment, and in particular I am indebted to Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985), Kathleen McKluskie's *Renaissance Dramatists* (1989), Valerie Traub's

*Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (1992) and Elizabeth D. Harvey's *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (1992).

While Anglo-American feminist critics have a tradition of challenging the validity of the canon of great writers, they do not often question the very idea of such a group. For them, the examination of social and cultural contexts of literary production and consumption are primary. The critical practice of 'reading against the grain' is valuable for throwing into relief potential sources of conflict in the author-text-reader relationship, with the effect of exposing the hidden purposes and ideologies of all three. The reader or critic is seen as taking an active part in constructing, not simply construing meaning. The reader or critic's specific role is to practice confrontational reading and interpretation, challenging every given and questioning the author's assumptions at every point. Clearly a didactic form of literary theory, this type of criticism in its early stages, including Millett, insisted on too literal a reflection of reality through literature, and a misguided demand for positive female role models for their own sake, to both of which dangers Shakespearean feminist theory has to some extent succumbed.

\* \* \* \* \*

### French Feminisms

The late 1970s was a period of tremendous interest in a powerful, and often obscure, mixture of psychoanalysis, deconstruction and linguistics: French literary theory. French feminist critics, notably Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva (who is in fact Bulgarian), have drawn largely on the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida and revisionary Freudianism of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's psychoanalytic explanations of the development of children and their assumption of their place in the world is described as the

transition from the Imaginary (harmony with the mother; a sense of integrity and of being at one with the world) to the Symbolic Order (a fracturing of the relationship with the mother, imposed by the father [or Law of the Father]). This rite of passage entails a permanent sense of loss. Selfhood, particularly for the female, is seen as a sense of loss: the self is absence. Cixous and Irigaray expound theories of a disruptive, politically anarchic, female voice and language, *écriture féminine*. Their focus on women's sexuality and bodies as the primal *locus* of creation surprisingly links them to stereotypical images of motherhood and nurture. Their position is analogous to a permanent opposition to a male government, which forever places woman in the role of the other at the same time that it attempts to avoid attempts at fixed definition. This inversion of misogynistic assumptions into positive strengths, and the problems it raises for feminist criticism has been particularly relevant in my discussions of idealised portrayals of women and female sexuality and the internalisation of patriarchal attitudes by female characters.

Cixous' theory of an *écriture féminine* sees creation (which here encompasses both reading and writing) as a sexual as well as a literary act, a point at which words and their meaning fracture in orgasmic liberation. Unfortunately, this implies that women are defined by a particularly narrow understanding of their physical nature, as sensuous, fluid beings. It confirms their exclusion from (male) normality, without examining or challenging such definitions. It is a theory which accepts, even justifies, women's relegation to the margins of experience and power. As emotional outpouring, Cixous' work is impressive (and inconsistent), but also unlikely to be read by the 'typical' woman whom she apparently wishes to address, and whose existence she alternately asserts then denies.<sup>8</sup> Cixous' approach exults in the marginalised status which the prevailing

8. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, in Elaine Marks, & Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1981, pp. 245 - 64, pp. 245 - 8.

patriarchy has imposed on women and their writing. Her suggestion that works written by men and women are complementary polarities, and that the author's sex (if she is a woman, her body) writes the text, substitutes one set of sexist stereotypes for another.

By contrast, Julia Kristeva asserts that 'woman' is a social construct rather than a biological sex. This is much closer to my own understanding of the workings of gender in Shakespeare. For Kristeva, women do not have an exclusive right to this subversive language, simply a stronger claim in that they have realised the possibility of its existence and purpose ahead of men. Rejecting a male-female dichotomy (which Cixous denies and then reconstructs), Kristeva sees the danger "of creating within feminism an enclosed ideology parallel to the ideology of the dominant class." She focuses on the deconstruction of gender, while advocating its usefulness as "an advertisement slogan for our demands." Her stance is overtly political and joined with other power struggles: she urges feminists to "get out a bit from 'among women', from among ourselves."<sup>9</sup> Kristeva's status as a feminist has been called into question by others who take exception to these attitudes.

I take issue with French feminists' overwhelming concern with psychoanalysis, parent-child relationships, fixations, *differance* and otherness. I am also wary of the weight given to authorial intention prevalent within psychoanalytic interpretations of Shakespeare 'the man' rather than of his plays which is particularly intrusive through discussions of Shakespeare's personal attitude towards female sexuality. Several feminist literary critics have developed Cixous' suggestion of complementary sexual polarities in relation to Shakespearean criticism, including Linda Bamber, Marilyn French, and Coppélia Kahn (see bibliography for full details). Their work on the correlation of gender

<sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Woman Can Never be Defined', trans. Marilyn A. August, in Marks, & de Courtivron (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 137 - 41, p. 141.

and genre in Shakespeare's plays, in particular Bamber's assertion that "whatever matters most in tragedy, comedy and romance - Shakespeare associates with the feminine" has been valuable throughout the preparation of this thesis.<sup>10</sup>

### Marxism & Feminism

While eschewing a formal union, feminism and Marxism have a fruitful and continuing dialogue. Both are concerned with social change, not simply literary theory; both have an explicit commitment to play a role in that transformation: both are political. They agree that history is not fixed, nor is our relationship with it; author, text, reader/audience, history, ideology and the versions of reality which each presents to the other are highly mediated, engaged in an ever-fluid dialectic. The leading Marxist literary critics have tended to be men and most have remained cautious about fully embracing feminism. British critics such as Cora Kaplan, studying the links between ideology and psychoanalysis,<sup>11</sup> and Michèle Barrett, working on ideology as the site of gender construction,<sup>12</sup> have been amongst the most important Marxist-feminist critics. Feminists have gained much from Marxist attention to the access to the means of literary production. It could be argued that Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One's Own* are Marxist feminist works, because of their realisation that the ability to become an author is governed primarily by economic independence, a state to which 'Judith' Shakespeare could never aspire.

Marxists and feminists share a perception of culture, and literature, as means through which people experience their societies and their times. The

10. Bamber, op. cit., pp. 5 - 6.

11. Cora Kaplan, 'Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism', in Gayle Greene, & Coppélia Kahn (eds.), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, Methuen, London, 1985, pp. 146 - 76.

12. Michèle Barrett, 'Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender', in Judith Newton, & Deborah Rosenfelt (eds.), *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, Methuen, New York, 1985, pp. 65 - 85.



works which they analyse, and their reasons for analysing them, are seen as being directly connected to the way life is lived - and how it might be lived differently. Women are subject not only to the usual ideological oppression of capitalist society, but also to sexual politics (or in Marxist terms a *gender superstructure*). This superstructure attempts to prevent women from earning money and insists on devaluing female experience in contrast to male: a further layer of ideology which constructs particular expectations of gender and then uses these expectations as weapons of increased economic and political oppression. I shall argue that the construction and manipulation of gender in Shakespeare is inconsistent and often unconsciously directed towards a political end, the suppression of female power, and in analysing this, feminist-Marxism has proved particularly thought-provoking.

Feminist Marxist criticism concentrates on language as a tool that comes to the author saturated with ideological, male-dominated significance; hence the concentration of feminist linguistics on phallogocentrism which I have discussed throughout 'The Power of Language.' Marxist criticism, like much feminist criticism, privileges the place of authors in their own work. Even if authors are unknown, their sociological and ideological position is indicated in the text. Just as politically progressive authors are favoured by Marxist critics, so are female authors by gynocritics. Unfortunately this verges on seeing literature as a vehicle in which the 'correct' gender or ideology may express itself, tempting critics to reward authors on the basis of their political correctness. The establishment of stronger ties between Marxism and feminism has been hampered by the fact that literature is seen by both as a product of a certain set of sociological and economic forces which have affected different sexes differently - in effect by a Shakespeare's sister syndrome which has left gaps not just in the literary canon, but also in the fabric of our historical perceptions. Often there are silences instead of recorded voices: both Marxism and feminism concur on the need to re-evaluate history itself as the record of a diverse set of social and gender groups.

Feminist-Marxists acknowledge that sex can be a significant determinant of ideology, which in turn constructs gender. Women who are part of a socio-economically dominant class, and whose interests are therefore supposedly represented in and by orthodox ideology and established culture, are in fact in a very different position from their male peers. For example, in the prevailing paternalistic ideology of this country at this time, a wealthy man and his male employee may find pornography reaffirms both their world views. Hence Shakespeare's bawdy and the misogynistic myth and metaphor evident throughout his plays assert the dominance of a patriarchal culture and provide the context within which female characters exist. This simultaneously constructs contradictory ideas of the validity of female power. Female characters are shown to be effective and assertive even as the context within which they operate is shown to be fundamentally misogynistic. This is a point which I have discussed with particular reference to 'The Power of Action' and in 'The Power of Language.' Some feminist critics, including Kathleen McKluskie, argue that such misogyny plays an important role in the plays' construction of their own specifically male audience.<sup>13</sup>

The relationship between literature and ideology is not one of simple reflection. There are a great many factors mediating characters' holding-up of any mirror to nature. This is particularly important to feminists who are seeking to relate these plays to actual life either in the sixteenth century or today. The fusion of Marxist and feminist criticism is particularly useful because of their shared political roots and belief that by raising awareness of oppression of all kinds in and through literature and criticism, they may play a part in its end.

Psychoanalysis, while a significant mainstay of many branches of feminist criticism, has been brought into perhaps its most fruitful dialogue with Marxist

13. Kathleen McKluskie, 'The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*', in Jonathan Dollimore, & Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985, pp. 88 - 108, p. 96.

politics and feminism in Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), which includes a thought-provoking re-evaluation of Kate Millett. Particularly important for raising consciousness of the political significance of Shakespeare's plays in recent times has been Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's *Political Shakespeare, New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985). This collection of essays incorporates material from several critical perspectives, including Marxism and feminism, and presents a fruitful dialogue between critics concerned primarily with "historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis".<sup>14</sup>

### Gynocriticism

Gynocritics are embarked upon a re-examination of the Canon of Western literature. They argue that men's greater access to education and to the production and consumption of literature has meant that Western literature has been dominated by patriarchal texts and interpretations which have had a vested interest in perpetuating established misogynies. As the name suggests, this group of critics concentrates on the works of women authors, and to an extent argues the case for the superiority of the female experience of life. They incorporate dimensions of most of the ideas outlined in this section. This thesis is not concerned with the works of a female author, but where I discuss the works of female feminist critics I may be seen to belong to this group, although I have also found the work of male feminist critics, and both male and female critics who are not feminists, invaluable.

Works such as Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy's *The Feminist Companion to Literature in England: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1990), challenge and extend the existing canon of female authors. Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1972) concentrates on the problems of writing as

<sup>14</sup>. Dollimore & Sinfield, op. cit., p. vii.

a young mother while Michelene Wandor's *On Gender and Writing* (1983) suggests that child-rearing provides the inspiration to write. Gynocriticism is extremely valuable for its work in challenging the established range of literature and examining the criteria employed in deciding who is a great writer. The assumptions uncovered have implications not only for literary criticism, but also for the teaching and study of history, since any study of a female literary tradition is often a study of what has *not* been recorded. Gynocriticism therefore has links with sociological and historical research on hitherto under-represented groups excluded from the mainstream of history as well as literature because of their class or race, or other factors as well as sex.

Gynocriticism highlights the important point that works by women are not automatically free of male dominance, for example in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) or Catherine R. Stimpson's discussion of the genre of the lesbian novel.<sup>15</sup> Gynocriticism argues that a female writer can be thoroughly imbued with 'male' or traditional views, in particular about women, and can thus 'write like a man'. Similarly, women readers can be encouraged to 'read as a man'. Elizabeth D. Harvey's *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (1992) questions whether the creations of male authors, which at some level the reader assumes to 'be' female, can in any sense be considered such, since they are the product not only of male authors, but also of a culturally constructed view of the female psyche and voice, and are thus projections of an entirely male view. The internalisation of patriarchal values by female characters is a constant reminder that these are highly mediated figures. Such questions concur not only with sociological research on perceptions of women in Western culture, but also with the massively economically influential world of advertising and the media to which most of us are subject. To a greater or lesser extent, all feminist critics are gynocritics.

15. Catherine R. Stimpson, 'Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English', in *Critical Inquiry* 8, Number 2, Winter 1981, pp. 363 - 79.

Within gynocriticism, as within French feminism, critics employ traditional arguments to subversive ends. Celebrating the fundamental difference (superiority) of women's experience of life, they focus on physiology and 'nature' in the importance of menstruation and child-birth, which they suggest gives women a greater link with creative forces. However this approach coincides with received opinion, concentrating on the biological attributes which have traditionally been seen as weaknesses, and which are now claimed as strengths. Such criticism runs the risk of establishing new biological essentialisms which justify patriarchy. I have discussed the problems raised by overtly positive endorsements of the female in both 'The Power of Language' and 'The Power of Sexuality & Desire.' At its most extreme, separatism is not progress, but stalemate.

### Feminist Linguistics

Many feminists argue that language, both in the available lexicon and grammatical structure, privileges men and must alter to accommodate the female voice. Feminism and linguistics are modern terms but women have long argued that their access to and use of language is different from that of men. For seventeenth century women such as Dorothy Osborne and Margaret Cavendish, the overblown, classically-derived style of their male contemporaries was a subject of scorn. Feminists today are still debating the difference between male and female use of language. The most important topics of debate centre on two different ideological positions: that of acknowledging the limitations of language while working to change and improve it; and that of seeking to prove the existence of, or to establish, a distinctly female language. All branches of feminist criticism see language, as it is currently constituted and used, as a male weapon. Fighting against phallogocentrism (the dominance of the phallus/pen) - a concept also dominant in psychoanalytic feminist criticism - feminist linguists

see the use of language to decide who is heard, what is given high cultural status, and how experiences, people and objects are defined, as a male-led impulse of rationalisation, to which women can react either by rejecting it altogether (perhaps in favour of Cixous' female language), or changing it from within, exposing how it works, and what it is doing. This, I believe, is a more productive path.

Feminist linguists ask challenging questions about the raw material of literature and communication: who says what, to whom, how, when, where and why - or why not? In particular, they raise key issues of communication between and within the sexes, and examine the affect of language on gender, and vice-versa. Recognising the central and active force of language in the construction of gender, feminist linguists draw our attention to the fact that, as literature does not simply reflect life, so language does not simply record experience. Linguistics is one of the most politically charged areas of feminist discussion. By examining the idea of the silenced woman, feminist linguists draw attention to the cultural production of circumstances which have hitherto been assumed to be normal. They examine a diverse range of concerns, from the hesitancy of such great women writers such as the Brontë sisters or 'George' Eliot to declare their sex, to the rationale of why men still apologise for swearing 'in front of the ladies'.

The issue of women's talk also raises the significance of other traditions apart from the literary. For women, particularly within economically underprivileged groups, access to education has been much less than that of men. Still today, female illiteracy outweighs male in the Third World and in many parts of the First. Female literacy is of primary importance in world-wide programmes of contraception, which are aimed at helping women towards greater economic independence. Feminist linguists argue that oral traditions, myth, story-telling and gossip are all important parts of a distinctly female linguistic culture, which, until this century, has been largely dismissed as an inferior sub-culture, associated

with the home and child-rearing. Most feminists acknowledge the importance of economic and social conditions on specific genres of women's writing, including the domestic confinement which originally made the novel women's own.

Similarly, many feminists are concerned with women's access to language, a theme which finds some common ground even between Showalter and Woolf!

For feminist linguists as for Marxist-feminists, the political impact of the context of writing is fundamental. The difference between them lies in how they choose to address it.

French feminists, including Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, have argued the case for a distinctly female language. Cixous suggests that this already exists in the synaptic lapses and irrationality of language. Yet rejoicing in the existence of an irrational and supposedly female language relegates women to irrationality - a site patriarchy has previously reserved for them - and verges on agreeing that women talk nonsense, or that nonsense is female. Irigaray suggests a utopian vision of new grammatical structures and a different female language which will somehow be better than our present language. By using such critical paths within Shakespearean criticism, it is possible to examine whether the language female characters use suggests an alternative female language and meaning within Shakespeare's plays that is distinct from that of the male characters and from the patriarchal context within which female characters speak. But language outside the plays cannot be so well controlled that we may simply replace old systems and impose new. Where would this new language come from? Who would use it? In the United States, the phenomenon of Political Correctness (PC) has attempted to ban racially and sexually offensive terms, particularly on university campuses. However its most disturbing effect thus far has been to provoke allegations of a 'thought police', obscuring its laudable aim of discrimination-free communication.

Other feminists concentrate on the language we already have, particularly

on the idea of naming. Sociolinguistic and anthropological studies such as Zimmerman and West's work on the gendered differences evident in the way in which men and women speak to and interrupt each other in conversation have provided significant background material for feminist linguists.<sup>16</sup> Drawing on the work of anthropological linguists such as Sapir and Whorf in early twentieth-century United States, Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (1980) examines the importance of naming in the construction of our place in and understanding of the world. The fact that this process of naming is not random or neutral, but is based upon past meaning and patriarchal perspectives is central to her work. Cheri Kramarae and Paula Treichler's *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985) has been compiled to challenge the stereotypical definitions of supposedly objective existing word-bibles. Robin Lakoff has been attacked as an 'anti-feminist' feminist linguist, particularly for her *Language and Woman's Place* (1975). Nevertheless, her insistence that women's language is different, and in her view inferior, to men's is instructive because it focuses our attention on why this might be so. Within the context of Shakespeare's plays, such critical paths raise important questions about the context within which female characters speak and are heard, and the specifically gendered circumstances of the creation, and reception, of what they say.

The context of creation and reception is of primary concern for feminist linguists who are seeking to explore whether words are sexist or sexed in themselves, or only become so according to where, why and by whom they are spoken. Are words divisible from meaning; is language a system or a process? These questions are similar not only to those asked by all linguists, but also to other feminist critics who stress the fluidity of meaning as an indication of the presence of a subversive 'female' aspect of language. Feminist linguists recognise that misogyny is dangerously accessible and familiar. In a quite

16. Don H. Zimmerman, & Candace West, 'Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation', in Barrie Thorne, & Nancy Henley (eds.), *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, Newbury House, Massachusetts, 1975, pp. 105 - 29.



Brechtian way they are aiming to 'make strange' linguistic concepts which embody patriarchal attitudes, to show how our minds and meanings are manipulated. Happily, they seem to be succeeding. Anti-sexist language is increasingly being adopted; the use of 'man' is being challenged; the Church of England has made a move to accept 'inclusive language' as well as women priests; many universities, including my own, include guidelines on non-sexist and non-racist language in their constitutions and mission statements.

I have a profound belief in the power of the word. I see my task as offering my opinion as to how and why women have been misinterpreted and misrepresented, not only and not always by men, through language. The importance I attach to the way in which ideas and language affect action, people's opinions of themselves and others, and their approach to life, whether on stage or off, has led me to study an author widely recognised as a consummate master of the English language. My version of feminist literary criticism is an analysis of the effect of words on women and of women on words.

## The Power of Language

Language is a site of power. Where female characters have unequal access to language and to the power it confers, their ability to act, to express and defend themselves and to affect the world around them is diminished. Yet female characters in Shakespeare are frequently thought to be powerful and witty speakers. The problem lies in the fact that both the context within which these characters speak, and indeed the act of speaking, are affected by particular expectations of women and words. Different meanings and realities are communicated through language according to the cultural construction of the speaker's and listener's gender. In particular, the expectation that silence can be equated with chastity is used to control women's voices, and the underlying misogyny of the play-worlds is demonstrated by the deliberate manipulation of women's meaning by male characters, the frequent and humorous use of sexual innuendo and bawdy, and the collusion of female characters in the misogynistic implications of such language.

There is also an opposite dimension to the gendering of language. Female characters create alternative value structures in the language they use. They do this through their exceptional wit, which in the romantic comedies is often the strongest force in the play; by telling the truth and ignoring the consequent views of their 'honesty' or chastity; by prophesying and cursing; through the recognised, if reviled, role of the scold, and by appropriating men's lead in language for themselves. Thus although most often silence ultimately prevails, women's voices are shown frequently to have disturbed the predominant ratiocinative logic - even if this does not amount to a fully-blown post-structuralist *feminine*.

In her study of the significance of gender in literature, Elizabeth D. Harvey challenges us to remember that the author of all these characters was a man, and

to consider whether there is necessarily “a difference between a feminine voice constructed by a female as opposed to a male author?”<sup>1</sup> Lisa Jardine also argues that the sex of the author inescapably affects the nature of his (in this case) insights into women and their psychology.<sup>2</sup> If this is true, no author can create authentic characters of the other sex. Commenting on Linda Bamber’s work, Jonathan Goldberg is particularly sceptical of the idea that Shakespeare’s women “remain other, incapable of change and often little more than the projections of male fantasy, since it is impossible for a male author to inhabit a woman’s mind or body”.<sup>3</sup> These are valid problems and valid objections. The fact that Shakespeare was a man means that we are not in any of the characters discussed in this chapter looking at the language of ‘real women’. But this is the point. Characters are not real people, nor would they be the same had they been created by any other author, female or male. More important than the author’s sex is the wider cultural construction of gender, and the manipulation of meaning according to gender. This is undoubtedly affected by the author’s sex, but it is through the workings-out of the play that we may explore all the issues concerned with expectations of gender which the plays expose.

Because the scope of this chapter is so wide, I have limited myself to four key areas: misogyny in language in *Othello*, the voice of marginalised women in *Richard III*, women’s wit and silence in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and men’s manipulation of meaning in *The Taming of The Shrew*. I have prefaced my discussion of these plays with an exploration of some key themes.

It is from the aphorisms and axioms of a play that we gather the full, if

1. Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 16.
2. Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, second edn., Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1989, p. 69.
3. Jonathan Goldberg, ‘Shakespearean Inscriptions: The Voicing of Power’, in Patricia Parker, & Geoffrey Hartman (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, Methuen, London, 1985, pp. 116 - 37, p. 117.

submerged force of misogyny and much of the context against which we will read and understand the play's action. Being part of a community depends on shared and agreed codes of behaviour but relationships between male and female characters cause problems for such agreement. The cultural expectations of gender require very little to manipulate automatic reactions to female characters, and jokes, innuendoes and metaphors toy with references to feminine sexual infidelity. The unstudied way in which this is done constructs a background cast of women who are not individuals, but a single feminine-type. Women are coerced into agreement with these remarks for several reasons: frequently they are absent and cannot challenge them on-stage; often when they are present they do not challenge them because to do so would be beyond the possibilities even of Shakespearean radicalism; or, because these remarks occur in amusing passages of direct contact with the audience, they have a weighty truthfulness about them. The misogynistic humour of the plays is particularly problematic. Not to laugh would appear churlish; our own social *mores* are brought to bear if we object. A wish to see powerful women without an examination of the nature and extent of their power can mean participation in the construction of gender.

Part of the task of feminist criticism is to ask whether and why certain remarks are amusing. Banter between men and between men and women constantly casts aspersions about women's fidelity. Frequently reinforced is the stock idea of feminine faithlessness. While this by no means outweighs all the other factors which may be at work in a play, or suggests that the play itself endorses these remarks, such attitudes are forceful undercurrents which indicate that particular expectations towards women are deeply embedded and affect both the female characters and the action of the plays. In particular, sexual innuendo is used by male characters to trump the responses of female characters to whom they speak. Any hint at sexual meaning by a man throws the woman to whom he speaks into a dilemma. If she responds in kind her modesty can be questioned; if she says nothing, he has forced her into silence, and if she strikes a physical blow,

she has proved she is a scold. Conversation and argument are not conducted on an equal footing, because the interpretation of the participants' words and actions is gendered.

However there are also points at which female characters grasp new ways of speaking for themselves. Characters like Emilia in *Othello* and Paulina in *The Winter's Tale* see and tell the truth. Moral good is frequently shown to be allied to a woman's voice even in surprising circumstances. When Isabella and Mariana cry rape against Angelo in *Measure for Measure* (although both are, for different reasons, both lying and telling the truth), the play makes clear that they should be taken seriously. Positive embodiments such as peace and justice are frequently described as female (*R III*, V. viii. 40 - 41). But mythologised virtue also presents problems. It sets a standard below which women are certain to fall, and then invokes a greater degree of reproof and retribution against them for failing to fulfil the impossible. Idealised virginity (or at least chastity) and silence ensure that female characters can never succeed in being less than fallen idols, should they succumb to the reasonable and - within a romantic comedy - inevitable fate of being won and no longer chaste (chased). Myth and metaphor build upon the idea that women are generic types: victim or monster. Male-constructed imagery undermines individual character, and pressurises women to conform to type. Women have the same (or worse) fate as their metaphorical counterparts. Usually metaphor and its subject split in a moment not unlike Cixous' ecstatic severance of word and meaning. But for women in Shakespeare's plays, most disturbingly in the rape of Lavinia, they fuse instead into self-fulfilling prophecy. Lavinia is exactly like a doe, and during the course of a real hunt she is savagely mutilated in a 'swallowing womb' of a pit. Parallels drawn with Philomel and Lucrece doom her to share their fate. To have a woman sanction murder and rape in a place akin to some dreadful embodiment of women's *pudenda* portrays an intense hatred and fear of women's sexuality. Yet the interpretation of nature in this deeply misogynistic way is spurious. An inanimate location can have no 'say' in

the gender allotted to it. Like Lavinia, nature is interpreted to mean whatever truth is apparent to the speaker.

Some female characters' speech is more ripe for attention by Kristeva than Cixous. Challenging the ownership of succinct, active language by men, characters such as Joan and Margaret in the *Henry VI* tetralogy spur men into action through their words, while Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, triumphs in defeat by her resolute and unemotional endurance of her punishment. Joan's ultimate victory over Rouen and Burgundy in *Henry VI Part 1* is achieved by words rather than deeds. By invoking the idea of the motherland, the naturalness of the child's affection for the mother and vice-versa, Joan overcomes Burgundy's warlike mood. Patriotism here is portrayed as a fundamentally female concept and 'nature' begins to make him relent. Although the emphasis on womanhood and nature is perplexing from a woman who suffers constant undermining by such stock attitudes, it is a shrewd evaluation of the political situation which convinces Burgundy and wins victory.

Stories are often full of gendered expectations of feminine behaviour. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the nurse thinks that her long-dead husband uttered a prophetic and charming profundity when he told Juliet that she would "fall backward" when she was older (I. iii. 44), that is she would settle into her proper feminine role of sexual subordination. The nurse, so thoroughly imbued with traditional women's roles, cannot imagine how different Juliet is from that norm. Mercutio's Queen Mab speech is a vivid example of misogyny (*R & J*, I. iv. 55 - 95). By contrast Juliet's unorthodoxy is reflected most clearly in her language. It is *she* who longs for the love-performing night, she who imagines she has bought but not yet possessed her mansion, she who compares Romeo to a flower, not vice-versa. Juliet's language suggests the irrationality and subversive nature of Cixous' *écriture féminine* when her syntax and sense fracture in Act III Scene 5. In fact Juliet's reaction is entirely rational and gives her an integrity because she speaks

the truth, although (or perhaps because) no other character on stage understands her exact meaning.

The correlation between virginity, virtue and silence works to inhibit even the most verbally accomplished women. Portia understands that without the aid of male disguise she must rely on men's interpretations of her silence, since "A maiden hath no tongue but thought" (*Merchant*, III. ii. 8). Blonde, beautiful and rich, Portia is constricted in what she may say until she adopts disguise as a man. As her female self, Portia is subject to interpretation by men and is bound by her dead father's will. Only as Balthasar can she demonstrate her verbal skills, successfully defending Antonio and moving the entire court with her words. In more tragic circumstances, Cordelia cannot heave her heart into her mouth to speak words she does not feel, and her original honest silence becomes the ultimate silence of her death (*Lear*, I. i. 91 - 2). Had Lavinia lost her tongue earlier, it is possible that no-one would have noticed (*TA*, II. iii). She gains a voice just in time to prove that she has one to lose, and when Titus states that "I understand her signs" (III. i. 143) we cannot prove him wrong. It is his interpretation of what is preferable for Lavinia that leads to her death.

Frequent reference to women by men gives the illusion of communities of women who do not exist. This is more than the dramatic construction of crowds. These women, for instance the prostitutes of *Measure for Measure*, have no representatives to voice their opinions. Such women are simply male characters' interpretations of the words and actions of one woman-type. Although this may indicate that women cannot be forgotten, more obvious is the fact that women's presence in men's language shows how irrelevant they are in person. But it is not only men who use troublesome words about women; female characters collude in misogyny. Even Volumnia, the Saviour of Rome as she is hailed by the populace, compares herself to a clucking hen (*Corio*, IV. iii. 161 - 5). Rosalind/Ganymede itemises women's faults to Orlando (*AYLI*, IV. i. 153 - 5).

Portia's conclusion that she dislikes the Neapolitan prince is turned into a joke about feminine infidelity (*Merchant*, I. ii. 41 - 43). Men's inadequacies of character are blamed on women's inadequacies of sexual fidelity - by women who are themselves suffering from stereotypical definition at the hands of others. Undoubtedly there is a danger that the views of one unstable male character commenting on women may be misguidedly judged to be the common view of all in the play (and worse, of the author). Nevertheless, even if one man's voice is unrepresentative, it is often a powerful (Leontes) or a trustworthy (Enobarbus) man who is speaking.

\* \* \* \* \*

These are old fond paradoxes, to make fools  
laugh i'th' alehouse.

(*Oth*, II. i. 140 - 41)

How can it happen that Othello comes to kill Desdemona on the slender but malicious evidence that Iago presents to him? How can the 'divine Desdemona' be convicted of adultery? Desdemona's banter with Iago after arriving safely on Cyprus belies the significance of her comments (II. i. 140 - 41). It is the familiarity of the attitudes about women that Iago rehearses with her which lies at the heart of the play's tragedy: an unthinking misogyny so far ingrained in Othello that all Iago need do is to pour poisoned words in his ear. In this play where women's gender and Othello's colour *per se* influence the context of their presentation, words are far more potent than actions, and language becomes a fatal weapon. The power of language is central to the play, which begins with Roderigo attempting to silence Iago, and ends with Lodovico's departure to relate the dreadful events to the Venetian state. Othello's stories have the power to provoke Desdemona's love and a chaos of shouts wakes Brabantio with news of the elopement. Desdemona secures her journey to Cyprus through her eloquence before the court. Iago effects the tragedy through seductive lies. Emilia's truth-telling comes too late and Iago's final silence proves the ultimate indictment of the destructive power of words.



Of all the characters in the play, Iago and Emilia have the clearest understanding of misogyny and the greatest power to affect the action through language. But while Emilia perceives the workings of the sexual double standard, she does not speak in time. It is not until her mistress is dead that she understands what her husband has done. By contrast Iago has from the start a sharp understanding of misogyny and its power, and of how to time his insinuations to maximum effect. He knows that the most effective way to attack another man is through his wife. It is profitless to seek an explanation of Iago's motives for destroying Othello, not least because so many are offered: losing promotion to Cassio; lust for Desdemona; conviction that Othello has cuckolded him. All are presented with an equal (lack of) conviction and with a voyeuristic nonchalance that indicates Iago's understanding of how sexual relationships may be manipulated and misinterpreted. More interesting than why he pushes his master to murder is *how he is able* to do it.

Act II Scene 1, particularly the exchange between Iago and Desdemona, shows how Iago operates and establishes the play's concern with women and misogyny. When she arrives on Cyprus with Iago, Desdemona passes the time in trivial but misogynistic banter until Othello arrives safe from the storm. Although she does this, we presume, to cover up her worry about Othello's safety, she hints at a justification of the charge of deception:

I am not merry, but I do beguile  
The thing I am by seeming otherwise.

(II. i. 125 - 6)

Desdemona's ability to deceive her father and Othello by seeming to be afraid of his stories when in fact she was falling in love with their teller are weapons Iago can use against her. Now her innocent cheerfulness in passing the time in talk rather than silent worry about Othello's safety shows her ability to confess to a deceptive nature that Iago may exploit and which she herself never entirely denies, even at her death. Desdemona becomes happily embroiled with Iago's dismissal of her sex:

Iago           She never yet was foolish that was fair,  
                   For even her folly helped her to an heir.  
 Desdemona   These are old fond paradoxes, to make fools  
                   laugh i'th' alehouse.  
                   What miserable praise has thou for her  
                   That's foul and foolish?  
 Iago           There's none so foul and foolish thereunto,  
                   But does foul pranks which fair and wise ones do.  
(II. i. 138 - 45)

Women are types, not individuals, in this kind of banter. The interchange of epithets for fairness and blackness, wisdom, wit and folly carry with them connotations of promiscuity, and even the most deserving woman deserves no more than to gossip and bear children (II. i. 163).

In her consideration of the scene, Valerie Wayne stresses that the patriarchal conditions here, as elsewhere, cannot be considered as a monolithic and unvarying phenomenon. In particular, she asserts that this scene specifically associates Iago with the residual Renaissance discourse of misogyny that is *not* shared by all male characters in the play. Brabantio's attitudes towards his daughter and her husband are not shared by the Venetian senators or Duke. It is true that a common misogyny links Brabantio, Roderigo and indeed Othello. But Wayne's pronouncement that women are all whores to Iago limits her understanding of the complex manifestations of misogyny, by failing to recognise that it differs even within individuals.<sup>4</sup> For Iago has a profound understanding of the fact that innocent women are the best means by which to injure another man because of what is perceived to be their generically and sexually duplicitous nature:

Thus credulous fools are caught,  
 And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,  
 All guiltless, meet reproach.

(IV. i. 43 - 5)

Iago simply manipulates culturally-generated suspicions. Madelon Gohlke, agreeing that men are made most vulnerable through 'their' women, verges on blaming Desdemona for making Othello vulnerable to Iago's machinations. She

<sup>4</sup> Valerie Wayne, 'Historical Differences: Misogyny and *Othello*', in Valerie Wayne (ed.), *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1991, pp. 153 - 80, p. 163.

suggests that Othello recognises Desdemona's power to hurt him (but obviously not the fact that she is being used as a means for another *man* to hurt him) and seeks to eliminate her power by killing her. Thus the violence he commits indicates the strength of his sense of powerlessness. While Othello clearly does feel vulnerable to Desdemona, Gohlke's argument that the plays depict a world where there is an "erotic destructiveness at the heart of his relationship with Desdemona" and more extraordinarily that "if murder may be a loving act, love may be a murdering act, and consummation of such a love is possible only through the death of both parties" is strained.<sup>5</sup> Gohlke's interpretation colludes with this construction of supposed feminine sexual aggression (adultery) and its consequences. Othello feels bound to take violent action against his wife, who feels powerless to defend herself. This presentation of power, murder, love, and eroticism is thus highly gendered.

The fact that the action takes place away from the apparently more reasonable attitudes of the Venetian senate exacerbates the power of misogynistic tale-telling. The audience knows that Desdemona is innocent of the crimes laid against her (even if she is not divine), that Brabantio is wrong in his judgement of her, and that Iago is deceiving everyone. But Othello and Brabantio both believe the worst of Desdemona, and it takes only one misguided man to kill her. The play shows that these attitudes are wrong, but also that they are potent even when felt by only a few men and shared by the women whom they affect. Richard Levin argues convincingly that feminist criticism fails to recognise that the patriarchy itself abhors the abnormality of acts such as Desdemona's murder.<sup>6</sup> This is a salient point. Nevertheless, there can be no defence of patriarchy. A system may be shown to be responsible for its own faults. The fact that the Venetian senators would by no means approve either Iago's attitudes or

5. Madelon Gohlke, "I wooed thee with my sword": Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms', in Murray M. Schwartz, & Coppélia Kahn (eds.), *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980, pp. 170 - 87, pp. 174 - 5.

6. Richard Levin, 'Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy', in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 103, 1988, pp. 125 - 38, p. 127.

Desdemona's murder does not exonerate the patriarchal system from culpability in the construction of misogynistic myths which take tragic effect on Cyprus. Marilyn French, of whom Levin takes a particularly dim view in his article, argues the opposite case, which is that "Shakespeare was suggesting that the values that motivate and characterise an Iago are *accepted and respected values in the Western world*" (her italics).<sup>7</sup> In fact this also is an overstatement. No-one accepts or respects Iago's values when their true nature is discovered, and they are not endorsed at any point by the play itself.

It is easy to assume that misogyny takes the form only of an extremely poor opinion of women. In fact an inflated view, in its effects, can be equally misogynistic, and, in this play, equally fatal. The high regard in which men like Cassio hold Desdemona may seem flattery, establishing her innocence and showing that a great wrong is being perpetrated. But the idea of Desdemona's consummate virtue is doomed since she cannot fulfil unreal expectations. Heavenly virtue and hellish whoredom are mutually exclusive yet interdependent polarities. This creates a tension between what was apparently known of Desdemona, the paragon of retiring feminine virtue (unnaturally so), and the supposition of her typically feminine inconstancy. Thus the contrast is struck between the quiet maiden and her deliberate and gross moral abandon in loving Othello (I. iii. 94 - 8).

Throughout the play, individual words are highly charged with the responsibility of reference to all women. When Emilia seeks to defend her mistress' honour, the credibility of the female sex hinges upon it:

For if she be not honest, chaste, and true  
There's no man happy; the purest of their wives  
Is foul as slander.

(IV. ii. 18 - 20)

Granted, Desdemona is (apparently) all these - and therefore supposedly all

7. Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1982, p. 214.

women are in the clear. She is murdered even so. Emilia's words remind us of those of Brabantio: "Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds/By what you see them act" (I. i. 172 - 3), or of Antigonus who swears that "every inch of woman's flesh is false" if Hermione has been untrue to Leontes (*Wint*, II. ii. 140). All women are in theory safe because neither Desdemona nor Hermione has deceived her husband. Nevertheless, both suffer, and it is remarkable, but not unusual in a Shakespearean play, that even a woman such as Emilia or a sensible man such as Antigonus should think to use the specific case of one woman as a potential judgement on an entire sex.

Iago's attitude towards such extremes, like so much else about him, is attractive in its bluntness. In contrast to Cassio's immature deification of the divine Desdemona or Roderigo's impression of her blest state, Iago is direct. "Blessed fig's end! The wine she drinks is made of grapes" (II. i. 251- 2). Unlike Brabantio and even Othello, Iago can accept Desdemona's sexual drive. He uses this understanding as a lewd argument of her insatiability, demonstrating what appears to be a frank, yet is actually a suspect, approach to sexual relationships, and undermining every virtue Cassio can perceive in Desdemona with a deliberate salaciousness:

Cassio She's a most exquisite lady.  
 Iago And I'll warrant her full of game.  
 Cassio Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.  
 Iago What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley  
 to provocation.  
 Cassio An inviting eye, and yet, methinks, right modest.  
 Iago And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?

