

I give permission for public access to my thesis and for any copying to be done at the direction of the archives librarian and/or the College librarian.

---

Laura Tallon    May 1, 2009

Silencing Sirens: Love, Sexuality, Marriage  
and Women's Voices in Shakespeare

Laura Tallon

Submitted for Honors at  
Mount Holyoke College  
English Department  
Advisor: Peter Berek  
May 1, 2009

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Even after writing over a hundred pages, I am having a difficult time finding adequate words to express the depth of my gratitude for my advisor, Professor Peter Berek. Without his unflagging enthusiasm, insightful guidance, meticulous editing, and genuine support, this thesis would never have been possible. I have learned so much from him, not only this year, but over the past four years; he has been an incredible Professor, mentor and friend to me in times of both tranquility and great stress. I am now and will forever be deeply grateful.

I would also like to thank my readers, Professors Nancy Campbell and Amy Martin for their time, attention, and support of my work. Although Printmaking and Studio Art may appear unrelated to English, my classes with Professor Campbell have greatly enhanced my ability to think about imagery and visual elements in literary texts, including Shakespeare.

I have to thank my parents whose love and support has always motivated me. They often had to listen to me talk in circles, and I always better organized and clarified my ideas by talking to them about them. Finally, I would like to thank my Mount Holyoke friends, especially Tamar, Celine, Clarity, and Ingrid- I know that someday soon we will look back on our late nights in the “circle room” with fondness and nostalgia.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE	
Economic Language and Female Sexuality in <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> .....	5
CHAPTER TWO	
Gender, Anxiety, and Marriage in <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> .....	21
CHAPTER THREE	
Lust and Marriage in <i>Measure for Measure</i> .....	43
CHAPTER FOUR	
Sexuality: Appetite, Voice, and Death in <i>Othello</i> .....	61
CHAPTER FIVE	
Holding Hands: Friendship, Jealousy, and Redemption in <i>The Winter's Tale</i> .....	78
WORKS CITED.....	99

## INTRODUCTION

I decided to combine my interests in gender and in Shakespeare by exploring Shakespeare's depictions of love, sexuality and marriage. The possible ways to approach these issues in Shakespeare's work are vast, and an enormous amount has already been done, some of which has guided me through the mires of his often conflicting depictions of gender dynamics, romance, and jealousy. Out of all of the critics that I have read, I am most indebted to Carol Thomas Neely, who in *Broken Nuptials* explains that "Marriage is the social context that centrally defines the female characters in Shakespeare's plays; with few exceptions their conflicts, crises, and character development occur in connection with wooing, wedding, and marriage. Their roles and status are determined by their place in the paradigm of marriage – maiden/wife/widow – which likewise governed the lives of Renaissance women."<sup>1</sup>

After reading Neely's work on courtship and marriage, especially on its effects upon female characters, I chose to focus my own project on the way that the voice or articulate ability of female characters metaphorically stands for their sexuality, and the way that that they become increasingly less vocal as their marital statuses shift from "maiden" to "wife." Male characters often express anxiety about female sexuality, which they see as as a wild and corrupting force. Often, they exert control over female voice (whether Benedick flirtatiously and

---

<sup>1</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 2.

effectually “stop[s]” Beatrice’s “mouth”<sup>2</sup> or Othello strangles the voice and life out of Desdemona) as an attempt to exert control over their sexuality.

I began by looking at the various ways that the sonnets portray love, and although I have not included a section on the sonnets in my thesis, these poems greatly influenced the way in which I have approached the plays: the heightened and often volatile emotions of the sonnets, including the intense desire to have children, the doting of one man for another, the yearning and disgust connected to lust, and the fear of female sexuality as pernicious, continued to stand out to me as major issues in the plays.

I’ve chosen five plays, and I follow the same major line of interest in sexuality, marriage, and female voice, although with slightly different focuses in each. In *The Merchant of Venice* the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio reminds me of the sonnet speaker and the fair youth; despite the love and dedication that exists between them, the pressure for heterosexual marriage and reproductive responsibility supersedes their relationship. Two levels exist simultaneously and in contrast: the superficial plot tidiness of the final marriages, and the more implicitly negative message of unhappiness with marriage through imagery and language.

*Measure for Measure* explodes issues of the gender dynamics of sexuality and marriage in an extreme, strange, ridiculous and ultimately complex depiction

---

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 5.4.96.

of the dangers of lust for both sexes. Marriage acts mostly as a legitimization of lust and a protection against the birth of illegitimate children. When the Duke exclaims to Mariana, “Why, you are nothing then; neither maid, widow, nor wife!” (5.1.176), he perfectly illustrates Neely's point that female characters are primarily defined by their marital status in Shakespeare's plays. Consequently, their sexuality becomes a defining characteristic of their identities, and the power of their voices wanes with the actualization of their marriages.

Humorously in *Much Ado About Nothing* and tragically in *Othello*, Shakespeare explores the same underlying issues: male anxiety about female sexuality (Claudio and Othello), the love, faith and loyalty between female characters (Beatrice/Hero, Emilia/Desdemona), and the demand for the woman's death (illusory or real) in order to enable male characters to regain trust and an idealization of female sexuality. While *Much Ado* uses comedy extensively in its ubiquitous bawdy puns, cuckoldry jokes, and flirtatious bantering to confront the apprehensions of both genders surrounding sexuality, marriage, and the loss of same-sex bonds, *Othello* uses the tragic deaths of Othello, Desdemona and Emilia to reveal the dangers of male jealousy.

Finally, *The Winter's Tale* continues all of the above issues and conflicts, but it introduces a new and remarkably important element in its emphasis on the redemptive power of children. In what almost seems to be a combination of *Much Ado* and *Othello*, Hermione dies (because of Leontes' irrationally jealous

tirade), but she also comes back to life- with her resurrection comes new hope for the reconciliation and change possible in relationships. Female friendship remains important throughout these plays, but attains an especially impressive level of power and sincerity in the character of Paulina. Reproduction becomes more than the social responsibility of the procreation sonnets and *The Merchant of Venice* or the burden to enforce marriage in *Measure for Measure*. In *The Winter's Tale*, children are the key that “physics the subject, makes old hearts fresh” (1.1.33-34), healing the damage of their parents’ generation.

Without claiming to make a developmental argument, I write about the plays in chronological order, referring and connecting them to each other often. I hope that by making connections between these plays, while incorporating the work of some important critics, I can enhance the reader’s understanding of Shakespeare’s many compelling and complex depictions of female voice, gender, friendship, sexuality and marriage.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### **Economic Language and Female Sexuality in *The Merchant of Venice***

*The Merchant of Venice* reveals Shakespeare, relatively early in his career, struggling with issues of gender and sexuality similar to those in the sonnets. Immersing the reader in a world in which economics has replaced religion as the only way to measure humanity's worth, Shakespeare employs economic language and imagery as a way to explore the complicated issues of gender and sexuality. Sometimes the “worth” of a woman praises her virtue and reproductive potential, while in other instances objectifying language works to ease male anxiety about female sexuality. Despite attempts to criticize excessive materiality through the depiction of Shylock and the casket game, the language throughout the play is interwoven with economic imagery, especially in relation to love and sexuality. In spite of male characters' attempts to objectify and control women through language, the women work to find agency within the economically regulated system. Portia and Nerissa reverse this system back onto their husbands, using rings to symbolize their own female sexuality and to assert a female power, even if it is significantly limited in practice and undercut through humor.

The character of Shylock functions as the embodiment of the negative attributes of excessive materiality, and as a distinct antithesis to more generous characters like Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia. He is portrayed as selfish and

inhumane for the way in which he values money and possessions over people. After Shylock tells a parable about Jacob and lambs, Antonio asks “is your gold and silver ewes and rams?” and Shylock replies, “I cannot tell. I make it breed as fast.”<sup>1</sup> Using the metaphor of breeding, Shylock gives money a life of its own; he elevates the material to the natural act of reproduction in a disturbingly distorted way. In the parable, Jacob interferes in nature's course by controlling the lambs so that he can profit from their procreation, a ploy which Shylock believes offers a Biblical rationalization for his own behavior. However, Shylock's metaphor twists the natural act of breeding, and manipulates it to stand for monetary gain, thus grossly distorting the natural into the superficial and material.

Antonio sees Shylock as corrupted and says “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose . . . like a villain with a smiling cheek, / A goodly apple rotten at the heart. / O, what goodly outside falsehood hath!” (1.3.94-98). Antonio identifies the danger in a person who appears good, but is actually sinful and devious internally. The image of the apple recalls the fruit of knowledge, something that is immensely tempting but hides the potential to drag humanity into transgression and even damnation. “Rotten at the heart” stresses that Shylock’s humanity has been corrupted: his capacity for love has been corroded by greed.

Shylock's attitude is soon further contrasted with Antonio's, who asks, “for

---

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1.3.91-92. Future references will appear in my text.

when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?" (1.3.148-149), a statement which returns to the metaphor of breeding, now implying that for Antonio it is unnatural or wrong to use money to make more money. When setting the terms for their agreement, Shylock warns that if Antonio does not pay him back on time, he will claim "an equal pound / Of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me" (1.3.145-147). With the verbs to "take" and "please" and the alliterative description of "fair flesh," this threat takes on a potentially sexual tone. Shylock's translation of money into flesh is meant to be appalling, especially when he enthusiastically tries to transact it later.

When Shylock learns that Jessica has run off with Lorenzo and some of his money, he laments, "My ducats and my daughter!" (2.8.17) and rages, "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" (3.1.30). His repeated use of the word "flesh" (before with the threat to Antonio) carries a primitive, degraded connotation. There is a real sensory weight to "flesh" that its synonyms lack, and this solid flesh image works to present Shylock's claim over it as more shocking or disturbing than the other characters' uses of language for the body.

Salerio asks Shylock what good Antonio's flesh would be to him, and Shylock replies, "To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else it will feed my revenge" (3.1.45-46). Like his previous metaphor of breeding, this image of fish-bait again distorts nature to reveal the corruption of materiality. By feeding human flesh to a fish, Shylock would be interfering in and thoroughly disturbing the natural hierarchy (fish eat worms, humans eat fish, etc). This degradation of the

human body is meant to reveal Shylock's grotesque lack of respect for human nature and morality resulting from his intense greed.

Further emphasizing his priorities of possessions over people, Shylock says, "I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear!" (3.1.75). Like many of Shakespeare's other male characters, Shylock finds the fantasy of a statuesque or corpse-like woman appealing because of the utter control it would allow. Although the situation here is of a father controlling his daughter, as opposed to a husband and his wife, his desire is intense to render cold and deadened what he perceives as the stressfully rampant nature of female sexuality. This fantasy of her dead body adjourned with jewels reveals Shylock's coping mechanism; he translates uncontrollable femininity into the language of money in which he is generally so powerful and successful.

However, despite the play's abhorrence with Shylock's claim of ownership and control over human flesh, the male characters of the play use similar (albeit more pleasantly worded) objectifying language to refer to the women that they desire. Shylock demonstrates an extreme example of the masculine propensity to objectify and evaluate people through economic terms and logic, but other male characters exhibit the same language in less obvious but equally as disturbing ways, especially when they talk about women.