(II. iii. 18 - 24)

Much of the play's dramatic strength derives from seeing a normal woman failing to behave as more than humanly chaste and thus becoming vulnerable to the most extreme suggestions of sexual culpability. Shirley Nelson Garner finds that Othello's alacrity to believe he is betrayed, which he shares with Leontes and Posthumus, reflects his psychological *need* to be so betrayed in order to reject -

and kill - Desdemona and return to a exclusively male community. The idea of a woman on a pedestal is a part of this fantasy, she maintains, because even if that woman simply fails to be transparently and always beyond accusation, she will be judged fallen.<sup>8</sup> This is an intriguing version of the common critical approach which points out the possible homosexual undertones to Iago and Othello's relationship and links it to the bitterness with which Leontes blames marriage and Hermione for ending his exclusive relationship with Polixenes.<sup>9</sup> But although such arguments contribute to our understanding of Othello's jealous rage, equally important is the genuine depth of love Othello feels for Desdemona. If such psychological activity is taking place, it is well hidden even from Othello. He desires only death, not a return to the world of soldiering after Desdemona is dead, and is wracked, not relieved, by his knowledge of Desdemona's supposed infidelity.

*Othello* chronicles not blanket misogyny or racism but rather shows how the fears of individual men and their understanding of feminine nature, which is a completely false construct, may destroy love and truth. Roderigo and Iago are quick to play upon such fears by pointing out Brabantio's failure as a father who has lost control over his daughter's choice of sexual partner (I. i. 135 - 6). That Brabantio has already dreamt of such an event, and is now so speedy to believe that a terrible deception has been practised upon him, emphasises the fear and expectation of feminine duplicity (I. i. 145 & 162), and this is the first case in the play where one supposed lapse of chastity is enlarged into a general example (I. i. 172). Once Desdemona has been seen to be capable of committing this deception, Brabantio sees her case as an example of the inconstancy of women: the individual becomes a gender-type, against which men must warn other men.

8. Shirley Nelson Garner, 'Male Bonding and the Myth of Women's Deception in Shakespeare's Plays', in Norman N. Holland, Sidney Homan, & Bernard J. Paris (eds.), *Shakespeare's Personality*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, pp. 135 - 50, p. 138.

9. See for instance Gohlke, op. cit., pp. 171 & 174; also Norman N. Holland, 'Sons and Substitutions: Shakespeare's Phallic Fantasy' in Holland, Homan, & Paris (eds.), *ibid.*, pp. 66 - 85., p. 77; also Garner in Holland, Homan, & Paris (eds.), *ibid.*, p. 144.

Thus we have the irony of Brabantio deriving some satisfaction from warning Othello that: "She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I. iii. 293). When this is later recalled by Iago, who understands that such suspicions already lie dormant in Othello's mind, it assumes the status of a pseudo-prophetic utterance, giving weight to the charges of Desdemona's adultery and forming part of the male lore of women's duplicity between the two men:

Iago           She did deceive her father, marrying you,  
                  And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks  
                  She loved them most.  
Othello       And so she did.

(III. iii. 210 - 12)

Othello is also easily convinced of the truth of Cassio's supposed dream, out-running Iago in his suspicions to reach a foregone conclusion (III. iii. 433). When he is duped into listening to Cassio talk about Bianca, thinking he is referring to Desdemona, Othello is similarly eager to hear the worst (IV. i. 114). Iago succeeds because Othello *expects*, as well as fears, that what he says is true.

Desdemona and Othello play a part in their downfall through the language they use to explain their positions. Othello's measured attempt to reassure the council that his marriage will not affect his duty shows him at pains to point out that it is for Desdemona's mind, not her body, that he wishes her to accompany him to Cyprus. He is far more timid than she to admitting to their sexual union (I. iii. 260 - 74). By contrast, Desdemona does not hesitate to make explicit her desire to be with Othello, in language that is strong and - were it not for her subsequent avowal of proper loyalty to father as well as husband - defiant of convention:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence and scorn of fortunes  
May trumpet to the world.

(I. iii. 248 - 50)

But even this honesty Iago can invoke as proof against Desdemona to men who wish to believe him, using her words to convince Roderigo of her insatiability and imminent need for a new lover once she has tired of Othello (II. i. 234 - 6).

Whether Iago believes what he is saying is irrelevant beside his ability to convince another man of the truth of his sentiments. Desdemona's words are open to misinterpretation. When she pleads Cassio's case to her husband, she plays the part of the nagging wife, making her husband's life a misery until he gives in to her demands. This is exactly the accusation Iago made against Emilia - and all women - in Act II. It is what wives do, and Desdemona needs no instruction on how to nag:

My lord shall never rest.  
I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience.  
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift.  
I'll intermingle everything he does  
With Cassio's suit.

(III. iii. 22 - 6)

Knowing that this is how she is bound to proceed, and that it is in her nature to go beyond what is necessary, Iago does not find it difficult to manipulate the situation so that the more Desdemona pleads, the worse it looks. Communication between husband and wife has already broken down. They are conducting two halves of separate conversations:

Desdemona	Pray you let Cassio be received again.
Othello	Fetch me the handkerchief. My mind misgives.
Desdemona	Come, come, you'll never meet a more sufficient man.
Othello	The handkerchief.
Desdemona	I pray, talk me of Cassio.

(III. iv. 88 - 91)

Desdemona is inconsistent in the impression she gives. Undoubtedly articulate, she is at times disarmingly frank, almost losing Iago the opportunity to twist her interview with Cassio by speaking of it in exactly the terms with which he had intended to disturb Othello: "I have been talking with a suitor here" (III. iii. 42). Yet she appears quite wilful in her lies to disguise her loss of the handkerchief, a deception in which there is little point and which steers the way to her murder. The use of the subjunctive is instructive in this context, as Desdemona suggests that her loss of the handkerchief would justify jealousy - if Othello were that sort of man (III. iv. 25 - 9). Tragically, she does not realise that he is.



Emilia has a frank approach to differing standards of sexual behaviour between the sexes. As she prepares Desdemona for her (death) bed, Desdemona rallies from her dazed reaction to Othello's anger to talk of the attractiveness of another man (IV. iii. 34) and of adultery (IV. iii. 59 - 61) - possibly the most inappropriately apposite subjects of which she could speak, and words which now Othello would certainly take as further proof of her lust, rather than as naive curiosity. Emilia's summation of the injustices of the sexual double standard carries weight.

But I do think it is their husbands' faults  
 If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,  
 And pour our treasures into foreign laps,  
 Or else break out in peevish jealousies,  
 Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,  
 Or scant our former having in despite:  
 Why, we have galls; and though we have some grace,  
 Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know  
 Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,  
 And have their palates both for sweet and sour,  
 As husbands have. What is it that they do  
 When they change us for others? Is it sport?  
 I think it is. And doth affection breed it?  
 I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?  
 It is' so, too. And have not we affections,  
 Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?  
 Then let them use us well, else let them know  
 The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

(IV. iii. 85 - 102)

Valerie Wayne suggests that Emilia's words have a double resonance lost on modern audiences familiar with ideas of equality. She argues that to the Renaissance ear, Emilia's stress on the similarity of frailty and desire between men and women would have been profoundly new, since contemporary debates stressed the profound difference between female and male sexuality.<sup>10</sup> Indeed Emilia's words are reminiscent of Shylock's on equality, discrimination and revenge: "The villainy you teach me I will execute" (*Merchant*, III. i. 67 - 8). Eamon Grennan makes the point that this scene of intimate conversation between the two women allows Emilia the certainty that her words will be heard and

10. Wayne, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

understood in the way that she intends, not twisted by a man of Iago's mind.<sup>11</sup> He sees this scene as a much more tranquil, if bitter-sweet moment than does Jardine, who stresses its sensual elements, which cloud the idea of Desdemona's absolute innocence.<sup>12</sup> Certainly there is an implicit undercurrent of sexuality here. Grennan also makes the point that while Emilia may redeem the power of language by speaking the truth at the end of the play, she also originally catalysed the tragic action by lying in Act III Scene 4 about the handkerchief's whereabouts, and remaining silent as Desdemona and Othello argue over its loss.<sup>13</sup> Her final truth-telling is not only evidence of women's ability to see and tell the truth but also of the redemption of language itself, when so much evil has been achieved by words. Emilia is indeed one of the most 'honest' characters in the play, with Bianca. This is particularly notable given that one is a prostitute, and the other clearly portrayed as having a far from orthodox attitude to sex, men and adultery. Nevertheless, Bianca is constant to Cassio, and Emilia strives to remain within the duties of a wife, but knows that she must disobey her proper position when finally she realises what Iago has done (V. ii. 203). Emilia fulfils a positive, shrewish function, berating Othello with the truth when he still wants to believe Iago's lies, and wins a moral victory for her honesty at the cost of her own life: "So, speaking as I think, alas, I die" (V. ii. 258).

In this play of linguistic sophistry only a clear denial, an open challenge, could counteract the movement of the play. But both Desdemona and Othello avoid direct confrontation with either truth or suspicion until it is too late. Othello's jealousy so unsettles Desdemona from her original self-confidence of Act I that she becomes uncertain of her own honesty. She even asks Iago whether she deserves the title of whore (IV. ii. 121). Iago evades a reply and when

11. Eamon Grennan, 'The Women's Voices in Othello: Speech, Song, Silence', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38, 1987, pp. 275 - 92, p. 281.

12. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

13. Grennan, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

Desdemona hopes that Othello thinks her honest, there are echoes of the scene where Iago used the same word to imply the darkest malice of Cassio (III. iii. 105 - 107). Desdemona's unwillingness to defend herself compounds the effects of Iago's scheming, as did her apparent stubbornness in not admitting the loss of the handkerchief. Her extreme fortitude in wishing heaven to forgive Othello is echoed in her song, which bears within it the memory of other women who have similarly suffered and forgiven: "Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve" (IV. iii. 50). Most notably, Desdemona never denies Othello's justification in killing her and cites herself as her own murderer (V. ii. 133), making even her last words lies, as Othello points out (V. ii. 138). Desdemona's patience simultaneously underlines her great love for Othello and shows her casting herself as a victim. She is (misguidedly) confident of her ability to plead for Cassio, but not for herself. Desdemona has internalised patriarchal assumptions about the power of women's words and 'natural' feminine weakness.

The passivity of the words Desdemona speaks at her death and her earlier refusal to defend herself by arguing with Othello or demanding proof of his accusations have received mixed criticism. For Sheila Garner, such extreme fortitude represents men's fantasy of women's forgiveness, no matter how terrible the crime.<sup>14</sup> Valerie Wayne argues that Desdemona's collusion with the idea of her whoredom indicates the connection between Iago's misogynistic discourse, as adopted by Othello, and Desdemona's body. Desdemona's failure to oppose such attitudes, Wayne argues, shows how misogyny works in the text and in language to construct thoughts and deeds that Desdemona has *not* had or done, but for which she will nonetheless be killed.<sup>15</sup> In other words, passivity and reticence, which at one level are signs of Desdemona's modesty and confusion, are at another active agents of misogyny. This is true. Diane Elizabeth Dreher is even more explicit, seeing Desdemona as representative not only of a passive

14. Garner, op. cit., p. 147.

15. Wayne, op. cit., p. 170.

masochist, but of legions of battered wives. Interestingly, Dreher reverses the idea of woman on a pedestal, suggesting that Desdemona idealises Othello as a substitute father-figure to the extent that she lacks the assertiveness needed for her own defence. For Dreher, it is this the idolisation of a men by women that makes women accomplices in their own destruction and this passivity that indicates how such female characters have been sabotaged by an unhealthy ideal.<sup>16</sup> Dreher's perception of the self-destructive nature of Desdemona's own understanding of women's nature is undeniably accurate.

Iago's ultimate defence is simply to stop speaking. It is words that have achieved all this; to him they are no longer necessary. His manipulation of seeming has brought a society of suspicion to the point where "All that is spoke is marred" (V. ii. 367). The fact that the play makes it clear that words and actions are being twisted to make lies appear truth is a significant counter-force against such machinations. However, the ease with which the female characters' own words and actions can be twisted towards misogynistic ends is equally powerful. What the audience knows to be true, and what it sees being made credible, diverge, as Iago exploits the distance between them with the (unconscious) co-operation of those he manipulates. Thus it is that the valiant soldier of royal descent and clear-cut honesty never challenges the situation face to face, but is happy to rely on Iago's sub-text of (mis)reading signs that supposedly indicate truth more clearly than reality. This is how Desdemona, innocent, but not divine, is murdered by herself. The noble man and the strong woman are caught in a trap simply sprung by Iago through his keen perception of the fact that this society can, with little encouragement, destroy its virtues by playing on its deepest, gender-based, fears.

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16. Diane Elizabeth Dreher, *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1986, pp. 13 - 14.

## Why should calamity be full of words?

(R III, IV. iv. 126)

Iago and Richard, Duke of Gloucester, have a similar power to manipulate meaning, particularly in relation to women. But in *Richard III*, this is defeated by a greater linguistic power: that of the women and most obviously of Queen Margaret. This again is a play dominated by language, but whereas in *Othello* no direct challenge was made by women until it was too late, here Margaret acts as a constant reproach to Richard, forcing the other women in the play to band together in their hatred. Marilyn French points out that Richard shares with Iago a profound contempt for women and for sexual relationships, and uses both political power and misogyny to destroy the men around him. It is barely incidental to Richard that this process also involves destroying women. Women without power are merely channels to power for Richard. Most surprisingly, French then continues to claim that strong women in the tetralogy such as Margaret and Joan are implicitly blamed by Shakespeare for not adhering to French's own feminine principle.<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to see how Shakespeare blames strong women for being insufficiently 'feminine', as the spectral figure of Margaret dominates and represents unpalatable, but undeniable, truth, whereas Anne is destroyed by Richard. Indeed it is femininity - passive, wooed by Richard and unwilling or unable to destroy him - that the play portrays as complicit in its own doom and in others' destruction.

In *Henry VI Parts 1, 2 and 3* it was a truism that "men are ruled by women" (*Richard III*, I. i. 62). Now it is no longer true. The women have lost much of the power that distinguished female characters in the earlier plays of the tetralogy. Margaret has become a bitter, spectral figure, and the other women seem no match for their circumstances. Yet Margaret is ennobled in a magnificently twisted way and retains a terrible splendour, not for what she is, or

17. French, op. cit., pp. 64 - 5 & 70.

even for what she was, but for the process of loss by which she has made the transition between the two, an embarrassment of a queen without a king(dom). Through language alone, in her curses, she gives the play its predominant pattern, particularly in Act I Scene 4 and Act IV Scene 3, and teaches Queen Elizabeth how to out-play Richard in Act IV, Scenes 4 and 5. Irene Dash notes that this chief antagonist of Richard is often cut from both stage and film productions.<sup>18</sup> Dash takes this as evidence of a misjudgement of the significance of her role, although it may simply be because of the problem of explaining who Margaret is if *Richard III* is performed in isolation. But without Margaret the play loses a vital dynamic.

Richard achieves much of his dominance through the manipulation of language, particularly in his dealings with women. Yet although powerless to act physically against him, even when he kills other women or their children, these women form a significant community representing an alternative value structure and indeed moral good. Both Carol Thomas Neely and Lisa Jardine point out that just as men in this play are no longer ruled by women, so women are no longer ruled by men. Neely sees Margaret as a woman freed from the usual roles of mother, wife and (in her case) queen to become both marginal and masterless. Such women, Neely claims, are outside gendered roles and thus have most power, as well as the ability to act in conjunction with other women.<sup>19</sup> Jardine provides an interesting study of lawless women in the early modern period as evidence of a privileged role for women's carping words, and notes that Margaret's curses have real power to harm evil men.<sup>20</sup> Yet by suggesting that, in the history plays, the power to dismay through language is the only power open to women, Jardine forgets her own account of Margaret's valour in the rest of the tetralogy, and

18. Irene G. Dash, *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981, pp. 197 - 8.

19. Carol Thomas Neely, 'Shakespeare's Women: Historical Facts and Dramatic Representations', in Holland, Homan, & Paris (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 116 - 34, p. 130.

20. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

discounts other powerful women, notably Joan and the Duchess of Gloucester. Equally surprisingly, Irene Dash ends her treatment of the various powers of action and speech in these plays by stating that they “demonstrate the powerlessness of women whether virgins, wives or widows”.<sup>21</sup> This is simply untrue. In the first three plays women have had the power to act; here they defeat evil and build a (tentative) alternative community of women through language. Jardine’s point that Margaret’s curses, Paulina and Emilia’s truth-telling, and Cassandra’s prophecies all share ‘the scold’s privilege’ is important in suggesting that marginalised women can have power, and indeed a recognised (if reviled) role, when it is least expected. This role is similar to that of the fool, which was sometimes taken by women, and demonstrates that there was a well-established tradition of the gift of divine revelation being specifically tied to women’s speech.

Not all women possess powerful speech. As Anne opens the mourning scene over Henry VI’s body, her words seem strong: “Foul devil, for God’s sake hence, and trouble us not” (I. ii. 50). But the scene turns to farce as Anne is drawn into conversation with Richard. Her eloquent ability to mirror and subvert his words is self-destructive. Anne’s fighting talk is soon defeated by Richard’s web of sexual innuendo and intrigue, in a similar way to that in which Petruccio can frustrate Kate’s attempts to match him in argument in *The Taming of the Shrew*. By allowing the meeting to be prolonged in these encounters, Anne defeats her own apparent purpose of quitting Richard as quickly as possible. She loses her dignity, even her self-respect. Although Richard’s attitudes are abhorrent, he triumphs in this scene. Harvey Rovine argues that the silent pallbearers accompanying Anne act as a public audience, distracting the audience’s full attention from the morality (or not) of Anne’s response, and demonstrating that it is not just a woman who is overcome, but society itself that capitulates to Richard’s nefarious behaviour.<sup>22</sup> This is an important point. Although Anne is

21. Dash, op. cit., p. 206.

22. Harvey Rovine, *Silence in Shakespeare: Drama, Power & Gender*, UMI Research Press, Michigan, 1987, p. 32.

vulnerable in this scene primarily because of her sex, she is not the only one whom Richard conquers. Male characters as well as female are unable to combat him until the final scenes, and no-one speaks out against him with the vigour of Margaret.

Richard burdens Anne with the responsibility of his own actions. This is patently unjust, but elicits from Anne the response he seeks. Just as Angelo would prefer to blame Isabella in *Measure for Measure* for the lust he feels she has provoked by her beauty, so Anne here becomes the passive subject of Richard's obscene flattery, as he claims that her beauty has been the cause of his killings (I. ii. 121). Richard's argument is unconvincing, but not successfully refuted and by line 180 ("I would I knew thy heart"), Anne has lost the war of words. Her curses have no effect. The more outrageous Richard's lies, the more irresistible he seems. Anne has no words with which to defy him, and, as an ordinary woman, is unable to contemplate killing him as he playfully suggests. Richard will not take her seriously. Her mouth, he tells her, is made for kissing, not contempt (I. ii. 159 - 60). He is absolutely sure of her lack of courage when he dares her to stab him, thus defeating her on two fronts: greater linguistic skill and the knowledge that only an exceptional woman (like Margaret) could kill him at his suggestion. Anne is not exceptional. To make doubly sure, he sows doubt in her mind whenever she offers to strike: "'twas thy beauty that provokèd me" (I. ii. 168); "'twas thy heavenly face that set me on" (I. ii. 170).

Anne wants to believe Richard (as Othello expects to believe Iago), seeming to desire the power over him that the audience, and very likely she herself, knows is impossible. Richard thus plays upon the unspoken doubts about her own role that lurk in Anne's mind, and upon her foolish hopes of loving words. At this point she only dimly understands that Richard's words are lies. The clearer this manipulation becomes, the stronger its effect. When later Anne is summoned to marry Richard, she realises that her curses have been defeated by



his "honey words" (IV. i. 78 - 80). This theme of self-destruction is strongly rooted in words: Anne speaks her own fate, a fate caused by her submission to Richard's stronger language. Within two scenes she is dead. She herself perceives that her own curses (unlike Margaret's) have rebounded on herself, and it is only in her posthumous curse of "Despair and die" (V. v. 117) that her words can wound Richard rather than herself, as they gather force with the curses of his other victims.

Even Richard cannot believe Anne's stupidity. Marilyn French notes that his conversation with her in Act I Scene 2 reinforces his contempt for the powerlessness of women.<sup>23</sup> Her capitulation is food for his self-projection as a super-charismatic creature. Significantly however, his later conversation with Queen Elizabeth, which in many ways mirrors this earlier exchange, has a very different outcome. There it is Richard who is fooled, although he does not realise it (IV. v. 17 - 19). The change between the two scenes has been affected by Margaret. Although without husband, son, crown or political power, and despised by the court, even by the other women in similar positions, Margaret is not powerless. She has nothing to lose, and nothing more to fear from Richard or his court. The warnings to her that she remains only on pain of death are meaningless. Margaret's power lies in the curses which make men's hair stand on end, and which all come true. Irene Dash notes that Margaret's first curse, of her husband after the banishment of Suffolk, occurred much earlier in the tetralogy, and was at that point a sign of her powerlessness to help her lover (*2 Henry VI*, III. ii. 304 - 308).<sup>24</sup> Now her curses are both a sign of political powerlessness and a weapon of revenge with the power to kill.

The play has a significant tragic element specifically oriented towards the women. The previous plays in the tetralogy were full of outward-looking

23. French, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

24. Dash, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

speeches and actions, and women like Margaret played a full physical and vocal part. By contrast, the community of women in this play is a group of isolated individuals focusing on their own grief. They suffer together, but not in sympathy, from the words and actions of dominant and cruel men. In Act I Scene 3, Margaret curses not only men but also the other women. This is a play of monologues, of women talking, in effect, to themselves:

Queen Elizabeth	Was never widow had so dear a loss!
Children	Were never orphans had so dear a loss!
Duchess of York	Was never mother had so dear a loss!
	Alas, I am the mother of these griefs.
	Their woes are parcelled; mine is general.

(II. ii. 77 - 81)

It is significant of the isolation of those in the court from each other, and of their own feelings of dispossession from their proper roles, that allegiances and enmities are fleeting. It is easier for the women to turn on Margaret than on Richard (I. iii. 185 - 7). Unlike them, she is bereft of value (but not of power), with no proximity to the throne, no beauty or sexual potential which Richard can use to his own ends. Her anger is impressive, yet Richard manages for the moment to divert it against herself. After her outburst "Thou rag of honour, thou detested" he slips in "Margaret!" (I. iii. 230 - 31). Even another woman, Elizabeth, gloats at this: "Thus have you breathed your curse against yourself" (238).

Although the women are similarly affected by loss, they are not united. Margaret's most telling prophesy is directed against Elizabeth. The ultimate bonding of the women is borne of necessity, not friendship. Yet the play places considerable emphasis on the positive moral weight associated with women, who represent the vestiges of family life, normality and the potential for future regeneration. The widows present in their incantations a community of loss, cast adrift from orthodox positions in society because of their loss of male relations and the loss of titles that accompany them, whether of mother, queen or wife. Mutual grief unites them in Act IV Scene 4 despite their petty attempts to out do

one another's loss. Their earlier reiteration of lost titles emphasises their apparent defeat:

Duchess of York      Thou art a widow, yet thou art a mother,  
    And hast the comfort of thy children left.  
    But death hath snatched my husband from mine arms  
    And plucked two crutches from my feeble hands,  
    Clarence and Edward. O what cause have I,  
    Thine being but a moiety of my moan,  
    To overgo thy woes, and drown thy cries?  
    (II. ii. 55 - 61)

These women are not paragons of perfect suffering, but faulted creatures in tragic circumstances. While women may be close to the source of power (the throne), they are both too close to be safe, and also too far removed to protect themselves or their children.

In the previous play, Margaret was told that all would have been well had she not intervened in war and politics (*3 Henry VI*, II. ii. 160 - 62). But passivity does Anne and Elizabeth no good. When bad news arrives, the very name of 'mother' takes on a dreadful significance (*R III*, IV. i. 40). Elizabeth's lamentations on the deaths of her sons are without point. God will not step in and make all well. Margaret emphasises the new tragedies, asking "Where is thy husband now? Where be thy brothers?/Where are thy two sons?" (IV. iv. 92 - 3). She at least can face the fact that there is no remedy for the situation until Richard is dead. Act IV Scene 4 marks a turning point in the play as the women join together in reviling Richard rather than singly scorning him. The Duchess of York realises that there are limits beyond which motherhood does not go. While she does not have the power to stop Richard's actions, she can withdraw from that most basic human bond. This she effects, although he ignores her, by vowing that she will never speak to him again (IV. iv. 182). The irony of this linguistic rejection by a woman, so soon after Richard becomes king, is part of the gathering momentum of his loss of control of language, particularly language over women, as Marjorie Garber points out.<sup>25</sup>

25. Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*, Methuen, London, 1981, p. 103.

In direct correlation to this, as the play progresses the women gain more power through language. Although she has asked Margaret to teach her how to curse, Elizabeth realises that she must refrain from such language in order to outwit Richard at his own game. Not every form of power in speech is the same as Margaret's. Elizabeth's skill in the conversation of Act IV Scene 4 owes more to Richard's own way of speaking than to Margaret's blunt approach, although it has been inspired by her strength. Elizabeth realises that Richard's own sophistry is the most powerful way for her to counter his words, while he still thinks she can be defeated in argument as easily as Anne. He does not realise that his casuistry convinces neither her nor the audience as he tries to manoeuvre himself away from responsibility for her sons' deaths: "Lo; at their births good stars were opposite" (IV. iv. 216). From line 297 to 308 Elizabeth hardly lets Richard speak, finishing his sentences and turning his meaning against himself. Elizabeth seems to relent and agree to Richard's plans by the end of the scene, bribed by the prospect of the name of grandmother to replace that of mother. But she has actually held her own in the conversation while being astute enough not to let him see this. Gradually the linguistic manoeuvring turns against Richard.

The play concludes with an assertion of values and ideals which are taken to be female: "Now civil wounds are stopped; peace lives again./That she may long live here, God say 'Amen'." (V. viii. 40 - 41). This is a trite couplet, and without doubt the abstraction of peace as female is not without problems for feminist criticism. Nonetheless, these words represent a positive endorsement of the moral force of the women. The women have won a qualified victory and their curses has taken effect (V. v. 158 - 60). Richard is dead.

These women are all losers. Because their identities have focused on their relationships with men, their roles of queen, wife, mother, warrior and prophetess have merely underlined what has been lost. But the women have also exceeded their own expectations of what they can or should do. There is no safe path for

women. Whether they choose to fight, to watch, to curse or lurk in the shadows, they are not guaranteed the ability to protect others or themselves. This is an accurate reflection of the complexity and the faults of the society in which they live. "Why should calamity be full of words?" the Duchess of York demands (IV. iv. 126). It is more than that: it is a call for change.

\* \* \* \* \*

But manhood is melted into courtesies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones, too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving.

(*Much Ado*, IV. i. 319 - 24)

Beatrice, like Portia, is a woman with considerable verbal power, and *Much Ado About Nothing* is a play obsessed with language and its effects. Beatrice and Benedick's witty words constantly dazzle as the reluctant lovers are gulled into a realisation of their true feelings by overhearing themselves described. Language is the medium of love, but also the means of the supposedly fatal slander of Hero on her wedding day. Majorie Garber suggests that language threatens to prevent Beatrice and Bendick's courtship even as it signals their suitability for each other.<sup>26</sup> It certainly shows the division of physical power between the two sexes. Beatrice's words cannot "Kill Claudio" (IV. i. 290). But Claudio's words at the wedding have a calamitous effect for Hero, who, as a woman, depends on a spotless reputation, and who even in the world of romance can be undone by foul stories. Beatrice's exasperation at the fact that the war-world has turned into a world of wit counterpoints the fact that as a woman, the greatest weapons to which she can aspire are merely words.

Beatrice is clearly admired as a witty heroine. For Marilyn French this is all the more remarkable since Beatrice, she argues, is a force for anarchy,

26. Garber, op. cit., p. 85.

mocking male pretence and misogyny.<sup>27</sup> In her study of mutuality (by which she means equality with difference), Marianne Novy concedes that although matched wit for wit, Beatrice and Benedick are finally divided by their society's - and their own - understanding of appropriate behaviour for male and female characters which means that only Benedick can take up arms.<sup>28</sup> Irene Dash under-estimates this play as little more than a light-hearted sparring match between these two characters, who, she assumes, are equally verbally matched.<sup>29</sup> She does not refer to the fact that, for all her outspoken wit, Beatrice is powerless to defend her cousin. Lisa Jardine sees similarities between the shrewish Beatrice and Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, both of whom are finally domesticated. When Beatrice realises that she is powerless to act, Jardine suggests, "she recognises the tongue as the symbol of impotence and inaction, of the threat which will never become a deed".<sup>30</sup> While this indeed true, Beatrice's words are strong enough to convince Benedick to take up arms on her behalf. She has the power to convince him of the validity of her interpretation of events. But the real power of language lies not with a woman's voice, but with the watch, Dogberry and Verges, who inadvertently uncover the plot against Leonato and Hero. It is their linguistic ineptitude that discovers the truth, not Beatrice's intervention in persuading Benedick to challenge Claudio. Ultimately the watch's words defeat both Don John's machinations and the strength of slander, resurrecting the power of language in a comic version of Emilia's truth-telling in *Othello*.

The power of women's words in this play is again constricted by its context. Beatrice may choose between appropriating the language of men's wit prompted by Benedick's past rejection, or silent happiness caused by his (and her) final

27. French, op. cit., p. 131.

28. Marianne L. Novy, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984, p. 28.

29. Dash, op. cit., p. 252.

30. Jardine, op. cit., p. 113.

realisation of love. Hero, like Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*, initially impresses her suitor with her modest silence. The play combines ideas of wit, war and love to allow women to emphasise, rather than challenge, men's dominance. After their return from war the male characters quickly establish witty repartee as their new sphere. It is their world of wit that Beatrice appropriates, and her references to Signor Montanto in her first speeches merely continue, rather than initiate, an eloquence displayed even by the messenger. Undoubtedly, her role as an intelligent woman out-witting the men at their own game of words is a significantly humorous force in the play. Yet within the play's structure, Beatrice's one weapon, speech, is doomed to be absorbed back into the masculine cycle from which it originated. Even as she speaks, other forces - including love, marriage and happiness - aim to silence her. Constant and subtle references to her past relationship with Benedick establish a framework in which the fact that she speaks at all seems spurred by her relationship with Benedick (I. i. 138 - 9). Already partially an outsider because of her status as niece rather than daughter to Leonato, she speaks because she is unloved by a man and unwilling to admit her need of one. This is a temporary form of loquaciousness which her later happiness silences. Her wit in the first scenes is a blind, disguising the fact that she is sad 'in her dreams' but pretending otherwise. The love-plots are thus assured of success because they catalyse, rather than impose, an avowal of love. Once truly happy, it is implied that Beatrice will have no need to speak. She will be calmed and quietened, and as the play ends in her marriage, Benedick playfully kisses her into silence: "Peace, I will stop your mouth" (V. iv. 97).

Women in this play, including Beatrice, silence themselves as well as being silenced by men. Beatrice exposes herself to an interpretation of sexual availability, as Don Pedro notices, by speaking wittily (II. i. 305). This makes it necessary to make clear that her words are not serious: "I was born to speak all mirth and no matter" (II. i. 308 - 9). The fact that such interpretations are

possible demonstrates the need for her to defuse the effect of her own words.

Happiness strengthens this restraint:

Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?  
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.

(III. i. 108 - 12)

Beatrice's silence after this speech is unusual. She has been fooled into admitting her love for Benedick by overhearing Hero and Ursula's stories. These women recognise that Beatrice will accept their condemnation of her outspoken attacks on Benedick as a reasonable charge. That she reacts so quickly is necessary to the play's workings, and their opinions must therefore be seen to bear some amount of truth, even though the audience realises that they are intended to fool her.

Beatrice, happy and thinking herself in love, is quiet. Her silence is compounded by a cold and shock to provide a temporary interlude from her powers of argument, ensuring that she is not at her strongest when Claudio denounces Hero at the wedding. In the virulence of Claudio's attack, Shirley Nelson Garner again sees evidence of a man's certainty of betrayal. It is this, she argues, which inspires the deliberate cruelty of Hero's humiliation. Garner also suggests that this vilification, like Othello's belief in Iago and extreme violence towards Desdemona, testifies to a longing to remain within an all-male community.<sup>31</sup> This is a point echoed by Madelon Gohlke, who argues that "the prospect of heterosexual union arouses emotional conflicts that give shape to the plot, unleashing a kind of violence that in the comedies remains symbolic, imagined rather than enacted".<sup>32</sup> What Claudio apparently achieves through words - the death of Hero - Othello achieves in deed. This seems a plausible argument but is never made explicit by the plays. Indeed Claudio is delighted to find 'another' Hero whom he is willing to marry without having seen, and Othello

31. Garner, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

32. Gohlke, *op. cit.*, p. 171.



is tortured by Desdemona's infidelity. Gohlke's point is an exaggerated psychological critique of male characters.

The misogynistic gender divide lies along linguistic lines. Claudio proves the power of men's language to destroy a woman's reputation, which consists entirely in the words that may be spoken about her. Even the silent and modest Hero is vulnerable to such lies. Lisa Jardine notes that Hero thus becomes surrounded with a halo of 'female' (feminine) heroism common to the slandered heroines like Hermione - and indeed Desdemona-who are most grand when most wronged.<sup>33</sup> This is of course apparent only to the audience, not to the men who condemn her. Marjorie Garber sees such strong parallels between the two plays that she suggests *Much Ado About Nothing* as an equally appropriate title for *Othello*, since both accept lies as a rationale for murder, because both Claudio and Othello fail to accept and understand sexuality.<sup>34</sup> But there is a more disturbing parallel between the two plays which most critics do not discuss. For had Hero or Desdemona really been unfaithful, their accusers would have thought to have been 'right' both within the play world, and possibly by the audience as well. The audience's relief when the truth is told colludes with the expectations of feminine chastity which have provided the opportunity for lies to be believed, obscuring the fact that men and women are judged unequally for their sexual activity.

It is not until Don Pedro, Don John and Claudio have left the wedding scene that Beatrice states Hero has been slandered (IV. i. 147). Beatrice loses her greatest opportunity to speak powerfully. The resurgence of her speech lets her condemn - too late - the fact that men are turned into mere tongues. She of course, has no power to be anything else. Beatrice's failure to speak out in the church, combined with the effectiveness of the slander against Hero, makes

33. Jardine, op. cit., pp. 189 & 193.

34. Garber, op. cit., pp. 138 - 9.

Beatrice long for the action from which she, because she is a woman, is forever barred. Her only recourse is to rage and grief. It is this helplessness, this need for action that she herself cannot undertake, that allows Benedick the opportunity to prove his love. Without it their romance could not thrive. Beatrice simultaneously demonstrates women's 'natural' helplessness and also her own power to inspire Benedick to undertake the action she cannot, because of the limits imposed by the cultural construction of gender. Beatrice's combination of witty power and physical powerlessness (as she also sees it) is a necessary part of the romantic love plot.

Hero's role counterpoints the pressures at work to silence Beatrice. In Act I she is present but silent. She is the perfect, quiet woman. It is this which leaves her open to attack. Hero is not even an active, if unknowing participant in Don John's plot, since it is Margaret's action that is used against her. Harvey Rovine, while observing that Hero has the power of silent attraction which charms Claudio, fails to note the devastating importance of both Beatrice's and Hero's later silence in the church,<sup>35</sup> whereas Garner notes that Hero's silence leaves her without defences.<sup>36</sup> But when Garner states that Hero's angry response is 'given' to Beatrice instead, she forgets that Beatrice only reacts after the main action of the scene is over. Hero's passivity does not protect her from either the malice, or the well-intentioned but misogynistic humour of the other characters in the play. Her father's first reference to her comes as a stock joke about feminine faithlessness when he tells Don Pedro that Hero's mother has many times told him that she is his daughter (I. i. 98 - 100). This exchange is used as a means of enhancing Benedick's reputation - which can only be enhanced by references to a full sexual history, just as Hero's reputation can only be damaged if there is any suggestion that she has been sexually active. Such jokes are apparently not taken seriously. Benedick treats his eventual surrender to the inevitability of an

35. Rovine, *op. cit.*, pp. 38 - 9.

36. Garner, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

unfaithful wife as amusing (V. iv. 122 - 3). The frequency of references to horns and the community of cuckolds provides evidence for Coppélia Kahn of a "shared humiliation" which unites men.<sup>37</sup> This is particularly visible in misogynistic humour. But jocularly on this subject exists only in words. When Claudio, or Othello, think that they have been betrayed in reality, even although they should expect it according to such humour, they are outraged, and it is Hero and Desdemona whom they decide to kill. These men do not see other men as the enemy in such jokes; nor indeed do they attack other men when it comes to exacting revenge, although they believe that it is through men's sexual predatoriness as well as women's inevitable faithlessness that they become cuckolds. Cuckold jokes band men together in the recognition that women are bound to be faithless. This supposedly amusing attitude has serious consequences, since it creates a perception that women are by nature treacherous. This explains the fear and expectation of such infidelity as well as the extreme nature of male reaction to it. Mirth at the expense of the idea of women in general is part of the cultural expectation and creation of gender that deeply affects individual women. Even Hero's innocent suggestion to Don Pedro that she will walk with him can suggest to him that she has a romantic intent (II. i. 80 - 82). Because such ideas are commonplace, it is not too difficult for Don John to convince Hero's supposedly true love, and her own father, both of whom know her to be silent and modest, of her unbridled lust. Hero's own realisation that a single word has the power to destroy love and trust offers her no protection from exactly such destruction (III. i. 86).

That Hero must, even temporarily, die for nothing she has done underlines the atmosphere of vindictiveness against the submissive woman. Her question "And seemed I ever otherwise to you?" is fatally ill-chosen because it reiterates the charges laid against her (IV. i. 55). By this point in the play there is nothing in her words - or her silence as she faints - that cannot be misinterpreted by men.

37. Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981, p. 125.

Indeed her guilt is said to go beyond the boundaries of language itself, as she is accused of infinite imagined crimes which are "Not to be named ... not to be spoke of" (IV. i. 96). In this war of words, truth is placed on a par with speech: "they are spoken, and these things are true" (IV. i. 67). Beatrice, recovered, correctly interprets this as proof that "He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it" (IV. i. 322 - 3). For both Hero and even the witty Beatrice, language proves a dangerous medium, as they are (temporarily) denied access to truth. Indeed Hero is pushed further to the margins of existence as the friar plans to announce her death, and even when she is allowed to return, it is not as herself, but as *another* Hero. Although the words spoken against her have proved entirely false, it is implied that they have stained the original, since "One Hero died defiled" (V. iv. 63). Hero's ultimate innocence excuses her accusers and ensures a romantic ending. Similarly Desdemona's attempt to exonerate her husband ensures that *Othello* remains a tragedy of love and not a study of unadulterated hatred, which would have been inevitable had she denounced Othello as her murderer. Both Hero and Beatrice are silent as they marry, and it is Benedick, not Beatrice, who has the last word. Both the verve and the skill which Beatrice has shown in appropriating men's wit are finally defeated by love.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,  
 And place your hands below your husband's foot,  
 In token of which duty, if he please,  
 My hand is ready, may it do him ease.