For instance, when discussing love, Graziano claims "Who riseth from a feast / With that keen appetite that he sits down?" and "All things that are / Are more with spirit chased than enjoyed" (2.6.8-13). Using the metaphor of a feast

for sexuality, his statement encapsulates the attitudes and experiences of other characters for whom lustful pursuit is much more exciting than post-consummation stasis. Apparently “the appetite” for sex diminishes after it has finally been attained. While men are in the pursuing stage, they are able to idealize female sexuality as chaste, pure and consequently safe. After, however, the balance of power changes because men are suddenly susceptible to the corrupting and shameful nature of sex. Like in Sonnet 129, “Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action; and till action, lust” (1-2), Graziano expresses a male “appetite” or “lust” that physical consummation can never satisfy.

Male anxiety toward female sexuality is manifested through male characters' attempts to control the female body through the use of material metaphors. For example, Portia's dead father still manages to control access to her body through a test in which suitors must choose from three caskets of gold, silver, and lead, and the first man to choose correctly gains permission to marry her. This casket test exhibits male control over female sexuality through the use of representational material objects, as well as a moral lesson against excessive materiality (because the correct choice turns out to be lead). The first suitor, Morocco, falsely chooses the gold casket because he reasons, “Never so rich a gem / Was set in worse than gold” (2.7.54-55). Comparing Portia to a jewel, he assumes that her highly virtuous character transfers over into the highest valued metal, but this assumption is a trap set up by her father. Like Shylock, Morocco

equates human worth and monetary value, and he is reprimanded for it. The message in his chosen casket chides, “All that glisters is not gold . . . Gilded tombs do worms infold” (2.8.65-68). The repeated message that beautiful things often hide corrupt insides is brought to a new and surprisingly grotesque level with this image of golden tombs infested with worms- perhaps also meant to be a stark reminder of human mortality as an incentive to live virtuously.

Shylock claims ownership and control over Antonio's body quite literally when he confronts the Duke, “The pound of flesh which I demand of him / Is dearly bought. 'Tis mine, and I will have it” (4.1.98-99). Antonio seems to internalize his loss of wealth into a lessening of his own worth. He tells Bassanio, “I am a tainted wether of the flock / Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground; and so let me” (4.1.113-115). The reference to the “wether” harkens back to the parable of the lambs, as Antonio now sees himself becoming Shylock's property. By definition a “wether” is a castrated ram, a metaphor which ties Antonio's lowered status to sexual impotence. Although perceived ownership over a man's body is rare, it has the same implication of sexual control as it does for women. Perhaps the unnatural aspect of a man's body being treated like a possession renders the male to feel impotent, whereas women are constantly treated like possessions and their fertility is often what is sought to be controlled. In a surprising turn from Antonio's earlier criticism of Shylock as “A goodly apple rotten at the heart” (1.3.97), Antonio now compares himself to ripened “fruit,” thus connecting negative qualities to natural decay, and

emphasizing the intensity of his current self-loathing. All that initially seems to have changed for Antonio is his monetary status and his consequential vulnerability to Shylock, and yet his loss of wealth drastically reduces his estimation of his self-worth and virility.

Another reading of Antonio's suddenly lowered opinion of himself relates his love for Bassanio as the primary factor of turning him into a “tainted wether” (4.1.113). The word “tainted” adds a complicated element to the statement because it implies a moral corruption beyond a simple material loss. The pathos of his genuine willingness to sacrifice his own life in Bassanio's place reveals a compelling depth of love. Antonio has a love for Bassanio comparable to the male bond between the sonnet speaker and his male friend, that is both intensely powerful, but also potentially corruptive or “tainted.”

The conversation between the two men in the moment before they assume Shylock will kill Antonio reveals a love between them that is separate from and even superior to the relationship between Bassanio and his new wife, Portia. Antonio bids Bassanio, “Commend me to your honourable wife. / Tell her the process of Antonio's end. / Say how I loved you. Speak me fair in death . . . bid her be the judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love” (4.1.268-272). His touching willingness “with all [his] heart” (4.1.276) to die for Bassanio connotes a union deeper than friendship, a sentiment Bassanio returns, proclaiming, “I am married to a wife . . . But life itself, with my wife, and all the world / Are not esteemed above thy life. / I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all / Here to this

devil, to deliver you” (4.1.277-282). Not only would Antonio die for Bassanio, but Bassanio would sacrifice his wife, his life, and the “world” in order to save Antonio. This loving loyalty harkens back to the complex emotional entanglement of the speaker and the youth in the sonnets. Whether their bond is sexual or erotic is unclear, but the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio is certainly a loving one that exhibits more genuine dignity and respect than does any other relationship in the play.

Unlike the intensity of the love between Antonio and Bassanio, the tangled exchange between Portia and Bassanio before the final casket scene takes on possessive and religious language that reveals the hidden potential danger in their imminent sexual union. Portia recognizes a danger in her love for Bassanio, which could “make me wish a sin” (3.2.13), and she defensively assumes the role of his priest: Bassanio says, “Promise me life and I’ll confess the truth” and she responds, “Well then, confess and live” (3.2.33-34). As a chaste figure, Portia’s power over Bassanio is elevated to a powerful position because her sexual influence over him is so immense that it could lead either to sin and death, or to virtue and eternal life. In stark juxtaposition to the merciful priest, Bassanio then compares her to his torturer: “O happy torment, when my torturer / Doth teach me answers for deliverance!” (3.2.37-38). Perhaps this oxymoronic “happy torment” is lust or sexual desire, and he expects her to guide him in the direction of the ideal and productive form of love in procreation, and away from the torturous path of hellish carnal lust. Like the sonnet speaker, Bassanio sees the power of

temptation and damnation wholly in the hands of the woman; the male is only the potential vulnerable victim without any clear ability to resist female sexuality's corrupting influence.

Again returning to the tempting yet false allure of outward beauty, Bassanio says, "So may the outward shows be least themselves / The world is still deceived with ornament" (3.2.73-74) and "Look on beauty / And you shall see 'tis purchased by the weight / Which therein works a miracle in nature / Making them lightest that wear most of it" (3.2.88-91). Like the sonnet speaker, Bassanio recognizes the false paradoxical "ornament" of beauty that so often leads men into transgression, but he also adds a more economic spin to the metaphors with the word "purchased." The juxtaposition of "purchased" and "nature" reveals the relationship of the material world as a corrupting force on the natural. He identifies examples of these kinds of poisonous women, who with "snaky golden locks" make "wanton gambols with the wind" (3.2.92-93). The adjective "snaky" compares these women to Eve with their ability to tempt men into sin. It also may contain an allusion to Medusa, another fatal woman whose appearance would turn any onlooker to stone. The comparison to Medusa warns that even looking at and desiring these deceitful women could be extremely dangerous for the men enthralled.

The women in the play have to deal with both an economically male-dominated reality and language, but some of them manage to manipulate the terminology, and consequently the system to find their own senses of authority,

however limited. Even within the male-regulated system of the casket test, Portia finds some autonomy by subtly influencing Bassanio's choice: she has one of her train sing, "Tell me where is fancy bred / Or in the heart, or in the head?" (3.2.63-64). Considering that the correct choice, "lead," rhymes with "bred" and "head," this semantic equivalence may be Portia's way of ensuring that the man she desires chooses the correct casket. She abides by the rules of the male-conceived game, but at the same time she manipulates the system to influence an outcome in her favor.

Portia transfers herself and her possessions to Bassanio, saying, "Myself and what is mine to you and yours / Is now converted" (3.2.167), but she also finds some minor sexual freedom within this male-imposed language of economics that generally works to regulate and control women. For example, she tells Bassanio, "Beshrew your eyes, / They have o'erlooked me and divided me. / One half of me is yours, the other half yours-- / Mine own, I would say, but if mine, then yours, / And so all yours" (3.2.14-18). She ultimately has no control over who she will marry, but she pledges herself to Bassanio even before he undergoes the test. Her only option is to be transferred like property from her father to a husband, but she is vocal about suitors, making her preferences heard even if they are irrelevant. In this speech, she objectifies and divides herself, willfully giving herself over to a man that she will eventually be given over to no matter what. By vocalizing the decision herself, she takes on a reassuring sense of power, however illusory.

She continues in a similar dialogue after Bassanio has chosen the correct casket, “for you / I would be trebled twenty times myself / A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich / That only to stand high in your account” (3.2.152-155). Even though she is far wealthier than he, and he is profiting much through his marriage to her, she acts as though his desire for her is unconnected to money. She desires to increase her human worth for him, but she also reveals an ambition in her own character to strive for the highest standards. In spite of the previous statement that seems to elevate Bassanio over herself, she then gives him money to bail out Antonio and says, “Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear” (3.2.312). Acknowledging that she has “bought” him, Portia claims an economic power usually reserved for men, and she stresses her choice to “love” him instead of allowing wifely devotion to be imposed upon her as a natural duty.

Portia gains agency and power by dressing up as a man: she defends and saves Antonio when no one else can, even in spite of her husband's harsh claim that he would forfeit her life to save his friend (4.1.280). Shylock swears, “There is no power in the tongue of man / To alter me” (4.1.236-237), because it is only a woman in disguise who can accomplish such a clever feat. Despite her intellectual power demonstrated in her successful freeing of Antonio, the necessity of her male guise denies this sense of power to women as themselves - women can only achieve influence and independence by pretending to be men. Regardless of her garb, Portia becomes an influential judge, and she soon turns from evaluating Shylock to her own husband. Disguised, she asks her husband for the ring she had

given him, which he relinquishes (not knowing her true identity) despite previous fervent oaths that he would never part from it.

Portia and Nerissa give their husbands rings that come to stand for their sexuality. Even though Portia has no choice over who she will marry, by giving Bassanio the ring, representative of her fidelity, she claims a sense of agency and control over her own sexuality, even if it is extremely limited. When Bassanio tells her that he has given away the ring, she responds, “Even so void is your false heart of truth. / By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed / Until I see the ring” (5.1.187-189). Even though she has the ring, and soon reveals it, she forces her husband to undergo this trial, threatening him with infidelity in order to insist upon her control over her own sexuality. She holds her sexuality as something sacred by the reference to “heaven” as well as her further comments stressing the “virtue” (5.1.198) of the ring. She tells him that he would be “honour[ed] to contain the ring” (5.1.200). This bold assertion contradicts the corrupting nature of female sexuality so often depicted in the sonnets, instead elevating female sexuality as a channel for men to attain honor and virtue.

She pushes this lesson even further, insisting that the doctor now “hath got the jewel that I loved” and, “I'll not deny him anything I have, / No, not my body, nor my husband's bed” (5.1.223-227). Male characters in Shakespeare often speak of women as jewels or possessions that they have ownership and control over, but here Portia reclaims her sexuality in the same language by giving a sexual meaning to the “jewel” or “ring” herself. Although at first it seems that her only

power is to transfer her sexuality from one man to another (depending on who is in possession of the ring), the fact that she is the secret owner of the ring brings an entirely new and compelling dimension into the scene: Portia demands a right to ownership of her sexuality. This rebellious claim is perhaps lessened by the fact that she only gains it if for some reason her husband fails or proves untrue, but the claim is still strong and she holds it up as a high moral standard saying, “Now by mine honour, which is yet mine own, / I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow” (5.1.231-232).

The sexual dimensions of the rings are further complicated by subtle references to potential pregnancy as a result of the ownership of a “ring.” Bassanio tells Portia that if she could “conceive for what I gave the ring” she would “abate the strength of” her “displeasure” (5.1.194-197). In other words, he assumes that pregnancy would make her happy. Antonio tries to explain, “I once did lend my body for his wealth / Which, but for him that had your husband's ring / Had quite miscarried” (5.1.248-250). Like the implied corruption associated with Shylock's control over Antonio's “flesh,” Antonio's claimed connection here between his own “body” and someone else's “wealth” has sexual implications resulting in a “miscarriage.” The miscarriage perhaps serves as a sign of the aberration from the natural that results from this male to male love and potential sexuality. Because a sexual relationship between men could never result in procreation (the only positive outcome of sexuality as expressed in the sonnets), their relationship is linked to the distorted image of a “miscarriage.”

Portia and Nerissa reveal the truth to their husbands that they are the “male” owners of the rings, and that they have really only slept with themselves, but this short punishment of their husbands is impressively done, especially since it is conducted in the language that men generally impose on women. At the same time, the joking tone of the speech diminishes Portia's power, and the repetition of “ring” over a dozen times forcefully reminds the audience of Portia's true gender, despite her cross-dressing, and also carries an imposed jocular and demeaning reminder of her proper gender and place.

Even though Portia seems to believe that she has taught Bassanio a lesson and has finally gained a truer promise of fidelity, Antonio is the one who returns the ring to Bassanio, saying, “Here, Lord Bassanio, swear to keep this ring” (5.1.255). Despite the apparent resolution between the married couple, the question arises: who is Bassanio actually swearing his love to as he accepts Portia's ring from Antonio's hands? This moment of separation between the men, as Bassanio reaffirms his marital vows to Portia, holds a melancholic undertone, especially for Antonio.

The final act of the play also depicts another relationship, between Lorenzo and Jessica, who sitting under a moonlit night profess their love to one another. Despite the apparently loving and happy relationship shown between the couple, they reference a catalogue of allusions of disastrously failed lovers: “Troilus,” “Cressid,” “Thisbe,” and “Dido,” unfortunates whom they then equate to themselves (5.1). This tension between their current happiness and the negative

connotations of their allusions carries an ominous undermining of their future prospects together. C. L. Barber interprets this scene as purely blissful: “Lorenzo is showing Jessica the graciousness of the Christian world into which he has brought her; and it is as richly golden as it is musical! Jessica is already at ease in it, to the point of being able to recall the pains of famous lovers with equanimity, rally her lover on his vows.”<sup>2</sup> While Barber acknowledges the “pains” of the lovers, he chooses not to interpret Shakespeare's decision to use all these lovers as examples of relationships ending in death or tragedy, and consequently simplifies a more complicated and potentially negative aspect of the scene that may be intimating the inevitable tragic future of this currently contented couple.

On the surface, the end of *The Merchant of Venice* depicts three happy couples on the eve of sexual consummation and marital bliss. However, between previous oaths of the elevation of love between men over marital love, allusions to miserably failed classical couples, and the necessity of women to return to their proper gendered places, the play's true feelings about love, relationships, and sexuality appear much more complicated and conflicting. In the sonnets, the male sonnet speaker professes a real love and affection for the fair youth, while at the same time recognizing, even enforcing, the necessity for heterosexual marriage and procreation. More or less the same seems to occur here: despite the undeniably intense love between Antonio and Bassanio, the impulsion for marriage (and hints for reproduction alluded to within the conversation of the

---

<sup>2</sup> C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 188.

ring) is ultimately asserted. In a similar way, the dangerous and often disastrous effects of love that are so explicitly depicted in the “dark lady” sonnets are subtly referenced to in Graziano's equation of love to a feast, and in Lorenzo's and Jessica's conversation. In the end, Shakespeare leaves the audience with multiple dimensions of love and sexuality by giving a choice between the surface happy ending, and the more complicated and conflicted undercurrents.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### **Gender, Anxiety, and Marriage in *Much Ado About Nothing***

*Much Ado About Nothing* occupies an important space within my project because it uses comedy to express and temporarily release the underlying anxieties of both genders toward the complicated issues surrounding romance, sexuality, and marriage. This play is often similar to other comedies like *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, but the unsettling issues embedded underneath its comedic plot arch also foreshadow the tragic future narrative of *Othello*. While *Measure for Measure* dramatizes the dangers of fornication through extreme and overly exaggerated presentations of harsh legal and moral judgments on lust, *Much Ado About Nothing* makes light of the same issues through the ever present cuckoldry jokes. At the same time, the plot parallels between *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello* reveal connections between the comic and tragic exploration of the same underlying issues: male anxiety about female sexuality (Claudio and Othello), the love, faith and loyalty between female characters (Beatrice/Hero, Emilia/Desdemona), and the necessity of female death (illusory or real) in order to regain masculine trust and enable re-idealization of female sexuality. Using humor extensively, but especially in the cuckoldry jokes, and in female death, both literally and figuratively or sexually, *Much Ado About Nothing* confronts major dramatic issues of love and sexuality in a humorously masked manner that when unmasked reveals deeper and often contradicting ideas

about love, sex, gender, and marriage.

*Much Ado About Nothing* utilizes humor as the primary mode of romantic and sexual expression even more intensely than other comedies because of its ubiquitous bawdy puns, cuckoldry allusions, and flirtatious bantering. On one level, the humor can be seen as a much needed release for underlying anxieties, but the pervasiveness of the anxieties, however humorously expressed, also creates a subtle tension and irreconcilable uneasiness in regard to the nature of the constant power struggle between the sexes, taking place in the process of courtship and marriage. C. L. Barber mentions that “In terms of Freud's analysis of wit, the energy normally occupied in maintaining inhibition is freed for celebration,”<sup>1</sup> when explaining the festive atmosphere of Shakespeare's plays. Just as “The holidays in actual observance were built around the enjoyment of the vital pleasure of moments when nature and society are hospitable to life,” so Shakespeare's comedies, including *Much Ado About Nothing*, emphasize moments of heightened appreciation for the vibrant and entertaining elements of life. Although Barber seems to focus on the presence of actual festivals – specifically, “the customs of Easter Smacks and Hocktide abuse between the sexes”<sup>2</sup> alluded to in the verbal sparring between Beatrice and Benedick, the process of wooing and imminent marriage also seem to be a major element essential to creating the highly festive, and humor-filled atmosphere of this play.

Carol Thomas Neely extends C. L. Barber's introduction of the idea of

---

1 C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 7.

2 Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 6.

comic release by focusing on “broken nuptials” specifically. In relation to *Much Ado About Nothing*, she claims that “In the Beatrice/Benedick plot, the mutual mockery, double gulling, and Benedick's acceptance of Beatrice's command to 'Kill Claudio' function, as do the mockery, trickery, parody, and tamings of the festive comedies, to break down resistance and to release desire and affection.”<sup>3</sup> She discusses the importance of the two separate and vastly different pairings, Beatrice/Benedick and Hero/Claudio, as working together to ultimately “maintain an equilibrium between male control and female initiative, between male reform and female submission.”<sup>4</sup> While comedy releases some tension, the comedic banter between the sexes also constantly brings attention to the preoccupations of the characters, which never seem to be fully resolved. The Hero/Claudio pairing eventually succeeds in marrying, but the fundamental structure of their relationship never appears very strong: they barely ever speak, Claudio's mistrust and irrational anxiety is easily inflamed, they both court and marry while masked and with much outside interference and regulation by external patriarchal figures like Don Pedro, Leonato, and the Friar. On the other hand, the Beatrice/Benedick pairing is one of the most satisfying of Shakespeare's couples (at least in my opinion) because of their seemingly balanced intellect and power, but their relationship also demonstrates some major issues. For example, the methods of the indirect wooing of their friends removes agency from the couple in the

---

3 Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 40.

4 Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 40.

courtship process and utilizes the same unrealistic idealizations of love that lead to Claudio's grave mistakes. Also, the seeming appointment of absolute power to Benedick in the end and the corresponding waning of Beatrice's voice moves them from a courtship that seemed balanced in gendered power and voice into a marriage that requires female subordination to male authority.

Neely claims that the bawdy element of the play “expresses and mutes sexual anxieties; it turns them into a communal joke and provides comic release and relief” in two ways: “it manifests sexuality as the central component of marriage and emphasizes male power and female weakness.”<sup>5</sup> While I completely agree that the play simultaneously “expresses and mutes sexual anxieties,” I think that sexuality acts both as “the central component of marriage” and even more strongly as the central problematic component of marriage. Men are afraid to marry because of the potential public humiliation of being sexually betrayed by their wives, and women are afraid to marry because of the loss of power they see as inherently connected to sexual consummation. Paradoxically, men fear the sexual power of women, while women fear losing power because of sex.

The repetitive cuckoldry jokes in this play may be meant to humorously release male anxiety about female sexual infidelity, but their persistent and nearly incessant appearance in a way creates anxiety, or at least enforces the surprising depth of male paranoia, later tragically enacted in *Othello*. Benedick, initially

---

<sup>5</sup> Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 41.

representing the ultimate bachelor, continually verbalizes a rejection of committed love and a fear of sexuality that can lead men to be cuckolded or humiliated by women. He claims, “it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted. And I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.”<sup>6</sup> When his friend, Claudio, confides his love for Hero, they immediately objectify and quantify feminine beauty into the small and easily contained image of “a jewel” (1.1.146), which Benedick insists needs “a case to put it into” (1.1.147). Despite his attempt at comfort in the fantasy of female sexuality as easily contained within a “case,” Benedick still laments, “Is't come to this? In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion?” (1.1.160-161). As it later turns out, the world does not seem to have “one man” that can resist the pull of marriage, as even Benedick, the proclaimed bachelor himself, is eventually inducted into marital life. Marriage seems to be the inescapable social destination, a fate that can either be easily accepted through unrealistic idealization as seen in Claudio, or resisted through great skepticism as initially seen through Benedick. Ultimately, Benedick's more realistic, perhaps even cynical, view of marriage turns out to be the more profitable because despite the anesthetizing happiness of ignorant idealization that Claudio manifests, he at the same time sets himself up for inevitable disappointment, resulting in the near-tragic damage to Hero (and actual death of Desdemona later in *Othello*).

---

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1.1.101-103. Future references will appear in my text.