(*Taming*, V. ii. 181 - 4)

From the vigorous performances typical of productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* (although perhaps less so in the Bogdanov production discussed in Dollimore and Sinfield<sup>38</sup>), this play seems a sharp verbal and physical sparring match of the sexes. Yet the spitfire Kate (I have called her this throughout as she seems more a creature of others' creation than her own preferred 'Katherine') is

38. Alan Sinfield, 'Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology', in Jonathan Dollimore, & Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985, pp. 151 - 81, pp. 170 & 173.

actually an infrequent speaker, who ends the play with an extreme endorsement of men's supremacy. Only ostensibly is there a problem: one loud, violent, older sister and one pretty, modest young one. Their father will not let the latter marry until her older sister is married, presumably because he is worried that he will be forever saddled with a shrewish spinster. But is this quite true? What these men describe and what we see do not coincide. Kate has wealth and is young and beautiful (I. ii. 85). Her treatment of Bianca makes it clear that she does want to get married, and the idea that she is "intolerable curst" is projected onto her by the men who discuss her (I. ii. 88). An examination of the language of Act I Scene 2, which establishes our expectations of Kate for the rest of the play, shows the powerful misogyny ranged against her through the language in which men describe her. According to them, she is likely to prove "a shrewd, ill-favoured wife" (59) since she is already "intolerable curst/And shrewd and froward" (88 - 9), "Renowned in Padua for her scolding tongue" (99), "Katherine the curst" (126), "Katherine the curst - /A title for a maid of all titles the worst" (127 - 8), "curst Katherine" (182), "this wild-cat" (194) who is "famous for a scolding tongue" (254). Faced with this barrage of opinion, it is hardly surprising that Petruccio decides that "I know she is an irksome, brawling scold" (186) even when he has admitted in the same scene that "I know her father, though I know *not her*" (my italics) (100).

The tension between perceptions of the play and what an examination of its language reveals can in part be attributed to its exploration of the control and distortion of perceived reality through language. Sly's senses and such wits as he has are deceived into the peerage; the audience may be similarly duped. The play has a markedly unfinished feel about it, both because of the absence of Sly and his deceivers at its close, and also from the open-endedness of the final comment: "Tis a wonder ... she will be tamed so" (V. ii. 194). Indeed it is - so much so that Kate's final and longest speech defies simple explanation or credence. Underlying the idea of the linguistic control of reality is the disturbing manner in which

people are used by others with superior physical and verbal power, with the aim of experimenting upon human character, disorienting it, and seeing what may be made of the results. This is true for both Sly and Kate: there is a certain parity between a beggar and an unwanted spinster in the minds of those they encounter, although Kate notes that even beggars calling at her home receive better treatment than she does from Petruccio (IV. iii. 4 - 6). In the Induction, it is not only class divisions, but also those of gender which are crossed. To amuse the lord, the page is dressed as a lady; to amuse us, Kate is apparently turned into one.

The Induction is comic because of the presentation as truths of patent untruths. We revel with the lord and his courtiers in our superior knowledge of Sly's reality, and the play ends without his being undeceived. The emphasis on the change of sex does more than titillate. The joke implies that in the area where we most trust our instincts, we may be most completely fooled. What greater deception than to mistake your lover's sex? Furthermore, relationships in this society must be conducted in a mutually accessible language. Sly needs to know the correct terms in which to address his wife before he can be taken seriously (Induction 2, 106 - 7). The relationships in the play proper do not achieve that state. Before we hear Kate speak, Bianca's suitors feel perfectly at liberty to insult her to her face and in front of her father, who seems peculiarly careless of her (I. i. 58). Her bitterness here is a manipulation of the audience's perceptions. She is called rough and treated rudely. Her subsequent irritation is hardly surprising. It is exactly what she has been forced to say, confirming the terms in which she has been described. It is a self-referential and self-justifying projection.

The difference between male and female characters is most noticeable in their access to and use of language. For the women, it is often a snide weapon of jealousy. It proves inadequate for the frustrations which Kate feels, to the point that she strikes Bianca. But Kate is no anti-marriage radical thinker. When she

ties-up Bianca and baits her with taunts, she is envious, as far as one can gather, both of her father's apparent greater affection for Bianca, and of Bianca's popularity with suitors (II. i. 32). The two hundred and eighty-five lines of the scene never relent from the idea of Kate's shrewishness. Yet all we have as actual proof of her character is fair reaction to bad treatment, which is neither excessive nor particularly 'curst'. Coppélia Kahn also observes this disparity between what Kate says and does and how she is described. Kahn attributes this misrepresentation to the fact that Kate, powerless to act against the injustices of her treatment, lashes out in language, and, under direct intimidation because she is a woman, hits out as well.<sup>39</sup> Because Kate is not a typically passive woman, her reactions are perceived as the only other available type of feminine behaviour: shrewishness.

Of course this has to be a false battle. Once unleashed, how could the woman who was as terrible as these men say ever become the miraculously tamed 'household Kate' of Act V? Who would want her? Kate is misrepresented by the men commenting on her behaviour as the ultimate shrew-type rather than as an individual woman reacting to her particular circumstances. Very often we hear about Kate's actions second-hand and from men. Their reports tell us of a wildly independent character who "did call me rascal, fiddler/And twangling jack" (II. i. 157 - 8), breaking the music master's lute over his head. What character! What fun! What evidence? Because the scene is presented off-stage, we have to trust a man's judgement of Kate's behaviour when it has already been taken for granted by the male characters in particular that she is a shrew. Marilyn French suggests that Kate can only be tamed because she was not a shrew in the first place. I agree. However, her point that the play describes the taming of both shrews, Kate and Petruccio is less convincing - and of course asserts that Kate is a shrew after all.<sup>40</sup> It is hard to see how Petruccio is tamed and by whom. It is Kate who reacts

<sup>39</sup>. Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>40</sup>. French, *op. cit.*, p. 82 & 83.

to his behaviour, not vice-versa, and she who capitulates to his version of marriage, patriarchy and indeed reality. Kate is a victim of the marriage market. Petruccio finds a real bargain - beauty, money, and finally the most obedient wife of all. He also remains an untamed shrew both in speech and action. Petruccio's outrageous behaviour is never taken as a typical of husbands. There is no enlargement of one man's behaviour and words into a gender-type in the way that is true here for Kate or in *Othello* for Desdemona.

Petruccio's absolute confidence in his chances of success and dismissal of Kate's power to stop him appears comic, in that the audience presumes a superior knowledge of Kate's shrewishness and therefore expects Petruccio to be surprised (I. ii. 94 - 5; 197 - 209). When it transpires that he will act the shrew much better than she, the audience's delight in having its own expectations of the situation, rather than Petruccio's, reversed, increases. Petruccio's apparently defiant threats make his task seem all the greater, and the fact that he achieves what he determines to do from the start seems a great victory, rather than simply an expectation fulfilled. In order for the inevitability of his intention not to destroy the humour of the play, the audience must see (or be persuaded that it sees) a great battle of wills when, in fact, there is no such clash. Kate never desires spinsterhood and the challenge that would offer to the male order. Indeed she seems obsessed with men, far more so than Bianca.

The competitive edge to the sisters' relationship raises the question of whether the end of the play shows the 'ugly duckling' having her revenge on the mallards, once she has turned into a swan - but this still leaves woman at the level of a "bird" (V . ii. 48). Whereas the affectionate cousins of *Much Ado* or *As You Like It* are paired foils of characters, Bianca and Kate are direct rivals, never loving sisters. Marianne Novy points out that Kate is entirely without female friends in the play.<sup>41</sup> This means that neither she nor the audience has a

41. Novy, op. cit. p. 60.



sympathetic female ally against whom to judge Petruccio. Indeed the dominant theme of the relationship with other women remains one of jealousy, never friendship or alliance. In Act V, the widow expects Kate to be a shrew, and Bianca quite clearly thinks her mad when she spoils her cap. Harvey Rovine notes that Bianca attracts suitors by her silence, yet forgets the irony that by the end of the play Bianca has become far more a shrew than her sister.<sup>42</sup> Indeed Bianca's elopement and subsequent sullen stubbornness presents the established order with far more of a challenge than any of Kate's words or actions, reinforcing the idea of "unconstant womankind" (IV. ii. 14).

Act II is a single scene which gives a mixed impression. Petruccio is talking about a situation which does not exist with his "two raging fires" (II. i. 132). In his courtship and marriage of Kate, where communication should be closest, misinterpretation offers a rich vein for comedy. Petruccio takes this potential further by severing the relationship between language and meaning, a complex idea worked-out against what is actually an ultra-orthodox marriage. Marianne Novy sees the scene as an important example of game-playing between the couple, which will eventually result in their married harmony.<sup>43</sup> By this argument, Petruccio uses language to test Kate's response, rather than to reflect or convey truth. He invents an imaginary reputation for her to see how she will respond to the idea of being widely praised. Just as Kahn suggests that Petruccio needs Kate to validate his masculinity, so Novy argues that he needs her to become complicit in his wooing as a partner. Even if Novy's understanding of this game-playing is accurate, however, Kate is particularly unfairly handicapped. Joel Fineman provides a different view, which is that Petruccio - like Claudio in *Much Ado* - is one representative of the large group of male characters who compare themselves to the women of the comedies (who are stronger figures) and

42. Rovine, op. cit., p. 39.

43. Novy, op. cit., p. 47.

finding their masculinity wanting; hence their defensive gynophobia.<sup>44</sup> But this again over-estimates the power of female characters. There is no evidence that Petruccio feels in any way either threatened by or inferior to Kate. If such is the subliminal action of the play, it militates very heavily against what is apparent on stage.

The meeting of Kate and Petruccio is crucial to the play. We imagine that the two lovers spar as equals. They do not. Petruccio's "You lie, in faith" (II. i. 185) in response to Kate's simple naming of herself is astonishingly arrogant, and goes completely unchallenged. In fact there is nothing Kate can do, for that most fundamental of verbal markers, one's own name, is not one's own. It is a power given to others. If Petruccio chooses to call her Kate rather than Katherine, she cannot stop him. Their repartee is unequal because Petruccio has the ultimate weapon (and one still frequently used today): the sexual innuendo. He implies an absence of respect for Kate with his "Come, sit on me" (II. i. 198) and "What, with my tongue in your tail? Nay, come again, / Good Kate, I am a gentleman" (II. i. 216 - 17). However Kate chooses to respond, she is in a conversation where Petruccio has effectively pre-programmed her response. If Petruccio refuses to acknowledge her equal role in this conversation, does it exist? This is a sphere in which women cannot win. Kate's blow at this point is hardly shrewishness, but rather frustration with a degrading situation where she cannot defend herself and where she is made to sound as though it is she who is making the lewd suggestions.

Marianne Novy suggests that it is indeed Kate who initiates this bawdy conversation, but that she cannot cope with the consequences of what she has started. Petruccio proves the more effective linguistic manipulator.<sup>45</sup> Kate does

44. Joel Fineman, 'Fratricide and Cuckoldry: Shakespeare's Doubles', in Schwartz, & Kahn (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 70 - 109, p. 84.

45. Novy, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

respond quickly, wittily and in kind to Petruccio, but it is he who puts the sexual gloss on her words. Even though the audience can see that Kate is being manipulated, part of such a scene's enjoyment is derived from her dilemma. It is inevitable that the force of comedy makes the audience collude in such an amusing scene, without necessarily approving it. Petruccio's linguistic power is further underlined with his question "Why does the world report that Kate doth limp?" (II. i. 247) No-one has mentioned such a thing, but we are in the realm of auto-suggestion. It would indeed be comic if Kate looked both aghast and annoyed as her legs suddenly refused to function normally, if only for the duration of Petruccio's speech.

The play appears to prove that Kate has great spirit, and, after a great struggle, learns to be resolved to a peaceful life. The truth is that her fate, and her desire for marriage (in which of course she is successful), have been fixed from the start. Indeed it becomes increasingly clear that, as this is a romantic comedy, she has fallen in love with Petruccio - perhaps because he has taken more interest in her than has anyone else in the play. This true affection means that her treatment seems marginally less disturbing than it might otherwise appear. This dangerous mixture of abuse and affection finally renders Kate powerless by love. Her shrewishness is a false blind put up to make us believe a mythical transformation when in fact male power has remained absolute. Kate never expresses a productive challenge to the way things are managed, because she is never given time to understand them, and the unintelligible is uncombatable. Combined with Kate's attraction to Petruccio, without which she might truly object to her treatment, it is also inescapable.

The wedding is a typically complex scene. Here, Kate's apparent antipathy to her marriage is actually the reverse: a bitter voicing of her expectation that she would be left at the altar. She exits not rejoicing at her lucky escape, but weeping for her lost opportunity. Once the marriage has been performed, there seems a

moment of indecision as to whether Kate will assert herself and refuse to leave until she is ready (III. iii. 80). It is not simply Petruccio's picture of Kate as his goods and chattels which defeats this intention, but his cry "Fear not, sweet wench. They shall not touch thee, Kate./I'll buckler thee against a million" (III. iii. 110 - 11). This is both a threat and a promise. It seems charming that Petruccio should care so vigorously about a woman for whom Padua and her family have shown a conspicuous lack of affection; but it is not true. This speech is not addressed directly to Kate, but to the crowd, who are surely doing none of the things Petruccio suggests: "Nay, look not big, nor stamp, nor stare, nor fret. /I will be master of what is mine own" (III. iii. 100 - 101). This community does not want the embarrassing spinster - why should they try to take her from her husband when they are undoubtedly relieved she is married? But it may well be that the audience wants her to be wanted. Coupldom is highly valued, even when it is as potentially dangerous for women as it is here.

Act IV isolates Kate with Petruccio. The elements are cruel and offer no protection. It is harsh weather for a bride's homecoming. Once more the comedy of the scene, where Kate's horse falls and Petruccio beats Grumio despite her pleas is reported, not seen. But this time the description of her behaviour leads to Curtis' recognition that Petruccio "is more shrew than she" (IV. i. 76). By this point the supposedly shrewish Kate needs no taming, and yet the violence surrounding her increases. Petruccio presents two conflicting realities, telling his wife to "be merry" and then striking the servants (IV. i. 134). His words do not tally with a reasonable response to his actions. Petruccio's statement of policy and later aside show that there is a stable reality (or so he thinks). He knows the meal is not eaten by Kate and the tailor will be paid. But always he keeps the upper hand. Petruccio breaks the links between signifiers (words, clothes) and what they signify (gender, status, meaning), to a specific end. The audience can begin to see that these are arbitrary connections, a radical point of view that questions our powers of communication with the world and people around us.

But Petruccio uses this knowledge quite differently, to endorse absolutely an absolute regime of conservatism. The fact that Petruccio pretends (that is, intends) all to be done for Kate's benefit is, of course, one of the greatest arguments for supposedly benevolent dictatorship.

Kate's experience of living with Petruccio cannot be rationalised. All the outrageous actions are performed "under the name of perfect love" (IV. iii. 12). There is no discernible logic in Petruccio's methods, except that they are presented with consummate confidence as if they were the most reasonable thing in the world. The play dislocates the usual tension and balance between meaning and language, and between language and behaviour, which only exists because we choose severally to endorse it. Once Petruccio stops playing the game and invents his own rules, meaning becomes highly subjective. By the end of the play, it becomes very difficult to respond to language in our accustomed manner. Hence the unreal aura around Kate's final speech, although the threat of violence which surrounds her never feels less than real. Ruth Nevo reminds us that Petruccio neither beats nor rapes Kate, two other methods of taming termagant wives.<sup>46</sup> While this is true, it is hardly proof of his gentleness. Indeed, given that this is a romance, Petruccio's efforts to deprive Kate of sleep and food when she has already capitulated to his wishes seem sufficiently extreme. The difference between Kate's violence and Petruccio's is that he calculatingly maltreats Kate to guide her lesson in obedience while she hits out to express her exasperation at the inadequacy of words and the disintegration of recognisable meaning in her world. She is a good candidate for this exercise exactly because she is not a shrew - she only fights before the taming begins, not after she is married. Once his plans are underway, she capitulates beyond expectation.

The word-play of Act IV Scenes 3 and 5, provides the final severance of Kate's naive trust in meaning. Petruccio allows no time for her to answer his

46. Ruth Nevo, *Comic Transformations in Shakespeare*, Methuen, London, 1980, p. 38.

“What! Hast thou dined?” (IV. iii. 59). Clothes are simply another set of signs Petruccio is determined to prove fallible. Lisa Jardine uses the historical significance of the sumptuary laws and dress codes to point out that Petruccio is making a direct assault on Kate’s wardrobe as her means of self-expression, just as he was intending to shock Paduan convention by appearing at his wedding so ill-attired.<sup>47</sup> Marianne Novy argues that all Petruccio’s reversals of dress, speech, sun and moon, male and female (Vincentio) represent his scorn for convention and his preference for internal rather than external values.<sup>48</sup> This sounds noble - but at what cost is it conducted, and at whose expense? If Petruccio simply wants to scorn society, why does he find it necessary to do so by teaching Kate his intention? Similarly, if it is all a game, as Novy suggests, it is one with two very unequal players, one of whom has prior knowledge of the game’s meaning, and the other of whom is imprisoned and maltreated until she understands the message. For Kate, the benefit is questionable: a greater understanding of the fact that she must live subject to an arbitrary but absolute system of value and meaning imposed within a patriarchal system by her husband. Finally, Kate’s speech is determined as she seeks to call a halt, to confront what is happening, and to demand an explanation. The audience may expect Petruccio to justify his actions.

My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,  
Or else my heart concealing it will break,  
And rather than it shall I will be free  
Even to the uttermost as I please in words.

(IV. iii. 77 - 80)

This echoes strongly Emilia’s protestation that:

I will speak as liberal as the north.  
Let heaven, and men, and devils, let ‘em all,  
All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak.

(*Oth*, V. ii. 226 - 8)

But the relief never comes. Unlike Emilia, Kate is ignored. Petruccio overrides her meaning, conducting a quasi-logical conversation with what she is *not* saying:

47. Jardine, *op. cit.* p. 154.

48. Novy, *op. cit.* p. 51.

Kate           Belike you mean to make a puppet of me.  
 Petruccio      Why true, he means to make a puppet of thee.  
 (IV. iii. 103 - 104)

Conversation is a joint exercise. If the play can do such extreme violence to its own dialogue, it cannot help but have significant impact on the dialogue it has with the audience, particularly in the possible responses to Kate's final speech. Petruccio's perversion of Kate's meaning is uncombatable. If others more powerful than she refuse to abide by the same rules of communication as those she knows, she must learn to speak their language. Codes of dress and speech may be arbitrary, but they are vital. We need them to make ourselves understood, to understand others, to perceive reality, perhaps even to exist at all. If Kate is deprived of any system of words or dress through which to communicate in the play, she will slip from the margins to non-existence. It is therefore notable that by the end of the play, she starts to speak more. Petruccio teaches Kate his system, in which she becomes more fluent than in the conventions of Padua: "What you will have it named, even that it is, /And so it shall be still for Katherine" (IV. v. 22 - 3). Kate now understands Petruccio's game - but he is still in control. Her use of her longer name seems to signify a new discovery of self, just as she surrenders it completely. Or is this simply a linguistic manipulation to make the line fit the metre? At the very moment she understands that things are divisible from the words used to describe them, she hands the power of that discovery, and power over herself, back to Petruccio. Kate thus endorses a rigid hierarchy of experiencing reality according to Petruccio's arbitrary desire.

By Act V any reliance on linguistic pointers has been so shaken that it is difficult not to read heavy irony into the supposed simplicity of the ending. For there are no longer any rules, and this is where Petruccio himself is in error. Kate has not profited by the discovery of revolution in words. When it becomes clear she is not a shrew, unlike the other women, and that Petruccio has brought about a miracle - a tamed woman - it appears that the normal supremacy of men has been

re-established. This in turn implies that men's supremacy in marriage is *not* normal, as the other men marvel at Petruccio's power and fortune. Yet the supposed liberty and dominance of the other wives is not freedom, but stereotypical shrewishness, while Kate is completely submissive. The play's wider resonances can be realised only by the audience. Is the throwing down of the cap the action of a slave, a freed spirit, or a fool? There is no definitive interpretation in a play where interpretation has proved itself to be dangerously deceptive. This fracturing of reality, language and meaning rebounds on Petruccio and on the idea of men's supremacy in marriage, in whose name it has been exercised. Kate's final speech seems to endorse everything such a man could have hoped to achieve in training his wife for her role. She is now the model wife who instructs other women how to behave:

Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,  
And place your hands below your husband's foot,  
In token of which duty, if he please,  
My hand is ready, may it do him ease.

(V. ii. 181 - 4)

Kate's words may be read in a variety of ways, but remain strikingly hollow-sounding. The speech may be dismissed as outrageous and pernicious, or it may be thought to be true. It may simply show Kate deliberately surprising the other couples' expectations, or be read as highly ironic. Ruth Nevo is particularly convinced of its positive nature. Petruccio's comic therapy, "so instructive, liberating and therapeutic", has secured liberation from Petrarchan patriarchy for himself and his wife.<sup>49</sup> This is the absolute opposite of the truth. Kate's description is an accurate reflection of a wife's position in the time at which it was written, and in many instances is still true today. Coppélia Kahn sees in the speech evidence of a Kate who has retained her intellectual spirit and has learnt that to maintain her inner freedom she must outwardly deny it by reiterating Petruccio's dominance. In other words, it is spoken with complete and deliberate

49. Nevo, *op. cit.*, pp. 39 & 50.



irony. Kahn suggests that the speech represents men's fantasies at two levels: both as a sign of total obedience, and as a sign that woman remains untamed even in subjection. She also argues that this demonstrates that women's power consists in the ability to validate (or not) a man's masculinity, maturity and social respectability.<sup>50</sup> While I agree that power exists primarily in relationships, the supposed power Kahn describes is entirely negative. Moreover the validation of 'masculinity' may be pleasing for men; the parallel reinforcement of 'femininity' is destructive for women. Petruccio did not lack women's validation before he married Kate - or at least he suffered from no lack of self-confidence. What he did lack was money, which Kate's dowry has provided. As Lisa Jardine observes, Petruccio is a fortune-hunter, and "if obedience correlates with financial support, then it is Petruccio who should kneel to Kate."<sup>51</sup>

Jardine also notes that the type of marriage which Kate's final speech represents does not reflect her own experience of marriage to Petruccio. A speech which did mirror Kate's recent experience would be one of humiliation, not merely subjection. Marianne Novy on the other hand sees this speech as a consummate example of the reconciliation of patriarchy with married equality and understanding,<sup>52</sup> echoing Harvey Rovine's idea that Kate ends the play as a sober spokeswoman for mutual dependence in marriage.<sup>53</sup> While I entirely agree with Novy that Petruccio has conducted a language game aimed at redefining the external world, I question her understanding of both his methods and his motives. Most obviously, the game does not change Kate's position, nor her relationship in marriage. It is extremely optimistic to claim that because Petruccio has treated Kate so badly in the early days of their marriage, now that she understands him, he will become a gentle husband. Marilyn French is chiefly concerned that the

50. Kahn, *op. cit.*, pp. 115; 117 - 18.

51. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

52. Novy, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

53. Rovine, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

play "concludes with a harmonious synthesis of unabused masculine and inlaw feminine principles, but it celebrates the outlaw aspect, defiance and rebellion".<sup>54</sup> But then one might expect her to say that.

It is my own opinion that this play demonstrates a combination of men's physical and verbal dominance, while undermining its own position by proving to Kate and to us that such dominance is based on the shifting sand of arbitrary meaning and constructed gender. The ambiguity of the ending contains merely a *frisson* of recognition that Petruccio's success is double-edged. To reinforce the dominant system, which was not threatened, and certainly not by Kate, Petruccio has uncovered a labyrinth of danger. He departs from the stage happy in having won his wager and proved his point. All this may indeed do him ease, but it cannot us.

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Language is a dangerous medium for female characters. Whether they show appropriate modesty or exhibit great wit and power, they are open to potentially fatal misinterpretation and are ultimately silenced. Through the power of misogyny expressed both in and through language, we may see the workings not only of gender-based biases, but also the actual construction of misogyny itself. These women's words and their use of, by and within language, speak powerfully to us of their predicament. This points the way to the construction if not of a new language, then certainly of a new way of speaking.

54. French, op. cit., p. 85.

## Power Dressing

Cross-dressing simultaneously blurs and stresses gender difference, underlining the heroine's peculiarity or 'otherness' at the same time that it seeks to assimilate her into the predominating patriarchal society. As evidence of a female character's (temporary) liberation from the social or romantic constraints formed by cultural expectations of gender, it is highly qualified. Often, it compounds her romantic predicament. Cross-dressing is not a cause, but a symptom, of the fracturing of gender-identity. There are seven Shakespearean female characters who choose to cross-dress, all located within plays which may either be called romantic comedies or which are dominated by the theme of romantic love: Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; Portia, Nerissa and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*; Rosalind in *As You Like It*; Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Innogen in *Cymbeline, King of Britain*. I have chosen to concentrate on three of these characters: Portia, Rosalind and Viola.

Cross-dressing suggests a paradox: that, because they are female, these characters do not have the appropriate power they need for the circumstances in which they find themselves, and yet also that they have exactly that power, because when they are cross-dressed, they are still female and still manage to achieve their aims. In other words, the plays infer that for a woman to have power does not require that she stop being female but that she stops being perceived as feminine so that other characters may react differently to her for a while. This indicates the difference between female and feminine: women are not supposed to become successful advocates, or live out in a forest: yet they are clearly capable of doing so. If the trousers do not quite fit, neither do the skirts.

In this chapter, I seek to answer the following questions: in what power relationships are these characters involved; in what capacity and with whom; what gendered expectations underlie them; why do they need to cross dress; how

is the balance of power affected; what opportunities and problems does cross-dressing present; what has changed when they revert to womanhood? A doublet and hose give female characters the opportunity to take an active, vocal and central role in ordering their (love) lives in a way which is prohibited to those in skirts. But is the cross-dressed heroine in control?

Female characters cross-dress in the pursuit of love. Male characters do not cross dress - it would be entirely unthinkable for them to do so. The mutability of gender is a one-way process which does not significantly disrupt the social order. Cross-dressing does not give female characters any great insight into men's character or psyche. They become neither men, nor even the youths whom they imitate, who are themselves unskilled in being men. Indeed cross-dressed heroines provide evidence that manhood is a learned condition, or at least one that comes only with maturity, since an immature man and a young but mature woman are thought to be the equivalent in habits, appearance and vocal power. Marjorie Garber develops this idea, asserting that there is a third gender of the cross-dressed too often allied with one or other of the existent opposite sexes, rather than being seen as a distinct gender (or absence of gender) in its own right. Arguing against the idea that cross-dressing is simply fun and functional because liminal and temporary, Garber suggests that the space liberated by this blurring of gender (and, in the Renaissance, class) distinctions is fundamental to culture, which cannot exist without "the crisis of category itself" that transvestism provokes. The Renaissance sumptuary laws provided "visible and above all *legible* distinctions of wealth and rank" and the confusion of such important outward codes was met with absolute horror by contemporary commentators.<sup>1</sup> Thus theatres and players had to be granted exemption licenses so that actors could portray anyone other than themselves, whether cross-dressed or not. Catherine Belsey places a similar emphasis on the liberating effect of cross-

1. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1993, pp. 3, 17 & 26.

dressing for all fixed notions of gender when she points out that "it is possible, at least in fiction, to speak from a position which is not that of a full, unified, gendered subject."<sup>2</sup> In fact the space created by this fracturing of sex and gender indicates both how the plays suggest that gender is manufactured, and also where they imply that it is 'natural'.

These plays are important for feminist criticism for obvious reasons: the leading roles are given to female characters, and the plays focus on the question of the innate nature of women and men and the social construction of masculine and feminine genders. Although neglected by many feminist critics, the boy players are fundamental to any understanding of the significance of cross-dressing. The cross-dressed heroine presents both an examination of femininity and women's power upon which twentieth-century feminist critics concentrate, and also an examination of homosexuality and effeminacy which engaged the contemporary audience much more directly.

I have chosen 'Power Dressing' as the title for this chapter because the characters who cross-dress apparently gain greater power merely by changing their dress. In the 1980s, Power Dressing became a term widely-used to describe a certain type of women's wear: suits with short skirts, powerful shoulder pads, large amounts of fake jewellery and high heels. In variations of this outfit many Western women chose to pursue positions of power in 'a man's world'. Even in a supposedly post-feminist era, dress, particularly for women wishing to enter traditionally patriarchal areas, is extremely important: people still consciously dress for success and there are specific differences between the way in which men and women dress in order to be taken seriously by the predominating power-brokers, that is, men.

2. Catherine Belsey, 'Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies', in John Drakakis (ed.), *Alternative Shakespeares*, Methuen, London, 1985, pp. 166 - 90; p. 180.

Women who chose to power dress deliberately accented their sexuality and even their sexual availability. With heavily made-up faces and emphasised legs and bosoms, they provided a near parody of supposedly heterosexual femininity. But their provocativeness was double-sided: a deliberate challenge to men's authority clothed in highly stereotyped attire, worn by professional women, many of whom took exception to being called feminists. These women gained power within professions traditionally dominated by men by dressing to emphasise that their nature as women remained predictable.

In the New Age '90s, women thirsty for professional success do not power dress. Nor do they cross-dress: they do not need to do so. If they want to wear pinstriped trouser suit, shirt, tie and cuff-links, they are considered chic. When we look at Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines, we do not think them particularly strange; we are not as conscious of their cross-dressed state as was the sixteenth century audience.

What has this to do with Shakespeare? It serves as an example, from a period close to our own, of the fact that women who wish to occupy positions of power in a patriarchal society may still decide to dress in a manner that deliberately evokes and simultaneously challenges that patriarchy, using stereotypical sexuality as a weapon in the struggle for power. It focuses our attention on the complexity of the influences and effects of cross-dressing. It also suggests that we lose at least one dimension of discomfort, and therefore complexity, by the fact that we no longer have boys in the women's parts.

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Although the circumstances surrounding each cross-dressed heroine are specific, there is a pattern which holds true for them all. All cross-dressers are young, female and on the verge of romance. Their new guise exaggerates, rather

than disguises either their sex or their romantic circumstances - at least to the audience. Viola and Rosalind in particular are at great pains to point out their inadequacies as youths. As Cesario, Viola is terrified of fighting Sir Andrew; as Ganymede, Rosalind constantly laments her doublet and hose when she learns Orlando is in the forest and swoons when Oliver tells of the danger Orlando has risked for his sake. Because the plays establish the heroines as believable women lovers before they cross-dress, the audience is constantly aware that what it sees is an illusion, and the cross-dressers' own references to the peculiarity of their state emphasise this. Only Portia appears confident of her new role, which involves no physical danger to her person but instead a testing of her existing wit and verbal abilities, skills which a woman can be thought 'naturally' to possess.

Indeed, since these cross-dressers become neither youths, nor men, nor remain (at least at one level) as young women, they become a different rather than an imitation gender. This ensures that their femininity is consistently emphasised, rather than diminished, by their cross-dressed state, reinforcing our understanding of the nature of women rather than challenging it. Most feminist critics argue that cross-dressing opens-up a realm where all gender is shown to be socially constructed. However it is also possible to argue the opposite point of view, based on the fact that in particular, Viola and Rosalind's supposedly essential femaleness (femininity) remains unaffected. The plays thus also present the possibility that gender may be fixed and indivisible from biological sex: there is such a thing as female nature that cannot be altered by a change of clothes, which can only fool the other play characters for a while, and the audience not at all.

These cross-dressers are always isolated, separated from their family or community. They are the heroines of the plays - by which I mean the main characters. They cross-dress out of necessity, not out of a whim or desire to dress in men's dress for its own sake. Cross-dressing occurs only within the context of a romantic love plot which deals also with the nature of same-sex love and/or

friendship. It also creates problems, particularly in terms of the sexual orientation of the other characters attracted to the cross-dresser. The heroine may choose deliberately to keep-up her disguise even when abandoning it would resolve such problems at a stroke. Yet these characters do not want to become men: they do not intend this as a permanent transformation. In fact, by allying cross-dressing so closely with romantic love, there can be no danger of the heroine remaining cross-dressed. Her objective in cross-dressing can be achieved only if her state is temporary and resolved by happy heterosexual coupledness in the final act. Cross-dressing does not change what women are expected or allowed to do. Although certain things may have been achieved, the patriarchy remains not only unshaken but apparently also confirmed. Yet it is possible to interpret the plays completely differently, arguing that the patriarchy has been shaken to its foundation: women have proved that they can do all these things; they have asserted themselves. Life will never be the same again. Both readings have validity.

Cross-dressing allows female characters the opportunity to be treated with a different set of gendered expectations of their behaviour. Feminist critics are often tempted to think of these heroines as examples of assertive women, reflections of a historical and social reality in sixteenth century England. It is also seductive to think of them as positive role models for real women. "Limits? What limits?" exclaims Clara Claiborne Park.

It would seem that no girl need feel herself diminished when she reads *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice* or *Much Ado*. Rather, she is given a glittering sense of possibility. Who would not, if she could, be beautiful, energetic, active, verbally brilliant and still sought after by desirable men, like these Shakespearean heroines? <sup>3</sup>

This sort of attitude has barely changed since Anna Jameson: "Portia *clever!* What an epithet to apply to this heavenly compound of talent, feeling, wisdom,

3. Clara Claiborne Park, 'As We Like It: How a Girl Can be Smart and Still Popular' in Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, & Carol Thomas Neely (eds.), *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1980, pp. 100 - 116, p. 102.



beauty and gentleness!"<sup>4</sup> But there are significant problems inherent in such whole-hearted endorsement. Feminist historians often take opposing views of the significance of female characters within these plays, the relationship between literature and life, and what these characters can suggest about life in sixteenth-century England. Citing the same sources, Linda Woodbridge and Lisa Jardine come to opposite conclusions. Jardine argues that the strong female characters of Shakespeare's plays almost certainly meant that there was no 'Paradise of Weomen' in contemporary England,<sup>5</sup> while Woodbridge recounts a number of surprised male reactions to women's apparent liberty:

There is much to suggest that the Renaissance literary obsession with aggressive women reflected the realities of London life. Foreign visitors to England marvelled at Englishwomen's liberty, particularly their visiting playhouses and taverns unescorted: Thomas Platter, a Swiss traveller, went so far as to maintain that women frequented taverns and alehouses more than men did. Frederick, Duke of Württemberg, who visited England in 1602, wrote that "the women have much more liberty than perhaps in any other place." Fynes Moryson voiced a common proverb in 1617: "England in generall is said to be the Hell of Horses, the Purgatory of Servants and the Paradice of Weomen."<sup>6</sup>

Woodbridge's eagerness to concur with this image is infectious to feminists: at one level we want to believe that real life was "full of women who gad about visiting each other, shopping, attending plays, drinking in taverns".<sup>7</sup> But these characters are the exception not the rule, and it is this unusualness, combined with the fact that their change of identity is only temporary, which allows them to be celebrated, before they are once more confined within the traditional role of wife.

It is important to consider how far the boy actor has influenced female parts

4. Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare's Heroines*, Ernest Nister, London, 1897, p. 13.
5. Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, second edn., Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1989, p. 104.
6. Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind 1540 - 1620*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1984, pp. 171 - 2.
7. Woodbridge, *ibid.*, pp. 172.

in Shakespeare and how far his presence was accepted as absolutely normal. Shakespeare and his audience were entirely familiar with boys in female parts, and cross-dressing is a symptom of their confidence: the complexity of the disguise could be alluded to without destroying the illusion and power of the comedy and the romance. Stephen Orgel is intrigued by the fact that the English stage employed boy actresses when other European countries had women actors precisely because they found transvestite boys more disturbing. This is a false premise since it implies a conscious and deliberate choice of the boys over women in England when no such choice was thought of. Orgel's view that the number of women in the audience would add to the pressure for female actresses seems similarly strange, since presumably the women in the audience were as well-used to the tradition of boys as were the men, and there is no evidence that they thought of themselves as a coherent voice of comment. Nevertheless, his point that in many of Shakespeare's plays, and particularly in the romances and comedies, the women's point of view is the normative one is interesting, as is his insistence that both sexes - as marriageable children - are oppressed in a patriarchal society. One reason why the boy players survived so long in England, Orgel argues, was the specific misogyny of contemporary culture, which regarded women, marriage and female sexuality as far more dangerous than the homosexuality of the contemporary stage:

The dangers of women in erotic situations, whatever they may be, can be disarmed by having the women play men, just as in the theater the dangers of women on the stage (whatever they may be) can be disarmed by having men play the women.<sup>8</sup>

This may account for the fact that the wooing scenes between Ganymede and Orlando maintain a balanced uncertainty between whether the scene is overtly heterosexual or homosexual, as does Rosalind's epilogue. However, although Orgel's views are intriguing, they suggest a consciousness of the peculiarity of

8. Stephen Orgel, 'Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?' in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88: 1, Winter 1989, pp. 7 - 29, p. 13.

boy actresses and determination to keep them which almost certainly never occurred to Shakespeare or to his audiences.

Writing over thirty years earlier on the subject of boy actors, W. Robertson Davies takes a particularly enlightened view of the boy actresses and the charges of homosexuality laid against them. Emphasising the familiarity of the audiences and playwrights with boy actresses, Robertson Davies has confidence in their ability to carry off all female roles, comic, romantic and tragic. But this confidence derives from his opinion that Shakespeare ensured that the women's parts were easier, with more set pieces such as Portia's speech on the quality of mercy which could not fail to move the audience. This devaluing of the female part is allied with a sweeping dislike of female actresses, who "are without bowels in artistic matters, and... take an essentially low view of their art... [which] becomes in their hands mere self-exploitation".<sup>9</sup> He also urges actresses to consider the female part from the point of view of the boy actor for the most fruitful interpretation and performance. Rather differently, Michael Jamieson suggests that Shakespeare wrote to the skills of his players and exploited the advantages (youth, vigour and high-spirits) of the boy actresses.<sup>10</sup> Both arguments have weight, in that Shakespeare undoubtedly wrote to the strengths of his players, but given the domination of these plays by the cross-dressed heroine, and Davies' own faith in the virtuosity of the boys, the idea that the women's parts are somehow easier (than what is not explicit) is questionable.