If Claudio has an overly idealized view of female sexuality as pure and chaste, Benedick exhibits the antithesis in his paranoid belief that women are by nature sexually wild and unfaithful. Aware of his own anxieties, Benedick snidely comments, “That a woman conceived me, I thank her. That she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks. But that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to none . . . I will live a bachelor” (1.1.195-201). A critic like Janet Adelman might be able to understand how Benedick transitions from a seemingly healthy appreciation of his mother to a deeply embedded distrust of all other women, but this passage, and the play in general, seems to offer no clues toward the source of Benedick's pervasive anxiety, it only testifies to its existence. He tells his friends that if he should ever be married they should “pluck off the bull's horns and set them in my forehead, and let me be vilely painted, in such great letters as they write 'Here you may see Benedick, the married man'” (1.1.216-219). Imagining marriage as deeply connected to public disgrace, Benedick seems incapable of believing in a possibility for a marriage devoid of humiliation.

For much of the play, Beatrice acts as the female counterpart to Benedick, expressing her own female objections to marriage. As with Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, her remarkable and impressively outspoken, witty, and even argumentative nature seems primarily possible because of her independent status as a maid without the imminent threat of having to submit to male authority in a

marriage. Making her more independent in both marital choice and speech, Beatrice lacks a father figure, as Leonato is only her uncle, and so, unlike many female characters, she is free from a patriarchal authority to coerce or control her marital potential. Anticipating a combination of the non-sexual elements of Isabella and Angelo, Beatrice thanks “God” and her “cold blood” for her absence of desire for marriage, and furtively rejects any desire to be wooed, saying, “I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me” (1.1.106-108). Perhaps Beatrice's rejection of love can be explained as a superficial defense against embarrassment (as she quickly embraces Benedick's love later), but her verbal authority in repeatedly stating a rejection of expected marital desires remains impressive.

In a similar, but markedly more comedic tone from Isabella, Beatrice works to defend her maiden status. In a jocular discussion of facial hair, she concludes, “He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him. Therefore I will even take sixpence in earnest of the bearherd and lead his apes into hell” (2.1.29-34). Jokingly, but somewhat shockingly, Beatrice dedicates herself to the status of an “old maid” without any overt expression of horror, even if it would land her at the gates of “hell.”

Allusions to Adam and Eve by both Beatrice and Benedick introduce an interesting potential root for the ongoing difficulties between the sexes. In a remarkably witty assertion of her equality, she claims, “Adam's sons are my

brethren, and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred” (53-54). Of course, Biblically, the Genesis story explicitly creates a hierarchy in which women are below and subjugated to men, while here Beatrice expresses a sense of levelness or equality with her “brethren.” Her statement also introduces a differentiation between sexual and familial love, even in non-familial relationships, that Claudio also attempts to exemplify later. By Beatrice's logic, because she regards men with a familial affection as opposed to a sexual one, it would be wrong for her to marry. This belief is supported by her interaction with men; she never displays the demure hesitancy of many female characters, but instead unhesitatingly engages in the immodest banter as if she were indeed interacting with “brethren.”

Benedick originally adamantly objects to the idea of marrying Beatrice, saying, “I would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed” (2.1.218-220). His allusion, a reminder of the paradise lost because of Adam's transgression, may stand as the only possible explanation for Benedick's general mistrust of women. By citing the story of the Fall, Benedick showcases the ultimate example of the potential danger of the temptation of female sexuality.

Just as the cuckoldry jokes reveal Benedick's anxiety about female infidelity, Beatrice exposes a prevalent female fear of becoming impregnated and carrying the shame of illegitimate children. While men seem susceptible to sexual humiliation by women inside of marriage (through infidelity), women appear to be more vulnerable to a similar humiliation outside of marriage (if they become

pregnant before they are married). When Don Pedro tells her “You have put him down” (2.1.246), she replies, “So I would not he should do to me, my lord, lest I should prove the mother of fools” (2.1.246-247). Her statement intimates that her verbal altercations with Benedick serve as a kind of defensive maneuver; by “putting him down,” she defends herself against the possibility of sexually submitting to him and becoming the “mother of fools.” In an attempt to avoid the fate of a character like Juliet in *Measure for Measure*, Beatrice takes a stance somewhere between the self-righteous Isabella and Portia (who is verbally impressive but also disguises herself in male garb as well as quickly submits to a marriage arranged by her dead father).

This back and forth banter between the two certainly airs anxieties on both sides that have remained mostly unspoken in the other plays. Neely compellingly explains that “The witty verbal skirmishes comprising Beatrice's and Benedick's 'merry wars' explicitly express the anxieties about loss of power through sexuality, love, and marriage that lie beneath Claudio's and Hero's silent romanticism.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, Beatrice and Benedick verbalize the unspoken issues of Hero and Claudio, but they also seem to express the more general gender anxieties of previous and future Shakespearean couples. Beatrice expresses a female resistance to the expected female acceptance of marriage in a newly energized and witty manner, while Benedick is able to express and hopefully release prevalent male anxiety about being sexually betrayed by women.

---

<sup>7</sup> Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 45.

Unlike Benedick, who merely jokes about his apprehension of female sexuality, Claudio embodies completely irrational male paranoia about the fidelity of a woman that he barely knows, and yet manages to idealize her to an unrealistic level of beauty and purity at the same time. He epitomizes the many male characters that paradoxically idealize women to the highest level of chastity, while also constantly suspect them of infidelity (Hamlet, Othello, Posthumous, Leontes). Even when his own friend, Don Pedro, explicitly states that he will woo Hero on his behalf, Claudio believes that he has been betrayed, saying, “beauty is a witch / Against whose charms faith melteth into blood. / This is an accident of hourly proof” (2.1.157-159). Much like the sonnet speaker denouncing the dark lady, Claudio blames female temptation for the dissolution of male bonds of love.

Choosing a severely degraded image from the “jewel” used earlier to describe Hero, Benedick scolds Claudio, “Ho, now you strike like the blind man – 'twas the boy that stole your meat, and you'll beat the post” (2.1.175-176). The comparison between Hero and “meat” appears several times in the play and presents a disturbingly negative connotation of the role of women and their position for male consumption. Continuing, Benedick also compares Claudio's possessive feelings toward Hero to a boy and a “bird's nest” (2.1.194), an image that subtly highlights Benedick's simplified view of a potential wife's role as purely domestic and reproductive.

Male characters continually enter into dialogue evaluating, comparing and preparing exchanges of the female ones. The necessity of Don Pedro to woo Hero

for Claudio seems especially unusual. Like the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, Don Pedro acts as a necessary external force, arranging, modifying, and enabling the romantic couplings of the play. As they are also both figures of high authority, it seems possible that they come to represent the expectations of Renaissance society, in which “more than 90 per cent of those reaching adulthood in the sixteenth century would marry,” and marriages were orchestrated with a great deal of help from family and friends outside of the couple.<sup>8</sup> Although it may signify a custom of social hierarchy, the utter transferability of love from one suitor to another greatly diminishes the role of love in the forming of marriages. Reminiscent of the frequently switched pairings in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, another play that holds extremely comic or festive elements, Hero's ability to transfer her love from the man that wooed her to a man that she barely knows makes the romantic bond between Hero and Claudio seem extremely superficial and even imaginary.

Like Don Pedro, Hero's father plays a large role in arranging her romantic life. As if conducting a business transaction, Leonato tells Claudio, “Count, take me of my daughter, and with her my fortunes. His grace hath made the match, and all grace say amen to it” (2.1.262-264). Invoking God in “all grace” Leonato connects male authority over marital arrangements to the highest spiritual authority. Hero remains disturbingly silent throughout the entire process, having been wooed by Don Pedro and then given over to Claudio by him and her father.

---

<sup>8</sup> David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 285.

As in many other plays, the most outspoken female character, Beatrice, an unmarried maid, stands in stark contrast to the taciturn wife-to-be, Hero.

At the first (failed) wedding ceremony, the connection between marriage and male exchange continues. Leonato tells Claudio that he gives the “maid,” Hero, to him “As freely, son, as God did give her me” (4.1.24), passing her on from one male owner to the next. Claudio then twists the previously positive, albeit objectifying, language of Hero as a “rich and precious gift” (4.1.26) to express his contempt; he bids Leonato “take her back again” and compares her to a “rotten orange” (4.1.30) before launching into a scathing accusation of her promiscuity. Much like the sonnet speaker, a man often obsessed with the disparity between physical beauty that implies purity and alleged inward wantonness, Claudio repeatedly contrasts the “semblance of her honour” (4.1.31) or her maiden appearance, and the “sin” and “guiltiness” that he believes to be hidden beneath her blush (4.1.40). In a similar way to the continual connection between sexuality and bestiality in *Measure for Measure*, Claudio admonishes Hero, “more intemperate in your blood / Than Venus or those pampered animals / That rage in savage sensuality” (4.1.57-59). This stunning and alliterative phrase, “savage sensuality” epitomizes one repeatedly expressed view of sexuality as inherently debasing, animalistic, and beyond human rationality. The wildness of “savage” emphasizes both the irrational bestial nature of sexuality as well as its potential for great aggression and danger.

Claudio denies that he is the one who has sexually transgressed with Hero,

and demonstrating an odd idealization of premarital love, he uses the simile: “as a brother to a sister showed / Bashful sincerity and comely love” (4.1.51-52) to express his supposedly non-sexual treatment of her. Earlier, Beatrice attempts to sidestep the expectation to marry by identifying her feelings toward men as her “brethren,” as if the safe love of familial bonds could be applied to somehow neutralize a potentially dangerous sexual relationship between genders. Claudio sets up an intense divide between non-sexual, almost familial, love between couples and the animalistic savagery of lust and sexual action, completely omitting the possibility for a happy or fulfilling sexual love.

In another example of the necessity of external interference in match-making, the men get together to woo Benedick for Beatrice. While the men are working to foster love for Beatrice in Benedick, they focus mainly on her potential death because of love for him. Claudio says, “Hero thinks surely she will die, for she says she will die if he love her not, and she will die ere she make her love known, and she will die if he woo her, rather than she will bate one breath of her accustomed crossness” (2.3.156-159). The repetition of the word “die” enforces the idea of Beatrice's complete reliance on Benedick, an idea that should seem ridiculous to him considering the amount of independence and strength that Beatrice has shown in each of their encounters. However, even Benedick, a generally skeptical character, becomes seduced by this idealized fantasy, reveling in the idea of Beatrice being in a position so vulnerable that her very life would depend on his affection.

Interestingly enough, while this wooing of Benedick is occurring, Balthasar sings a song that brings into question which gender is actually more frequently betrayed, despite the prevalent male cuckoldry jokes. The lyrics read “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more / Men were deceivers ever, / One foot in sea, and one on shore, / To one thing constant never” (2.3.56-59). The inconsistency in this scene is both baffling and fascinating: while Benedick, the figure of never-ending reminders of male cuckoldry, is being convinced into a relationship, a song is playing about the inevitable mistreatment of women by unfaithful male “deceivers.”

Benedick is quickly won over by the idea of Beatrice's unrequited and deathly dangerous passion for him, renouncing all of his previously held arguments against marriage. Again returning to the metaphor of meat, he claims, “A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age. Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humour? No. The world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married” (2.3.210-215). The main rationalization for marriage that Benedick offers is “The world must be peopled.” Articulating an argument often seen in Shakespeare, especially in the procreation sonnets, Benedick connects romance or marriage with responsibility for procreation. Just as in *Measure for Measure*, in which marriage primarily serves as a legitimization of fornication, Benedick here seems to use the excuse of reproductive duty to gain access to or fulfillment of potentially less noble sexual

desires.