The significance of the boy actress for feminist criticism is inconsistent. While today it is particularly pertinent that there was a boy in the role of the gender-confusing cross-dressed heroine, it is important to accept that he was also

9. W. Robertson Davies, *Shakespeare's Boy Actors*, J. M. Dent & Sons, London, 1939, p. 197.

10. Michael Jamieson, 'Shakespeare's Celibate Stage: The Problem of Accommodation to the Boy-Actresses in *As You Like It*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*' in G.I. Duthie (ed.), *Papers, Mainly Shakespearean*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1964, pp. 21 - 39, pp. 22, 31 & 35.

taken seriously as a woman by his contemporaries. Indeed, the manipulation of the sex of the player and gender of the part which is most obvious in Rosalind's epilogue would not be possible unless it was played against a background where the boy was accepted as a young woman. Furthermore, the player's sex is not under discussion elsewhere. In other plays, while it is interesting to note the presence of the boy actress, there is no self-referential discussion of his sex, nor the suggestion of homoerotic interest in him as a boy actress. The part is more interesting than the player, and while the sex of the player may add piquancy to the playing of that part, it would destroy both the comedy and the romance of these plays completely if, for the majority of the time, the audience did not accept the heroines as women. The boy actresses' sex is one means through which the artificiality and uncertainty of gender is highlighted, rather than a direct concern of the plays themselves. It is also quite possible to maintain these levels of complexity while accepting other female characters as women, even when they too were originally parts taken by male players.

The arrival of female actresses on the English stage after 1660 did not necessarily prove a positive step for the representation of women. It can be argued that the boy actors allowed the female role to be treated with a greater dignity than that possible for the first female actors. Without the same pressure experienced by later playwrights to exploit the novelty (and bodies) of female actors on stage, Shakespeare was able to present female characters who would be taken seriously - ironically because they were really male. Later roles were tailored to actresses' off-stage reputations (which were largely sexually scandalous) whereas the boys of Shakespeare's days are anonymous. Elizabeth Howe asserts that "actresses provided both new literary opportunities to explore female needs and desires on stage, and new opportunities for female exploitation."<sup>11</sup> Changes in critical reactions to cross-dressed heroines over the

11. Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660 - 1700*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 176.

last four centuries, coupled with the fact that these parts are now almost exclusively played by women, present a microcosm of the cultural shift in our understanding of what it is to be a man or a woman, which aspects of behaviour are natural and fixed in our biological sex, and which are socially constructed. These concerns are fundamental to feminist literary criticism.

Today the pressure to conform in dress is far stronger on men than women.

Woodbridge suggests that

Renaissance literature always regarded male transvestism as less attractive than female transvestism, just as in our day a man wearing a dress is in a different league from a woman in pant suit and tie. Men had a greater horror of effeminacy than women of mannishness: for a man to behave like a woman was shameful, but for a woman to behave like a man, while unnatural, was at least a step up.<sup>12</sup>

This is an over-simplification. The contemporary debate about cross-dressing, particularly the *Hic Mulier - Haec Vir* controversy, emphasised the importance of dress as an indication of social position as well as sex. The sumptuary laws of the day were entirely concerned with the social gradation of people by what they wore. Cross-dressing flaunted both class and gender distinctions. The impact of the cross-dressed heroine is thus threefold, disturbing the distinctions between classes, between sex and gender and between sexual partners. In the sixteenth century, the plays were performed by men and boys for an audience, which, while not exclusively male, was part of an even more strongly patriarchal society than that of today. Transvestism was already a burning topic of debate. Contemporary sermon-writers and pamphleteers were concerned with the phenomenon of female transvestites outside the theatre, and the immorality of *male* transvestite actresses within it. Female transvestites within the plays were not their concern because they were male. Instead, effeminacy and incitements to homosexuality exercised the contemporary mind.

12. Woodbridge, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

Quoting contemporary evidence from Dr John Rainoldes and Thomas Randolph, Lisa Jardine emphasises the importance of moral uneasiness surrounding the boy player, who was “liable to be regarded with erotic interest which hovers somewhere between the heterosexual and the homosexual around his female attire.” Sixteenth-century critics, she states, were concerned that “the boy player’s female dress and behaviour [would] kindle homosexual love in the male members of his audience.”<sup>13</sup> By contrast Woodbridge remarks on the prevalence of *female* transvestites outside the theatre, citing the many essays, poems and public pronouncements by King James, and sermons attacking women in masculine clothing and men who were guilty of effeminacy and foppishness. She contends that contemporary interest was focused on female transvestites and effeminate men rather than on male transvestites. Her argument is that there was a vogue for real-life female transvestites in the 1570s to 90s, declining thereafter until 1600, then regaining its momentum and reaching a peak between 1615 and 1620.<sup>14</sup> There were a surprising number of female transvestites in contemporary London, or rather women who dressed in variations of men’s dress who apparently made no attempt to disguise their actual biological sex. But the effect on Shakespeare which Woodbridge ascribes to this phenomenon is misguided, particularly her suggestion that Shakespeare stopped creating cross-dressed heroines *circa* 1600 for fear of seeing in the street a woman dressed like his own cross-dressed heroines: “Shakespeare had caught a whiff of the winds of sexual change blowing in his own culture. The idea that sex roles might alter was apparently an aroma which seared his nostrils.”<sup>15</sup> In fact the cross-dressed heroines are a deliberate exploration of the possibility and likelihood of the alteration of roles allotted by gender. The combination of historical data with psychoanalytical conjecture here is unhelpful.

13. Jardine, *op. cit.*, pp. 11 & 17.

14. Woodbridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 139 - 41.

15. Woodbridge, *ibid.*, p. 156.

The fact that each heroine stresses that she is still a woman, and that her disguise has not changed her female nature (femininity), as well as the fact that heterosexual harmony is apparently achieved in the final act, does not prevent these roles from containing the seeds of a radical challenge to ideas of fixed gender. Contemporary and modern audiences and critics may concentrate on different issues, and their choice indicates as much about the concerns of their day as it does about the plays themselves. Both play and audience carry a substantial weight of historical and cultural influences which inevitably mediate meaning. Woodbridge is not alone in her forgetfulness of the boy player. Twentieth-century feminist literary criticism, concerned with current productions and *female* cross-dressers has produced relatively few critics who have chosen to dwell on the significance of the boy player. Even Jardine, who discusses his importance as an object of homoerotic interest, dismisses his/her increased resonance for other female characters. For Jardine these plays are an almost entirely male affair: "it does not matter that the coy seductiveness of the boy player is for plot purposes being appreciated by a woman ... Playing the woman's part - male effeminacy - is an act for a male audience's appreciation". But having commented on the importance of the boy player as "the object of Elizabethan erotic interest in his own male right", arguing that such players were "sexually enticing *qua* transvested boys", Jardine does not go on to remark any further on the significance of female casts in twentieth century productions, nor the difference which they must have, particularly on feminist criticism.<sup>16</sup> Despite evidence from other historians<sup>17</sup> who are not feminists that women were often present in the audience, feminist critics seem certain that the audience was 'male', if not in its composition, then at least in its patterns of thought and reactions.<sup>18</sup>

16. Jardine, *op. cit.*, pp. 31, 7 & 29.

17. See for instance Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 60 - 63.

18. For further study of the creation of a male audience see Kathleen McKluskie, 'The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*', in Jonathan Dollimore, & Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985, pp. 88 - 108, p. 96.

By casting women in these roles we lose a layer of tension between the sex of the player and the gender of the part. The epilogue of *As You Like It* is instructive. Seemingly, everything is resolved; everyone has departed to heterosexual harmony. Yet Rosalind leaves us with a distinctly blurred impression of her sex: "If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not" (*AYLI*, epilogue, 16 - 19). This leaves the audience bemused, since she is by now dressed as the female Rosalind. The playing of women's parts by women marks a significant reversal of perspective between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

The emphasis may differ depending on whether the cross-dressed heroine is played by a boy or a woman, but in both cases the ready acceptance of this girlish youth as a future man links femininity and unformed masculinity "as boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour" (*AYLI*, III. ii. 398). These roles imply that there are indeed two sexes, female and male, but that a man is in effect a girl until that moment at which he has had his first sexual experiences with women. The cross-dressed heroine disguises herself as a young man on the verge of manhood: conspicuously still a virgin, but ripe for sexual initiation. Portia becomes a youth "between the change of man and boy" (*Merchant*, III. iv. 66); Phoebe remarks of that Rosalind/Ganymede will eventually "make a proper man" (*AYLI*, III. v. 116) ; Olivia tells Viola/Cesario that "when wit and youth is come to harvest/Your wife is like to reap a proper man" (*TN*, III. i. 131 - 2). This uninitiated male, who will become a man - and therefore be differentiated from women - through sexual experience of women, is closely allied with the female sex.

The cross-dressed heroines become players in, even caricatures of, a powerful stage of the building of the gender myth. They know the typical traits of youth: and it is pretty and love-struck. The gender which they emulate is a learnt imitation of men and they neither bring to it a greater understanding of



women from a male point of view just because they are cross-dressed females, nor take from it a greater understanding of what it is to be a man. Viola alone defends women. Portia enters the communal conspiracy with gusto, regarding one of the most important aspects of her disguise as its sexual attractiveness and misogynistic brags. The 'quaint lies' a youth would tell would be familiar proof that in fact the youth had not had any sexual experience with women and was therefore a virgin, not yet a man. It is this virginity which identifies both heroines and youths: a gender of the sexually uninitiated.

Although Portia conspires with Nerissa against the men, both in overnaming her suitors and in the final ring plot, misogyny and sexual suggestion come without hesitation into her words, just as Rosalind does not hesitate before taking Silvius' part in his wooing of Phoebe. This is disturbing. If women perpetuate the myth, who is left to disagree? Only Portia actually capitalises on the supposedly distinguishing trait of young men (sexual licence), taunting Bassanio, once she is back as Portia, with the idea that she has slept with 'the doctor'. Both Viola and Rosalind, though very different, are models of chaste constancy.<sup>19</sup>

None of the heroines, as boy or woman, is ugly; they are all referred to as 'pretty', Rosalind in particular, and by both sexes.<sup>20</sup> The heroine's disguise changes her place in the world, and most notably in the reactions of those around her, and this change is one of the reasons for cross-dressing, but she is still desirable. Julia and Rosalind wish to avoid lascivious male attention on their travels but Rosalind, having reached Arden, encourages sexual attention from Orlando towards her male/female self. As Ganymede, Rosalind is at pains to point out her understanding of gender roles:

19. Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1982, pp. 124 - 30.

20. *Merchant*, III. iv. 64; *AYLI*, III. ii. 325 & 372; III. v. 114 & 121; IV. iii. 7 & 76.

I could find in my heart to disgrace my man's apparel and  
to cry like a woman. But I must comfort the weaker vessel,  
as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to  
petticoat; therefore, courage, good Aliena.

(II. iv. 4 - 8)

Yet it is she who is on the verge of tears, not Celia, who is merely tired. Indeed Celia manages the journey quite as well as Rosalind and seems a great deal more robust than her cousin. Celia performs two roles. She manages her affairs competently in Arden, and secures the partner she wants, Oliver. As a foil to Ganymede/Rosalind she provides a point of reference for ideas of the correct behaviour for men and women, which she attempts to reinstate. She gives Rosalind the opportunity of a female confidante which ensures that Orlando's wooing of 'Rosalind' is grounded in a girlish conspiracy, as well as a homoerotic intrigue. When Rosalind threatens to weep, Celia reminds her that tears are not appropriate for a man; when Rosalind indulges in misogynistic banter with Orlando, Celia crossly rebukes her with having misused women, and threatens to reveal her true identity. This, however, is missing the point. It is not a simple matter of revealing who Rosalind 'really is' since this is impossible, as the epilogue later demonstrates. Celia is an assertive example of womanhood. But her ideas of the division of male and female normalities are shattered as she speaks.

*Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* encourage their audiences to find the cross-dressed heroines more feminine than they would be without their breeches, through an impression of female weakness (which is seen as femininity) combined with male effeminacy (which is not endorsed as masculinity). This is most obvious in Rosalind's wooing scenes with Orlando where her behaviour fuses the typical love-struck youth with the fact that she is a woman to present a gender that is neither male nor female - nor indeed androgynous. Michael Jamieson points out that Rosalind's essential femininity is revealed through and not in spite of her disguise.<sup>21</sup> With superior knowledge of Rosalind's true identity,

21. Jamieson, op. cit., p. 30.

the audience can appreciate her predicament as a woman even at the same time as it recognises a tone of homosexual intrigue from the significance (particularly in the Renaissance) of her adoption of the name Ganymede and the frequent references throughout the play to Jupiter/Jove, his mythical lover.<sup>22</sup> At the same time that Rosalind confides to Celia that she is a typical woman in love, she also adopts attitudes which are distinctly misogynistic, most notably when she upbraids Phoebe and tells her to "sell" while she can (III. v. 61).

Marilyn French correctly argues that the presentation of Rosalind demonstrates Shakespeare's questioning of the constrictions and construction of gender, even as he asserts them.<sup>23</sup> The confusion opened-up by Rosalind/Ganymede (and also by Viola/Cesario) shows that there can be no certainty over gender. By simultaneously provoking heterosexual and homosexual desire, Rosalind passes beyond a masculine or feminine, and indeed male or female, identity. When Rosalind/Ganymede offers to help Orlando find a remedy for his love for her female alter-ego, the pair form an apparently typically heterosexual but male-male bond of shaking-off the shackles of love for a woman. This is overlaid by the homosexual overtones of the wooing itself, throughout which it is evident that Rosalind/Ganymede/Rosalind by no means wishes to cure Orlando of his affection for either 'Rosalind'. In fact the wooing process tests Ganymede/Rosalind much more than Orlando, who is constantly late for their meetings, while Rosalind languishes on the verge of tears. This wooing cannot eclipse for Orlando his desire to see the 'real' Rosalind. But just as he, and we, think that she appears, our certainty over her identity is shattered. As Catherine Belsey points out, by the time of the epilogue, there is no answer to the question of "Who is speaking?"<sup>24</sup>

22. See in particular *AYLI* I. iii. 123 - 4; II. iv. 56 - 7; III. ii. 152; III. ii. 231. See also James M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986, *passim*.

23. French, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

24. Belsey, *op. cit.*, (note 2), p. 180.

Of course not all cross-dressed heroines are the same, and the differences between Portia, Rosalind and Viola are instructive. Unlike the exiled Rosalind and the ship-wrecked Viola, Portia is a woman of means. Portia is powerful both as herself and as Balthasar. She retains her power within marriage even as the play ends, although the expression of all this power is cast within the prevailing patriarchal terms. Portia is dynamic as both male and female. When Portia stands in front of the court and wins the case, we see a young woman winning it. Her cross-dressed attire is not sufficiently shocking to us to make us think entirely that she is a young man; besides which, we know, with little ironic complication, that she is a woman. However today's director dresses her, there is little that most audiences have not seen women wear in the street and they continue to think of her as a woman.

Although contemporary audiences would have known that Portia was being played by a boy, they would have accepted her as the rich lady of Belmont. They too would have seen a talented woman winning the case. While today's heroine has an essential integrity which her the boy actress lacked, in that sex co-incides at one level at least with the gender of the part, both audiences should receive the impression of a highly capable woman. This is very different to the confused genders of both Rosalind and Viola. Portia is a positive presentation of active womanhood making the most of her natural skills which she can only display in disguise as a man. While Rosalind and Viola challenge the basis of sexual gender identity, on the grounds that they are attractive to both sexes simultaneously, Portia's sexuality as a cross-dressed heroine is far less important than her practicality. Within *The Merchant of Venice*, it is Antonio rather than Portia who challenges the sexual division of gender with his love for Bassanio, just as his namesake in *Twelfth Night* proves that it is quite possible to fall in love with the same sex, in the form of Sebastian. In short, Rosalind and Viola disturb expectations of sexual identity, whereas Portia challenges the expectations of what women can do. Rosalind and Viola challenge gender expectations only

because they cross-dress. Portia is formidable in either outfit. She is therefore *more* of a challenge to traditional notions of gender than either Rosalind or Viola.

There has been much written on the androgyny of these heroines in their cross-dressed state, suggesting that those heroines who become dependent boys, rather than Portia's independent advocate, assume mythical power. Stevie Davies sees Viola as being elevated to mythic status, with a role to "touch Olivia's nature into the motion of Eros. As *coincidentia oppositorum* the 'bisexual' Viola ... is associated with change, impulse, a dynamic arousal of human nature's possibilities".<sup>25</sup> A more sophisticated psychoanalytic approach is taken by Coppélia Kahn, concentrating on the reaction of the audience (although again she does not make clear *which* audience, contemporary or modern, supposedly 'male' or not) to the blurring of the gender divide, suggesting that this forces us to "conceive of novel and conflicting ways in which sexual identity might be detached from personal identity; we are cut loose from our habitual assumption that the two are inextricable, that the person is defined by his or her sex." Pointing out that Cesario is both homo- and heterosexually attractive, and yet is one and the same person, Kahn concurs with the consensus of feminist opinion in suggesting that female characters in male disguise "threaten the binary opposition on which sexual identity, and much else in culture, is based. Without the strict differentiation of male from female, sexual integrity disappears and chaos impends."<sup>26</sup>

In order for there to be a romantic intrigue and a plot, someone must woo the heroine. Therefore, there must be female characters who are assertive wooers. Olivia in *Twelfth Night* and Phoebe in *As You Like It* are the obvious examples. If Olivia did not fall in love with Cesario, there could be no resolution to the play.

25. Stevie Davies, *The Idea of Woman in Renaissance Literature: The Feminine Reclaimed*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1986, p. 114.

26. Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981, pp. 208 & 209.

Orsino would presumably continue to woo her and although Viola and Sebastian could be reunited, there would be no romantic coupling. The plays suggest that it was normal for a woman to woo, which is not the case. But then again, as feminist critics, it is something we might *wish* to see. All three plays make clear that it is possible to fall in love with the same sex through the presentation of the relationships between Antonio and Bassanio, Antonio and Sebastian, Olivia and Cesario, Phoebe and Ganymede, Orlando and Ganymede. The fact that there is a Sebastian to substitute for Cesario is convenient in saving Olivia's embarrassment. Her failure to notice any difference between the two shows that women, as well as men, fall in love with women. Viola's male twin makes this the only play in which the assertive female who woos the heroine can be satisfied. Perhaps one may conclude that it is her class which ensures Olivia is not made to look as foolish as a vain shepherdess like Phoebe, although even she has Silvius waiting in the wings.

Same sex relationships between men are displayed in scenes of strong friendship or in more complex scenes like the homosexual wooing of Ganymede. The idea of love includes not only the romantic and apparently heterosexual love of the heroine and her lover, but also friendships such as that between Antonio and Bassanio, Sebastian and Antonio. Today we might well choose to describe these relationships differently, as sexual attraction or friendship rather than as love. In these plays, the fluid application of the word underlines the complexity of the power relationships. When Portia exclaims 'O love!' as Bassanio has to depart in answer to Antonio's letter, it is not clear whether she is worried by the mention of love two lines above, angry that her plans for marital merriment will have to be delayed and is therefore telling love itself to 'be gone', or urging Bassanio, her love, to go and help his friend, just as her reference later to Antonio as her husband's 'bosom lover' may - or not - contain a realisation of rivalry (*Merchant*, III. ii. 320; III. iv. 17).

For Marilyn French, the isolation of the homosexual male results from mixing the gender principles in an unacceptable way. Antonio in *Twelfth Night*, she suggests, combines aspects of the soldier and the lover in a way that is not acceptable in Illyria.<sup>27</sup> This is true. Certainly his application of love, desire and jealousy to his relationship with Sebastian suggests more than friendship. Same-sex love is major concern of the plays with cross-dressed heroines, not only between men, but also between women. Homosexuality was a subject of contemporary debate, as is evident from frequent references to Deuteronomic pronouncements against it. Woodbridge points out that this contemporary interest in homosexuality:

James's pacifism helped create a climate where distinctions between the sexes broke down; but homosexuality allowed the nation's leading woman-hater to reestablish barriers. Male homosexuality was peacetime's answer to the male-bonding of soldiers (which, of course, could also be homosexual): both excluded women. But homosexuality lent James and his courtiers, in the eyes of many observers, exactly the quality James as a woman-hater should have despised - effeminacy. Most courtiers in Jacobean literature are portrayed as effeminate in varying degrees. James's attack on man-clothed women was the real-life equivalent of a prominent literary motif - the confrontation between effeminate man and aggressive woman.<sup>28</sup>

Yet although there is attraction between women in these plays, friendships between them dissolve: the cross-dressed heroine has no peer. Despite having vowed that she and her cousin were 'one', Celia's friendship with Rosalind is dissolved by their time in Arden and particularly by her cousin's encounters with Orlando, the complications of which Celia seems not to understand; Portia and Nerissa remain mistress and servant; Viola and Olivia, and Julia and Silvia, are unintentional rivals.

Portia also has a rival - Antonio. He establishes the battle with her for Bassanio's affection, and his money is the only means by which Bassanio can

27. French, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

28. Woodbridge, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

woo Portia. Indeed it is primarily to repay his debts to Antonio that Bassanio does woo her. When the default on his loan endangers his life, Antonio retains the emotional upper hand, putting Bassanio in the awkward position of asking Portia to judge the depth of Antonio's love for him. We have no means of telling whether Bassanio's depth of friendship for Antonio is spurred by love or debt. Nevertheless, Antonio's manipulative lover's farewell elicits the desired response from Bassanio, who vows that both his own life and Portia are not worth more than Antonio. Having overheard Bassanio's comments, Portia/Balthasar urges her husband to hand over her ring and accepts his refusal with pretended ill humour. It is *Antonio* who urges Bassanio to change his mind. It is he who insists that Balthasar's bonds of debt and love for him should be valued '*gainst your wife's commandment*' (IV. i. 448) (my italics).

To free himself from Antonio's overwhelming patronage, Bassanio needs financial security - which he can only gain through marriage to a woman like Portia. Both he and Portia are obligated to Antonio until Portia can break Antonio's stranglehold by saving her rival, losing her 'ring' to him and then making him instrumental in its return. She thereby takes over from Antonio as the most powerful person in the triangular relationship. Although her cross-dressed state helps her to do this, it is her own wit and verbal skills which enable her to effect it successfully. Cross-dressing merely lends her the opportunity to be heard. In the quest for supremacy in Bassanio's affections, Antonio cannot win because Portia's cross-dressing ensures the triumph of the heterosexual tie over the homosexual. Although Antonio has heard Bassanio say that he is more important than Portia - and if he is literally cut to the heart in forfeiting the bond, he dies a martyr to his love - he is saved from death by Portia herself. In an attempt to prove the love between men stronger than that between a man and woman, Antonio makes Bassanio break faith with Portia. But by making Antonio the chief instrument in the return of the ring which he urged Bassanio to give away (to the inescapable Portia herself, of course), Portia triumphs. The audience



knows that the threats which end the play are - probably - harmless, since physically both inevitable and impossible: Portia will have to 'lie' with Balthasar every night, since they are the same person. But the threat is still the stereotypical one of possible - or probable - sexual infidelity.

Marilyn Williamson quotes Foucault to argue that a Renaissance wife had the power to make her husband a cuckold because she was his property; his very possession of her invested her with power.<sup>29</sup> This is both disturbing and apt. It is also an effective weapon in maintaining the *status quo*, suggesting that victims should simply realise they are part of a power relationship. It offers no solution of how to change the nature of that relationship. Portia gains the upper hand through a combination of her own individual skills and the opportunity cross-dressing provides for her to use them. A study of female characters (whether from a feminist perspective or not) in conjunction with such an understanding of power, enables an exploration of where the nature of the power really lies, who has control of a relationship and what are the possibilities for change, or the factors preventing it.

In conventional terms, either of the sixteenth century or today, Portia is the 'golden girl' who has everything: money, beauty, a household of her own and a lover she wants, who wants her. This would appear to give her power over her life, her choice of husband and her supremacy in his affections. Yet her power is tightly delineated according to a patriarchal structure. Indeed her power before and after she cross-dresses is a man's usurped power of dominion over herself and her estate, while her power when she is dressed like a youth is her own individual eloquence that her dress merely lets her display. Fundamentally, neither sex nor gender has anything to do with the origin of her powers. It is a paradox that Portia is the most successful cross-dresser because she confidently achieves her

29. Marilyn L. Williamson, *The Patriarchy of Shakespeare's Comedies*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1986, p. 12.

goals through that supposedly typically female skill, argument. It is an ability that was evident within the walls of Belmont, but which Portia can only exhibit without them when she is dressed as Balthasar.

Demonstrating a typical example of the mistakes of over-enthusiastic feminist criticism, Williamson oversimplifies the significance of Portia's power:

In the middle comedies Shakespeare gave a variety of kinds of power to his heroines. Portia, the most formidable, is wealthy and beautiful, a magnet for suitors from the world over. In fact, the competition for Portia's hand combines monetary language - gold and silver - with terms of merit - deserving and giving. She is intelligent, witty and capable of dealing with complex legal and, apparently, mercantile questions. She is quite at home in male disguise, and although she is subordinated to her father's will, she proves a match for it and for all the destructive forces Venice can offer. She is in control of the action in the Venetian court and in the return to Belmont. She not only begins the jokes about cuckoldry but also intrudes into male competition with Antonio for Bassanio's loyalty. Perhaps a woman can be powerful in *Merchant* because of the importance of wealth in the play. In Venice wealth transcends or threatens social boundaries, and Portia is wealthy.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Williamson's claim to be using a combination of historical material and Foucault's theories to construct her argument, she does little more than take the idea of a 'splendid woman' and recast it with a feminist gloss. This is the danger of *looking* for positive female roles. Firstly, women's roles are complicated by the issue of the sex of the actor. Secondly, assertive female characters are not necessarily attractive. Portia is a central character in a play about money and manipulation. Her exertions and achievements are as mercenary as those of the other characters. Even if we want a heroine, we should not let Portia's wit blind us to her faults, nor her weakness. What power does Portia have? Before she takes to male disguise, she is a sitting target for fortune hunters. We see her only indoors, debilitated within the confines of her estate as well as her father's will. As she herself comments, she has no choice of suitor: her defence against having

30. Williamson, *op. cit.*, pp. 29 - 30.

to marry a man she detests is a combination of luck, male arrogance or stupidity in choosing the wrong casket, and an extra glass of Rhenish for the Duke of Saxony's nephew. Her alternative is to remain a spinster in Belmont. Belmont is of course her domain: surely she has power here? Yet she sees this power in terms of a patriarchal household, where she has temporarily usurped the correct hierarchy until she hands herself over to Bassanio. The one role she could not fulfil was kingship over herself: a woman alone lacks the power to make her world complete, and into that breach steps Bassanio, the husband (III. ii. 149 - 74).

More accurate than Williamson is Lisa Jardine, who points out that Portia has to distort the appearance of Bassanio's impoverishment as an indication of her love for him.<sup>31</sup> This she achieves by lying about her own intelligence and education. The purpose of this distortion is a construction of romantic love. Portia has internalised the patriarchal values concerning the proper relationship between husband and wife and knows that her wealth and intelligence must be seen to be subordinate to Bassanio - or at least not superior, which they clearly are. Portia's self-devaluing is necessary for the audience to receive an impression of love rather than fortune-hunting, and to give the appearance of equality rather than disparity between the lovers.

The audience may assume that the choosing of the casket is merely a plot device, assuring a happy ending in the neatly controlled world of Shakespearean comedy. After all, Portia is formidable, she is in control. But her true love places Portia's wealth before her beauty. Bassanio wishes to be fortunate; Portia is the golden fleece. The casket-scenes stress not only the fact that Portia is a hostage to fortune, but also that gold is deceptive and beauty superficial. Bassanio originally described Portia to Antonio in a mercenary metaphor: "her sunny locks/Hang on her temples like a golden fleece" (I. i. 169 - 70). But Bassanio is not entirely

31. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 60.



attracted by gold. As he rejects it for lead, he is disturbingly vitriolic about deceptive appearances, recalling his initial description of Portia's appearance in a most unflattering comparison.

So are those crispèd, snaky, golden locks  
Which makes such wanton gambols with the wind  
Upon supposèd fairness, often known  
To be the dowry of a second head,  
The skull that bred them in the sepulchre.

(III. ii. 92 - 6)

Portia is noteworthy as the golden-haired girl in a play where the golden casket contains a *memento mori*.

The power struggle in the play is not over money, or about Shylock, but between Portia and Antonio for control of Bassanio's affections. All Portia's money, her beauty, her Belmont estate, is worthless against this. Her powers must be exerted according to these men's terms. To beat them, she must join them. She does this through the notable skills in argument and persuasion which are her true power. Significantly she does not derive these powers from cross-dressing, which merely lends her the opportunity to display existing abilities until now confined to Belmont. (If we follow Williamson's line of argument, we might even suggest that it is Antonio's predicament which has 'empowered' her.) We know from her over-naming of her suitors, as well as her speech to Bassanio, how well she speaks. Her speechless messages have been transformed into accomplished loquaciousness. This, as she herself points out (in an intense twenty four line speech), is inappropriate in a young virgin who should have "no tongue but thought" (III. ii. 1 - 24). Portia is an extremely able speaker, who is nevertheless aware that, according to the prevailing ideology, she talks too much. Cross-dressing releases her from cultural expectations (gendering) of her speech, which understand only the modest and silent maid and the shrewish scold. But even this release is achieved through the typical feminine attribute - tongue - and the final balance of power is maintained by the stock threat of sexual deceit.

Although Portia seems more assertive than Rosalind, her images of womanhood are stereotyped. Dismissing the Neapolitan prince, she admits to thinking that she fears his mother must have "played false" - a common misogynistic throw-away (I. ii. 41 - 3). She implies that she is a piece of property, and Bassanio her owner (III. ii. 19). She leads us to believe that she is uneducated, yet with the aid of lessons in Padua and a doublet and hose, she becomes a skilled advocate. The convention of the ignorant woman is exposed as a convention: but still Portia's linguistic skills are held in tension as she saves the greatest rival for her husband's affection. For her, cross-dressing is only temporary liberation from a particular set of misogynistic constraints which she appears to endorse. This extreme (and untrue) self-debasement backfires into an aura of duplicity: the Portia who does what no male lawyer in Venice could do is hardly an unschooled girl (III. ii. 159). This self-undervaluing makes the contrast with her cross-dressed state all the more remarkable. Thus cross-dressing is at one and the same moment a step towards liberty, and also a reinforcement of misogyny, as female characters themselves perceive powerlessness as appropriate to the female role - a role to which they must return, and which they actively pursue while cross-dressed.

Portia is the only cross-dresser who retains the power of her transformation after it is ended. This she needs in order to maintain her superiority in the balance of power with Antonio for Bassanio. Whereas the other cross-dressed heroines appear to have resolved their romantic problems (if not our certainty of their sex) by the final act, the spectre of Antonio on Portia's threshold, in the intimate position of returning her 'ring' to Bassanio, means that she must maintain an eternal threat. In *The Merchant of Venice*, a powerful heroine begins with the feminine power to attract men with her money and beauty; finds that this still does not secure her husband's love; uses her powers of language in the guise of a youth, free of expectations of feminine speech; and ends the play with the power to prove a scold *par excellence* and a cuckold if Bassanio gives her reason.

Portia's powers of speech, intelligence, wit, beauty, money and property have all been subsumed into a misogynistic nightmare of a wife one must watch like Argus, while at the same time she has proved the superiority of her love and power over Bassanio. Just as Rosalind and Viola appeal to both sexes simultaneously, so, as Orgel suggests, Portia's ring trick "plays on both the male fears and the female fantasies of a patriarchal society."<sup>32</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

The changed state is always resolved by the end of the play. It is a purely temporary choice which may be liberating while it lasts, but which is bound to end. When it does end, the subject is back within the boundaries of marriage. It is proper only to note, not to object to, the fact that all these heroines' efforts are channelled to one end: marriage, where their position will be as their husband's subordinate. It may be argued that since the heroine has had some element of control in her choice of sexual partner, while cross-dressed, she has benefited from the opportunity to experience life as a man. On the other hand, if the most radical part of cross-dressing has been the act of donning the disguise, what has changed? Female characters have merely tasted, reinforced and then laid aside the freedoms of a role from which they are forever excluded. For contemporary audiences the boy player complicated the play and its resolution, while today the audience may not be convinced that heterosexual harmony and coupledness - or marriage - is necessarily a happy ending. Now the bias may be to look for the inherent problems of a heterosexual couple, rather than to pick on the travesty of Rosalind's epilogue. Each age looks for different things and finds problems or interests in different places, for different reasons.

There are other plays in which women choose to dress in ways which challenge the male order far more than do Portia, Viola or Rosalind. Cross-

32. Orgel, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

dressing is not the only means by which a female character can assert herself. Helena chooses holy disguise rather than the style of a page-boy, most probably because Bertram already despises her: to dress as a boy would only make further rejection inevitable. Joan and Margaret both dress in traditionally male attire, but without pretending to change their sex. There are alternatives. What cross-dressing shows us in particular, however, is a complex examination of gender. Feminist critics have not yet satisfactorily explored the significance of these characters. Most have concurred that these heroines present us with a free-floating version of gender. More work should be done on the fact that they also present the opposite: an indication that the plays show that a female character's supposedly essential femaleness (femininity) cannot be changed with her clothes. Further work also needs to be done on the significance of the boy player, the distinctions between different periods of reception and the nature of the power which these characters display. However, much has already been done, and feminism in particular has a difficult task in striking the balance between seeing what it wants to see, and condemning what it finds.

## The Power of Action

Civil strife and the ineffectiveness and irresponsibility of male rulers and lovers give female characters the opportunity to act. This chapter examines the power of action in two spheres: war and love. Joan la Pucelle and Queen Margaret in *Henry VI Parts 1, 2 and 3* influence the fate of their countries. Helen in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* take control of their marriages. These characters' male partners and counterparts are unusually passive, or fail to conform to their allotted gender roles. I discuss Helen and Juliet's choice of their lovers here rather than in 'The Power of Sexuality & Desire' because of the importance of passive men to the creation of a space in which women may be actively assertive. The question of how far King Henry, Bertram and Romeo are victims of gendered expectations of action connects these plays in a more illuminating manner than does a concentration on the fact that in two of the plays this action takes the form of marriage.

Because Joan and Margaret enter the explicitly male world of the battlefield, it is easy to assume that they mount a challenge to patriarchy. In fact they fight for its preservation. Nevertheless their ability to act poses a significant challenge to normal expectations of how women should behave. This is evident in the paradox that the system they fight to uphold would normally deny their ability to fight to uphold it. Juliet and Helen challenge a basic tenet of patriarchy: men's control of women's sexuality. Both use their power to gain the man they want as their husband and to bestow their virginity as they please. Helen begins *All's Well* with a clear understanding of the sexual double standard which means that she can never have the same sexual freedom without responsibility as can a man. But this challenge is never more fully articulated than at the start of the play. Helen argues for her right to sexual freedom yet simultaneously confines herself within the orthodox roles of wife and mother. Only Juliet establishes true autonomy through her assertiveness. Her action is



apparently the least radical but in fact the most challenging of all. It extends only to marrying Romeo and committing suicide. But Juliet's ability not to be bound by Veronese convention and her mental freedom from standard patterns of thought is exceptional.

Female characters do not normally go into battle or see themselves as the active partner in love. These female characters disprove the connection between femaleness and passivity, maleness and activity. This exceptional status marks a point of difference between contemporary interpretations and our own. Once exceptions proved the rule because they were exceptional. Today they demonstrate that women may do things which have only been *thought* to be exceptional. Action also entails isolation for these characters, who lack political allies and genuine friends, and are compelled to reject, or are rejected by, their families. This isolation both strengthens their resolve and weakens their power. Lisa Jardine suggests that the presentation of such characters is carefully managed, since "it is a matter of considerable patriarchal importance for social stability to celebrate brilliant exceptions to the female 'rule' only reluctantly, and then as exceptions".<sup>1</sup> In fact the plays cannot so carefully control their own significance, although it is true that within them, female characters may have the power of action without necessarily altering the *status quo*. The plays make it clear that France and England need Joan and Margaret, Helen ought to catch Bertram and Juliet is right not to marry Paris. But their assertiveness is a replacement of, not a rival to, men's authority. Charles Frey sees such exceptions as "heroic exceptions to the more general rule of depressing male domination".<sup>2</sup> There is also a more optimistic view. These exceptional women demonstrate that

1. Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, second edn., Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1989, pp. 56 - 7.
2. Charles Frey, ' "O sacred, shadowy, cold, and constant queen": Shakespeare's Imperiled and Chastening Daughters of Romance', in Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, & Carol Thomas Neely, *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1980, pp. 295 - 313, p. 296.

action need not be limited by social expectations of appropriate behaviour for the two sexes. There are male exceptions too: the Dauphin, King Henry, Bertram and Romeo are not typical men, and do not behave as their societies desire. When women and men who do not conform to gendered expectations meet, the delineation of acceptable behaviour along gendered lines becomes redundant.

Unlike the cross-dressed characters of my chapter on 'Power Dressing' these female characters act as women. Frequently moral good is shown to be allied to the women, although when the state is in turmoil there is more at fault than one sex alone can correct, however much the actions of that sex have challenged the constraints of gender. Largely, the achievements of these female characters are short-lived and their power reverts to male authority. These characters present a significant questioning of the roles allotted to their gender, but do not reflect the historical reality of ordinary female power or experience. The context within which these characters' actions exist is not neutral, but a significant force. Each society has embodied within it gender-related expectations of appropriate behaviour for men and women which even the most assertive woman cannot overcome. The same decision to fight or make a sexual choice is judged differently for male and female characters according to predominating cultural *mores*. Men's weakness creates a space in which female characters have the opportunity to act with unusual assertiveness. The creation of this space demonstrates that gender is a social construct, ill-befitting all individuals, of both sexes, whom it affects.

\* \* \* \* \*

... I am ready to put armour on.

(3 *Henry VI*, III. iii. 230)

Both Joan la Pucelle in *Henry VI Part I* and Queen Margaret in *Henry VI Parts 2 and 3* lead armies. This unusually assertive action for a woman is only possible - and only necessary - because of the weakness of two men: the Dauphin and King Henry. It is recognised in the plays that it should not be necessary for females to fight. Both women's assertiveness indicates a strength of purpose and a belief in their own effectiveness that is not justified by their place in, or experience of, society. As queen, Margaret has access to greater political and military power than is usual for women, but even as the wife of the king her power would usually be circumscribed. Here the strength she wields is the counterpart of Henry's weakness. In the closing play of the tetralogy, *Richard III*, war is reported in its consequences for (passive) women who lose their families and suffer violent assault. Civil strife is mirrored in the microcosm of the family where female characters play an important part even when they do not, or cannot, take up arms. By contrast the three parts of *Henry VI* show women who wage war.