As Neely points out, the wooing of Beatrice is extremely different from that of Benedick, as the women “attack at length and with gusto Beatrice's proud wit, deflating rather than bolstering her self-esteem. The men emphasize Beatrice's love whereas the women emphasize her inability to love as a means of exorcising it.”<sup>9</sup> As soon as Beatrice falls in love, her attitude completely changes, and she adopts a submissiveness unprecedented in her character. She dismisses “contempt” and “maiden pride” (3.2.110) and instead bids Benedick “love on. I will requite thee / Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand” (3.2.112-113). Invoking the falcon metaphor, Beatrice suddenly positions herself not as an equal to Benedick, but as a subordinate to be trained and controlled. In this moment, Beatrice abandons her maiden independence and accepts a submission of her “heart” to his “hand,” expressing what she sees as the necessary transition for her position, as if female subordination is inherently connected to love and marriage.

Just as the men unite to put Benedick and Beatrice together, they also quickly come together in their vilification of Hero after Don John's accusations and staged window scene. Don John tells Claudio that “Even she. Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero” is “disloyal” (3.2.89-90), grammatically and figuratively placing Hero in male possession from her father, to her fiance, and then generalizing to mankind's shared experience of female betrayal. It takes very little for Claudio to turn against the woman he had previously so highly praised,

---

<sup>9</sup> Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 48.

and even the seemingly rational Don Pedro steps in, saying, “as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to disgrace her” (3.2.106-107). This strife between the male and female characters further separates the genders, while it also increases feelings of solidarity within the groups of men and women.

After they succeed in publicly shaming her, even her own father turns against her with surprisingly harsh language in which he calls for her death if she proves to be unfaithful. He tells her, “For did I think thou wouldst not quickly die, / Thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames, / Myself would on rearward of reproaches / Strike at thy life” (4.1.123-125). Continuing his claim of possession over her, he emphasizes, “But mine, and mine I loved, and mine I praised, / And mine that I was proud on, mine so much / That I myself was to myself not mine / Valuing of her – why she, O she is fallen . . .” (4.1.135-138). Using “mine” six times in four lines, Leonato completely centers Hero's experience on himself and his attempt to reaffirm his ownership and control of her. Reusing the previously repeated comparison of her to meat again, he finishes, “the wide sea / Hath drops too few to wash her clean again, / And salt too little which may season give / To her foul tainted flesh” (4.1.139-142). Any sign of sexuality in Hero reduces her from a valued chaste “jewel” to the degraded “foul tainted flesh” of raw meat.

In the face of all of this male violence, disgust, and accusation, the Friar helps to come up with the plan to fake Hero's death in order to save her life and reputation. He clearly states the intent to “Change slander to remorse” (4.1.210)

by convincing everyone that she has died of shame. In an interesting scheme of manipulation, the Friar understands that “what we have, we prize not to the worth” (4.1.217), concluding that absence is the only way to win back Claudio's affection for Hero. The Friar anticipates that once Claudio hears of Hero's death, he will remember “every lovely organ of her life” as “More moving-delicate, and full of life . . . Than when she lived indeed” (4.1.225-229). Consequently, her death, or Claudio's belief in her death, becomes the only remedy possible for restoring Claudio's idealization of Hero as completely pure, beautiful, and untainted. As a back-up plan, the Friar tells them that Hero may enter into “some reclusive and religious life, / Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries” (4.1.241-242). Religious isolation seems to be the only real escape for maids, when marriage becomes impossible or undesirable. Hero's potential sequestering is in fact the life that Isabella so desires, but is denied because of her marital desirability in *Measure for Measure*.

Beatrice bids Benedick to kill Claudio to redeem Hero's honor. She exclaims, “O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place” (4.1.303-304). Like the bond between Bassanio and Antonio, the loyalty and love between Beatrice and Hero transcends heterosexual romance. When familial and romantic love fail, as both Hero's father and fiance turn against her, Beatrice is the only figure to maintain complete faith and loyalty. Like Emilia and Paulina, Beatrice feminizes the role of a knight fighting to restore feminine honor. Without these same-sex bonds, Hero, Desdemona, and Hermione would be completely lost

in the face of torrential male jealousy and rage.

Because of gendered restrictions, Beatrice is unable to act directly to restore Hero's honor; however, she uses the power that she does have, in Benedick's love for her, to ensure that Claudio is challenged for his wrongful shaming of her friend. She tells Benedick, "I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving" (4.1.317-318). Beatrice has to figuratively put her own life on the line and to expose an intense sense of vulnerability in order to gain Benedick's service. Illustrating Lucio's statement that "when maidens sue, / Men give like gods, but when they weep and kneel, / All their petitions are as freely theirs / As they themselves would owe them" (1.4.79-83),<sup>10</sup> Beatrice is forced into a debasing position of vulnerability in order to acquire male assistance. At the same time, in an attempt to incite him into defensive aid, she also provocatively challenges his masculinity, saying, "manhood is melted into courtesies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones, too" (4.1.314-316). Benedick finally agrees, simply, "Enough, I am engaged, I will challenge him" (4.1.325). While his use of "engaged" primarily means that he is committed to challenge Claudio, it also seems to allude to their imminent marital contract.

Once the truth is revealed, Claudio recants, "Sweet Hero, now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I loved it first" (5.1.235-236). Her death and proven innocence allow Claudio to return to his idealization of her, but the

---

<sup>10</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

fundamental issue remains that such an unrealistic “image” of her can only make him susceptible to future irrational rages and disappointments, even if they are unseen in this play. Othello kills Desdemona after they are married, and even after being married to Hermione for many years, Leontes is still capable of spontaneously believing that she would cheat on him with his best friend, and his ensuing rage has tragic results. In relation with these other male characters, Claudio's reestablished and unrealistic idealization of Hero lacks any assurance that irrational jealousy will not overtake him again sometime in the future.

While Claudio stands as the example of the dangers of idealistic marital expectations, Benedick seems to represent more of a solution: he manages to release enough of his anxiety about cuckoldry through humor, therefore making himself less vulnerable to a build-up of irrationality, paranoia, and rage. Comic release turns out to be a powerful thing. While Claudio requires Hero's death (or faked death) in order to restore an unhealthy standard of feminine chastity, Benedick embraces sexual desire for Beatrice, joking, “I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes” (5.2.86). The difference between Claudio and Benedick is further emphasized by their use of “dying” with one connected to a testament to chastity and the other to sexuality.

Despite his comparatively accepting view of the incorporation of sexuality into marriage, even Benedick regains some of his anti-marital feelings on his wedding day. Don Pedro reflects on Benedick's “February face” (5.4.41) right before the weddings, and Claudio speculates,

I think he thinks upon the savage bull.  
 Tush, fear not, man, we'll tip thy horns with gold,  
 And all Europa shall rejoice at thee  
 As once Europa did at lusty Jove  
 When he would play the noble beast in love. (5.4.43-47)

Here, the “savage” element of sexuality has changed into a “noble beast,” although the elements of violence intimated by the allusion to Jove are not entirely eliminated in this newly worked depiction of the relationship between marriage and sexuality. In anticipation of marriage, the animalistic qualities of sexuality are lessened, but still acknowledged through the reference to the “bull.” Also, the men combine elements of economic imagery –that they so often fall back upon in threatening sexual situations, such as when they refer to Hero as a “jewel”-- by claiming that Benedick's cuckold horns will be slightly amended by their adornment in gold.

In the end, the two contrasting couples are married: Hero to Claudio, and Beatrice to Benedick. Of course, Claudio is tricked into the marriage, agreeing to marry Hero without seeing her face or knowing her identity. Even if he would probably have rejoiced to know her as his wife, the fact that they must be wed without the acknowledgment of the woman's identity links to the orchestrated marriage between Angelo and Mariana, although theirs is even more problematic. Furthermore, this masked wedding ceremony emphasizes the unpredictability of marriage in general and the potential danger of marrying a person without really getting to know them.

In one of her rare moments of voice, Hero proclaims, “One Hero died

defiled, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid” (5.4.63-64). Her statement is one of surprising separation of her own being; she splits herself into the Hero that “died defiled” and her reestablished identity as “a maid.” Benedick and Beatrice agree to marry, but Benedick gets the last word in their ongoing banter, saying, “Peace, I will stop your mouth” (5.4.96), which turns out to be a rather complicated comment. At first, this kiss seems witty, romantic even. However, at the same time, he does “stop [her] mouth” in a more permanent way, as she does not speak again through the rest of the scene, and the end of the play. Taken alone, this instance would probably appear unremarkable, but when it is contextualized by other instances of female silence at the moment of marriage (like Isabella's and Paulina's), it seems to be much more of a sign of necessary female subordination in marriage. Ending with a final allusion to cuckolding, Benedick tells Don Pedro “get thee a wife, get thee a wife. There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn” (5.4.116-117). Benedick finds a way to reconcile his fear of cuckoldry with his desire to marry, even while continuing to express apprehension about marital fidelity.

*Much Ado About Nothing* ends with one of the more satisfying pairings, although it is not completely devoid of issues. Hero's only contribution is to announce her chastity, and Beatrice's silence leaves the two women in inferior roles to their husbands. Neely states that “Throughout the comedies broken nuptials, even when initiated by men, give women the power to resist, control, or alter the movement of courtship. But with the celebration of completed nuptials at

the end of the comedies, male control is reestablished, and women take their subordinate places in the dance.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, women seem to reach the zenith of their power as maids in the beginning of the wooing process, becoming increasingly silent as marriages solidify. In many ways, *Othello* will come to seem a tragic rewriting of *Much Ado About Nothing*. While this play ends with the possibility of embraced sexual satisfaction between Beatrice and Benedick, *Othello* instead picks up on Claudio's strain of jealous, possessive, and irrational male sexual standards for women. While *Much Ado* explores these issues of male anxiety and female sexuality through a comedic and festive tone, *Othello* later revisits the same issues with a much heavier sense of danger and ultimately tragic results.

---

11 Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 57.

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### **Lust and Marriage in *Measure for Measure***

A provocative play of interwoven sexual extremes, *Measure for Measure* displays Shakespeare's continuing exploration of the issues surrounding love, marriage, and sexuality. While some elements of the play harken back to the male anxiety about female sexuality seen in the sonnets and *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure* also exhibits much more severe, opposing, and generally negative attitudes towards marriage. In fact, marriage itself can be used as a measure for each individual character's unique attitudes toward love, relationships, and sexuality; this play clearly differentiates between characters' physical desire for sex and their pursuit or rejection of the social institution of marriage. Often solely a legitimization of lust, marriage is markedly diminished from its position in *The Merchant of Venice* as the key factor for achieving a happy ending, holding the promise of reproductive bliss. For the male characters in the play, marriage often engenders the end to irresponsible sexuality as well as the implementation of constricting societal and moral judgment. For women, marriage acts both as an oppressive end to female voice, necessitating female submission to masculine authority, as well as a social protection to safely experience sexuality without the fear of being impregnated and discarded.

Strangely, in *Measure for Measure*, most of the characters seem

uninterested in marrying despite their sexual relationships. Katherine Maus points out that “any link between desire and marriage seems to have snapped. No one, with the possible and problematic exception of the Duke, weds unless and until compelled to do so.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the play's ending in which characters are neatly paired off and married, the overall anti-marital tone continues to resonate powerfully, leaving the reader with a negative impression of marriage. The narrative opens with Claudio's imminent execution for fornication, absorbing the reader into a world of exaggerated danger and adverse consequence linked to sexual action. Continuing in the extreme, Shakespeare presents an array of characters that embody starkly different sexual attitudes: the women are both nuns and prostitutes, pregnant and virginal, and the men are aggressively sexual or disdainfully abstinent.

David Cressy offers insightful information about the relationship between premarital sex and marriage in the time period:

Moralists were consistently hostile to sexual intercourse in advance of marriage, but not every couple heeded their advice. Analysis of parish registers shows some 20 to 30 per cent of all brides bearing children within the first eight months of marriage. The illegitimate birth rate was low--around 2 to 4 per cent—and was mostly associated with broken betrothals . . . A reasonable guess might be that half the couples who contracted to be married engaged in sexual congress; no more than half were still virgins before their wedding night.<sup>2</sup>

It would seem that in reality, premarital sex was not uncommon and that women

---

1 Katherine Eisaman Maus, “Sexual Secrecy in *Measure for Measure*,” in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Measure for Measure*, ed. Richard Wheeler (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999) 198.

2 David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 277-278.

often married when they were already pregnant. Both in reality and in *Measure for Measure*, marriage often acts as a way of protecting women from giving birth to illegitimate children. In this play, Shakespeare chooses to dramatize the negative power of lust, enhancing the danger of its consequences in a way that is both entertaining and startling. Even though Juliet is the one to physically bear the sign of premarital sexual transgression in her pregnant body, the danger of lust for men is presented much more explicitly and dramatically in the threat to Claudio's life and in Angelo's complete moral deterioration.

Lucio and Claudio reveal a complicated and interesting dynamic in their conversation about sex. Claudio, the man who has slept with Juliet, a woman he claims to want to marry, describes people driven by lust or sexuality as “Like rats that raven down their proper bane, / A thirsty evil; and when we drink, we die” (1.2.109).<sup>3</sup> With the nearly growling consonance of the “r” sound, this extremely distasteful simile of the rats and rat poison frames romance as a debasing or corrupting force, (much like the sonnet speaker's sentiments in the poems denouncing the dark lady). Claudio generalizes his experience by using the inclusive term “we” as an expression of male solidarity in the face of corrupting female temptation. Personifying lust as “a thirsty evil” emphasizes its intense power to overwhelm rationality. Claudio's sentiment that “when we drink, we die” presents lust as an irrational force that leads men into corruption and misery comparable only to death. Because of this continually established male feeling

---

3 William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

that lust facilitates a female trap, marriage for men becomes the trap for which lust acts as the bait.

Lucio, on the other hand, a much more salacious and crude character, who has impregnated a woman he refuses to marry, describes sex and procreation in naturalizing and positive terms. He tells Isabella,

Your brother and his lover have embraced.  
 As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time  
 That from the seedness the bare fallow brings  
 To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb  
 Expresseth his full tilth and husbandry. (1.4.39-43)

This account of sexuality is one of the rare positive portrayals in the play, presenting the sexual act as natural, instead of animalistic, and emphasizing the regenerative power of reproduction (present also in the procreation sonnets). He portrays Juliet as an earthly entity universally connected to the natural world. The simile also enlarges Claudio's stature to a level of high importance, as he is endowed with the responsibility of procreation. At the same time, Lucio works to naturalize male control over female sexuality, as he compares the womb to a field plowed and managed by the male farmer. The use of the word "husbandry" is interesting and important because it connects male management with both the earth and the household. Giving men a surprisingly active role in reproduction, Lucio attempts to bestow the responsibility and control of pregnancy on men through their control of women: the female womb acts as an "express[ion]" of maleness; the womb becomes merely the vessel of male seed instead of the primary and formative power in reproduction. In Lucio's eyes, the sexual

relationship between Claudio and Juliet is transformed and elevated from something base and animalistic into something natural and admirable specifically because of their imminent marriage. The prospect of marriage changes the state of a couple's sexuality, as it replaces hedonistic lust with a sense of procreative responsibility.

The most interesting point about these two opposing views on sexuality is that they come from the opposite character from which they would be expected. Claudio seems to be in a faithfully committed relationship with Juliet, he had plans to marry her when they slept together (or so they claim), and his demeaning comparison of sexuality to rat poison is startling. Unsuspected, one of the only positive accounts of sexuality comes from a male character that seems to have no intention to marry, in fact, he fervently rejects any desire to marry the woman he has impregnated. This unexpected switch of attitudes reveals the deep seated pessimism toward the institution of marriage present in the play: a man faced with marriage reacts with feelings of disgust, maybe even doom, while a man currently safe from marriage seems able to idealize procreation as natural, while at the same time abandoning his own child to a state of illegitimacy.

Claudio explains his arrest as a result of “too much liberty” (1.2.105). Using the word “liberty” to stand for sex is fascinating in its linkage of sexuality to freedom. The OED's first two definitions of the word are “Exemption or release from captivity, bondage, or slavery” and “Freedom from the bondage of sin, or of

the law,”<sup>4</sup> which brings into question, what exactly is the “bondage” from which sex releases Claudio? The first obvious answer is that Claudio's sexual behavior with Juliet was previously free from moral and social implications, and that his arrest resulted in an end to this time of “liberty” from societal constraints.

However, I think that a second reading of this word is also possible: in Sonnet 129, which begins “Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action; and till action, lust / Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame” (1-3),<sup>5</sup> lust is presented as an irresistible and unrelenting driving force that, despite its sweet promise, results in intensified suffering. The sonnet ends, “All this the world well knows, yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell” (13-14). Much like the sonnet speaker, Claudio presents lust as an oppressive bondage, and sex as the momentary release or “liberty” that results only in further misery. The initially positive connotation of “liberty” in its connection to sex is immediately eradicated by the fact that Claudio cites “liberty” as the reason or source of his arrested and miserable state. Much like “A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe,” Claudio's “liberty” is a momentary release leading into further “hell.” This question of the positive or negative implications of “liberty” as a code name for sex epitomizes the complicated questions of the play in general in regard to the way that sexuality and marriage influence and infringe upon freedom differently for male and female characters.

---

4 *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989, OED Online, Oxford University Press. 10 April 2009 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>, s.v. “liberty”

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 129,” in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

If sexuality is a form of “liberty” for men, it signals the end of freedom for women. When the Duke exclaims to Mariana, “Why, you are nothing then; neither maid, widow, nor wife!” (5.1.176), he perfectly illustrates Carol Thomas Neely's point that female characters are primarily defined by their marital status in Shakespeare's plays,<sup>6</sup> and consequently their sexuality becomes a centrally defining characteristic for them and the power of their voice. A pattern does seem to exist in which virginal, premarital women (like Portia or Isabella) are also vocal, intellectually interesting, complex characters- in other words, pre-marital women have more “liberty” at least in expression. However, the process of wooing, and the end result of marriage often seem to correlate with the silencing of these previously outspoken characters. It is as if the shifting of their status from maid to wife intrinsically alters their entire being, mentality, and consequently character. In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella's devotional purity and virginal status correspond with her powerfully articulate nature, and as this status becomes endangered by the Duke's marriage proposal, her voice diminishes, in fact disappears, at the same time. The imminent wives-to-be, Mariana and Juliet, barely have voices at all, while the only actual wife of the play, Elbow's wife, never even appears.

The connection between sexual attractiveness or freedom and female voice arises in 1.4 when Francisca explains, “When you have vowed, you must not speak with men / But in the presence of the prioress” (10-11). By this account, when a

---

<sup>6</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 2.

woman becomes a nun she gives up both sexual and vocal interactions with men, almost equating sexuality and voice. The fact that Isabella has set herself on the path to a life secluded from men establishes her as a character that is deeply uninterested in the typical life available to women of becoming wives and mothers. Unfortunately for her, her devout sexual purity and outspoken character become the major factors that attract Angelo to her, entangling her in a plot that ends with the Duke's marriage request.

Isabella is a complex character, who can be difficult to categorize in her staunch defiance against allowing Angelo to defile her virginity, even if it would save her brother's life. From moment to moment, her unwavering devotion to herself and her chastity seems alternately admirable and ridiculous. Her virginity defines her both in her own eyes, and in the eyes of the other characters. Lucio clearly respects and admires her, saying, "I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted / By your renouncement, and immortal spirit, / And to be talked with in sincerity / As with a saint" (1.4.33-36). His repetitive comparison of her to a "saint" reveals his immense deference for a woman sexually inexperienced, a starkly different attitude than the disgust and irreverence with which he treats the "whore" he himself has impregnated and tries to refuse to marry at the end of the play. He also recognizes her as someone "to be talked with in sincerity." Isabella's sexual abstinence grants her a kind of respect and recognized mental capability from Lucio, who treats her with seriousness and honor.

Isabella's virginal status awards her a persuasive ability and power over

men that becomes unavailable after marriage or sexual consummation. Claudio describes Isabella: “in her youth / There is a prone and speechless dialect / Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art . . . And well she can persuade” (1.2.159-163). The oxymoron “speechless dialect” imputes a mysterious, formidable power to her “art.” Much like Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*, Isabella has a persuasive power over men without the need to disguise her femininity with the use of male garb (like Portia). Lucio compels her, “Go to Lord Angelo; / And let him learn to know, when maidens sue, / Men give like gods, but when they weep and kneel, / All their petitions are as freely theirs / As they themselves would owe them” (1.4.79-83). Lucio’s statement emphasizes the power of “maidens” specifically to change the minds of men; however, as in his earlier comparison of reproduction to husbandry, he demands an acquiescence of women to male control. In order to really get what they want from men, women must “weep and kneel” before these men that are “like gods.” Consequently, women have to submit to superior masculine power if they expect their “petitions” to be granted.

Initially, Angelo seems to be a male counterpart to Isabella because of his lack of interest in sex and his rigidly uncompromising moral standards. However, unlike Isabella, who is revered for her sexual abstinence, Angelo’s lack of interest in sex is presented as unnatural, and is commented on by other characters. For example, Lucio describes Angelo as “a man whose blood / Is very snow-broth; one who never feels / The wanton stings and motions of the sense, / But doth

rebate and blunt his natural edge / With profits of the mind, study, and fast” (1.4.56-60). Metaphorically changing Angelo's blood into “snow-broth,” Lucio portrays Angelo as somewhat less than a man, lacking a defining necessary characteristic for human life. Later, he speculates, “Some report a sea-maid spawned him, some that he was begot between two stockfishes. But it is certain that when he makes water his urine is congealed ice” and “he is a motion ungenerative; that's infallible” (3.1.353-356). Angelo's rejection of a socially and morally imposed responsibility to contribute to reproduction calls his own origin into question. The repeated emphasis on Angelo's coldness translates into his “ungenerative” or impotent nature. Despite some equations of lust to animalistic behavior, there seems to be a hierarchy: at least rats are warm blooded. Angelo's lack of interest in sex makes him so unnatural that he becomes cold-blooded like a fish.