Given the assertiveness of these characters, it is notable that the tetralogy has inspired only a limited amount of feminist criticism and that Joan and Margaret have received little attention. Clara Claiborne Park is dismissive of Joan, who, she asserts, barely aroused Shakespeare's interest. Park argues that Shakespeare allows his [sic] women a severely limited sphere of action, and that he shows that female intervention in politics is always disastrous.<sup>3</sup> But while it is true that Joan and Margaret are unsuccessful in war, this proves no more than saying that most of the male characters' interventions are disastrous. The women's actions are limited, as are those of the male characters, by the self-destructive nature of war, particularly civil war, and the plays condemn the

3. Clara Claiborne Park, 'As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular', in Lenz, Greene, & Neely, op. cit., pp. 100 - 116, p. 103.

combination of scheming and passivity by men far more than the actions of women as the cause of war and its continuation.

The portrayal of Joan, although pandering to national, religious and sexual stereotypes popular with the contemporary audience, is remarkable for delaying a simple condemnation of her as a French witch. English patriotism as well as historical fact demands that the French, Catholic female martyr must be burnt. Yet Joan is not dismissed from the start. Her confident assertiveness is impressive, and her claim to holy guidance initially links her to Henry. Like him Joan suggests divine interest in the war, although, unlike him, she is finally shown to be a charlatan. Her social position is negligible. As the daughter of a shepherdess she has nothing to offer but her courage. Her claim to divine backing from the Virgin may not have endeared her to contemporary English audiences; but to the Dauphin and his troops it is at least temporary evidence of a woman who should be allowed to fight, even if they cannot respect her for doing so. The attitudes of the men surrounding Joan undoubtedly inform the audience's opinion of her, but very often these attitudes are shown to be wrong. Given that she is a French woman fighter in an English play, this is surprising. Finally, however, the pressure to conform to stereotype is irresistible, and when Joan's 'fiends' appear we can be left in no doubt that she is a witch. Margaret's appearance at this point is not auspicious since she too is French. Yet it can also be argued that as one woman dies, another rises: it is impossible to eclipse women.

Joan and Margaret derive freedom from a combination of orthodox attitudes towards them as women and the unorthodox action they take. They both gain specifically feminine - and obviously gendered - power from their physical attractiveness to men. The progression of Joan from inspired saviour to witch is mirrored in her ravaged beauty at the end of the play. The change from Margaret's attractiveness to Suffolk to the point at which York savages her for her lack of beauty reflects perceptions of her progress from bride to vicious warrior.

Even in war, women are subject to men's perceptions of their appearance. It is Margaret's beauty and her supposed ability to be 'wooed and won' because she is a woman which inspires Suffolk to think of her as a future queen (*1 Henry VI*, V. iv. 34 - 5). But this is a purely passive form of power and a potential source of weakness until Suffolk makes up his mind not to rape her but to wed her to Henry. Linda Bamber suggests that Margaret is judged against a norm of feminine behaviour by other characters, and that she is then criticised for being unwomanly, while Joan is not.<sup>4</sup> This contradicts Bamber's previous point that the male characters' emphasis on Joan's femininity diverts attention from her exclusive concern with military and political action. That would only be possible if these characters were judging Joan according to stereotypical norms of femininity, as indeed they are. Joan colludes in this, underlining the importance of her attractiveness to Charles. She is regarded as a potential sexual conquest by the Dauphin, is called a strumpet and a witch by Talbot, and is vilified by York for her promiscuous claims to pregnancy before she burns. Bamber asserts that Margaret, because of her reliance on Suffolk and Warwick, and because of her precipitation into action as wife and mother, is not a woman warrior, unlike Joan who has none of these family ties and male associates. Bamber does not suggest what Margaret may be, nor why only a woman devoid of family and other relationships should qualify as a warrior. Undoubtedly Margaret feels she must fight because Henry's abdication of duty as king, husband and father threatens not only her own role but also her son's succession. But this does not alter the fact that she takes up arms and wages war.

Where women are regarded as having usurped men's power, particularly the power of action, the mere act of seizing power cannot secure its full force for women. Because power can exist only within a relationship, the way its possessor is perceived affects its potency. Out-numbered by men and acting within a patriarchal culture, these women are subject to men's reactions to them,

4. Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1982, pp. 135 - 7.

as well as to their own preconceptions of gender and power. The presentation of Joan demonstrates the problems for women who attempt to act outside the usual bounds of behaviour. When she fights Charles, he is surprised that a woman has defeated him and changes the subject. Joan's claim to divine inspiration is immediately followed by Charles' statement of lust for her. He implies that responsibility for his sexual arousal lies with Joan, depriving her of power over his interpretation of her (*I Henry VI*, I. iii. 87). By ascribing Joan's power to sexual attraction, Charles attempts to devalue the power of divine intervention. This is similar to Richard's later treatment in *Richard III* of Anne and Queen Elizabeth, and Angelo's reaction to Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. It is a recurring problem for female characters. While the audience knows that none of the men is justified in blaming the women for their own sexual desire, this knowledge is counterbalanced by comments such as Joan's emphasis on her physical beauty, which she claims is a mark of having been touched by her vision: to her it highlights the truth of her claims to divine help, while to the men around her it proves them spurious and makes Charles desire her as much as her help.

Despite her adulterous relationship with Suffolk, Margaret never suffers the same degree of censure for sexual duplicity from critics writing about the tetralogy as does Joan, of whose sexual activity there is no firm evidence. Marilyn French accuses Joan of sexual dalliance on a grand scale, adopting pejorative terms in which to describe her supposed activities.<sup>5</sup> French charges Joan with provoking sexual innuendoes from the men around her through her promiscuous sexuality, but fails to recognise that such comments are also *the* inevitable reaction of men to a female warrior whose very presence implies that male warriors are inadequate. As soon as Joan appears, Alençon presumes her dealings with Charles are sexual, not martial (*I Henry VI*, I. iii. 98 - 102). In complete contrast to this view, Marjorie Garber sees Joan as a militant virgin.<sup>6</sup>

5. Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1982, pp. 46 - 7.

6. Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*, Methuen, London, 1981, p. 132.

This is also misguided since it is Joan who draws attention to her sexual attractiveness and invokes the shadow of feminine infidelity, well before she claims pregnancy as a possible means to avoid being burned.

When Charles attempts to blame his own watch's laxity on Joan she rightly rebuffs his claim (*I Henry VI*, II. i. 59 - 60). The men around her in the war are too dependent on her as a saviour. It is this voluntary but unlooked-for dependency, not Joan's sex, which emasculates the French because it stops them taking responsibility for their part in the war. Coppélia Kahn sees Joan as a composite portrait of the ways in which women are dangerous to men, usurping both the masculine role of the warrior and also using her feminine, sexual appeal to dominate the French.<sup>7</sup> But it is the men's reaction to Joan, and their interpretation and construction of her femininity - overwhelmingly sexual, likely to deceive, in touch with the supernatural - which emasculates them, not Joan herself. She wants to dominate the English, not the French. The self-destructive power which Kahn ascribes to Joan should more properly be seen as her troops' own creation. By contrast, Margaret empowers her troops and strengthens their resolve. The meeting of Joan and the robust English Talbot is instructive. The most obvious and damaging thing Talbot can say of Joan is that she is in league with the devil. Nevertheless, he cannot laugh at her. This strumpet disturbs him sufficiently to make him want to chastise her and to dismiss her victories as having been won by fear, not force. Marilyn French suggests that the contrast between Joan and Talbot points to the underlying war against the outlaw feminine principle which is identified with sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Yet while the war is waged against one woman, Joan, it is hard to see how this can be expanded to a general principle of feminine sexuality. The French are regarded by the English as effeminate - but that is not the same point. French risks endorsing the attitudes she describes

7. Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981, p. 55.

8. French, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

by failing to acknowledge that her gender principles, and the lines according to which she says they are divided, may be wrong.

The relationship with weak men within which female characters display their power is an important factor affecting the strength of that power. Given that the context in which these women act is overwhelmingly patriarchal, it is not surprising that their relationships with men diminish rather than augment the effect of their actions. Women warriors may claim physical prowess, but if they are derided even by their own side for being women, their power is necessarily less than it would be for a man taking similar action. An inability to convince men to take her seriously also affects Joan and through her the men whom she is struggling to champion. Charles in particular does not know how to react to Joan, and suspects she may prove a false prophet (*1 Henry VI*, I. iii. 123 - 4; 129). A combination of an over-reliance on Joan's power with a derogatory attitude towards her because she is a woman weakens the French troops. Joan's power of action begins as skilful war-making but degenerates into a reliance on a (supposedly) typically female trust in the supernatural. While this does not happen because all men fail to take Joan seriously - indeed men like Burgundy do take her seriously and are as convinced by her arguments as others are by her success in battle - it emphasises that she cannot rely on active strength alone.

Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, denied access to any other form of power over or through her husband, also assays political power through a pact with supernatural forces. Eleanor schemes for the advancement of her husband because only as his wife can she gain political power. Although, as is evident when she is led through the streets in penance, she has great individual strength of character, without Gloucester she has no chance of political power and she is defeated by his inability to take her seriously. Irene G. Dash argues that it is Gloucester's inability to see women as men's equals which means he is deaf to his



wife's warnings.<sup>9</sup> Eleanor is devious, clearly 'familiar' from the start with the supernatural, whose consequences for Joan the audience has already seen.

Eleanor's lack of fear in pursuing her ambitions is as impressive as the strength of her later repentance. But although she understands court politics, her relationship with Gloucester presents an ambiguous view of a woman wanting to play a significant role at court, both struggling to break free from expectations of what she may do and also conforming to the cliché of a nagging wife. The representation of Eleanor colludes with, as well as confounds, cultural expectations of a woman seeking power, and ultimately Eleanor's ability to pursue her ambitions is thwarted by her feminine gender. But the limits of that gender, like the dress for which Margaret reviles her, is an outward garb, not a biological determinant of character or purpose.

Margaret chooses to assert herself first against another woman. Eleanor is the easiest target and the one who angers her most. Portrayed as a typically feminine argument over personal attire, this antagonism shows that both women have internalised the same patriarchal values which their assertiveness challenges, since each despises the other for dominating her husband. Lisa Jardine notes that Margaret perceives Eleanor's dress as a signalling of Gloucester's power as protector as well as her own contempt for the queen.<sup>10</sup> Eleanor cannot claim that power as her own, but does have the means to make it obvious through dress. Irene Dash argues that a woman's achievement of power frequently entails scorn for her own sex, as the gap between her and the successful men she imitates diminishes, and that between her and other women is increased.<sup>11</sup> While this may be true of Joan and Margaret, it is dangerous to assume its normality as Dash does, particularly when the feminist critical enterprise, in which Dash is engaged,

9. Irene G. Dash, *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981, p. 166.

10. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

11. Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 169 - 70.

is working to the opposite scale of values. It is doubly odd for Dash to argue that the process of gaining power makes women misogynists; indeed it is a paradoxically self-destructive argument.

Increasingly, the female characters occupy supposedly masculine roles of leadership and command in these plays, rendering a gendered attribution of action or language redundant. Gloucester and Beaufort are childish in their bickering, Eleanor is dignified in her acceptance of her punishment, Henry speaks mildly and gently to Gloucester, while Margaret perceives the protectorship as an irritating threat. The inappropriateness of gender-stereotyping is evident in the encounters between Eleanor and her husband after her trial. It is Gloucester who prepares to cry as his wife is led through the streets. Conversely, Eleanor is dignified, realising Gloucester's danger when he naively believes he will be safe. She may seem misanthropic besides his emotional generosity. But she is right: he will soon be murdered.

With Margaret comes the loss of Anjou and Maine and an alliance with the King of Naples which quickly becomes irrelevant. This weakens her position and that of Henry although it does not stop her taking an active part in England's future. Since she has nothing to offer but her own strength of character, it is clear that her achievements are all her own doing. Margaret may derive her power from her position as Henry's wife, but she also derives difficulties from his vacillation and fights largely for his cause. Just as Eleanor finds that Gloucester is unwilling or unable either to join in her plans for political advancement, or heed her warnings of the danger in which he stands, Margaret has little help from Henry, who wanders like a child back across the border into captivity while she is pleading with Louis for military assistance to fight for his kingdom. However harmless Gloucester or Henry may appear, it is wrong that Henry is unable to stop Gloucester's arrest in his own realm. Henry effectively abdicates from his duty both as king and as friend, the proper protector of his kingdom, people and indeed

of his protector, by succumbing to the feeling that he can do nothing more than weep for his friend. He may be a gentle king, but this gentleness lets his friend's enemies do their worst. The Dauphin on his own is a similarly ineffective ruler. Both England and France need help. There is a gap into which women may step and through which they may take power.

Joan's manner of making war is suspect because she is French as well as female. The English warriors already think that the French are effeminate in their methods. The fact that they are led by a woman merely elides nationalistic and misogynistic biases. The construction of gender here goes beyond male and female and extends to French and English. Joan's ability to disguise herself and win easily is very different from Margaret's straightforward approach to war. Joan's victories are presented as supernatural and Talbot's prejudice seems well-founded (*1 Henry VI*, I. vii. 21 - 2). Joan does little to rebuff the slur on her fighting methods, and Bedford's heroic death emphasises the contrast between Joan and the English. These are stereotypes that Margaret fulfils in the opposite way. Although she is French and female, unlike Joan she fights like a man and when necessary retreats like one (*2 Henry VI*, V. iv. 3 - 6). The audience does not see Margaret in the same xenophobic light as Joan because it is obvious that she is a good leader and a necessary one because of Henry's weakness. Her methods are the same as those of her opponents. She is as bloody as they are, although at crucial points she lacks the political skill to manoeuvre as they do, a failing that is expensive for both her troops and for her son's life.

Margaret has a genuine love for Henry, despite his rejection. This love gives her a depth of character which Joan, and indeed Eleanor, lack. It is not just a patriarchal reading of the text which values the depth of love Margaret feels for Henry and for her son, as well as for Suffolk. Her love demonstrates her humanity and lends her moral weight. Her relationship with Henry is a study of two different temperaments locked into the opposite of what are considered the

usual gender/political roles. Margaret is outraged by Edward's brash behaviour in front of his king. Her high estimation of kingship is so different from the reality that confronts her in Henry that it is surprising that she can, within a very short space of time, fight for him, argue for him, tell him to be quiet, then fall immediately silent at his reminder that he is, after all, a king (*3 Henry VI*, III. ii. 84 - 6; 119 - 20). Margaret is obviously lying in her surprise at the news that Gloucester has been murdered, yet her concern when Henry faints is genuine: she has not hardened entirely (*2 Henry VI*, III. ii. 33). She gains her position because of a man's weakness and yet is also portrayed as dependent on another man - Suffolk. Indeed she has a curiously stereotypical relationship with him, and is also deeply vulnerable to rejection by Henry, as well as to the death of her son (*2 Henry VI*, III. ii. 120 - 21).

Margaret's adulterous relationship with Suffolk reinforces expectations of the male rather than the female gender. It is evidence less of typical feminine infidelity than of the unsatisfactory way in which the royal marriage has been arranged, with Suffolk choosing Margaret for Henry and marrying her as his proxy. Henry has failed to act as an assertive husband. Denied the usual amount of power due to a queen because of her husband's passivity, Margaret takes power in more unusual ways. Nevertheless, even as an assertive and active leader, Margaret is powerless to protect her lover when Henry asserts himself to banish Suffolk on pain of death. It is this action which leads to Margaret's first curse - but in this play her curses have significantly less effect than those of *Richard III* (*2 Henry VI*, III. ii. 304 - 8). Suffolk's severed head clutched to Margaret's bosom reinforces the idea of weak protectorship, and her images of the babe who dies on the nipple foreshadow the death of her son (*2 Henry VI*, III. ii. 395 - 7; IV. iv. 5 ).

A contrast is struck between Margaret as an active warrior and as a lover. As a warrior, Margaret's rejoicing in York's misery is intense. When York berates

her for being unwomanly, he does not realise that she is beyond the terms in which he speaks. Women are not soft, mild, pitiful and flexible' (*3 Henry VI*, I. iv. 142 - 3). These absolutes have been shattered as she offers him his son's blood on a cloth and stabs him. Margaret is particularly vicious in her joy at York's suffering. Yet it is very clear that her own humanity, as well as her supposed femininity, has diminished. In all cases, the loss of humanity in a ruler is important, and since that humanity is represented as itself a gendered quality, the loss of humanity is different for men and women. Margaret challenges orthodox ideas of how mothers may act, but the fact that her actions, in particular her savage enjoyment of the death of York's son, precipitate her own son's death means that the impression of her as an active woman is morally double-edged. After her son's death Margaret is reduced from proud warrior to marginalised voice. She has been wounded on the part which may be perceived as feminine but which is in fact most human. Now her actions melt away and she appears only as a distraught mother. Instead of increasing her desire to fight, this wound makes her want to die and ends her active role.

Margaret and Joan are isolated because of the unusualness of their position. Joan's divine calling and sex separate her from the rest of the French troops who tolerate rather than welcome her. But Margaret's family ties of son and husband mean she has more to lose than Joan. Her part in her son's death sets the seal on her redundancy as a mother; she is already as far as Henry is concerned redundant as a wife. Margaret stands alone in the war, having her best success when Henry is absent. After Suffolk's death, Margaret is politically isolated, lacking any allies except her son. Irene Dash asserts that had Margaret lost Suffolk any earlier, her political naiveté would have been even more disastrous.<sup>12</sup> Dash argues that Margaret misinterprets the court, firstly because of her French, absolutist background, and secondly because she is not privy to all the conspiracies around Henry. But this is an over-simplification. Margaret may be ignorant of the

12. Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 157 - 8 & 162 - 4.

English court, but she soon asserts herself. Although the outcome of her intervention means the loss of husband, lover, son and kingdom, there are no guarantees that passivity would have secured any more, as Dash herself acknowledges in relation to Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III*. These women are caught in a double-bind, risking blame for not having acted at all, or for having done too much.

Although powerful because of their own actions, both Margaret and Joan are judged in relation to men. Both their fathers, although not significant characters in the plays, affect the measure of their power. Margaret is quietly subservient to a father for whom she is little more than a political tool, and whose lack of political power ensures that she is not welcomed as Henry's bride. Joan rejects all bonds of family, minimising the audience's emotional involvement with her. Her father is a figure of ineffectual pathos since Joan is not his good girl (*1 Henry VI*, V. vi. 25). Her arrogant rejection of him is a pertinent comment on her character (*1 Henry VI*, V. vi. 21 - 2). Coppélia Kahn observes that Joan's rejection of her father would be tantamount to suicide in Talbot's philosophy - and indeed this rejection does hasten her death.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Joan manoeuvres her father into agreeing that the English should burn her alienates the audience. It is this rejection of and by a man, provoked entirely by Joan, which ensures that the audience feels no overwhelming desire to see her saved. Joan's final plea of pregnancy is a typical and specifically feminine appeal, ineffective because she has proved herself to be so far removed from orthodoxy as to make her claim laughable. York's derision indicates that Joan's flirtatiousness, which underlined stock ideas of feminine sexuality, has rebounded on her in the most horrific way.

Joan and Margaret share an acid attitude towards male weakness, which is both the source and frustration of their power. Both argue with royalty when Charles and Henry prove unsuitable rulers. Had these men been better fitted to

13. Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

their duties neither woman would have had the cause or opportunity to take up arms. Margaret trusts Suffolk and is thus able to express sentiments about Henry which to unfriendly ears would be treason. Her scorn for Henry's character as inappropriate to his duties provides a gathering theme of these plays. The faults in the political system of *Henry VI Parts 2 and 3* consist largely in the over-extended protectorship and in the personal ambitions and childish jockeying for position by the court. Too old to be treated as a child, the evidence of which should be his marriage to Margaret, Henry is still incapable of asserting his power consistently. He neither abdicates nor rules, but vacillates between the two. This leaves Margaret in a precarious position, neither able to claim the full powers of a queen, nor having to resign herself to banishment from power. Henry is patently a good man, and potentially a good king, if the times and people were very different. It is wrong that it is wrong to be a good man; but Henry is not justified by this in his weakness or reliance on the protectorship, nor in his reluctance to rebuke those who insult his rule in his presence. His most damaging fault is his inconsistency.

For a while after Suffolk's murder Henry seems to re-establish a dominant role in his relationship with Margaret, attempting to lie to York by saying that Somerset is not in his camp. Prizing peace above all, he wishes to avoid more war. But Margaret, proudly re-entering with Somerset at her side, will not accommodate the compromise that could have saved her son's life (*2 Henry VI*, V. i. 85 - 6). Henry is suddenly practical, while Margaret, fighting for abstract concepts of kingship, loses more than she gains. By the beginning of *Henry VI Part 3* York recognises that it is in Margaret's power to talk of peace at *her* parliament, not Henry's (I. i. 35). Henry's desire only to keep the throne for the duration of his life does not live up to the ideals of his supporters; they will not see him living in peace, but despised. Now Margaret's power is augmented by others' reactions to her. It is to the queen that Henry's disappointed followers look. Most importantly, they *expect* her to act.

As Henry sits on the hill wishing for the good life while the father who has killed his son and the son who has killed his father pass before him, it is clear that there is no choice - or abdication of choice - which does not entail responsibility. The father and the son depict failed protectorship in the microcosm of the family. C. L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler see evidence of Shakespeare's own relationship with his father in the portrayal of Henry as a king who cherishes his realm even as his weakness lets his nobles and queen tear it to pieces.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not this is appropriate comment on Shakespeare's father, it over-simplifies Margaret's role by failing to point out that she takes action with the aim of protecting the realm, not tearing it apart.

The father-son bond is essential to the construction of men's identity in the tetralogy. Coppélia Kahn argues that these plays trace the decline of this bond from the selfless loyalty of the Talbots to the cruelty of Richard III, against a background where the means of masculine self-definition is aggression.<sup>15</sup> In fact Talbot and his son John present a picture of the construction of masculine honour as futile and fatal. Refusing to flee and save himself, John represents the ideal son who prefers death before dishonour. His action also means the death of the male line and Talbot dies clasping his son's corpse (*1 Henry VI*, IV. vi. 51 - 3). Norman N. Holland also sees the tetralogy as a study of the failure, rather than celebration, of the father-son relationship. John's request to re-enter the fray is complicated by the construction of a passive mother whose chastity can be invoked by John as a means of persuading Talbot to let him fight.<sup>16</sup> If Talbot does not do so, John will be thought a bastard, dishonouring Talbot's wife, his son and himself (*1 Henry VI*, IV. v. 12 - 17). This is the orthodox construction of the

14. C. L. Barber, & Richard P. Wheeler, 'Shakespeare in the Rising Middle Class', in Norman N. Holland, Sidney Homan, & Bernard J. Paris (eds.), *Shakespeare's Personality*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, pp. 17 - 40, p. 25.

15. Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

16. Norman N. Holland, 'Sons and Substitutions: Shakespeare's Phallic Fantasy', in Holland, Homan, & Paris, *op. cit.*, pp. 66 - 85, pp. 71 & 79.



feminine gender to which neither Margaret nor Joan conforms. Clifford's murder of Rutland is an even more vivid presentation of the waste occasioned by such honour, as Clifford kills the child because Rutland's father killed his father (3 *Henry VI*, I. iii. 47). Coppélia Kahn traces much of the *Henry VI* plays' tragedy to the fact that Henry conspicuously fails to live up to his father, Henry V.<sup>17</sup> She is correct in her estimation that without a strong father-figure as king, the English court degenerates into self-destructive squabbling. Margaret's activity cannot compensate for Henry's weakness.

Henry's passive viewing of these distressing scenes on the hill contrasts with Margaret's active part in the death of York's son, which precipitates the death of Henry and Margaret's own son. The self-destructive nature of civil war is most keenly illustrated by its effect on families, and most brutally by the breaking of the parent-child bond. Margaret, although implicated in responsibility for her son's death, has neither the same scale of power, nor, therefore, the same responsibility for events as Henry. Her censure by York after the death of Rutland is not played in the same cosmic terms as the plays' indictment of Henry's abdication of responsibility. Both Henry and Margaret fail as parents and as protectors, but because Henry's abdicated power is greater than Margaret's assumed assertiveness, the play makes clear that his is the greater fault. She is responsible for the microcosm, Henry for the macrocosm. The idea of failed protectorship dominates the play. Margaret is no more able to save her own son's life as an active warrior than is Queen Elizabeth, a passive onlooker in *Richard III*. The solution to England's problems is not found in its women taking up arms, but in the desire for a new society, where, whatever the character's sex, to be good is not to be weak, and to be strong is not to be bloody.

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17. Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?

(*All's Well*, I. i. 148)

In the different reactions of male and female characters in *All's Well That Ends Well* to the question of sexual choice and responsibility, and the power to affect that choice, we may observe the politics of gender at work. Helen does not value her chastity in an orthodox manner. Indeed virginity to her is more of a burden than an asset, and what she, like Juliet, wishes is full consummation of her marriage. Because no man pursues Helen for her virginity, she can gain no power from withholding it, and because Bertram is an extremely reluctant suitor, Helen must actively pursue him.

In a society in which notions of chastity shape opinions of women, the central question of a woman losing her virginity to her liking is shocking. Helen and Paroles' conversation in Act I Scene 1 is also misleading because no-one makes it necessary for Helen to barricade herself against an unwanted approach. This play examines not the passive protection of feminine virginity, but the active pursuit of feminine honour as it consists in fertility and marriage. Paroles' summary of the orthodox situation is blunt: there is no way that a woman can win. Men will have their way. This is not true of this play. Helen gets what she wants and Bertram loses his freedom. But this situation does not refer to a wider historical reality where women had this power of choice. Lafeu's daughter is far more representative, a shadowy woman with no voice to express her desire, or unwillingness, to marry Bertram. Helen has the freedom to choose an apparently unworthy as well as unwilling husband and the power to ensure she marries him. This suggests power but also upholds the idea that no matter how badly men behave, women will remain constant. The fact that both men and women are trapped by this argument compounds the problem.

Helen argues both sides of the sex versus virginity case. Usually, as with Diana and Bertram later, the woman tries to protect her virginity while the man

encourages her to sleep with him. But in the conversation with Paroles, Helen advocates the pleasurable loss of female virginity and her right to sexual satisfaction. Paroles, by stressing the inevitability of pregnancy and motherhood for sexually active women, is far more conservative than Helen, diverting attention from the radical nature of her words. The power of what Helen says, if pursued outside the bounds of marriage, would be a radical threat to patriarchal order. But it is contained by her marriage and pregnancy. Helen's ability to deceive, plot and master-mind her capture of Bertram gives us a double-edged impression of power, not just because it is unrealistic but also because, as Lisa Jardine points out, sex and pregnancy went hand in hand in the Renaissance imagination.<sup>18</sup> Helen argues for the right for the two to be separate, but acts so that they are inevitably joined. She wants the power to 'blow a man up', but gains that power over Bertram by ensuring that he makes her pregnant.

The context in which Helen exercises her powers of action and the way in which she describes them conspire to make her appear less extraordinary than she really is. Lafeu's comments on her dealings with the King have the same effect. Lafeu resorts to stereotypes as he urges the king to write Helen a 'love-line' and suggests that since she is a woman, she is a (sexual) traitor. Leaving Helen with the King, Lafeu suggests for himself the role of Pandar (II. i. 97). His playful assertion that any woman wishing to see the King must be dealing in sexual transactions is accurate since Helen is using her powers of healing to get herself a husband. Thus her extraordinary decision to pursue Bertram can be portrayed as the stereotypical actions of a woman dealing in sex. Such imputations build a stock mythology about feminine sexuality and power which is a constant undercurrent in all the plays discussed in this thesis.

Although Lafeu notes Helen's constancy, he also emphasises that her moral integrity is perceived in direct correlation to her virginity. Men's reaction to and

18. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

interpretation of feminine power is again crucial in this play. Helen plays an active part in reinforcing misogynistic myths. The price of failure, she tells the King, will be far more damaging to her than to him. She has nothing to lose but her reputation - which of course is also all she has - and encourages the King to know that, if she fails to cure him, she may be called a strumpet or worse (II. i. 170 - 74). This is nonsense: if Helen failed to cure the King it would have nothing to do with her virginity. But the worst punishment she can think of for herself, as a woman, would be the unjustified censure she outlines. The loss of reputation would be devastating for any woman. When Helen promises Diana a dowry in exchange for her help with the bed-plot, she can be assured that Diana will need it if she is ever to marry with a slur on her reputation. Helen plays an active part in maintaining the attitudes which unjustly condemn women for sexual crimes they have *not* committed. Helen sees this as inevitable and fair, even as she demonstrates the extraordinary power to choose her own husband. Thus the radical nature of her sexual-pleasure argument is defused. Helen is not advocating rampant feminine sexuality. Her desire to 'blow-up' a man is contained within orthodox attitudes about women, including herself, and with the honourable aim of getting herself a husband and a legitimate son. In her first speech she seems not to desire pregnancy; by the end of the play it is exactly what she has achieved. Helen's speech and action are at odds. The nature and amount of her power may be overestimated if the dual significance of Helen's role in the construction of the feminine gender is overlooked. Her actions are both chaste, because she acts within marriage and therefore with honour, and also sexually duplicitous because she foals Bertram in the bed-trick.

The play emphasises that the circumstances of Helen's power to act are very particular. It is not often that the King of France would need the help of a girl (although I have already discussed the Dauphin's need for Joan). Helen only has the power she does because of her father, and the King lets her help him because he knew and trusted her father well, and would have asked for his help had he still

been alive. Clara Claiborne Park sees in the fact that Helen's power of healing is inherited from her father evidence that Shakespeare preferred not to show her as an independently active character, despite the fact that powers of healing were an accepted female gift.<sup>19</sup> The fact that Helen's powers of healing are inherited demonstrates that the culture within which she acts does not accept that her power is wholly her own. Lisa Jardine notes that Helen's healing powers are all sublimated to orthodox ends, and that her chaste goddess/fierce warrior quality both celebrates and contains the achievements of women, and in itself is ultimately found wanting alongside the qualities of fulfilled femininity which are marriage and motherhood.<sup>20</sup> Jardine is correct: Helen's powers of action are self-limiting within orthodox roles.

When Helen asserts the choice healing has earned her, there is as much weight placed on her sexuality as her virginity. She does not immediately choose Bertram. This heightens the dramatic tension of the scene, and simultaneously undercuts Helen's protestations of chaste embarrassment. Bertram's rejection of Helen demonstrates the problems caused when a man's recalcitrance in sexual dealings is the spur of a woman's actions. Had Bertram rejected Helen without angering the King, Helen would have had no power to force Bertram to marry her. Her power depends upon the King's patronage and on the fact that Bertram's rejection personally affronts his sovereign. More important than Helen is the fact that the King feels *his* honour is at stake (II. iii. 150). Even when Bertram does take her, Helen attempts to make her weakness more impressive than her forwardness - although in saying that she dare not take him, she does exactly that (II. iii. 103). The King reinforces the proper order of things by which Bertram must choose Helen and not vice-versa (II. iii. 174-5). Helen has chosen Bertram, who could therefore be seen to be hers (especially since he does not want her). But such usurping of the masculine role is not allowed, and Helen does not desire

19. Park, *op. cit.*, (note 3), pp. 103 - 4.

20. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

it. Although she is visibly pursuing a reluctant lover, she does so only because it is necessary. She prefers the appearance of the more traditional roles of passive, feminine subject, and active, masculine lover. She has internalised patriarchal constructions of gender and sexual relationships, which she feels should be conducted within the normal parameters, even though Bertram's indifference forces her to act without them.

In order for the tension of this situation to be held in balance, Bertram is unsympathetically portrayed, particularly in his disdain at the idea of marrying a poor physician's daughter (II. iii. 116 - 17). His maltreatment of Helen demonstrates her loyalty and justifies her forwardness: she would not have done this had she not had to, all in the cause of true love. Once they are officially married, Helen is painfully obedient to Bertram's instructions, and even justifies his abandonment of her (III. ii. 116 - 18). Lisa Jardine sees Helen as another Shakespearean version of Patient Griselda.<sup>21</sup> But this implies that Helen is far more passive in awaiting the resolution of the plot than she actually is, since it is through her actions that Bertram will finally be secured, although it is only through the King's intervention (which of course she initiated by her inherited powers of healing) that she is able to marry him at all.

Helen is an orphan but with a defined place within her adoptive family circle. However, in order to assert her choice of husband she must deprive herself of immediate family by making her adopted family her in-laws. The process of rejecting the family in their existing state is an important part of growing-up for both Juliet and Helen, and a significant element of their power. The community of women is fractured by assertive women. Helen is shocked at the idea of the Countess as her mother, overlaying it with ideas of incest. The Countess uses pejorative terms in which to describe her future daughter-in-law's affections, speaking of it as "gross", something of which sense is ashamed, and

21. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

emphasising Helen's sinfulness and wilfulness (I. iii. 168 - 76). Helen must bribe Diana and the widow to help her. Their collusion in the bed-trick is not done out of friendship.

Misogynistic imagery undermines women's position, both within and without marriage. There are no unfaithful women in the play, but in its mythology, women are the source and cause of inevitable cuckoldry. Unmarried, they are either virgins to be assailed and, when won, despised, or whores simply to be despised. For all Helen's radical ideas on sexual pleasure, or the Countess' authority, men and women still talk about and to women in denigrating terms, specifically related to sexual faithlessness. The Countess encourages Lavatch to think that any friends he gained after his marriage would be cuckolders. Lavatch further destroys notions of women's sexual integrity by describing a comic counter-universe of his own creation where men are members of a cuckolds' club, saving each other the labour of sexually satisfying their wives (I. iii. 41- 6). The comedy of these comments belies the truth that such deeply ingrained attitudes have led to the subjection and domination of women within the patriarchal systems of these plays. This topsy-turvy approach to marriage helps to justify oppression. The Countess and Helen are exceptions to this misogynistic rule. They are chaste and constant. There should be no question that women in general would follow this rule, especially since no other women appear. Again the construction of different and contradictory layers of gender works simultaneously, both affirming and denying the idea of feminine infidelity.

The cohesive force of male friendship in this play lies in misogyny: the community of cuckolds, or the soldiers of Mars. But this community is based on a hollow notion of male honour. Friends are deceptive, the King attacks honour, and the Dumaine lords know of Bertram's plans with Diana but ignore them because they represent unusually disgraceful behaviour. In fact the Dumaine lords' reticence protects Bertram only temporarily, since by letting the action take

its course they unwittingly help the success of Helen's trick. The pointlessness of passivity for men is stressed by the fact that the young men are sick for exploit. War is an opportunity for lighthearted sexual as well as physical adventures. The King sends the Lords Dumaine to battle telling them to ensure that they wed honour rather than woo it (II. i. 14 - 15). Honour is female and not to be dallied with. The metaphor is then translated into the real enemy as the King warns his men not to become captives to the girls of Italy (III. i. 19 - 22). This is an entirely gendered view of the situation where women actively imprison men, interfering with their duties in the war, while it is Bertram and Paroles who in fact lay siege to Diana. The King's personification of honour as female is interesting, particularly since masculine and feminine honour are exclusive opposites. Men gain honour by forceful relations with women and through physical exploits; women have honour (virginity) which they must preserve at all costs in order to marry, and chastity which they must maintain within marriage, despite the fact that, as the Countess and Lavatch agree, wives are inevitably the cause of cuckoldry. Such personifications are a clever argument for a policy of *laissez-faire*. If peace, honour and other significant attributes are feminine, surely females have enough power?

Helen's religious disguise adds a spurious moral overtone to questionable acts. Like the other heroines who travel in pursuit of their future husbands, Helen cannot go as she is. This is not because she or any of the cross-dressers is incapable of what they attempt, but because they need to secure different reactions from others to themselves. Paula S. Berggren sees the fact that Helen does not choose to disguise herself as a man as a symptom of the loss of friendship between future husband and wife which was possible for the cross-dressed heroine.<sup>22</sup> However this is a simplistic view of the relationship between the cross-dressers and their lovers. Rosalind/Ganymede may approach friendship with Orlando, but as Balthasar, Portia is not Bassanio's friend. Portia does help

22. Paula S. Berggren, 'The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays', in Lenz, Greene, & Neely, op. cit., pp. 17 - 34, p. 22.



Antonio, but provokes the conflict between Bassanio and herself as Portia through her actions as Balthasar, and while there is a degree of friendship between Orsino and Cesario, it is based on the relationship of servant and master. More plausible is Berggren's suggestion that Helen's religious disguise is an ironic comment on ideas of chastity as virginity, in which Helen represents chastity as married sexuality.

The bed-trick is a warning to men that they may be deceived when they think they have the upper hand in sexual transactions. This both challenges and confirms patriarchal attitudes: women are powerful, but that power lies in sexual deceit. The bed-trick is evidence of a form of power which exacerbates the gender dilemma. Helen uses all means available to her, and since she is married to Bertram (just as Mariana in *Measure for Measure* was betrothed to but betrayed by Angelo) her actions apparently do not suggest feminine sexual duplicity. The audience also knows that it is Bertram who has behaved badly. Now the usually assertive male has become a passive victim of superior plotting, and Helen's aim is legitimate pregnancy. Nevertheless the problems the trick poses are clear: if a man deceived a woman in this way it would be tantamount to rape.

Janet Adelman argues that the unsatisfactory nature of the sexual encounter as a trap bodes ill for Bertram and Helen's future.<sup>23</sup> She also suggests that Bertram's flight from Helen is mirrored in his aversion to Diana once he believes he has slept with her. Adelman argues a forceful case against the positive nature of Helen's ability to force Bertram into a sexual relationship and thus marriage. To Adelman, Bertram's overwhelming fear of women and of sexual contact except as a deflowering of the virginal provides an insurmountable stumbling block to the relationship. The bed-trick fails to reconcile the problematic aspects of Helen's sexuality for Bertram, who is accustomed to her as a sister, not a wife.

23. Janet Adelman, 'Bed Tricks: On Marriage as the End of Comedy in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*', in Holland, Homan, & Paris (eds.), op. cit., pp. 151 - 74, pp. 152 - 4.

This idea of incestuous sexuality complicating Helen's assertiveness is also remarked on by Marjorie Garber, who sees in it a measure of excuse for Bertram's reluctance to marry his erstwhile adoptive sister.<sup>24</sup> Adelman's argument is more convincing than that of Diane Elizabeth Dreher, who suggests that it is not Helen's sexuality, but her courage and ingenuity which repel Bertram.<sup>25</sup> Dreher argues that Helen presents an extreme picture of androgyny in her assertive defiance of patriarchal convention which results in the Pyrrhic victory of her marriage to Bertram. This argument unfortunately suggests that any powerful woman is not really a woman.

Little - if any - critical attention is paid to the fact that the play shows how Bertram is *expected* to be interested in Helen. He is literally cast into this role, and it is one he does not desire. Critics are keen to justify or at least explain Bertram's reasons for rejecting Helen, without questioning why he should be expected to want her simply because she wants him. This is a construction of romantic love and *masculine* gender. Both in the scene where Helen chooses Bertram before the King, and in her religious disguise, Helen attempts to disguise the forwardness of her actions, and her assertiveness is contained within a desire for legitimate marriage and pregnancy - which is neither androgynous nor threatening to patriarchy. The structure of the play itself pressurises Bertram, as the heroine's desired lover, to return her affection. The unsatisfactory nature of the ending derives at least in part from his inability to live up to this role. The play indicates a wider value structure where the heroine's affections are more important than those of the (supposed) hero.

Cultural expectations of gender may influence the audience's reaction to acts like the bed-trick in favour of women, as well as against them. The

24. Garber, *op. cit.*, (note 7), p. 41.

25. Diane Elizabeth Dreher, *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1986, pp. 12 & 139.

temptation may be to give positive value to action and rebellion against the patriarchal system, at the expense of observing how such assertiveness confirms the patriarchy's deep-seated belief in the sexual duplicity of women. John C. Bean's ecstatic response is an example of this. He sees Helen as possibly the culmination of Shakespeare's studies of women, and certainly as his most erotic heroine.<sup>26</sup> Although Bean comments on the frightening non-being of women in the bed-tricks, he also emphasises Helen's erotic power. Perhaps Bean is so influenced by Helen's Act I discussion with Paroles on her right to sexual power that he has missed the irony that Bertram does not want her and does not notice whether he sleeps with her or with Diana. Helen may achieve what she desires through the bed-trick, but it is a peculiarly unerotic encounter.

In the final scene, Bertram's dismissal of Diana shows how far the usual expectations of action and its consequences have been reversed. Truth is on Helen's side and Bertram fails to prove Diana a 'common gamester' or destroy her credibility as a witness. This seems to prove that women's power in the pursuit of love is supreme. It is however a qualified victory for the idea of such power. For just as the romantic heroine is bound to be returned to acquiescent passivity in marriage, so the hero, however unattractive, is bound to be caught in coupledness. Helen's powers have secured both her aims, but they bind her within the traditional role which she desires. She does not wish to remain outside these roles; Bertram does not have the choice.

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26. John C. Bean, 'Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*', in Lenz, Greene, & Neely, op. cit., pp. 65 - 78, pp. 74 - 5.

O sweet Juliet,  
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,  
And in my temper softened valour's steel.

(R & J, III. i. 113 - 15)

Neither Romeo nor Juliet is able to fulfil the gendered roles allotted to them according to Veronese custom and within the context of the feud between Capulet and Montague. The fact that Romeo imagines himself as a swooning lover, and not a Veronese dueller, creates a space between the individual and the allotted role that leads to tragedy. A similar gap between Juliet's filial loyalty and love for Romeo breaks her bonds with her family, but also liberates her from orthodox action and thought. Juliet is a traditionally modest daughter who gradually takes control of her own destiny. Her realisation that she has the right to choose her own partner, as well as her determination to effect her choice, is a profound challenge to the patriarchal order. Although both she and Helen pose threats to patriarchy, their power is simultaneously controlled by the fact that they exercise their sexuality within marriage. However, given that it would be inconceivable for the contemporary audience, or indeed for Shakespeare, to sanction complete sexual freedom for either young men or women, the simple realisation by Helen and Juliet that they have a degree of power over their fates is remarkable.

Mooning over Rosaline, Romeo is absent from the violence with which the play begins, indicating his separation from this norm of his society. Juliet does not fall in love with the typically violent youth, which all but Benvolio and Romeo represent, but with the opposite cliché: the youth of ardour. Romeo's swooning over Rosaline is not genuine emotion; it is love for Juliet which matures him, and the immature posturing of youth which drags him back to tragedy. In his romantic imagination men are the victims of a passion which women control, reducing their lovers to a passive, weeping, wordy state. This is the behaviour he later demonstrates in the friar's cell. Romeo fulfils the stereotype of wounded lover. But Juliet does *not* act as a cruel mistress. She does

not achieve dominance over Romeo through withholding, but rather by granting, sexual favours, nor does her love depend on contrived indifference since the lovers' first meeting and instant attraction is naturalised by its accidental happening.

Juliet is terrifyingly honest in her approaches to Romeo, asking simply if he loves her. Nevertheless she is aware of the prevailing ideas about what women should say and worries that Romeo will think her too quickly won. That Juliet has broken with tradition is obvious from her effect on Romeo. His friends think that he is cured from love, not that he is feeling its true effects for the first time. This sort of affection should be a liberating force, but for a tragic moment Romeo finds himself forced to act as though it were a constraint upon his ability to show true manhood. Yet while he is free to roam Verona with his friends, Juliet remains secluded in her own garden, awaiting the nurse's return. Women are not the gaolers of Verona. When Romeo becomes directly involved in the fighting, however, he sees Juliet's effect on him as emasculating (III. i. 113 - 15). Romeo intends the charge of effeminacy as a rebuke against his own passivity, but it also demonstrates his inability to take responsibility for his own actions. The fault is his, not Juliet's, and, beyond both of them, a fault of the patriarchal society where to be a man is to be violent. Just as neither Troilus nor Antony is emasculated by love, so when Romeo is shown to be incapable of correct masculine behaviour, this is not Juliet's responsibility. She is an excuse for his inability to live up to the expected codes of masculine behaviour which are made explicit in the youths' posturing in the play's first scene. Two versions of masculinity - violent fighter and swooning lover, both equally constructed - clash tragically in this play. Romeo is unable to fulfil either. This is the background against which Juliet acts quite extraordinarily.

From the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* it is clear that the society which Juliet inhabits allows for no sneaking admiration for the predatory sexuality of

women, who are expected to be completely submissive to men. Coppélia Kahn's study of the play argues that the "phallic violence" of the feud ties the men to their fathers, and serves as a defence against women.<sup>27</sup> For Kahn, the play presents the conflict between manhood as violence on behalf of the fathers and manhood as the act of separation from the father and sexual union with a woman. Richard Levin points out that the feud is perpetuated by the young men, while the true patriarch, the Duke, opposes it and Capulet is a generous host to his enemy's son. Levin uses this point to deny that the feud is an expression of patriarchal attitudes.<sup>28</sup> Both readings have validity. Verona does equate manhood with violence, but the idea that the feud ties the men to their fathers is questionable. Levin is correct in that the older generation do not endorse the violence of the young. But the play does present the feud as an integral part of a society controlled by men. Kahn does not argue that this is the patriarchal norm, but rather that it is evidence of the values of assertive masculinity and feminine subordination taken to a violent, but not illogical, extreme.<sup>29</sup>

The feud represents an aggressively misogynistic violence, and it is the conception of this violence as manhood which leaves Romeo caught between two untenable positions: passive and supposedly effeminate love for Juliet, or disastrous violence. Kirby Farrell stresses that even those who seemingly oppose patriarchy internalise patriarchal values.<sup>30</sup> Here, this is not true. Juliet increasingly disassociates herself from patriarchal values. It is Romeo who has most internalised the ideas of gender that destroys them both. His acceptance of gendered roles has more power than does Juliet's rejection of them, in that it

27. Kahn, op. cit., p. 83.

28. Richard Levin, 'Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy' in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 103, 1988, pp. 125 - 38, p. 128.

29. Kahn, op. cit., p. 84 & 90.

30. Kirby Farrell, 'Love, Death, and Patriarchy in *Romeo and Juliet*', in Holland, Homan, & Paris, op. cit., pp. 86 - 102, pp. 88 - 9.

drives Romeo to the murder which catalyses tragedy. Romeo's power to act violently thus overwhelms Juliet's power to act differently.

Setting the tone for the play, the first scene is notable for the frequency and violence of its images concerning women and rape. The elaborate sword play and rivalry of the young bloods is expressed largely in terms of its consequences for women. Although these are only jeers, they indicate a perception of the vulnerability and weakness of women that brooks no denial. These gangs are part of a culture that has a determined antipathy towards women: proving manhood means proving it through actual or threatened physical violence. While that violence is directed at other young men, the verbal threats in which the youths engage use women as their most obvious weapons and targets. There is no idea that "the weaker vessels" could fight back (I. i. 14). A direct way of threatening another male is to say what one will do to 'his' women when one has finished with him. It is a property threat in which women's genitalia are passive while men's are assertive. There are no women present at these exchanges except in metaphor: they are redundant in person. When the fighting starts, it is the men who die. But later it is against the women in society, Lady Capulet and the nurse as well as Juliet, that the masculine property threat is unleashed. When women are present in metaphor, they have no opportunity to react. When this talk is translated into action it is too late for their pleas to have effect. Fictional women are male property just as Juliet later becomes a piece of property to Capulet.

Veronese men assert themselves *against* other men and women; when Juliet asserts herself it is to take control of her own marriage. The spheres of action are different for male and female characters. Romeo tragically wishes to act and live only within the romantic sphere, which, in the gendered view of Verona, verges on an effeminacy that is acceptable in times of love, but not of strife. Because of his society's expectations of manhood, Romeo cannot remain - as he himself sees it - effeminate. Rather than questioning the futility of the feud, Romeo decides to

become a man of violent action, but finds he cannot sustain that role either.

Marianne Novy notes that the play displays a rigid sense of gender distinctions in reaction to which Romeo and Juliet seek a separate world centred on their love, in which they could both be active without being affected by the polarisation of genders.<sup>31</sup> She notes correctly that they are destroyed by the identification of masculinity with violence and femininity with weakness. Tybalt's murder makes the significance of verbal threats real for both the men and women in the play. Just as Romeo finds that neither love nor manhood have to be the way they are usually portrayed - Juliet will reciprocate; he can love his enemies - he is forced back into a traditional role of the fighting man. Death proves that sparring games have consequences. Romeo cannot ignore this and continue to dream of love. He is as constrained by the limits of thought and action allowed within strictly delineated gender roles as are the women in the play. He implicates Juliet in what he sees as his own part in his friend's death. He has to take up arms.

Valerie Traub also asserts that the play shows the impossibility of finding a space for transcendent love outside this dominant ideology of masculine violence.<sup>32</sup> Traub argues that play demonstrates how the lovers' unusually flexible understanding of gender - as in *Antony and Cleopatra* - is defeated by the overwhelming fear of effeminacy which the male characters regard as inspired by women, or by erotic love for women, but which is in fact a product of inherent faults within the masculine psychic economy. This is true: Romeo's fear of effeminacy shows that the idea of masculinity as aggression is a Veronese construction to which he cannot more than momentarily subscribe. Benvolio and Romeo are both seen as weak by their peers in the first scenes of both Act I and Act III because of their attempts to call a halt to the fighting, but the play

31. Marianne Novy, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984, p. 100.

32. Valerie Traub, *Desire & Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 2 - 3; p. 48.



endorses their efforts at peace-making, which echo Escalus' own views. The authority of the prince is on the side of the peace-makers: the hotheads claim manhood; he accuses them of inhumanity (I. i. 80 - 2). The role of the two women at this point is also posited on the side of reason and peace. For the moment, maturity, law, order and the female voice are all on the same side. Later Capulet is also remarkably sensible in his approach to his enemy's son, his mature wisdom conspicuously in contrast with Tybalt's violent impatience to challenge Romeo's presence (II. v. 64 - 9; 75 - 80).

Juliet appears to have at least one dependable female ally in the nurse, who bridges the gap between the young and their parents, as well as between each other. She is the stock figure of a woman all her life intimately involved with childrearing. As Coppélia Kahn points out, the nurse represents the force of tradition weighing on Juliet.<sup>33</sup> The nurse personifies a feminine earthiness which reminds Juliet that everything for women normally comes down to sex and childrearing. When Juliet asserts herself, both her mother and the nurse oppose her actions. The first scene in which the women appear together is dominated by concern with babies, children and the possibilities of marriage (I. iii). Capulet's earlier realisation that young motherhood is not a blessing is far more challenging to orthodox ideas than the nurse's reiteration of the joys of marriage (I. ii. 13 - 17). The later exchange between Mercutio and the nurse highlights the assumptions which a typically masculine youth makes about feminine inferiority. Since the nurse is beneath Mercutio in class as well as gender, he feels he has the perfect right to speak to her as he chooses in lewd terms (III. iii. 105). Her ultimate recourse for defence would be to men (III. iii. 141 - 6). As is evident in her reaction to Capulet, she cannot defend herself when she is threatened with more than verbal taunts (III. v. 217 - 18).

The young bloods' folly and the vivid metaphors of the first scene ensure

33. Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

that any reinforcement of gendered expectations will be sharply felt by women. Tybalt's death and its aftermath preclude the possibility that Capulet will maintain his generous attitude towards Juliet's marriage. Rage and grief lead quickly to entrenched positions. The crisis of death suggests that there is safety and protection only in aggression. Capulet, seeing things fall apart, turns to his daughter with a far less enlightened attitude than before. The hint of insubstantiality in a system in which he has so much invested makes it imperative that the family, and the women, fulfil their allotted roles. When news of her impending marriage to Paris is broken to Juliet, she is placed in an impossible position, not simply because she is married already, but because of her genuine loyalty to her family.

Juliet shows spirited resistance to orthodox attitudes, but her rejection of parental authority unleashes against her the full force of a man whose authority has been challenged by those from whom he most expects complete submission. The threats he can offer are very real:

An you be mine, I'll give you to my friend.  
 An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets,  
 For, by my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee,  
 Nor what is mine shall never do thee good.

(III. v. 191 - 4)

This is the accurate sum of women's physical and economic vulnerability, evidence not so much as Kahn claims of the capricious changeability of patriarchal rule over women from indulgence to domination,<sup>34</sup> but as Lisa Jardine argues of the absolute rights of parents over their daughters.<sup>35</sup> Without a man to shelter, house, feed and protect her, Juliet is on her own. It is a disturbing picture. Capulet's reaction is the extreme opposite of his decision to offer Juliet the power of choice over her future. As Irene G. Dash emphasises, there are significant cultural pressures on Capulet to fulfil the proper role of a father in control of his

34. Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 95

35. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

daughter's marriage as well as on Juliet to abide by his decision.<sup>36</sup> Capulet's harshness is symptomatic of the construction of masculine gender and the effect of this construction on female characters.

Lady Capulet and the nurse's physical and economic dependence on Capulet isolates them from Juliet. The nurse advises Juliet to capitulate. Lady Capulet's behaviour is both brusque and controlled, thoroughly unsympathetic to the new vistas of choice that have opened before her daughter's eyes. She emulates the nurse's role of bawd, sent by Capulet himself. Juliet has to reject the nurse and her counsel to forget Romeo and marry Paris if she is to retain her new identity as a mature young woman. It is the nurse's pragmatic adherence to the only system she knows, and upon which she is entirely dependent, that severs her bond with Juliet, whose growing assertiveness gives her the ability to find integrity in separating herself from the established order. The tension between Juliet and her mother has an added edge in Lady Capulet's dislike of the realisation that she is now old enough to have a daughter who is the same age as she was when she married and gave birth to Juliet. Juliet's break with the nurse, Capulet's anger and Lady Capulet's and the nurse's agreement with him both isolate and liberate Juliet. She first rejects the nurse for not understanding the depth of her love and loyalty to Romeo, and is then herself rejected for disloyalty to her family, and specifically to Capulet's wishes. She becomes an adult through both processes of rejecting and rejection by those nearest to her. Romeo by contrast succumbs to the equivalent of Capulet's bullying, the demand that a man fight for his honour.

Juliet is always isolated; there is no other similar young girl in the play except the shadowy Rosaline. This isolation makes Juliet's behaviour seem less extreme, since we have only the nurse's, her mother's, Capulet's and Paris' norms with which to compare her behaviour, and the play increasingly discourages us

36. Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 74 - 5.

from sympathy with these views. By being honest, Juliet risks being thought forward, an issue neatly side-stepped by her death and cultural resurrection as a paragon of virtue. We do not draw unfavourable comparisons between her and other young women, because there are none. Rosaline provides the merest foil, proving the unsatisfactory nature of the coldness with which women are supposed to treat their lovers. Juliet's boldness is therefore not threatening. She is an adult who, in her maturity, eclipses all others in the play and points the way to a possible future that tragically neither her peers nor her elders can comprehend.

Juliet's rejection of an imposed marriage, having found true love, is a break with cultural expectations. Romeo's inability to live up to those expectations is evidence of their constructed and ill-fitting nature, but there is no indication of a further pathway open to him. Within the acceptable limits of gendered roles in Verona, Romeo's choices are more limited than Juliet's because he does not possess her vision to see beyond them. Juliet realises that what she is expected to do because she is a woman is wrong for her. The audience is her ally in seeing beyond the expectations of acceptable feminine behaviour, and knows that Romeo is wrong to say love for Juliet has made him effeminate. Capulet himself was on the verge of a liberal approach towards his daughter, far more so than his wife, before the moment that the young bloods' posturing drew blood and compelled everyone back within their gendered roles.

After a brief moment of disastrous intervention in the feud, Romeo caves in to emotion, eliciting repeated admonishments from Friar Laurence which revolve entirely around the question of his manhood and womanish tears (III. iii. 108 - 10). Both the friar and the nurse are uncomfortable with a youth who refuses to fit into the stock patterns of behaviour. Romeo is not a typical man, and even in this crisis cannot consistently behave as he is supposed to. The friar is no help in these unusual circumstances. He suggests that the lovers marry in the misguided hope that it will heal the rift between their households. When Juliet most needs

his help, the friar has a limited set of ideas on which to rely in his panic, thinking of no more than to hide her with a sisterhood of nuns. But the religious refuge for the woman who does not fit into her society is not a satisfactory alternative, even if it is the only one available. The circumstances for Juliet are quite unlike those for Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* or Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The play cannot be rescued from tragedy by retreat to sanctuary. Instead the only escape is to the tomb. The friar proves as ineffective as the nurse. Like the rest of his society, he cannot cope with a young man like Romeo, who refuses to conform to the required mould, and a strong young woman with no orthodox place in society's structure. The cultural demands of gendered behaviour are strong for both young lovers, but Romeo lacks Juliet's strength of purpose to resist them. In this Juliet is isolated even from Romeo. Alone with her thoughts before she takes the poison, Juliet works herself into a frenzy that might be expected to stall her decision, with its frightening images of dead ancestors attacking her in the tomb. Instead, at the very height of this fear, she takes the draught.

Fate neatly encloses Juliet in a trite final couplet that gives no hint of the true challenge her behaviour has offered to Verona. It is often thought that it is the older generation who are to blame for the tragic deaths in this play; in fact the irresponsibility and narrow-mindedness of the young hooligans is equally at fault. The words and actions of the gangs of young men compound the existing tension between the two households. Irene G. Dash is wrong in her argument that the feud superimposes conflict on Romeo whereas for Juliet there is inevitable conflict between her development as a full human being and as a woman constricted within the limits of Veronese society.<sup>37</sup> It is the combination of the immaturity of young and old which is the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. To begin with, Capulet is a sensible and loving father to Juliet. He defends the importance of Juliet's choice and consent, counter-attacking Paris' urgency to marry her. This is remarkable. It is possible only while Capulet feels no threat to his way of life.

37. Dash, op. cit., pp. 88 - 9.

He can afford to be a benevolent dictator. This luxury diminishes as the play progresses and the younger generation of both sexes threatens his authority. The greatest gendered cultural pressures in the play are on the men: upon Capulet to enforce his paternal choice of a husband for Juliet and upon Romeo to take up arms. These are pressures to which they both tragically submit, with devastating consequences for both male and female characters. Juliet alone points to an alternative way to live and to be treated. Marianne Novy argues strongly for the mutuality and symmetry that the lovers' passion provides.<sup>38</sup> But Juliet exceeds mere parity with Romeo. Juliet's power is something which she ultimately experiences as mental freedom rather than physical assertiveness. In her refusal to be bound by the expected limits gender places on her thoughts, words and actions, Juliet transcends the confines of both Veronese expectations of gender and of the tomb.

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The power demonstrated by female characters in these plays suggests either that people of a certain character are assigned a body of the wrong gender, or that the roles assigned to that gender are wrong. Throughout these plays men and women are, not surprisingly, interdependent. Strong women need weak men to have power, but are also dependent on other men to continue to wield it. In general no-one can be powerful on their own: power, like communication, is a two-way process. It is the construction of femininity and masculinity which constrains women, although they may believe that the problem lies in the fact that they are women. Joan, Margaret and Eleanor act in reaction to men's ineptitude; Juliet and Helen only realise they have the power to act when inspired by love for a man. Swapping traditional gender roles has pointed out the need to change those roles, not reverse the sexes allotted to them. Usurping traditionally masculine roles has solved very little. Rather it has stimulated a new question: how to act next?

38. Novy, *op. cit.*, pp. 99 - 109 *passim*.

## The Power of Sexuality & Desire

The representation of female Shakespearean characters both supports and denies the cliché that women are inescapably associated with sexuality and guile. Often female characters exert power over men and over their own lives, as well as affecting the construction of femininity, simply because they are female. This gives them a double-edged power to provoke in men a reaction to their virginity, to their beauty and to their sexuality: they are *desirable*. I have chosen to examine Cleopatra, Cressida and Isabella, each of whom affect or is affected by cultural expectations of women's sexuality, with very different intentions and consequences. In examining the complex mixture of love, sexuality, longing and distrust presented in these plays, I hope to avoid the major conflation between and obscurantism about these subjects of which Valerie Traub is appropriately scathing.<sup>1</sup>

To a greater or lesser extent the power of sexuality and desire can be observed (or its absence presented as sufficiently significant to remark upon) in all of Shakespeare's female characters. Sexual relationships are fundamental to established order, but if conducted without its confines threaten destruction and chaos. The relationships discussed in this chapter swing uneasily between such extremes. Male and female are divided into strict polarities, and yet at points these polarities are strategically reversed and the distance between them erased. The perception of this exchange of power, for instance in Antony's supposed emasculation by Cleopatra, emphasises the precarious position of female characters who are balanced between power and weakness, and simultaneously perceived as creative and destructive. It also illuminates the correlation of sexuality with gender.

1. Valerie Traub, 'Desire and the Differences it Makes', in Valerie Wayne (ed.), *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1991, pp. 81 - 114, hereafter *Desire & Differences*, p. 85.

The representation of desire in these plays both challenges and reinforces the traditional assumption that a particularly potent form of power for women is virginity. Prized by men, feminine virginity can become a bargaining tool between male and female characters, particularly before marriage. This power is doomed however, since, according to the genre in which it occurs, it must be surrendered in a romantic coupling, corrupted once possessed, or maintained as sterile chastity. A deep cultural expectation of feminine sexual duplicity turns the questionable advantages of such power into potentially fatal propaganda. Sexual fidelity can be seen not as a source of power but of inevitable weakness in a cultural context where women are held up as the cause of cuckoldry. Such expectations also lead to the construction of a passive sexuality for female characters who should only be desired, rather than actively desiring.

While such expectations hold true for both Isabella and Cressida, they are inadequate to describe Cleopatra, who is known to have had a sexual history without suffering a loss of moral weight. Her relationship with Antony augments, rather than decreases, her powers. Isabella, by contrast, remains steadfastly chaste, but is clearly not endorsed by the play for doing so. Cressida has the misfortune to realise that men who prize virginity see it as valuable pursued but not possessed. However she lacks the wisdom to heed her own understanding or see beyond the stereotypes to a position where she can truly value love. These plays portray very different aspects of sexuality and desire. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Cleopatra's sexuality is both stereotypical and also transcendent of all norms; the lovers' desire is both the great love that triumphs over death and also the longing for that death as the ultimate consummation of passion. In *Measure for Measure*, the play focuses on a single act of desire: Angelo's lust for Isabella, the virgin novice. In *Troilus and Cressida*, desire embraces war and disease, represents an impossible idealism and, for Cressida in particular, brings inevitable destruction.



Other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies.

(A & C, II. ii. 242 - 4)

Cleopatra is the ultimate portrayal of sexuality amongst Shakespearean female characters. Sexually active and still desirable, she is unsullied, although not unaffected in others' opinions, by her past liaisons with the elder Pompey and Caesar. Valerie Traub sees her as exceptional, possibly the only female Shakespearean character for whom the construction of feminine sexuality is not pre-empted by fantasies and fears of the female body.<sup>2</sup> Desirable, desiring and vulnerable, Cleopatra casts herself as all stereotypes in one: devouring of men, sexually available, able to out-drink a soldier and always defying description. But an emphasis on her changeability can obscure the equally important moments of unquestionably real emotion, which occur when Cleopatra becomes tongue-tied, jealous, culpable and vulnerable. It is her weakness that is evidence of her desire, and her strength that is evidence of her desirability. The play examines not only how and whether Cleopatra emasculates Antony, but also how carefully the passion between the lovers is constructed to make desire for Antony weaken Cleopatra. Because Cleopatra is a woman, vulnerability accentuates her sexuality, whereas, for Antony, weakness implies a loss of virility.

There is more to Cleopatra than mere physical appetite. For many years she has played an important part on the world political stage, if only as the mistress of powerful men. She has used her desirability to secure her own position. Cleopatra is a more successful survivor in the political sphere than Antony, who is inept at political bargaining, loses his grip on the battle field, and fails to kill himself in the proper Roman fashion. Cleopatra is most fully freed from the constraints of male definition in the monument after Antony's death, where she shows herself to understand her own position and be able to negotiate skilfully

2. Valerie Traub, *Desire & Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 64, hereafter *Desire & Anxiety*.

from it. She uses her sexuality as a political tool, particularly in her self-subjugation before Caesar, which embarrasses him, but wins her the reprieve she needs to divine his true purpose. Although she cannot escape Caesar's superior power, she can avoid his intentions.

Irene Dash loses no opportunity to refer to Cleopatra as a "political person", arguing that Cleopatra is unconstrained by the limits of gender in the play, although the men around her fail to recognise this.<sup>3</sup> Dash argues that Cleopatra has the potential for equality, but because Antony responds to her above all as a woman, and because Enobarbus' misogyny is typical of the attitudes towards the women in the play, that equality is hard to achieve. This is a false premise. It is not possible to be unconstrained by gender when gendered expectations so condition the physical action as well as the attitudes of Cleopatra's world. It is hard to see Cleopatra as a skilled politician, at least while Antony is alive. She is portrayed far more in relation to the politics of Rome, where her intervention is doomed to failure, than as queen of Egypt. Moreover, while Cleopatra undoubtedly is much more than simply an intensely sexual woman, Dash does not make clear exactly in what her equality would consist. She seems to suggest that she is referring to an equal marriage with Antony, yet the play lets Cleopatra lay claim to such a relationship only after Antony is dead.

Unlike Fulvia, who with some effect is first in the field of war, and despite her position as queen, Cleopatra is defeated by what is taken to be her typically feminine fright. This is also a construction of emasculated weakness. When Enobarbus tells Cleopatra that her presence will puzzle Antony, he is - accurately - questioning Antony's effectiveness as a general (III. vii. 10). As in *Henry VI Part 1*, it is men's reaction to and expectations of the feminine that emasculates them, not female characters themselves. Antony's reaction to Cleopatra is something over which she has no control. Believing him to be the great Roman

3. Irene Dash, *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981, pp. 209 - 48, passim.

general, it is unlikely she could have thought he would follow her from the field. Although played-out on an epic scale, this is still a construction of male-female relationships which apparently suggests supreme feminine influence, but actually depicts a particular instance of one man's weakness. The overriding impression is of Cleopatra's culpability for defeat at Actium. Feminist critics collude in this, perhaps in an eagerness to endorse the idea of the powerful female, even if her effect is unfortunate. Linda Bamber assumes that "of course, it is because of Cleopatra that the strategy they settle on is a disastrous one; they will meet Caesar at sea".<sup>4</sup> Cleopatra's defiance in wishing to take the place of a king in battle is impressive, but she is too afraid to stay there. The fact that Cleopatra is a woman makes it possible to accept that failure at Actium is her fault. She encouraged Antony to make the wrong decision and fight at sea, and so she is to blame for his defeat. She then ran away, when she should have realised that Antony, unmanned by desire for her, would follow. But all this is not true. It is rivalry with Caesar that makes Antony fight by sea, not Cleopatra. She does not suggest that they fight on the water but merely agrees with Antony's decision *after* he has taken it:

Antony	Camidius, we
	Will fight with him by sea.
Cleopatra	By sea - what else?
Camidius	Why will my lord do so?
Antony	For that he dares us to't.

(III. vii. 27 - 30)

Antony fights by sea because of Caesar's challenge, not Cleopatra's influence.

When Cleopatra flees the battle, she cannot know that the mighty Roman general will follow. But Antony determinedly states that she did know and that his defeat was her fault. She does not counter this claim - except to ask Enobarbus his opinion - and her silence on the subject implies that she agrees that her feminine weakness should entail her inevitable culpability for military defeat.

Although while Antony is alive Cleopatra is frequently indicted for

4. Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1982, p. 52.

unmanning and emasculating him, she recreates him as a god when he is dead. She is perceived as a destroyer of men by most of the Roman camp, yet she is also the creator of the myth of Antony, most notably in her lamentations in the monument. Irene G. Dash observes that Cleopatra, far from being responsible for Antony's downfall, provides him with a nourishing space in which he is reborn as a demi-god, as opposed to the Roman sphere where he had outlived his role.<sup>5</sup> This is an important point. Although the play is often thought of as a dialogue of opposites - Rome and Egypt, land and sea, war and love, honour and desire, men and women - it is not necessarily a contest between the two. Both worlds are faulted, and it is Rome that is far more corrupt and threatening to Antony than is Egypt.

Cleopatra is described as a destroyer of men who has transformed Antony into a strumpet's fool. But her responsibility for this is not active. It is his weakness, rather than her strength, which has brought Antony to this low point in other men's esteem. For Antony's troops, desire itself, not its object, is the active destroyer of a man's potency. The excessive attraction which Antony feels for her unmans him in his men's eyes, and jeopardises his respect amongst them. Valerie Traub points out that the Romans see that it is Antony's lust for Cleopatra (rather than she herself) who has compromised his virility.<sup>6</sup> The portrait which men paint of Cleopatra is significant not only for what it suggests about her role, but also for what they feel about their own. Antony suggests that she is a gaoler, by whose fetters he is imprisoned, and thus the supposed Roman hero portrays himself as a passive victim (I. ii. 109). This is a typical element in the construction of feminine sexuality which suggests the opposite of the truth. Cleopatra is not the aggressor. Men's reactions to their own idea of feminine sexuality depend more upon cultural stereotypes than upon an accurate reflection of the wooing process. Antony appears afraid of the power which Cleopatra is supposed to wield, as the

5. Dash, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

6. Traub, *Desire & Anxiety*, p. 134.

stock figure of the witch, combined with the untrustworthy woman, raises its head: "she is cunning past man's thought" (I. ii. 137). He feels the need to be constantly on his guard since women are the enemy. The play destroys the masculine myth at the same time as it builds up the feminine mystique.

For Linda Bamber neither Egypt nor Rome represents values endorsed by the play as a whole, and the dialectic between the two states (of sexuality) which Egypt and Rome represent is never resolved.<sup>7</sup> This can be taken further, in that Antony is defeated not by the seductive feminine power of Egypt, but by rivalry with Caesar. Fulvia's war-making and death make Antony return to Rome. Once there he is locked into a power struggle with Caesar. Antony is not sufficiently fettered by Cleopatra to stay in Egypt, nor is it on her account alone that he returns. But Cleopatra's vulnerability to jealousy of Antony's wives focuses the audience's attention on her rivals. This emphasises Cleopatra's fascination and diverts attention from the fact that it is Rome, and specifically Caesar's challenge to Antony's honour and military prowess, that drives Antony back to Rome and then once more to Egypt. It is the soothsayer's realisation of Caesar's superior strength that spurs Antony back to Cleopatra; it is Caesar's challenge by sea that makes Antony meet him on water, not Cleopatra's wish. The play constructs a powerful force of desire associated with Cleopatra which makes it easy to miss both these points, as many critics do. We may imagine that Antony rushes back to Egypt because Cleopatra is too fascinating to leave for long. Antony cannot cope with the knowledge that Caesar's power exceeds his own (II. iii. 14 - 16). He returns to Egypt because of his conversation with the soothsayer.

Antony     He hath spoken true. The very dice obey him,  
                  And in our sports my better cunning faints  
                  Under his chance. If we draw lots, he speeds.  
                  His cocks do win the battle still of mine  
                  When it is all to nought, and his quails ever  
                  Beat mine, inhooped, at odds. I will to Egypt;  
                  And though I make this marriage for my peace,  
                  I'th' East my pleasure lies. (II. iii. 31 - 8)

7. Bamber, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

Antony's motives for returning to Egypt are concerned with the desire to escape comparison with Caesar before desire for Cleopatra. It is not the grand passion that draws him back there, but an increasingly accurate fear of the loss of his political and war-like capabilities. The dramatic tension between Rome and Egypt is not just that of male-female supremacy; Antony is losing his grip. The emphasis on games as the focus for the two men's rivalry indicates more about the male fear of a loss of potency with his rivals than it does about the power of Cleopatra's sexuality over Antony. Madelon Gohlke believes that Antony's relationship with both Cleopatra and Caesar is dominated by anxiety about his loss of control over himself, perhaps even his loss of self entirely. She also argues that Cleopatra both dominates Antony's emotional life and invests his world with meaning, whereas the rivalry with Caesar is sterile. In other words, Cleopatra's greatest power is to allow Antony to be reborn, not to destroy him, just as it is her words which ensure his mythic status at the end of the play. This Gohlke takes as evidence of the fact that the values which emerge from this play, along with the other tragedies, are 'feminine' and associated with loyalty, friendship, love.<sup>8</sup> Gohlke endorses the idea that there is such a thing as female nature and female power in the tragedies, both of which bear significant moral weight, but does not specify whether this is her own opinion or her observation of the cultural construction of gendered values associated with women. In fact this play in particular should make us very wary of endorsing the idea of female power without carefully dissecting its gendered significance.

*Antony and Cleopatra* leads us along two paths at the same time: Cleopatra is a magnificent free spirit, living her own life, exulting in her sexuality, caring not a jot for the world's opinion, bewitching and dominating Antony by turns. Yet at the same time this awe-inspiring personification of woman is emotionally dependent on Antony, who is never shown to be as lonely as she is in his absence.

8. Madelon Gohlke, "I wooed thee with my sword": Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms', in Murray M. Schwartz, & Coppélia Kahn (eds.), *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980, pp. 170 - 87, pp. 177 - 9.

Her capacity for self-creation and acting has been noted by many critics. Marianne Novy sees Cleopatra as unusually glorified by Shakespeare for her ability to be sexually active, which is intimately connected with the ease with which she acts out various aspects of herself and of supposedly essential feminine nature.<sup>9</sup> When Antony leaves Egypt, Cleopatra can think of nothing other than to sleep until he returns (I. v. 5). There is a marked contrast between Cleopatra's loneliness in Antony's absence, and his acceptance in Rome of the marriage with Octavia. At such moments, the play portrays an orthodox relationship between Antony and Cleopatra. She pines, while he forgets her and carries on with his business. The overwhelming sexuality of Egypt is forgotten, and it is the soothsayer's words which make him return to her. Antony is not dominated by Cleopatra, accusing her of disloyalty even when it is he who has married again.

Antony's ~~assertiveness~~ contrasts with the fact that Cleopatra is not convinced of her own power over Antony. The audience knows that Cleopatra's female rivals are no threat to her: no-one can exceed her desirability. But Cleopatra does not see this. Octavia is an entirely uninteresting sexual partner as Dash points out.<sup>10</sup> Even Caesar seems to care for his sister more as a reflection of his own status than for her own sake (III. vi. 42 - 3). Octavia is not an autonomous being but a "piece of virtue" (III. ii. 28) to be bestowed where Caesar thinks fit. When Antony leaves her and returns to Egypt, she does not make serious complaint to her brother. Her worth relates to her position as one man's wife and another man's sister. Octavia is a political pawn. She is caught in a power relationship between Caesar and Antony as the only means by which they can be united, but because she lacks the power to make Antony desire her, she becomes a further occasion of antagonism rather than alliance between her brother and her husband.

9. Marianne Novy, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984, p. 91.

10. Dash, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

For Linda Bamber, Antony's marriage to Octavia is a betrayal of Cleopatra and an attempt to engage only in a very limited way with feminine sexuality, and with the idea of woman as 'other'.<sup>11</sup> However the matter is more complex. Cleopatra, the transcendent woman, is most exercised over her rival's appearance, a stock reaction to another woman. She is desperate to know that Octavia is physically her inferior (II. v. 112 - 15). The fact that Cleopatra is so distressed by Antony's marriage to Octavia prevents her from appearing arrogant, and emphasises the depth of her love for Antony, balancing the effect of her sexuality and sensuality. Her lack of confidence - her weakness in fact - is seen as powerful because she attacks the unfortunate messenger who brings news of Antony's remarriage. This allows her to display real, justified and jealous anger in a context that the audience can find both humorous and impressive. It is necessary to see Cleopatra asserting herself vigorously under such provocation in order to maintain the impression of her independence. But where Antony is angry directly with her, she never asserts herself violently or obviously against him. Jealousy is not equally portrayed between the sexes. It would destroy the idea of passion and the Egyptian myth. Instead, Cleopatra prefaces her jesting challenge with an "I would I had thy inches" (I. iii. 40). It is she who runs from his anger. Cleopatra is frightened of Antony. By focusing the audience's attention firstly on her jealousy of Octavia and then on her physical assault of the messenger, the play manipulates the impression of her power.

At the same time that Cleopatra's reaction to other women is amusing it also portrays the less attractive side of feminine sexuality: jealousy, nagging and changeability. Choosing to behave suddenly as a shrew, Cleopatra will not let Antony speak (I. iii. 24 - 41). In Act I Scene 3, it is Cleopatra's inability - or contrived inability - to express herself, rather than the grand parade of parts she has adopted in the beginning of the scene, which captures the imagination as proof of her love and demonstrates that an inexpressible constancy underlies her

11. Bamber, *op. cit.*, p. 52.



changeability (I. iii. 88 - 90). Her arch tones of surprise at the removal of her rival in her question "Can Fulvia die?" (I. iii. 58) show how Cleopatra is able at every turn to unfoot Antony in her reaction to his wife's death, not least as she wonders at his lack of grief (I. iii. 63). But there is more to this than humour. Cleopatra is both pleased and perturbed that Antony seems to lose his wife with little emotion, since she suspects it is evidence of his inability to feel deep affection for any woman, including herself. In fact Antony's later realisation that now Fulvia is dead she is worth more to him than alive mirrors the play's realisation that desire is strongest for the lost, and shows a greater understanding of her death than was evident to Cleopatra. Jonathan Dollimore sees this as evidence of the fact that sublimity is conditional upon absence.<sup>12</sup> This parallels the motion in the play towards the strongest desire: death. Only this can make the lovers equal. Before their deaths, vulnerability to one another proves their love and this vulnerability is portrayed and perceived in specifically gendered terms. Antony must succumb to Cleopatra if he is truly in love with her, and it is his own culture's construction of this as weakness, overlaid with the complexities of his rivalry with Caesar, which make this appear as emasculation.