Despite his originally icy sexual abstinence, Angelo becomes attracted to Isabella when she confronts him with her argumentative wit. He says, “She speaks, and 'tis such sense / That my sense breeds with it” (2.2.145). He connects her “sense” or persuasive ability with her sexual attractiveness. Even though he never genuinely plans to comply with her requests, both her virginity and her articulate ability merge together in his desire for her. Ultimately, it becomes revealed that his desire is disturbingly rooted more in a fantasy to defile her than in anything else. Janet Adelman concludes that Angelo displays a “morning-after fantasy, in which a virgin is violated and then abandoned, psychically transformed

into a whore.” She continues her analysis, explaining,

Othello destroys Desdemona and himself because he cannot tolerate the contamination of her sanctified being; Angelo wills just this contamination, experiencing desire only in terms of the split it would vindictively undo. But why does *Measure for Measure* portray desire only thus, only through the exciting image of contaminating a sanctified female space? In part, I think, because this image casts male sexuality as a punitive response to original female betrayal: through intercourse, Angelo would vindictively rewrite the sanctified female body as corrupt as though to punish it for originally betraying him to desire.<sup>7</sup>

Angelo's intentions, as well as his sudden and disturbing desire for Isabella are undeniably confusing, but Adelman's theory is compelling because even beyond Angelo's character there seems to be a great deal of evidence in many male characters for their resentment of women for tempting them into lust induced hell, and Adelman provides a motivation for these characters' often shocking actions.

Because of the bed-trick, Angelo believes that he has had sex with Isabella, and he immediately loses interest in her, but even more disturbing is his plan to disregard their deal, continuing the execution of her brother despite her seeming submission to his demands. Originally, Angelo is aroused by her purity as well as her voice, but he reveals that his only real desire is for complete control over her both by destroying her sexual purity, and by denying her request for her brother's life. He seeks complete power over her physically and emotionally.

This struggle between Angelo and Isabella serves as the play's example of the damage that can be caused by lust, as well as sex outside of marriage. There

---

<sup>7</sup> Janet Adelman, “Marriage and the Maternal Body: On Marriage as the End of Comedy in *Measure for Measure*”, in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Measure for Measure*, ed. Richard Wheeler (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999), 120, 127.

continues to be a differentiation between condoning sex within marriage as a natural and productive act and condemning lust outside of marriage as unnatural and destructive. Lust is also often manipulated and used as a kind of tool by characters: some women use the lure of sex to trap men into marriages (seen in sentiments expressed by Claudio, as well as Mariana's deception of Angelo), but men, namely Angelo, (but also potentially Lucio and the Duke) use sex as a fulfillment of what Adelman describes as "morning after fantasies" in which the defilement of a virgin constitutes their chief motivation.

When Angelo tries to coerce Isabella into having sex with him in order to save her brother's life, in their conversation their stringent characters and previously shared morality escalate into an altercation, revealing Isabella to be far morally superior, if equally as inflexible as Angelo. Both Isabella and Angelo tend to exaggerate their arguments to a point beyond typical human rationality. For example, Angelo equates fornication with murder in regard to its moral severity when talking about Claudio (2.4.42-45), but refuses to apply this strict morality to his own behavior. Both of them are ridiculous in this presumed fray between sin and virtue, the body and the soul. He tells her "You must lay down the treasures of your body" (2.4.95) to save Claudio's life. She adopts and further distorts the treasure metaphor in what appears to be a fantasy of euphoric self-flagellation: "were I under the terms of death, / Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies, / And strip myself to death as to a bed / That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield / My body up to shame" (2.4.99-103). These strange comparisons of sexual

bodies to treasure reveals the underlying struggle between masculine and feminine powers inherently connected to sexuality. While Angelo desires complete control and ownership over the “treasures” of Isabella's body, she relishes her estimation of how much physical torment she could endure to her own body, while protecting and maintaining control over it. Angelo's demand followed by Isabella's adamant refusal acts as an example of the generalized constant ebb and flow of power exchanged between the genders in their sexual dealings.

Angelo may unyieldingly hold others to extraordinarily high moral standards, but Isabella holds herself to them, valuing her virginity over even her own life: “O, were it but my life, / I'd throw it down for your deliverance / As frankly as a pin” (3.1.103-105), she tells Claudio. Despite her dramatic statements, Isabella also embodies a real and somewhat refreshing female strength in her defense of her own sexuality. Even when confronted with momentous male coercion by both Angelo and her brother to give up her body, she refuses and denies men the right to control her. Certainly, she comes across as incredibly selfish and harsh in her refusal to save her brother's life, but at the same time, she impressively withstands immense male coercion and shows a prowess rare in Shakespearean female characters.

When Claudio yields to his fear of death, and asks his sister to save his life, she turns on him with surprising repugnance, calling him a “beast” (3.1.138). Isabella degrades her own brother to the level of a “beast” merely for considering

sex as a potential tool to spare his life. When she continues by saying, “Heaven shield my mother played my father fair / For such a warped slip of wilderness / Ne'er issued from his blood” (3.1.142-144), she immediately diminishes her embodiment of female power by blaming her mother exclusively for Claudio's immoral behavior. Suddenly idealizing her “fair father” and introducing the odd possibility that her mother may have “played” him, seems a strange jump, but appears to reveal her internalization of a world in which female fidelity is always questioned and scrutinized.

Isabella claims that bearing an illegitimate child would be the worst possible scenario that she can imagine, worse even than her own brother's death. She tells the Duke, “I had rather my brother die by the law than my son should be unlawfully born” (3.1.189-190), verbalizing what seems to be the driving force of marriage throughout the play; marriage serves as a legitimation of practically unavoidable sexual temptation. At the same time, marriages seems to serve as a protection for women by keeping them from bearing children out of wedlock, even in spite of its simultaneously smothering effects upon female voice. Claudio defines premarital sex as “liberty,” and so, while marriage may be the end of liberty for men in a sexual sense, it also signifies the end of liberty for women in a much more general sense.

The connections between lust, love, pregnancy and marriage, a dominant presence throughout the play, become blurred in Angelo and Isabella's heated exchange. Angelo entreats Isabella, “plainly conceive, I love you” (2.4.141). The

double meaning of “conceive” continues to link female competency and sexual desire with fertility; her ability to understand, to think, to be logical, acts as a sign of her physical fecundity. Smartly, she points out that her brother is being executed for the same offense, but Angelo rejects her logic. He admires her mental capacity, but he never accepts or even considers her points. Her ability to reason contributes to his attraction to her, but it is just another aspect of her over which he desires utter control.

Even though Angelo's degeneration is a specific and extreme example of the potential for the pernicious effects of lust, the play also enforces the fact that sexuality is a rampant state throughout the population. Pompey makes it clear that fornication is a widespread offense, asking, “Does your worship mean to geld and spay all the youth of the city?” (2.1.205). When Escalus responds in the negative, Pompey simply and concisely concludes, “they will to't then” (2.1.208). Pompey presents salacious activity as the natural and prevalent state of the youth in the city, but even with his dismissive attitude, his use of “geld and spay” also intimates the animalistic nature of sexuality. Out of wedlock, sexuality is presented as debased to the point of brute animal instinct. Pompey estimates that if the law of execution for fornication is upheld for ten years, the population will dwindle to the point that he will be renting “the fairest house in it after threepence a bay” (2.1.216). His playful prophecy reveals a deeper anxiety that sexuality is an unstoppable, rampant force throughout human nature, and that despite its negative perception, without the existence of lust the population would quickly

diminish. The provost expounds on the point even further, lamenting of Claudio, “He hath but as offended in a dream. / All sects, all ages, smack of this vice; and he / To die for't!” (2.2.4-6). The somewhat disillusioning point is that in many cases, marriage occurs primarily as a result of premarital intercourse (after all, Shakespeare himself married a woman who was already pregnant).

Even though female characters are almost always genuine and chaste, for some reason women are continually and illogically blamed for the physical enactment of lust. Juliet is held more accountable than Claudio, when the Duke disguised as a friar says, “then was your sin of heavier kind than his” and she responds, “I do confess it and repent it, father” (2.3.30-31). The constant male accusation against women for leading them into sex and hell is unsettling enough, but the subtle hints of female internalization of these same attitudes are even more problematic. Even Isabella, a remarkably stoic and unwavering female power in defense of her own sexuality, accuses her mother of potential licentiousness because of her brother's poor behavior. Juliet admits to a “heavier” “sin” than Claudio, and takes on a deeper moral responsibility in addition to having to bear the physical repercussions of their act in her pregnancy.

Despite Angelo's mistreatment of her, Mariana pleads with the Duke to be rightfully married to Angelo, whom she has slept with, of course, he thought that she was Isabella at the time. Even though Mariana may be getting what she wants, the fact that a perfectly virtuous and devoted woman ends up marrying a man that previously attempted to coerce, sexually defile, and abandon another woman

eradicates the possibility for a happy ending beyond superficial plot tidiness. She pleads, “Let me in safety raise me from my knees / Or else forever be confixed here, / A marble monument” (5.1.228-230). The image and potential future that Mariana introduces for herself as a “marble monument” echoes Hero's fake death in *Much Ado About Nothing*, as well as Hermione's transformation into a kind of monument for sixteen years of *The Winter's Tale*. The statue or “monument” symbolizes the male idealization of their beauty, virtue, and safety (if they are immobilized they are incapable of infidelity). As Neely indicates, women are so defined by marital status, that they are forced into dependence on men to legitimize them - so much so that they have to be willing to die (or pretend to die, or temporarily die) to ensure their own protection from often irrational, enraged, and paranoid men.

At the end of the play, Angelo would prefer death to mercy, Lucio begs not to be married to the “whore” (5.1.508) he has impregnated, and the Duke abruptly demands Isabella's hand in marriage. The Duke, a character that previously seemed impenetrable to the so called “dribbling dart of love” (1.3.2) suddenly volunteers himself into the mess of love, sexuality, and marriage, a disastrous world whose consequences he has been witnessing and working to clean up throughout the play. After the downfall of Angelo, the underlying reason for the Duke's attraction to Isabella seems questionable, and it remains completely possible that he is motivated by the same disturbing “morning-after” fantasies of defilement that drive Angelo. Isabella maintains a strong and unyielding voice

throughout the play, especially when defending her own sexuality, but at the end she remains shockingly silent. Her reaction to the Duke's proposal is left unknown to the reader, but based on her previously unyielding devotion to becoming a nun, it seems more likely than not that she would be horrified at the Duke's request. However, her voice and power quickly slip away when faced with the imminence of marriage, and her silence leaves the ending lacking any satisfying sense of resolution.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Sexuality: Appetite, Voice, and Death in *Othello*

Because of the similar plot arch, *Othello* invites comparison with its comedic counterpart, *Much Ado About Nothing*, as it rejects the absolution of comic release, and instead airs the festering issues behind the cuckoldry jokes, tragically exposing the dangers of male jealousy. *Othello* transforms the festive “merry wars”<sup>1</sup> between the genders in *Much Ado About Nothing* into a harsh and divisive separation that breeds miscommunication and results in tragic deaths. While male characters in the comedies joke about their fear of outspoken women, in *Othello* the male characters continually connect any exhibition of the oral – either speaking or eating – with female licentiousness; vocal liberty equates to sexual liberty, and the eventual silencing of these outspoken women through marriage, as they are silenced in the comedies, is no longer enough. The male friendships are a source for the escalation of negative emotions as they become united in irrational paranoia and rage against women. The women, on the other hand, create a support system and remain loyal to one another to a point of self-sacrificing love, modeling the loving and dedicated relationship that the marriage between Othello and Desdemona drastically fails to achieve.