Enobarbus' studied levity in talking about women as 'nothing' undercuts the grand passion of Antony, a reassuring antidote to Cleopatra's fascinating presence (I. ii. 132). As a Roman and as a soldier, he is desperate to counteract Cleopatra's influence and bring Antony back, as he sees it, to Rome and honour. His most effective weapon is his humour, through which he attempts to prove to Antony that women are interchangeable, and one dead wife is an opportunity for pleasure with a new "petticoat" (I. ii. 153 - 62). But Enobarbus is not the voice of reason that he may appear. He frequently (as here) demonstrates a wilful cynicism not borne out by what the play shows. Women are not worth grieving over in a society where marriage is founded upon political worth. Yet it is also

12. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, second edn., Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1989, hereafter *Radical Tragedy*, p. 207.

Enobarbus who realises that Antony cannot abdicate responsibility. He knows that defeat by Caesar is Antony's own fault, not Cleopatra's (III. xiii. 3). But even with this clarity of perception, Enobarbus inhabits a world where men must not show emotion. He indeed is the sternest critic of emotion: at the reports of Antony crying over the dead (Julius) Caesar, he merely comments that Antony had a "rheum" (III. ii. 58). He begs Antony not to make his men show weak, feminine emotion (which in fact is true affection) as the end of his leadership becomes apparent, since there is nothing worse for a man than to be "onion-eyed" (IV. ii. 35).

Enobarbus is trapped in this role. His relationship with Antony is one of the closest in the play. But it is a relationship which, by his own code, should be kept at the level of a soldier's loyalty, not human love. When Antony loses command, Enobarbus sees it as his duty to join the other side. It is not what he wants to do; it kills him with his self-chastisement that "I am alone the villain of the earth" (IV. vi. 30). Antony's sending of Enobarbus' treasure after him is a great deal more generous than his reaction to Cleopatra when she also looks after her own interests by attempting to treat with Rome. Then, playing for time with Caesar, Cleopatra has to appear weak, and merely conquered by Antony, disowning the idea of herself as an active force, in order not to place herself beyond the pale of orthodox Roman attitudes (III. xiii. 62). When Antony bursts-in in a fit of jealousy, it becomes clear that she cannot win. Having appeared strong, then weak, she is accused of having unmanned Antony and brought him defeat. Now appearing weak, and in need of protection from Rome, she is denounced as unfaithful. Antony still does not know her, and thinks her political bargaining is evidence of her inevitable, feminine infidelity. Anne Barton suggests that he is uncertain of who exactly Cleopatra is, because of the hysteria of his reaction to this scene.<sup>13</sup> Antony is indeed furious that Cleopatra allows the emissary to kiss her hand, because it is a personal insult to *him* as the possessor of her sexuality.

13. Anne Barton, "'Nature's Piece 'Gainst Fancy': The Divided Catastrophe in *Antony and Cleopatra*", Inaugural Lecture, Bedford College, University of London, London, 1973, p. 15.

His anger points out not only his instant and deep mistrust of her feminine fidelity, but also a certain insecurity about himself. He is not confident of her love any more than he is of his own position.

In a world where men seem emotional fugitives, Antony's forgiving generosity towards Enobarbus is an act of friendship and love that surpasses gendered distinctions. But in such a world, Antony, the failed hero, and Enobarbus, the old soldier, cannot remain together and Enobarbus dies from a broken heart. These men are also victims of gendered expectations. Antony's relationship with Cleopatra is in part a substitute for the emotional constraints of allowable affection with other men. While Antony is quick to think that Cleopatra has deceived or betrayed him, it is he who marries another woman, and Enobarbus who abandons him, while Cleopatra remains consistently loyal.

For Richard P. Wheeler, "Antony's bond to Cleopatra expresses a longing denied by the Roman ideal of manly honor and autonomy".<sup>14</sup> The schism between Antony's Roman and Egyptian selves is his tragedy. Like Dash, Wheeler observes that Antony achieves a richer humanity through his longing for Cleopatra, and through her, for the feminine in himself. Murray M. Schwartz feels that Antony moves towards a new synthesis of masculine hardness and feminine fluidity, finally and triumphantly accepting his own feminine aspects, liberated by Egypt and by Cleopatra's vital erotic nature. He argues that Antony can only achieve this synthesis because of Shakespeare's construction of women as 'other'. This, Schwartz suggests, is evidence of an ambivalent desire for omnipotence which derives from and leads to a mistrust of women and provides evidence of Shakespeare's ability as a proto-psychoanalyst:

14. Richard P. Wheeler, "'since first we were dissevered': Trust and Autonomy in Shakespearean Tragedy and Romance", in Schwartz, & Kahn, *op. cit.*, pp 150 - 69, p. 157.

I cannot imagine my double re-creation without imagining Shakespeare both inside and outside his creation, both masculine and feminine, both self and other. ... I am asserting that Shakespeare, as I read him, learned something that psychoanalysis has just recently learned, the inter-wovenness of his cultural world and the earliest forms of trust in femininity, which is re-enacted by each of us in the movement from absolute dependence to the potential space of playing.<sup>15</sup>

There is a certain tension within Schwartz's argument however, over whether he is claiming particular significance for the trust or distrust of women. Schwartz's approach is a further example of the critical tendency to try and construct Shakespeare's attitudes towards female sexuality from the plays, and to judge them as deeply personal and reflective of his own attitudes towards real women. Joel Fineman feels that *Troilus and Cressida* represents a point at which "Shakespeare is seemingly overpowered by the divisive chaos figured in sexual duplicity".<sup>16</sup> Marilyn French presents an extreme, but not unrepresentative, interpretation of Shakespeare 'the man' and his feelings:

At the bottom, psychologically, his situation was probably fairly common: he was highly sexual, extremely guilt-ridden about sex, and associated sexuality with women - ergo ... [sic] For women to possess worldly power in addition to their already overwhelming sexual power (as he saw it) led - in his imagination - to the annihilation of the male. His state is not at all outdated.<sup>17</sup>

This is at many levels untrue. Attempting to extrapolate the author from the text, it presents a highly contestable view not only of Shakespeare but of his plays. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, Antony's suicide is by no means annihilation, but rather the means to the greatest fame he could hope to have achieved, in which Cleopatra plays a crucial role. Furthermore, Antony's antagonism against

15. Murray M. Schwartz, 'Shakespeare through Contemporary Psychoanalysis', in Schwartz, & Kahn, op. cit., pp. 21 - 32, p. 30.

16. Joel Fineman, 'Fratricide and Cuckoldry: Shakespeare's Doubles' in Schwartz & Kahn, *ibid.*, pp. 70 - 109, p. 99.

17. Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1982, p. 75.

Caesar is the chief cause of his demise. This in itself provides a comment on the inevitable loss of political potency faced by rulers in the male world as the new generation, represented by Pompey, begin to replace the old heroes. In celebrating mature sexual potency the play provides an alternative world in which Antony's stature increases rather than diminishes, and Cleopatra is instrumental in this. If anything, she saves him from inevitable annihilation and creates for him instead a posthumous myth.

Marianne Novy argues that there is a synthesis of gender between Antony and Cleopatra, rather than within Antony himself as Schwartz believes. Part of the depth of love which the play portrays, she argues, derives from the fact that both lovers display characteristics usually associated with the opposite gender: anger and forgiveness.<sup>18</sup> In fact, matters are not so simple. Cleopatra's anger at the messenger who brings news of Antony's marriage, while extreme, is not incompatible with typically feminine shrewishness, particularly under the extreme provocation of apparent rejection in favour of another woman. Jonathan Dollimore sees the play as being constructed upon sexual infatuation rather than love. This, he suggests, stems from and intensifies insecurity (particularly in Antony about his own position), and also legitimates a free-play of self-destructive desire in order to compensate for the loss of power.<sup>19</sup>

Rome provides a critique of its own values. A corrupt feast takes place aboard young Pompey's boat. Relationships between men in the play are generally hearty. When old foes meet, they exchange bluff compliments (II. vi. 76 - 80). But these strict adherences to gender distinctions as forms of human character begin to fall apart. Masculine honour is not an infallible moral code. A barge was the setting for Cleopatra's atmospheric description by Enobarbus, but the insubstantiality of water serves equally as a setting for men for whom political

18. Novy, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

19. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 217.

expediency may outweigh morality. Linda Bamber points out that Rome has gone as soft as the beds in the East, and the great meeting of powerful *men is* portrayed as a mean and drunken party: Rome is more corrupt than Egypt.<sup>20</sup> Pompey finds Menas' suggested assassination plot unpalatable, not because it is wrong, but because he hears of it before it is accomplished (II. vii. 72 - 9). Ignorance is honour's refuge where, as Dollimore notes, honour has been divorced both from ethics and from its own consequences.<sup>21</sup> The Roman system is rotten at its core. The soldiers realise that, although it is they and not their leaders who win the battles, it would be foolish to make this too obvious (III. i. 14 - 15). Just as Antony is threatened by Caesar's supremacy, so these men must not threaten their male superiors. It is the rivalry between men which precipitates the play's tragic conclusion.

While it may appear that Egypt represents a female republic, Lisa Jardine demonstrates that strong female characters inhabit a patriarchal world and are perceived through men's eyes. Thus their most compelling characteristics are seen "almost without exception [as] morally reprehensible: cunning, duplicity, sexual rapaciousness, 'changeableness', being other than they seem, untrustworthiness and general secretiveness". Jardine is talking with particular reference to Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, as well as *Antony and Cleopatra*. But while Shakespeare does indeed ascribe some of these traits to Cleopatra, they do not appear morally reprehensible, indeed quite the opposite. Jardine suggests that the dominion of Cleopatra, Cressida and Helen is disruptive of the public and political order, not of domestic order. These are strong women who invert the natural hierarchy by their ability to dominate and command, "an inversion readily translated into female sexual predatoriness".<sup>22</sup> Jardine sees a connection

20. Bamber, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

21. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 213.

22. Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in The Age of Shakespeare*, second edn., Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1989, pp. 69 - 70.

between Cleopatra's apparent emasculation of men, and the fact that she is consistently portrayed as being responsible for Antony's mistakes. But this is not so. Enobarbus admits that Antony alone is at fault when Cleopatra flies from Actium whereas Jardine wrongly accepts the standard critical reading that it is Cleopatra's wish to fight by sea. Jardine also argues that in the play's judgement, Antony's final eclipse is directly linked to the fact that he has been ravished by Cleopatra, as the logical end to a situation where feminine sexuality has man unnaturally in its thrall.<sup>23</sup> But this is only one, limited, view of the play's significance.

Cleopatra's real rival is the male-male bond between Antony and Enobarbus, and the rivalry between Antony and Caesar. There is no suggestion here of the homo-erotic relationships of *Yonkers and Cressida*, or of an alliance similar to that between Antonio and Bassanio which threatens Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. But the bond of soldiers is strong, and Cleopatra's position as a sexually active woman leaves her open to the misogyny at work in the play, notably through Enobarbus, who represents the bluff, manly opposite to Cleopatra's power. Although, as Dash points out, he is not necessarily an objective commentator, particularly not on Cleopatra, his misogyny, because amusing, carries weight.<sup>24</sup> Yet Enobarbus realises and describes Cleopatra's power more clearly than any other character in his tribute describing not her alone, but her effect (II. ii. 198 - 212). Enobarbus speaks of her as sensuousness beyond mere sexuality to men who can only understand her as a whore. Within ten lines this female phenomenon is described in somewhat less flattering terms by Agrippa: "Royal wench!/She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed./He ploughed her, and she cropped" (II. ii. 233 - 5).

William Kerrigan argues that the arresting part of this description is the fact

23. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

24. Dash, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

not that it portrays Cleopatra as the essential female, but rather that it distances her from other women. They destroy the appetites they feed, whereas she creates desire the more she provides satisfaction. Thus this transcendent woman is transcendent only because atypical. The fact that transcendence here equals difference is a valid point. But Kerrigan's argument develops in a less credible direction. He sees Cleopatra as Shakespeare's attempt to resolve his anger over feminine sexuality, untying the knot of sexual disgust and synthesising within herself all the women in the life of man: mother (and step-mother to both Pompey and Caesar), whore, wilful daughter and finally wife. Thus to Kerrigan Cleopatra is both the epitome of feminine sexuality in all its forms, and also Shakespeare's own personal working-out of sexual disgust with women.<sup>25</sup> The claim that Shakespeare presents a general pattern of disgust at female sexuality except in his presentation of Cleopatra is particularly contestable. It seems in direct contravention of the celebration of sexuality in the romances or still in supposedly problematic plays like *The Tempest* (III. i. 37 - 97). It also forgets that Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, who is discussed later in this chapter, is censured by the play for her adherence to chastity. At such points Kerrigan's argument is an imposition on the text of preconceived interpretations of sexuality rather than an exposition of the attitudes portrayed by the play itself.

The representation of Cleopatra both as transcendent woman and also as released from the feminine gender is one of the most intriguing aspects of critical debate. Because Cleopatra acts-out so many aspects of that gendered construct of desirability and desire which is consummate femininity, it has been suggested that she transcends gender, particularly in Act V. Cleopatra's failure to rest in any one part of her personality lends her an equal distance from all according to this argument. Her reference in the monument to the idea that some "squeaking Cleopatra" will "boy" her greatness undercuts the suspension of uncertainty over

25. William Kerrigan, 'The Personal Shakespeare: Three Clues', in Norman N. Holland, Sidney Homan & Bernard J. Paris (eds.), *Shakespeare's Personality*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, pp. 175 - 90, pp. 185 - 8.



her gender to a contemporary audience who were already watching such a boy actress take her part (V. ii. 216). In fact the problems raised by this debate do not confirm Cleopatra as genderless, but show that she both epitomises and transcends femaleness and femininity, being both Antony's bride in death and also "marble-constant" (V. ii. 236).

In the monument Cleopatra desires death, which she has the power to achieve as she intends. Her equivocation with the clown over the suitability of the female for being eaten by the worm marks the final misogynistic exchange of the play, and her death is both consummately feminine and yet dismissive of the female. It is difficult to argue, however, as does Madelon Sprengnether, that Cleopatra is in effect reclaimed as *male* in these final scenes, and thus the threat she represents as the consummate sexual other is diminished.<sup>26</sup> Sprengnether emphasises that Cleopatra constructs her own appearance and thereby suspends any judgement either over the motives for her sexual fidelity or indeed over her gender itself. Sprengnether argues that Cleopatra is an experiment by Shakespeare in the suspension of gender. The evidence for this she takes from Cleopatra's conversations with the clown, and her creation of a mythic stature for Antony in Act V. Central to this argument is Cleopatra's stress on her abandonment of womanhood. It is this distancing from the female which Sprengnether sees as the unique creation of this part, reducing the threat of emasculation which female power, particularly sexual power, epitomises, and also allowing a more complex representation of femininity than elsewhere in the tragedies. However it is equally possible that this line represents not a deliberate destruction of the illusion of Cleopatra's female nature, but a stressing of it. As Robertson-Davies points out, the boy player may double the irony, not diminish the role.<sup>27</sup>

26. Madelon Sprengnether, 'The Boy Actor and Femininity in *Antony and Cleopatra*', in Holland, Homan & Paris (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 191 - 205, pp. 200 - 202.

27. W. Robertson-Davies, *Shakespeare's Boy Actors*, J. M. Dent & Sons, London, 1939, p. 136.

In fact Cleopatra's death is more complex, consummately feminine in her references to the babe, the breast, the preservation of her beauty, but also transcendent of Caesar's power over her future. At the same time she has conspicuously undervalued herself and her women because of their sex (IV. xvi. 75 - 7). This speech in particular marks a movement from collusion in the portrayal of her own feminine weakness to an understanding of her powers of resolution and control over her own fate (IV. xvi. 92 - 3). Linda Bamber sees the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra, verging on consummation but never quite achieving it, as essential to the movement of the play. Antony holds himself in suspension between succumbing to Cleopatra and losing Rome, and rejecting her. Thus he avoids becoming a strumpet's fool in the final analysis by allowing her to destroy him. It is this which leads to both lovers' ability to pursue their private destinies which ensures their separate fame after death.<sup>28</sup> This is an intriguing argument, but an entirely negative form of union.

Cleopatra's death scene divides critical opinion between those who see it as final proof of her presentation as female, and those who see her abandoning gender altogether. Valerie Traub concentrates on the idea that Cleopatra abandons her sex and herself to death, becoming "marble-constant" (V. ii. 236). Traub sees this as self-imposed stasis, similar to the literally statuesque rebirth of Hermione, and evidence of the fact that even when the traditional equation of female virginity with moral good is inverted in Egypt and in Cleopatra, there is a significant internalisation of male values.<sup>29</sup> For Marjorie Garber, Cleopatra's death underlines her fertile nature and the association with the landscape of Egypt. Garber suggests that this may be one of the most Oedipal of all Shakespeare's plays because Cleopatra has slept with the fathers both of Pompey and Caesar and combines in her death both the sexual and the maternal.<sup>30</sup> This,

28. Bamber, *op. cit.*, pp. 69 - 70.

29. Traub, *Desire & Anxiety*, p. 48.

30. Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*, Methuen, London, 1981, pp. 150 - 51; pp. 207 - 8.

in fact, is an inaccurate description of the Oedipus complex. It is not unlike Kerrigan's view that the end of the play provides evidence of love's triumph over sexual disgust, Cleopatra's suicide affirming her love and defeating the Roman - perhaps even Shakespeare's own - attitude towards female sexuality.<sup>31</sup> It is also possible to argue that Cleopatra's ultimate desire is conventionality and the ability to call Antony 'husband' (V. ii. 282). She who stood outside and beyond all norms now longs to belong.

Cleopatra is presented against a background where particular expectations of feminine sexuality are endemic. Easy misogyny slips out even in front of the queen. When the clown comes to bring the deadly serpents, he comments that "the devil himself will not eat a woman" (V. ii. 268). Misogyny permeates the play, acting as an antidote to the myth of the all-powerful female, Cleopatra, but also building-up the mystique of feminine sexuality. Although Cleopatra seems confident of her position as this consummate woman, her 'infinite variety' also epitomises all the traditional female myths and values: nature, lust, insubstantiality, changeability, unreason, unworthiness. Cleopatra is capable of playing any part she chooses, but to a large extent her choice is limited by men's expectations of what 'woman' is. It is not until both Enobarbus and Antony are dead that she is released from all expectations and can realise the potency of her own resolution. The fact that she uses this opportunity to kill herself and join Antony in death enhances the magnitude of their love, freed from notions both of emasculated masculinity and also of supreme feminine sexuality.

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31. Kerrigan, *op. cit.*, pp. 188 - 90.

Men price the thing ungained more than it is.  
 That she was never yet that ever knew  
 Love got so sweet as when desire did sue.

(*T & C*, 1. ii. 285 - 7)

Cressida is a virgin, but worldly wise: more so than Troilus. Her wisdom does not allow her to see beyond its own disillusion. She does not heed her own understanding of the inevitability of betrayal, and is also unable to realise that Troilus' love for her may be genuine love rather than desire alone. In fact Cressida adheres to a rigid code of gendered sexual behaviour and then falls into its grasp, without questioning whether Troilus might be an exception to her interpretation of typical masculine sexuality as predatory and destructive of women. Cressida's position is complicated by the fact that her story was myth before the play's first performance: she is doomed to be held up as a pattern of feminine infidelity. This creates a striking dramatic tension within the play. The parallel plot of Helen, unfaithful and the cause of the war, adds a further dimension of inevitable feminine infidelity to the play. Both women are seen as destructive, of themselves, the state, ideas of family and of men. Helen's elopement and the consequent war between Greek and Trojan emphasises the peculiarity of women's position, since she and Cressida both divide two sets of men in enmity and also provide the common link between them.

But Cressida is not trapped. She is responsible for her behaviour in the Greek camp, even if she does not have the power to control the circumstances by which she arrived there. Her tragedy is that she believes in the gendered stereotypes of sexual behaviour. She reacts to Troilus as a man rather than an individual, and behaves herself as 'woman' rather than as a free agent, further confining herself within already tight boundaries. Marjorie Garber notes that Cressida realises the bargaining power inherent in her virginity, and sees in this realisation a 'sexual mercantilism' unusual for female characters in Shakespeare.<sup>32</sup> It is not as unusual as Garber seems to think. A great deal of the

32. Garber, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

comedy in romance is founded upon a subtle understanding that virginity is a commodity which will be traded in marriage. Cressida's particular tragedy is that she seems to estimate her own value only according to her virginity, which she is bound to surrender. She thus attempts to be what she thinks men in general wish her to be and finds herself condemned for being exactly that.

Catherine Belsey sees the play as a presentation of heroes rendered unheroic by desire. There is a parallel between her understanding of Troilus' fear that consummation of his desire for Cressida will be so overpowering that it becomes an unregistrable void and the desire which is death in *Antony and Cleopatra*.<sup>33</sup> Here, however, the play explores a much darker process of decay and the shattering of illusions concerned with the nature of desire. The only myth-making is negative and there is no nurturing space for male or female characters. In this world, the ideal man must exchange roles and contexts between his public and private life. In love he portrays himself as the passive victim of feminine aggression; in real war he is a manly soldier. In fact the best example of true manliness is Achilles, whose relationship with Patroclus provides a counter theme of homoerotic sexuality and desire. Marianne Novy believes that the genders are less polarised than usual during the lull in the fighting of the play's first half, and women are free to display an "open sexuality", while the men are conspicuously idle. When the war revives women and men are forced to return to the expected categories of feminine weakness and infidelity, and masculine violence. Thus in their private world the lovers achieve an equality which is not possible in public.<sup>34</sup> However Novy fails to make the connection between open sexuality, which is in itself stereotypical, notably in its presentation of Helen's infidelity, and the fact that it is this which is largely responsible for the return to stereotypes by the end of the play. Moreover Cressida feels it necessary to be particularly

33. Catherine Belsey, 'Desire's Excess and the English Renaissance Theatre: *Edward II*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*', in Susan Zimmerman (ed.), *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 84 - 102, pp. 93 - 5.

34. Novy, op. cit., p. 100.

circumspect about her desire for Troilus; she cannot afford to be open.

Troilus perceives love and desire in traditional terms of feminine strength and masculine weakness. Cressida's beauty becomes an aggressive attacker. To hear of it opens another "gash" (I. i. 62) in him; love is a "cruel battle" (I. i. 3). Cressida does indeed have the power to destroy her lover through her infidelity, but by doing that she destroys herself. But she is powerless to affect her role in this description, which is an orthodox inversion of women's actual passivity in sexual courtship. Such statements make female characters seem far more assertive than they are allowed to be, because they are female. This is the same force of gender construction that asserts the idea of emasculating and assertive female sexuality that is prevalent in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Women are excluded from real conflict - except as its primary cause. Men may alternate between casting themselves as passive lovers and active soldiers, but women must always remain passive. Troilus' wounded words are followed by a return to the world of action, in which it is "womanish" *not* to fight (I. i. 107). But the issues cannot remain so clear-cut: the war derives from Helen's culpability; when the truce becomes boring, a challenge is issued "To rouse a Grecian that is true in love" (I. iii. 276). War and love are inextricably linked, as are the roles of lover/soldier, and women cruel in the war of love yet absent from real battle. These are the roles assigned and perceived by men and believed by Cressida.

The greatest power Cressida has is to withhold her consent from sleeping with Troilus in case, by succumbing to his desire, she lose him. In fact there is no such risk - but Cressida fears there is. According to René Girard, it is this fear which leads her to begin a fatal game of provoking jealousy in Troilus. Girard puts up a spirited and extended case for the significance of one moment's betrayal after the couple first sleep together. In particular, he suggests that Troilus is unnecessarily hasty in his wish to depart. Troilus no longer sounds like a man in love. The shadow of doubt which this casts causes Cressida to regret the fact that

she has slept with him. She knows that she should have known (and indeed did know) better, and her rejection is inevitable according to the laws of masculine desire. Girard argues that Cressida is not enough for Troilus, who needs the admiration of other men to complete his conquest as part of the play's overall structure of 'mimetic' desire. Desire is not focused on the subject, but is a process of securing attention and jealousy from others. There is no exclusive relationship where desire flourishes, but only a public realm in which it is played out. The jealousy aroused by this process is again not focused on the subject, but on the idea of desire itself. Others are jealous of desire, not of the desired. They thus seek to steal desire by emulating it. In other words, Cressida is irrelevant besides Troilus' desire for her and his knowledge that she is - and will be - desired by others.

So buoyed-up is Troilus by his success with Cressida that, in an example of this emulation, he adopts Pandarus' deeply misogynistic bawdy. This mimetic desire, Girard argues, is also visible in the fact that Troilus' interest in Cressida is only fired again when she speaks of herself amongst the "merry Greeks" and thus threatens him with the possibility of her infidelity (IV. v. 55). Imagining their desire for Cressida, which does not yet exist but which Troilus decides inevitably will, Troilus both pre-empts and imitates it, and his original desire for Cressida becomes a desire based on jealousy of the Greeks' desire. Rivalry is imitation.<sup>35</sup> Girard's argument that the female who is perceived as sexual goods by men is, in herself, irrelevant, is perceptive and persuasive. However his confident assertion that Troilus "betrayed her first and her own betrayal can be read, at least in part, as an act of retaliation, of vengeful escalation, and therefore as an *imitation* of what Troilus has done to her" is a great deal to gather from Troilus' concern for Cressida's health.<sup>36</sup> It nevertheless shows the lovers' sensitivity to their

35. René Girard, 'The Politics of Desire in *Troilus and Cressida*' in Patricia Parker & Geoffrey Hartman (eds.), *Shakespeare & The Question of Theory*, Methuen, London, 1985, pp. 188 - 209.

36. Girard, *ibid.*, p. 197.

circumstances, and highlights the fact that subtle nuances of meaning are interpreted differently by male and female characters, particularly when those nuances relate to sexual relationships.

Valerie Traub has written an extended study of the idea of exchange, rather than imitation, as a central motif in this play. In particular, the transfer of affection exemplified in Helen indicates to Traub that political and sexual faithlessness are synonymous, as are war and desire. Both Helen and Cressida are affected by their transfer from Troy to Greece or Greece to Troy and accordingly positioned either as ideal woman or whore. Helen trades Menelaus for Paris, Cressida substitutes Diomedes for Troilus, Cressida is traded for Antenor. Traub develops this idea in a similar way to Girard, suggesting that a mimetic desire for the desired object of one's rival is a particular feature of the sexual economy of this play. She also makes reference to critical debate which suggests that the heterosexual dimensions of the play are a myth in opposition to the strongest sexual impulse which is towards the homoerotic. Thus Helen and Cressida become ciphers for male rivalry and desire and irrelevant in person. Most persuasively, Traub notes the theme of the fluid exchange of disease and desire which dominates in the play. Here, as in *Measure for Measure*, hordes of unseen prostitutes are portrayed as culpable of the worst effects of female sexuality and as the inevitable carriers of venereal infection. Men alone are vulnerable (women are not vulnerable because, as sexually used women they are not valuable) to this diseased exchange, and they are specifically vulnerable because of their excessive desire. As a procurer for other men's lusts Pandarus becomes implicated in both aspects of the construction of gendered sexuality, representing both the male victim and the female cause of the disease. Most disturbingly, Traub argues, Pandarus' apparently authoritative commentary on the play provides evidence that contamination is already harboured within the existing sexual economy. The fear of contagion comes too late.<sup>37</sup>

37. Traub, *Desire & Anxiety*, pp. 71 - 87.



Like Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, Cressida can provoke but not control the consequences of sexual desire. The more difficult it becomes to find some constant identity, the more desperate her projections of self become. For Cressida this entails a pessimistic insight into her own position, coupled with a desire and an ability to become whatever others seem to think she already is. Given that men's perceptions of women within this world are likely to be disparaging, this is a very dangerous method of self-projection and creation. This again is a play in which critics are keen to find evidence of Shakespeare's personal distaste for female sexuality. "Cressida is not evil, she is amoral, and Shakespeare wrote about her at a time when he seems to have been feeling deeply disgusted with women" comments Judith Cook.<sup>38</sup>

Cressida is sufficiently intelligent to perceive her position accurately, but not powerful enough to change it. Once spoken, her realisation that Pandarus is "a bawd" (I. ii. 277) provides proof that she is a whore. Further, it implies that she is a willing partner not only for Troilus, but also for a variety of men - which the end of the play confirms. The words that Cressida uses and which surround her confirm expectations of female sexuality as personified in Cressida. She is, we gather from her uncle's jesting, the sort of woman to whom dirty jokes can be told. The implication that she understands the jest sufficiently not to find it amusing embroils her in the thought patterns of Troy which are most disparaging of women (I. ii. 256). Traub sees Cressida as suffering from the idea that women's speech corresponds with lax feminine sexuality, and indeed her body 'language' is interpreted by Ulysses as evidence of her sexual wantonness (IV. vi. 55 - 8).<sup>39</sup> Such interpretation parallels the significance of bawdy as an attempt to revise male powerlessness.

38. Judith Cook, *Women in Shakespeare*, Virgin Books, London, 1990, p. 113.

39. Traub, *Desire & Anxiety*, p. 83.

Bruce R. Smith sees the world of *Troilus and Cressida* as oppressively male. Supposedly concerned with the heterosexual desire for Helen and of Troilus for Cressida, the play is instead occupied with homoerotic desire which excludes women. The relationships of desire are defined in terms of a power which is consummated in violence and ultimately death. This, argues Smith, reproduces the inconsistency of the patriarchal power structure of early modern England which upheld both heterosexual marriage and the male-male bond as ideal relationships.<sup>40</sup> Traub argues equally persuasively that the play is actually indifferent to the gender of the desired object, with desire having the same effect of effeminising both Achilles and Troilus.<sup>41</sup> Coppélia Kahn sees a far simpler fight in the play in which masculinity depends upon retaining exclusive sexual property in women. Pointing out that no man can rest secure because he will constantly suspect feminine sexual fidelity, Kahn notes the paradox that Helen is now worthless because obviously sexually unfaithful, yet it is unthinkable for the Greeks and Trojans not to fight. She argues that the women themselves become irrelevant since they are the property of another man which men can threaten, the symptom of a bargain between men, not of an agreement between male and female.<sup>42</sup> This accurately represents the position where women's sexuality becomes the property not of women, but of men. Cressida is at all times in the play a form of exchange between men: between Pandarus and Troilus, between the Trojans and the Greeks, amongst the Greeks, and between Diomedes and Troilus. The danger of such an argument is, however, that it denies Cressida any responsibility for her own position, and exacerbates her position further than is already inevitable, making her more powerless than she really is.

Like Cleopatra, Troilus projects a version of himself, seeing himself in the

40. Bruce Smith, 'Making a difference: male/male 'desire' in tragedy, comedy and tragi-comedy', in Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, pp. 127 - 49, pp. 133 - 7.

41. Traub, *Desire & Anxiety*, pp. 84 - 5.

42. Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981, pp. 131 - 2.

noble role of tortured lover and honourable soldier who loves with a "strained purity" (IV. v. 23). In the fetid world of this play, and with their fore-known fate already dooming the lovers, it is inevitable that Troilus will be taken as the pattern of loyalty and Cressida as the model of feminine unfaithfulness. The triangular relationship with Pandarus reinforces such roles, with Cressida all too willing to submit to others' perceptions of her likely turpitude. Cressida makes no refutation of Pandarus' charge that she will be fatal to Troilus (IV. iii. 11 - 12). Her later guilt of the alliance with Diomedes is practically irrelevant, since she has never been seen as innocent. Cressida is not admirable woman, but she is a convincing portrayal of a victim who seeks to bestow her affection in the hope of a response. Although Cressida is responsible for the liaisons which overturn the vows she swears to Troilus, there is a certain logic behind her inconsistency. The possibility that she may be constant has been dismissed long before her actual handing-over of sleeve and self. This is clear in the vows to which she, Pandarus and Troilus all put the sealing "Amen" (III. ii. 201 - 203). Cressida invokes against herself the potent force of others' opinion in the axiomatic idea that she can be an exemplum of corporate guilt to women, who will be "As false as Cressid!" (III. ii. 192). She does not contest the justification of this attribution of blame, and thus is responsible for it, as well as doomed within the structure of myth and history. Marjorie Garber emphasises the double time-scale that this creates within the play, as the characters' destinies are fixed by their very names into a spectacle of archetypes struggling blindly against their own defined identities.<sup>43</sup> Cressida however does not struggle very hard: she seems quite willing to accept the idea that her inconstancy could prove a pattern for all womanhood. The opposition of masculine and feminine is thus defined as that between constancy and infidelity, which become thereby gendered. The division between genders in this way is overwhelming in its impact on both Troilus and Cressida. Jonathan Dollimore notes that Troilus has believed Cressida so profoundly that his whole sense of self and reality is shaken by having to accept

43. Garber, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

the evidence of betrayal by Cressida he cannot resist.<sup>44</sup>

Cressida's sophistication and disillusionment in sexual politics doom her relationship with Troilus as she projects onto him typically masculine motivations which he does not feel until she has betrayed him, but which - as Girard argues - encourage her to betray him. The more Cressida tries to play the game men create around her, the more she is caught in its clutches as she fails to distinguish between love (of a kind) in Troilus and desire in Diomedes. Trying to be the thing men perceive her to be, Cressida becomes that which they despise. Seen as a whore, when she becomes one she is condemned for not being chaste. Cressida cannot win. Even as she tries to be honest, she loses ground. For by admitting that she was "Hard to seem won; but I was won" (III. ii. 114) she appears forward, taking "men's privilege/Of speaking first" (III. ii. 125 - 6). Unfairly, Marianne Novy takes such statements as evidence that Cressida has pretended from the beginning of the play, without also pointing out that this pretence is a necessary part of Cressida's self-protection as a modest woman.<sup>45</sup> When Cressida does take the initiative, she realises that she is acting outside the bounds of modesty and open to lewd interpretation. She also proves that the courtship game is dishonest, for, as a modest woman, she has had to dissemble indifference. Both the hypocrisy of the game and the accusation of her dissembling are lingering impressions, reinforcing the idea of women's falseness. Cressida even talks herself into the undignified and dangerous position of offering herself up: "Stop my mouth" (III. ii. 130). Her subsequent "T'was not my purpose thus to beg a kiss" sounds merely coquettish (III. ii. 134).

Helen is an object and a danger, a "carrion weight" (IV. ii. 11), "a thing not ours" (II. ii. 21). Even when Troilus defends women, it is as dirty objects who cannot be returned once soiled by men ( II. ii. 68 - 9). Sexually active women are

44. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 40.

45. Novy, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

damaged goods: the men who do the damage, who influence women to further their self-destruction, do not take the responsibility of having affected human life, but only of having dirtied linen. Such a view affects moments when the audience might feel pity in the pathos of Cressida's situation. So inured with patriarchal attitudes does she seem, that she cannot perceive her body without the echo of men's opinions:

Tear my bright hair, and scratch my praised cheeks  
Crack my clear voice with sobs, and break my heart  
With sounding 'Troilus'.

(IV. iii. 33 - 5)

Cressida speaks as if looking at and listening to herself from the outside. She has no inner self and is therefore denied the status of tragic heroine. Her tragedy is that she is not sufficient in herself to be tragic.

As Joel Fineman observes, this is a play in which violence - and sexuality - are self-destructive.<sup>46</sup> Cressida is destroyed by her own understanding of sexual stereotypes, and her inability to see that she has any choice but to live up (or rather down) to them. Cressida has the power to "soil our mothers" (V. ii. 136) without the guile to prevent it. Debating value with Troilus, Hector pointed out that for a thing - or a woman - to have value, it must be precious "of itself" as well as valued by its possessor (II. ii. 54). Cressida has finally given Troilus evidence that her self is what men perceive her to be. By personifying men's expectations, she has fallen into the trap of pandering to men's lowest opinions of women, and then been condemned for not living up to their highest ideals. For such "daughters of the game" there is no winning, only two stages of losing (IV. vi. 63).

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46. Joel Fineman, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

More than our brother is our chastity.

(*Measure*, II. iv. 185)

Is this her fault or mine?

The tempter or the tempted, who sins most, ha?

(*Measure*, II. ii. 168 - 9)

*Measure for Measure* poses difficult questions against the background of a cultural crisis concerning the legislation of sexuality. In the different reactions of male and female characters to the question of sexual choice and responsibility we may observe the politics of gender at work. Kathleen McKluskie suggests that one reading of the play "might present its social meaning as a despairing (or enthusiastic) recognition of the ineffectiveness of attempts at the control of such private, individual matters".<sup>47</sup> It is certainly true that the play fails to resolve the issues it raises, particularly in the open-ended reception of the Duke's proposal to Isabella. In the way Isabella is treated we may see a refracted analysis of the gender-politics at work in the state. She is not remote from the world itself but is manipulated by the Duke even more than by Angelo. She can only passively and then unwillingly exercise her 'power' of sexuality, and that power itself is defined and circumscribed by her expectations of her feminine gender.

Angelo raises the prime question of culpability in relation to feminine sexuality. He acknowledges that the fault is his, but cannot understand why he feels tempted by Isabella. Such questions indicate that the plays discussed in this chapter examine the construction of both masculine and feminine sexuality. Indeed, it could be argued that Isabella's sexuality, because passive, is inevitably a cultural construction, imposed upon her as by men's reaction to her as a woman, and controlled by expectations of her behaviour which have nothing to do with her own feelings. By contrast, Angelo's sexual drive is directly examined, and shown to be inexplicably uncontrollable. This indicates the lack of symmetry

47. Kathleen McKluskie, 'The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*' in Jonathan Dollimore, & Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985, hereafter *Political Shakespeare*, pp. 88 - 108, p. 94.

between perceptions of feminine and masculine sexuality and the power associated with them. Unusually, it also demonstrates that it is one man's lust, not all women's infidelity, which is the most destructive incarnation of sexuality.

Jonathan Dollimore has argued persuasively that the power struggle in *Measure* concentrates upon sexuality as a political tool, not a subject in itself. The emphasis on the seedy nature of Vienna is a diversionary tactic by the ruling classes to recover a political instability dangerous through years of negligent rule, justifying and extending the powers of the Duke.<sup>48</sup> Female characters are particularly vulnerable in this 'scapegoat mentality', and the Viennese prostitutes (whom we never in fact see) and those surrounding them become the focal point of blame for the licence which has supposedly endangered the state, blamed for the crime of human exploitation and living off the profits of sin. Yet in fact it is Angelo's attempted rape/seduction of Isabella that poses the most potent threat to the state, threatening to corrupt justice and the law at one fell swoop. The shift from acknowledging responsibility to alleging culpability in Angelo's attitude towards Isabella reflects this argument in microcosm. Angelo's rhetorical question about culpability for his sexually-excited reaction to Isabella's beauty focuses attention on the fact that women can be construed as provoking an immoral reaction to their sexuality and therefore be implicated in responsibility for immorality. In this way Claudio and Juliet are made scapegoats for a much greater failure of rule. The ruling classes are merely exploiting women and the lower orders as a means to disguise and/or react aggressively against this. Margot Heinemann in her interpretation of Brecht and Shakespeare agrees that "beneath the surface of Shakespeare's reassuringly happy ending lurks a very nasty underworld of sexual and commercial exploitation of inferiors".<sup>49</sup>

48. Jonathan Dollimore, 'Transgression & Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*', in Dollimore, & Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare*, pp. 72 - 87, pp. 82 - 3.

49. Margot Heinemann, 'How Brecht read Shakespeare', in Dollimore, & Sinfield, *ibid.*, pp. 202 - 30, p. 220.

For Dollimore, Isabella is caught between two powerful patriarchal forces: the state and the Church; because she is a woman rejecting orthodox sexual transactions with men. Trapped in the secular world just as she tries to enter the convent, she is not allowed to reject sexual involvement and is coerced back into a socially and sexually subordinate position, first by Angelo's illicit proposal, and then by the Duke's legitimate one. In fact, it is not clear that Isabella accepts the Duke's proposal, although many critics seem to think that she does. Dollimore's certainty that Isabella is ultimately subordinated is misplaced. Isabella has also suffered at the hands of a number of critics who find her choice of chastity over sexual activity perturbing, including feminist critics. Although Lisa Jardine thinks her one of the most complicated representations of a certain type of wrongly accused Shakespearean female heroine, she too assumes that Isabella consents to marry the Duke.<sup>50</sup> For Jardine, Isabella's rejection of Claudio's appeal to her to sleep with Angelo for his sake suggests an "obsessive fear" of her own sexuality. This is not plausible. While it is hard to sympathise with the language which Isabella uses to describe her position in Act III Scene 1, she is caught in an impossible position. Her reaction to Claudio's proposal is less human than his obvious desire to live. What does Jardine mean by 'obsessive fear'? Isabella's reaction is understandable, although not appealing when weighed against her brother's life. The play presents it as misguided and naive in a difficult context. Furthermore, Jardine does not comment in this context on the difference between characters like Hermione and Hero, whom she suggests (persuasively) are perceived as most grand when most wronged, and Isabella who is seen as most reprehensible when most wronged, both by Angelo and by her brother.<sup>51</sup>

Marjorie Garber also thinks that Isabella's defence of her chastity is evidence of an excessive, self-indulgent and "chilling" denial of desire which

50. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

51. Jardine, *ibid.*, p. 193.



both Angelo and Isabella are imposing on themselves.<sup>52</sup> Garber argues that Isabella's refusal of her sexuality is a denial of life to her brother, rating Isabella with Shakespeare's other "militant virgin", Joan la Pucelle of *Henry VI Part 1*. (In fact, Joan goes to great lengths to emphasise her female sexuality, flirts with the men around her and is assumed by both the French and English troops to be sexually active.) Celibacy to Garber thus becomes either ignorance or defiance of nature, an unnatural abstinence. This is highly questionable. Garber feels that there is a parallel between Isabella's and Angelo's denials of desire. Yet there is a very obvious difference: Angelo attempts to rape Isabella and to execute her brother. He finds denial of sexuality impossible and is positively attracted to destroying the virgin prospect which Isabella unknowingly presents. Thus his attempt at chastity leads to an opposite and excessive lust which has deliberately evil intentions. Isabella simply chooses an intensely strict moral code, although men try to prevent her from living according to it.

Angelo's lust will break out, no matter how severe the attempts to contain it. Indeed, the more severe the attempts the less likely the success. This is a particularly destructive combination of desire with political power, although Angelo's reaction to Isabella would be destructive whatever the circumstances. There can be no justification for his behaviour. Completely different is Isabella's choice of the convent which would affect only herself, were it not for the extraordinary and unjust circumstances in which she finds herself. The fact that her defence of chastity could result in her brother's death does not make her determination immoral. She is not responsible for the attitudes towards her as a woman which create this morally complex situation. Garber risks endorsing the point of view that Isabella *should* sleep with Angelo in order to save Claudio's life. Furthermore, whom is Isabella naturally supposed to desire? The fact that she was on the verge of entering the convent intensifies, but does not create, the situation with Angelo. In other words, would Garber have preferred (or seen as

52. Garber, *op. cit.*, pp. 130 - 34.

psycho-sexually more healthy) a situation where Isabella was attracted to Angelo? Would this make the situation morally acceptable? It would not. Isabella is denying nothing. She simply does not want to sleep with her brother's (potential and then apparent) murderer.

Jardine argues that Isabella's position is complicated by the fact that she conspicuously fails to live up to the examples of chastity which should be her ideal.<sup>53</sup> Isabella is portrayed as unattractive even in her defence of chastity - which is traditionally virtuous behaviour for a woman - because in these extraordinary circumstances it would be more noble to sacrifice her virginity, and herself, to save her brother. This idea of nobility is the position Garber adopts - and Jardine also seems to concur with this opinion in her statement that Isabella's behaviour betrays her "obsessive fear of sexuality in general".<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, of course, Isabella finds that she can only save her brother by imitating such examples and pretending to sleep with Angelo. Mariana's appearance means that the dilemma presented by a truly chaste woman is never resolved. Vienna does not have to answer the questions posed by Isabella's strict adherence to its own idealised version of feminine sexuality. This play presents an unorthodox view of that sexuality. Isabella, by defending her chastity to the last, is doing what women are supposed to do, but are thought incapable of doing, and yet she suffers censure. Irene Dash argues that the confusion critics face when commenting upon Isabella's right to control her own body betrays an inability to understand her sense of her self as an individual.<sup>55</sup> This may seem an extraordinary claim, particularly when levelled against feminist critics examining a female role, but it is an accurate reflection of much critical reaction to Isabella.

Renunciation of sexual activity by a woman is regarded in very different

53. Jardine, *op. cit.*, pp. 190 - 92.

54. Jardine, *loc. cit.*

55. Dash, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

terms from the same renunciation by a man. Because we quickly gather that Isabella is an attractive woman (if only by Angelo's reaction to her) her decision to enter the convent can be seen in terms of waste. The power of sexual attraction, of inspiring male desire, is for Isabella a handicap, but nevertheless mythologised by men like Angelo as a considerable and specifically female (feminine) force. Isabella is valued by others for her chastity - but only if it can be used or corrupted. Static, it is harmful to Claudio, a destructive, negative power of sexuality which is useful if turned into a response to men's expectations and desires. Lucio's opinion of Isabella is indicative of this attitude:

Hail, virgin, if you be - as those cheek-roses  
Proclaim you are no less.

(I. iv. 16 - 17)

Angelo is positively attracted by her purity:

Having waste ground enough  
Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary,  
And pitch our evils there? O fie, fie, fie!  
What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?  
Dost thou desire her foully for those things  
That make her good?

(III. ii. 175 - 80)

Isabella, who chooses to deny her own sexual power, is interpreted as emphasising it - and this is the thrust of her attractiveness to Angelo. This reaction to Isabella is a different version of the view which saw consuming sexuality emanating from Cleopatra. Marilyn French emphasises that the power to attract sexual advances, whether intentionally or not, is a particular example of the double standard between men and women. Sexual attraction is supposed to be the essence of femaleness and its denial tantamount to giving up the one true power which women possess.<sup>56</sup> This play presents a more complex view, however, in that it shows how sexual attraction may be projected onto even (or particularly) the most deliberately virginal woman, by a man. Isabella is not allowed to abandon her sexual power, and herself continues to deny that she has any other power, because she is a woman:

56. French, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

Isabella    Alas, what poor  
                  Ability's in me to do him good?  
 Lucio       Assay the power you have.  
 Isabella    My power? Alas, I doubt.

(I. iv. 73 - 6)

Isabella's estimation of her ineffectiveness is correct. Claudio's death is averted because this proves a convenient means by which the Duke can re-intervene in the Viennese legal system. Isabella's power of sexual attraction comes close to doing positive harm: had Angelo really slept with her, and not Mariana, the Viennese legal system would have been *proved* corrupt. Yet Isabella reinforces the very attitudes that lead to her predicament, talking of women who are as "soft as our complexions are, /And credulous to false prints" (III. iv. 129 - 30). This however does not make Angelo's response to such apparently<sup>o</sup>natural<sup>2</sup> weakness her responsibility: it remains the projection of culpability for a man's sexual responses onto the woman he desires. Her attitudes towards this process are irrelevant by comparison.

Lucio and Claudio both value Isabella's powers of speech more than she does herself, although they see these powers as being intimately connected to feminine sexuality. The convent will, of course, curtail both powers, imposing silence as well as chastity. Lucio rushes to stop Isabella entering the convent because Claudio believes that she will be an eloquent advocate. Lucio is convinced that Isabella will have some success with Angelo because "When maidens sue/ Men give like gods" (I. iv. 80 - 81). Of course this does not happen. The emphasis on maidens is instructive. Angelo reacts to Isabella as a virgin in a world where most women are sexually corrupted wasteland. Isabella was not only on the verge of entering sanctuary; she embodies sanctuary in the tainted world of Vienna, and it is too much. Angelo recognises that the strength of his desire is to bring a virtuous woman to the state of a whore. Isabella is attractive because of her virginity; if she lost it she would also lose her 'power'. When she tries to remain outside this system, she is judged - perhaps even by the play, and

certainly by feminist critics - harshly. Marilyn French sees the defence of chastity as essential in the cultural construction of feminine sexuality, yet fails to explore fully the complexity of Isabella's position. As French suggests, Isabella's stance is necessary, and quite deliberately constructed by Shakespeare to allow us little more than theoretical sympathy for her position. But in one of the most easily assailable modes of feminist-psychoanalytic criticism French goes on to describe Shakespeare's increasing sexual disgust and guilt. For her, this play confronts directly Shakespeare's deepest disquiet over female sexuality. More interesting is her idea that women are the guardians of the sexuality of the entire human race.<sup>57</sup> In fact this is one play where the opposite case is also true, in that it displays anxiety over men's, not women's, sexual continence. The real Viennese crisis of morals lies with the Duke and Angelo, not with Claudio or Juliet. Angelo and the Duke are responsible both for the apparent moral laxity of Vienna and also for their own personal failure of rule.

Isabella is valued for her art, not her reason; not for what she says, but how she says it (I. ii. 170 - 74). She seems to plead successfully. Angelo listens to her arguments about the nature of justice. But it is her physical attractiveness that wins a stay of execution for Claudio. Although Angelo acknowledges that her words have weight, it is not to talk that he wishes to see Isabella again. Indeed when it comes to the bed-trick, it does not matter that she is silent, just as in the bed-trick between Helen and Bertram in *All's Well That Ends Well*, Bertram fails to notice he has slept with Helen, not Diana. It is not until Isabella falls-in with the Duke's plans that she gains the power publicly to denounce Angelo for his treatment of her. In order for the Duke's plans to succeed, of course, Isabella has to pretend that she has in fact been raped by Angelo: she cannot distance herself from the entirely negative power of claiming to have been raped. Jardine points out that Angelo is right: Isabella will be believed only if it appears that she really

57. French, op. cit., pp. 190 - 91; 186; 127.

is the victim of rape, not simply if she is speaking out against attempted assault.<sup>58</sup>

Marjorie Garber argues that this lie provides the means for Isabella's transformation from stubborn chastity to human generosity, from justice to mercy.<sup>59</sup> But although Isabella has had to adapt to the position in which she finds herself, there is no evidence that she has changed, particularly because she does not answer the Duke's proposal. Garber argues that Isabella should change, that her original chastity is excessive, and to reinforce this argues that the bed-trick and the public pleading in effect restore Isabella's humanity. This is not borne out by the play, not least because Isabella's humanity is not in question in the manner in which Garber suggests.

There is a profound tension underlying Isabella's exchanges with Angelo which undermines the supposed morality of her argument. This tension derives partly from Viennese law and partly from the construction of Isabella's gender. Because Isabella is a woman, her pleading dialogue can be interpreted as having sexual undertones. Lucio as off-stage prompter urges Isabella to press her suit with greater vigour. Once she has warmed to her task, he adds as many innuendoes as he can, for the audience's benefit. Impressed by Isabella's increasing ability to hit the mark with Angelo, Lucio begins to worry that she will overstate her case. The audience is being manipulated in a very particular way here. The more enjoyable the scene seems, the more the audience colludes with Lucio's tone of "to him, wench!" (II. ii. 127), "Thou'rt i'th' right girl" (II. ii. 132), debunking Isabella's novice habit. Kathleen McLuskie sees this as a calculated construction by the play of its own 'male' audience, occupying a privileged position in observing the relationships between genders. Moreover, she emphasises the power of this construction, and argues that feminist criticism has particular problems if it seeks to deny the pleasure of seeing such a scene as this

58. Jardine, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

59. Garber, *op. cit.*, p. 220 - 24.

from anything other than this (supposedly) author-endorsed point of view. Thus a

feminist reading of the scene may wish to refuse the power of Angelo's plea, may recognise in it the double bind which blames women for their own sexual oppression. However to take up that position involves refusing the pleasure of the drama and the text, which imply a coherent maleness in their point of view.

The problems of this potential denial of pleasure in the play are over-stated, however, in McKluskie's insistence that

feminist criticism of this play is restricted to exposing its own exclusion from the text. It has no point of entry into it, for the dilemmas of the narrative and the sexuality under discussion are constructed in completely male terms ... the women's role as objects of exchange within that system of sexuality is not at issue, however much a feminist might want to draw attention to it. Thus when a feminist accepts the narrative, theatrical and intellectual pleasures of this text, she does so in male terms, and not as part of the locus of feminist critical activity.<sup>60</sup>

The reverse is true. Drawing attention to exclusion is one of the primary roles of feminist criticism. Furthermore, it could equally well be argued, as Dollimore has in terms of social politics, that the play presents a subtle but devastating questioning of patriarchal power through the faults that power contains within itself, all of which are liberated and activated only through the presence and influence (however negative and unlooked for) of women.

Isabella's conversation with Angelo ends by being flirtatious: she understands how to bargain in the world's terms with a man and how to win his approval. Both participants in this dialogue share their culture's expectation of gender. Isabella even teases Angelo with a bribe. Although this turns out to be her prayers for his good, she knows what to say to catch his attention. Angelo tells Isabella to conceive his meaning that he loves her (III. iv. 141). Again, she is well able to understand both significances of his words - and their consequences. She is not the innocent that a chaste woman might be supposed to be. She

60. McKluskie, *op. cit.*, pp. 97 - 8.

understands too much, she can flirt. These nuances attract Angelo and cause many of Isabella's problems.

By the end of the conversation with Angelo, matters are worse. Isabella has enlarged Claudio's problem to include herself. The threat hangs over her of having humanised Angelo to the extent that he is attracted to her, and she is implicated now in responsibility not only for her effect on men, but also for her brother's life. Isabella does not have to do anything to be given this responsibility, except conspicuously to be a woman and a virgin. She has sexual power without desire for it or control over its effects. Attempting in a limited way to tease Angelo into humouring her request, she becomes embroiled in a process she cannot control: Angelo's reaction. The audience knows that she is not culpable for this reaction. But it is also possible to observe here that the play inverts the usual construction of female sexuality, which equates virginity with moral good, since Juliet's fertile state is much more clearly endorsed than Isabella's chosen chastity. At the same time, Angelo responds to the more typical idea of female sexuality and is overwhelmingly attracted by Isabella's virginity. Paradoxically Isabella's power of sexuality is the power of denial. Alone, her soliloquy is trite and her thoughts on chastity seem cold. The actress Juliet Stevenson has commented that Isabella has some of the most difficult lines for any Shakespearean actress:<sup>61</sup>

Then Isabel live chaste, and brother die:  
More than our brother is our chastity.

(II. iv. 184 - 5)

This couplet is too neat, too closed for such a momentous decision. Her soliloquy contains no great self-questioning typical of the soliloquies of a tragic hero. Isabella has enough passion in her speech to let the audience understand how she excites Angelo, but in order to restore her to the role of chaste virgin she mouths a cold couplet to reiterate her own dilemma. Her language is inconsistent,

61. Juliet Stevenson, interviewed in Carol Rutter, *Clamorous Voices: Shakespeare's Women Today*, The Women's Press, London, 1988, p. 26



necessitated by a certain dichotomy in the audience's reaction to her as a sexually attractive yet determinedly chaste heroine. For all Isabella's affirmation of chastity she is embroiled in a world where men and women talk about and to women in denigrating terms specifically related to sexual faithlessness. When Claudio proves weaker than she expects, Isabella immediately suspects her mother of adultery, reasoning that her brother cannot be his father's true son to prefer dishonourable life to honourable death (III. i. 142 - 4). Her comments demonstrate how far Isabella has internalised the patriarchal understanding of feminine gender and of the myth of feminine infidelity which, unusually, is *not* a strong undercurrent in this play.

Even before she speaks, Isabella is already in an awkward moral situation, both because she does not believe her own argument (she sees Claudio as guilty) and because it is Claudio and Juliet who represent a positive incarnation of sexuality in this play. Isabella behaves as though she were defending a vice and never mentions that Claudio and Juliet love each other, that they were both willing partners, that they were going to marry anyway. She cannot see the positive value of sexual relationships, and in many ways shares the attitude towards sexuality which places it at the level of the waste ground, rather than as endorsed by her own brother's relationship with his betrothed. Isabella sees only sex where there is also love: a more extreme version of Cressida's philosophy. It is her inability to conceive of love, not an excessive fear of sexuality, which makes her defence of her chastity so intimidating.

Justice is not applied equally and female sexuality bears the greater burden of responsibility. This is clear in the Duke/Friar's conversation with Juliet:

Duke	Love you the man that wronged you?	
Juliet	Yes, as I love the woman that wronged him.	
Duke	So then it seems you most offenceful act Was mutually committed?	
Juliet	Mutually.	
Duke	Then was your sin of heavier kind than his.	
Juliet	I do confess it and repent it, father.	(II. iii. 26 - 30)

Juliet does not challenge the Duke/Friar's censure, but immediately accepts that her guilt is heavier both morally and literally. Yet her sentence is lenient, presumably because she is female and pregnant. Claudio will be executed for his sexual activity. Although he is ultimately saved, Claudio is part of an unusual presentation of the penalty for male sexual incontinence which is not excused here in the way typical of many other Shakespearean plays.

Isabella is attractive to Angelo because she represents an unusual facet of female sexuality in Vienna: chastity. She has power in that conversation, even although she does not realise or want it - the power to attract Angelo. In her conversation with Claudio, the opposite is true. She is powerless because of her determined chastity. When she goes to prepare Claudio for death he becomes more firmly convinced that he wants to live. This is because she accepts the law, and the traditional assumption that feminine chastity is an undeniable moral good. Isabella has believed the patriarchal propaganda about chastity; she believes in the law as law, but is forced to argue against it; she cannot see that honour merely serves men up to a point until it conflicts with their (natural) self-interest. When the two diverge, life wins. Her attitude is naive, but instructive:

There spake my brother, there my father's grave  
 Did utter forth a voice. Yes, thou must die.  
 Thou art too noble to conserve a life  
 In base appliances.

(III. i. 84 - 7)

Isabella understands honour to be specifically patriarchal. She suggests that Claudio has a scapegoat in their mother for his inability to live up to this unreasonable code:

Heaven shield my mother played my father fair  
 For such a warped slip of wilderness  
 Ne'er issued from his blood.

(III. i. 142 - 4)

She cannot see that it is exactly this mythology that has caused her dilemma with Angelo, and this honour that has caused the fracture between the law and justice

in the first place. By implication she also justifies men's opinion of women - because she believes it, although by example she proves a striking exception.

Isabella is rescued by the Duke/Friar, himself the core figure of the society which has her caught in a double bind. It is hard for the audience to feel sympathy with her under these circumstances. Her argument seems as ridiculous as the Duke's, but is spoken in all sincerity, whereas the Duke is merely testing Claudio. Of course the young man would rather live. The audience has already been tempted by Isabella's valuing of her chastity above her brother's life to want her to capitulate to Angelo. Now when the Duke offers a solution, he appears in a far more positive light than he deserves. Although Isabella is exonerated from causing the situation with Claudio, she also is the means by which her brother's life is threatened, and for most of the play this is seen as her problem, not Angelo's.

The audience's reaction to Isabella's sexuality and right to control her chastity is carefully constructed. It is possible to know that at one cultural and moral level she is quite right, but at another to think her deeply selfish. The double-edged nature of Isabella's predicament is highlighted by Marilyn French in her discussion of the problems of a woman who asserts her right to chastity.<sup>62</sup> French argues persuasively that such chastity can be seen as evidence both of female integrity and also of the male ownership of female sexuality. The play makes it clear that a value system which announces all women should be chaste but suspects them of being whores cannot cope with a woman who abides by its highest moral code. Isabella tries to construct her own version of female sexuality which she thinks is based upon accepted norms; she does not comprehend the full ramifications of the double-standard. However, like Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, who found she had no power to insist upon being called Katherine, Isabella discovers that, because she is a woman, she is subject to

62. French, op. cit., p. 125.

particular rules of interpretation. The power of sexuality is complex because women who possess it without the power to control it, and without the physical or political power to change it.

Mariana demonstrates a woman's right to love someone who is shown to be completely unworthy (and indeed unwilling). This implies power, but also upholds the patriarchal system, suggesting that no matter how badly men treat the women who love them, if that love is real those women will remain constant. The fact that Angelo has to be trapped in bed is simply a means to an end. Yet even a holy and virtuous woman like Isabella is part of this intrigue. Should we be shocked by the bed-tricks or should we applaud the use of supposedly feminine power which exacerbates the dilemmas of sexuality? In their introduction, Lenz, Greene and Neely suggest that it is too easy today to take a positive view, without recognising the reinforcement of traditional assumptions about female sexual deception which should affect our reading of such scenes.<sup>63</sup> This is particularly true since the Duke keeps Isabella in cruel ignorance of Claudio's reprieve. She is a pawn, not a power-broker in these manipulations.

The play's conclusion does not resolve these questions. Marriage is seen to be both the core of a moral society and also as the punishment for transgressing against its rules for both Angelo and for Lucio. Mariana still wishes to marry a man who has been shown to be unworthy and unwilling. As Catherine Belsey wryly comments, "Angelo and Bertram are evidently to be understood as husbands worth winning once they have repented of their earlier errors. (It is hard to think of female parallels in the period: women's innocence, once lost, is gone for ever)".<sup>64</sup> Angelo's terror at imminent exposure is tempered by his

63. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene & Carol Thomas Neely (eds.), *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1980, Introduction, pp. 11 - 12.

64. Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*, Methuen, London, 1985, p. 170.

assumption that any young woman speaking out in these circumstances will be thought mad to confess publicly to *her* shame. But his confidence is misplaced. Mariana and Isabella do speak out. While the Duke provides a safe context in which women may speak, at a deeper level he is manipulating them to his own ends. Nevertheless the play make clear that women should speak out against this sort of treatment, and that they should be believed. The charge against Angelo is justified, no matter how outrageous it might seem. Like Emilia in *Othello*, Isabella will not be quieted because "truth is truth/To th'end of reck'ning" (V. i. 45-6). Except, of course, that she is lying. Although she is a virgin, who has done nothing of which to be ashamed, Isabella must perjure herself to be credible. This is truly a double-edged comment upon whether cries of rape should be believed.

The fact that Isabella pleads for Angelo's life while still believing Claudio is dead serves as a further evidence that she has the resolution to live by the strict moral code she professes. She even takes some blame for what has clearly been shown to be Angelo's responsibility.

I partly think  
A due sincerity governed his deeds,  
Till he did look on me. Since it is so,  
Let him not die. My brother had but justice,  
In that he did the thing for which he died.

(V. i. 442--6)

Angelo and Isabella have now swapped sides of this argument. Isabella acknowledges a degree of culpability for something that is transparently not her fault. It is this extreme morality which has disturbed so many critics, and which has so often wrongly been seen as an obsessive attitude towards sex. This misapprehension of Isabella is itself a pertinent comment upon our own construction of feminine sexuality today. It seems easier to understand Isabella as a sexually-dysfunctioning female than as a painfully, but sincerely, chaste woman.

Janet Adelman is in no doubt that the bed-trick cures nothing, because no

curative power is invested in sexuality in this play where sexuality is associated with punishment and death. For her, it is the "sternly asexual" Duke whose intervention saves the day, not a curatively sexual woman.<sup>65</sup> Adelman is thus another critic who implies that Isabella should sleep with Angelo in order to cure this situation - or that a woman who did sleep with Angelo would be curatively sexual. This is a pernicious and patriarchal view. Isabella, for all her passive capitulation to the lies she is told and plots in which she becomes involved, represents a distinct challenge both to orthodox order and to notions of feminine sexuality. This is apparent in the Duke's final proposal of marriage - which we do not know she accepts. Isabella is not the prime force behind the play's resolution, but it is through her willingness to pretend to have been involved in sexual machinations that the play is resolved. Furthermore, the supposedly sternly asexual Duke ultimately becomes another suitor for Isabella: the sexual relationships of power are a great deal more complex than Adelman suggests.

Adelman point outs that the fantasy of escape from sexuality which Angelo, Isabella and the Duke espouse is finally defeated and the participants forced to resume their places in the sexually active family of society. But she elides the fundamental difference between masculine and feminine sexuality which is the most unusual feature of this play. For Isabella suggests both in her posture as novice and her final silence over the Duke's proposal that it is easier for a woman than for a man to renounce sexuality. This inverts the view of women as the inevitable (sexual) corrupters of men. In *Measure for Measure* it is Angelo and the Duke who are ultimately unable to reject their sexual desire. Although Isabella becomes embroiled in their plots, she ends the play distanced both from them and from this projected desire.

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65. Janet Adelman, 'Bed Tricks: On Marriage as the End of Comedy in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*', in Holland, Homan & Paris, op. cit., pp. 151 - 74, pp. 162 - 4.

Critical reaction to these female characters demonstrates a predominant interest in Shakespeare's personal attitude towards women and sexuality, and a disturbing endorsement of orthodox ideas of female sexuality. Underlying both the plays and also the opinions of many who have written about them, is the idea that for a woman value is weighed in direct relation to desirability, a damaging and dangerous view which coincides with patriarchal values. Only Cleopatra transcends such judgements. Cressida personifies their full force while Isabella suggests that an alternative path is possible, leading away from the cultural expectations of female sexuality, even if we cannot be sure that she takes it.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to deconstruct gender within a range of Shakespeare's plays. Yet my title of 'Female Power in Shakespeare's Plays' immediately genders power. I do not in fact believe that there is any such thing as power which is specifically female, just as I do not believe that blue is for boys and pink is for girls. There is, of course, both a female and a male sex. But culturally constructed ideas of female and male 'nature' create the world of gender: femininity and masculinity, different versions of which exist in different play worlds. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that gender is the sexed-stereotyping of certain ways of thinking, speaking and behaving which are thought appropriate to the male or female sex. This I regard as a spurious imposition of supposed normality. My intention has been to provoke a discussion not only of the meaning of power, but also of the meaning of female. I have done this through posing the following questions: does female power exist; what is it; what do its existence or non-existence and its nature prove?

It is my contention that power within these plays is different when wielded by women rather than men where the play-worlds see female as feminine, and male as masculine. These created genders mean that particular ways of behaving are seen as appropriate - or not - for men or women. The plays discussed here also question the construction of gender. Where they show that the elision of female and feminine is false they indicate that power could exist unaffected by gendered ideals. However, there are also points at which they present the opposite picture: gender as nature. At such points I have argued that the plays have not transcended the dominant ideology of the time and society in which they were created but have presented instead an idealised, or despised construction - the feminine - as being naturally female. Just as words, clothes, actions and sexuality are gendered within the play worlds, so is power itself. Its potency is particularly affected by cultural expectations of the gender of its possessor. For



women, that context and those expectations are precise. I have examined them in four particular areas: language, action, dress and sexuality.

\* \* \* \* \*

Female power in the plays discussed in this thesis takes two forms: power wielded by women, and the power of simply being a woman. Objectively, neither is 'female'. But within the play worlds it is. Power is a two-way process. It depends upon a response. Largely, it consists in the communication and understanding of itself in relationships between individuals, groups of people, within states and between countries. In these plays, those relationships are complicated by both sides' understanding of gender. This is further complicated by the fact that female as well as male characters may collude in the construction of genders which cause particular problems for women. Misogyny is a powerful force, and frequently the female characters discussed have internalised the patriarchal attitudes of their societies to such an extent that they become part of the gendering process which constricts them. The societies depicted within these plays attribute both strengths and weaknesses to their notion of the female gender. It is not only the attribution of weakness - sexual infidelity, shrewishness, physical passivity - but also of strength - transcendent sexuality, wit and assertiveness - which has a significant effect on these characters.

Language is both a vehicle of power and also a dangerous medium for female characters. Witty heroines like Beatrice speak in a world where misogynistic language and concepts are rife. An intense suspicion and expectation of female infidelity permeates the play worlds through bawdy and innuendo, constructing an idea of women as the inevitable cause of cuckoldry, and as shrews with wicked tongues. Both men and women talk disparagingly about women; both collude in the construction of gender. Because these remarks are humorous, they are powerful. But they are not a joke.

Women are killed by language which plays upon stereotypical expectations of gender. Desdemona is murdered by Iago's lies as well as Othello's hands. This is possible because her words can be misinterpreted and miscommunicated to provide supposed evidence of her sexual infidelity, which, since she is female, is already expected. 'Katherine the curst' is not the shrew that she is described as being. Petruccio severs the connection between words and meaning - but Kate does not profit by his discovery. Her most powerful linguistic legacy is the hollow echo of her final speech. Beatrice is witty. But Claudio almost slaughters the modestly silent Hero with slander, and it is the linguistic ineptitude of Dogberry and Verges which save her. Beatrice cannot kill Claudio with words. Her cousin cannot fully clear her name, but is resurrected as *another* Hero while her accusers are exonerated. Beatrice is finally silenced by happiness.

There are, however, alternative ways of speaking, and women can command language. Beatrice dominates the post-war world with her wit, which is sharper than Messina finds comfortable. Portia wins the court case that no male advocate could plead; Joan convinces Burgundy to return to the French side; Juliet inverts the usual metaphors and sees Romeo as a rose; Emilia and Paulina speak the truth which no other characters perceive; Margaret curses and creates a community of women who haunt Richard, out-manceuvre his sophistry and live to see the day when the dog is dead. Women are subject to, participants in and challengers of language as the communication of patriarchy. These characters speak powerfully to us of the problems and potential of words for women.

Male disguise both accentuates and denies the existence of an essential, female nature. It does not bestow power but provides the opportunity for female characters to experience a different set of gendered expectations of their behaviour, although only within the context of romantic love, where a return to 'normality' is inevitable in the happy conclusion of marriage. Temporarily borrowed breeches give Portia the opportunity to use her natural intelligence and

assertiveness, which otherwise would have remained circumscribed by the walls of Belmont and the conditions of her father's will. They also allow her to prove that her love for Bassanio is stronger than his bond with Antonio - although only by pitting her male against her female self. The original presence of the boy actor divides contemporary and modern interpretations of the roles. Gender is simultaneously shown as fixed and as fluid. Rosalind's gender is accentuated by her attire as she swoons, weeps and sighs. But she also hovers between two sexual identities as the object of both homo- and hetero-erotic desire, particularly once she has returned to female dress. Viola cannot live up to the identity she assumes. Her supposedly innate female fear of physical violence is accentuated by the fact that she is afraid to fight even Andrew Aguecheek. Disguise compounds her romantic problems as love for Orsino would apparently violate both sexual and hierarchical divisions, and she is instantly attractive to another woman. Her twin resolves the dilemma - but only for Olivia. For Antonio there is no remedy for being in love with the 'wrong' sex.

Weak men need strong women. Male passivity causes social and romantic problems for the play worlds. Women have the power to redress the balance. Female characters are capable of waging war and leading armies. But they cannot control the reactions of the men for whom and with whom they fight. It is not usual for women to take up arms. Because they have not been responsible for the macrocosm in which war has broken out, they find it hard to defend the microcosm even of their families. For a surprisingly long time, Joan survives not only the onslaught of her English opponents but also the expectations of the contemporary English audience. Eventually her physical prowess is proved to be the result of a 'typical' female alliance with the supernatural.

Men's actions are equally gendered. Henry's passivity points to the flaw in a world where to be a good man is to be a bad king. John Talbot's honourable death proves that his mother was no whore. The male line is legitimate, if self-

destructive. Margaret battles on despite Henry and without Suffolk. But her hopes of securing the succession for her son are dashed as she too becomes part of the world where children pay for the sins of their fathers, and, perhaps, the assertiveness of their mothers. Margaret can never know whether she would have been able to achieve more by doing nothing or whether, like the other women of *Richard III*, passivity would also have rendered her still without husband, son or kingdom to define her as wife, mother or queen.

Helen is a romantic heroine and therefore should be wooed. She is determined to enjoy the loss of her virginity, though this radical notion confines itself to the legitimate sphere of marriage and pregnancy. The powers of healing Helen inherits from her father secure the King's favour, without which Helen could not have forced Bertram to marry her. She can, however, subvert his sexual machinations by using sex as a trick. Bertram finally has no choice but to submit: he must, however grudgingly, play the part of husband and father. Juliet has not internalised the values of Verona. She does not intend to challenge her father or family. Indeed she is distressed when she cannot capitulate to Capulet's demands that she marry Paris. The extent of her action is to marry Romeo and to kill herself. But her mind is free. She knows that the nurse, her parents, the friar and Verona are wrong in their expectations of what it is to be a man or woman. She cannot escape the consequences of the misogyny and violence which dominates her society, but she does not feel obliged to agree with it. Romeo and Capulet are far more constricted by the demands of gender than Juliet, because they believe them. Romeo finds he can be neither the romantic hero nor the man of action he desires. Capulet wants to be a liberal and loving father, but the death of his kinsman makes him believe he must be the epitome of a patriarchal tyrant instead. This change has direct implications for his wife and the nurse, who are dependent on him for their survival, as he menacingly makes clear. Juliet finally finds integrity in the self-division of her secret marriage, even although it also means she must decide to die.

Female (feminine) sexuality is one of the most highly mediated constructions of gender, whose significance permeates all the other discussions in this thesis. The play worlds both challenge and endorse the idea that female value lies in desirability. Often, male characters react not to individual women, but to a mythologised idea of feminine sexuality over which female characters have little control. When they fail to live up to stereotypes, or indeed fulfil them *par excellence*, their culture is confused. Vienna cannot cope with Isabella, who not only believes, but lives, according to an ideal version of female chastity. Angelo recognises the paradox that a virginal woman attracts depraved attentions, but he cannot control his reaction to Isabella. Real male sexual incontinence, rather than mythologised female sexual infidelity, is a cause of evil. Too many critics think that Isabella should sleep with Angelo. They forget that even if she did, he has determined to execute her brother. A sexuality which pandered to the basest male instincts would solve nothing here.

Cressida discovers this for herself. She, like Isabella, believes patriarchal propaganda about sexual relationships, but she believes the opposite version. Suspecting that men can only value virginity pursued, not possessed, she cannot believe Troilus loves her. Because Cressida does not see beyond the stereotypes of gender, and of her own name, which dooms her as the model of female inconstancy, she decides instead to fulfil them. Male characters and critics alike see Cleopatra as transcending gender and yet also as the epitome of female sexuality, while she does not believe that her power over Antony is absolute, as indeed it is not. Wrongly perceived to be culpable for defeat at Actium - even by feminist critics - she is supposed by male characters to be sexually dominant, a destroyer of men. Yet she does nothing but love and mythologise Antony. She is jealous of rivals who are conspicuously sexually unattractive. Her vulnerability is carefully constructed to ensure that she seems to personify all females in one, without appearing overbearing. Cleopatra's greatest rival is Caesar. It is largely Antony's feelings of inadequacy compared with this man which drive him back to

Egypt, just as it is the inevitable approaching defeat by other, younger men, that ensures Cleopatra can finally call Antony 'husband'. Enobarbus most perceptively describes Cleopatra's effect. He is also a misogynist. But his narrow conception of male, as well as female, gender tragically rebounds on himself. He feels obliged to leave Antony, whom he loves, for a more successful soldier. Finally unable to deny his love, he dies alone in a ditch. Men are also victims of gender.

\* \* \* \* \*

Throughout these plays, contradictory versions of 'woman' and women are simultaneously constructed. Female characters possess power, use power, and are seen to be powerful. But the potency of their words, dress, actions and sexuality are all affected by expectations of the female (that is, feminine) gender. Witty women speak out in a patriarchal context, through a highly-charged medium which is also the vehicle for misogyny. Silent women are equally vulnerable to misinterpretation. Words can kill. But equally, truth counteracts false accusations, and women speak the truth. A change of clothes can provide both a liberation from, and confirmation of, gender identities. Women may assert themselves, although they cannot escape the consequences of male characters' perceptions of their actions. Nevertheless, it is not female activity, but male reaction to it, which 'emasculates' men. Most of all, the concept of female sexuality is double-edged, a balancing act between virginity and whoredom. Yet love and sexuality are also celebrated. In all genres, men and women achieve some version of equality which gives their love depth, even if the moment is fleeting. Female characters are therefore most often seen as powerful in the context of romantic love, where also they are fated either to happy silence or guiltless death.

The many and varied versions of female power discussed in this thesis point to two related conclusions: that the potency of power is affected by the gender of its possessor, and that gender is a cultural construct which has especially significant implications for female characters. The strengths, as well as the weaknesses, attributed to female characters are part of the construction of gender. The positive desire to endorse female power and find powerful women can collude in the construction of gender. A feminist approach in this thesis has given me the tools to strive for objectivity, while recognising that I am implicated in what I perceive. At times I have had an equal struggle with feminist criticism as with patriarchal concepts. At its best, feminism points out the problems of political correctness, whether of patriarchy or of other ideologies, including its own. It does not necessarily escape them. But I am undoubtedly an advocate of the continuing place of feminist studies within Shakespearean criticism, because the issues discussed here are relevant to the real lives of women and (since gender affects both sexes) men. By examining the construction of female gender and power within Shakespearean drama I have clarified my perceptions of the twentieth as well as the sixteenth century, and of the link between the play worlds and reality. This connection is direct: if we understand *how* misogyny works in literature we may be able to change *why* it works in life.

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