When Othello laments, “O curse of marriage, / That we can call these

---

<sup>1</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 45.

delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!"<sup>2</sup> (3.3.272-274), he summarizes the main source of anxiety for many of the male characters: that despite marital and societal restraints placed on women when they become wives, the fear of their potential sexual power never completely subsides. The repetitive connection between sexuality and "appetite" presents an interesting rationale for anxiety because sexual desire becomes like the body's physical demand for nourishment. The somewhat oxymoronic reference to women as "delicate creatures" highlights the contradictory aspects of female sexuality as both alluring and dangerous. As Louis Montrose explains,

like the ubiquitous jokes and fears about cuckoldry to which they are usually linked, the frequent allusions within Shakespeare's plays to the incertitude of paternity point to a source of tension, to a potential contradiction, within the ostensibly patriarchal gender system of Elizabethan culture: Namely, that the dependence of the husband's masculine honor upon the feminine honor of his wife simultaneously subordinates and empowers her.<sup>3</sup>

This idea, that female sexuality "simultaneously subordinates and empowers" the wives in Shakespeare helps to explain the contradictory way that the male characters both attempt to idealize their wives as chaste, while also fearing the possibility of sexual betrayal. Unfortunately, this inescapable shadow of suspicion renders many Shakespearean relationships disastrous, especially Othello's and Desdemona's.

Othello's contradictory perception of Desdemona as a "delicate creature"

---

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997). All following quotes will appear in parenthesis in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 120.

encapsulates her as having two sexual selves: one is “delicate,” beautiful, and virginal, and the other “creature” part of her has a dangerous sexual “appetite.” Even before Iago's poisoning influence, Othello shows his predisposition to mistrusting women and foreshadows the eventual madness that will overwhelm him. Othello expresses the view that cuckoldry is inevitable, saying, “’Tis destiny unshunnable, like death. / Even then this forked plague is fated to us / When we do quicken” (3.3.279-281). Like Benedick, Othello sees cuckoldry as an inescapable event, eliciting a constant sense of apprehension. Unlike Benedick, Othello fails to maintain a relationship in spite of this anxiety, and his simile, “like death,” alludes to the eventual tragic deaths that will result because of his inability to cope with this fear of cuckoldry.

Even in the beginning of the play, the way that Othello describes Desdemona reveals her latent sexual threat: “she'd come again, and with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse” (1.3.148-149). The especially strong connotation of female voraciousness in “greedy” and “devour” evinces Othello's undercurrent of apprehension, but also reveals a great deal about Desdemona's character. According to Othello, Desdemona becomes attracted to him because of the exposure he provides to her of a world outside of her household chores. Othello says, “She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished / That heaven had made her such a man” (1.3.161-162). While “she wished that heaven had made her such a man” could mean that she desires a husband made for her, it could also mean that she wishes she had been made “such a man,” endowed with the freedom to

fight, explore, and adventure in the world as Othello has. While many heroines envy the liberty of men, whether it be Beatrice's desire to fight Claudio herself or Portia's dressing up in male garb, Desdemona finds that her only way to gain access to this exciting masculine liberty is through proximity by marrying Othello.

Even though Desdemona is not quite as outspoken as Isabella, Beatrice, or Hermione, both Othello and Iago still perceive her as a formidable threat. Iago testifies to Desdemona's power, saying of Othello, "His soul is so enfeathered to her love / That she may make, unmake, do what she list, / Even as her appetite shall play the god / With his weak function" (2.3.319-322). He gives Desdemona the power of a "god" that can reduce Othello to a "weak" prisoner, dependent on her sexual favors. Othello cites the feminine "appetite" earlier as the highest danger, and here Iago chooses the same word, endowing female sexual desire as a powerfully influential force over vulnerable masculinity.

The maturing of heterosexual romantic relationships is frequently compared to a changing appetite. In *Much Ado*, when Benedick changes his mind about marriage he says, "A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age" (2.3.210), humorously implying that male taste in women changes with maturity, but in *Othello*, the men express an intense feeling of susceptibility to the power of feminine "appetite." Speaking of Othello and Desdemona, Iago differentiates between feminine and masculine sexual appetite with the female appetite holding the more powerful position. He says that for Othello, "The food

that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida” and for Desdemona, “when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice” (1.3.340-343). While Othello may find his currently pleasing “food” turn “bitter,” Desdemona seems to be the one with the real sexual agency in the relationship, at least in Iago's mind. He refers to her “choice,” an element that he omits from his depiction of Othello, a man helplessly afflicted by the “luscious” temptation of alleged feminine wiles.

Like other male characters, Othello is both drawn to and threatened by Desdemona's eloquence. In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes becomes convinced of Hermione's infidelity when he witnesses her successful persuasion of his friend, Polixenes, to stay with them longer. Angelo becomes attracted to Isabella in *Measure for Measure* while she pleads with him to save her brother's life, demonstrating her impressive level of logic and reasoning. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* successfully argues to save Antonio's life. These women are simultaneously sexually attractive and threatening because of their articulate abilities, and while the male characters are drawn to them, desiring them as wives, they also feel an almost compulsive need to gain control over their voices, as if controlling female voice can serve as a comforting metaphor for controlling their bodies. The repeated outcome in each scenario is the reaffirmation and acceptance of male dominance in marriage. Whether these women are silenced through accepting their submissive roles as wives, or are physically silenced through death (as in the case of Desdemona and, in a way, Hermione), each one of their voices is

diminished or silenced by the final scene of the play. Othello admits that Desdemona holds an impressive power over men, saying “She might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks” (4.1.177) or “she will sing the savageness out of a bear!” (4.1.181), and while her attempts to persuade him to change his mind about Cassio are unsuccessful, she unknowingly fuels his suspicions by asserting her opinion.

In many of the other plays, women lose their articulateness as marital relationships progress; however, in this play, Othello is rendered inarticulate as he descends into his paranoid ravings about Desdemona's fidelity. The noble and eloquent speaker of the first scenes disappears, as he stammers, “Lie with her? Lie on her? We say 'lie on her' when they belie her. Lie with her? 'Swounds, that's fulsome! Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief. To confess and be hanged for his labour. First to be hanged and then to confess! . . . Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!” (4.1.34-41). Unlike Benedick, who uneasily jokes about the cuckold's horns, Othello claims “A horned man's a monster and a beast” (4.1.59) with seriousness and truth (he himself turns into a murderous “monster”). In the end of their relationship, Desdemona retains her voice, while Othello loses his, but the result is disastrous. Unlike the couples of the comedies that recede into marriages that stifle female voice, this scenario shows the loss of male voice resulting in utter tragedy.

Othello initiates the final act, ending the play with a violence and division that leaves only the bond between the two women intact, although it does not save

their lives. He confronts Desdemona, “Minion, your dear lies dead, / And your unblessed fate hies. Strumpet, I come. / Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes, are blotted. / Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted”

(5.1.34-37). The repetition and rhyme (“blotted” and “spotted”) create the effect of a kind of incantation, sounding out the insane and creepy trance that has taken over Othello. He sees her sleeping and ruthlessly plots, “Yet I'll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.3-5). Othello expresses the desire to preserve this image of her sleeping, statuesque, white like “alabaster” because it would maintain the vision of the perfect wife: beautiful, sexually non-threatening, and completely safe.

While this appreciation of a moribund wife seems disturbing, it is not all that uncommon in Shakespeare. Hero's faked death redeems her to Claudio, and the deathly statuesque form of Hermione is practically worshipped by Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. The death of a wife completely silences her voice and removes the threatening element of her sexuality, allowing her to be idealized as pure and devoted.

Because his following line, “Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men” (5.2.6), begins with “yet,” it reveals a moment of hesitation, but unlike Hero and Hermione, Desdemona cannot be redeemed through the image of death alone. Othello's sense of anxiety and betrayal is so great that he has to assert complete control over her by physically killing her with his own hands. Strangling her, he makes it impossible for her to speak, attempting to end her voice and her life at

the same time. He rationalizes this murder as a justice to mankind, fatally aligning himself with men in general instead of with his wife. Comparing her to a rose, he condemns her: “When I have plucked thy rose / I cannot give it vital growth again. / It needs must wither” (5.2.13-15). Choosing the image of the rose, Othello connects the end of her life and her sexuality. Ultimately, death is the only way for Othello to redeem his love for Desdemona, and he resolves, “I will kill thee / And love thee after” (5.2.18-19).

After Emilia's intervention, Othello finally realizes his mistake, and turns his anger and disgust upon himself, although at the same time he attempts to lessen his responsibility in the tragedy, saying he is “an honourable murderer, if you will, / For naught I did in hate, but all in honour” (5.2.300-301). After Desdemona's death, he seems to regain his articulate abilities, but his logic remains weak in his claim that he did nothing in “hate.” He continues to consider himself a figure of justice: “Then you must speak / Of one that loved not wisely, but too well, / Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand, / Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away” (5.2.352-356). He degrades himself in his comparison to a “base Indian,” but even in his remorseful state, he still continues to completely objectify Desdemona in his reduction of her into a “pearl.” Describing himself as “not one easily jealous” is so full of inexcusable self-denial that although Desdemona forgives him, redemption from the audience may be more difficult to grant.

Male friendships in other plays are often powerful, dedicated, and capable

of existing alongside the men's marital relationships. In *Othello*, male friendship, represented through Iago and Othello, deteriorates into a source for jealousy and madness. Although Iago plots Othello's downfall, the extreme passion and motivation with which he obsesses over ruining Othello's marriage must be a sign of powerful emotions, maybe even love, that have been twisted into this depth of malice. Also, because Iago specifically targets Othello's relationship with Desdemona, instead of ruining some other aspect of his life, his intentions take on a much more sexual or romantic tone, as if he is a jealous, vengeful, and unrequited lover. The relationship between Othello and Iago seems to be the antithesis to that of Antonio and Bassanio, as well as a more corrupted but similar version to that of Leontes and Polixenes. In *Much Ado*, Benedick testifies to Hero's fidelity, working to facilitate Claudio's marriage, whereas Iago consistently pollutes Othello's mind against Desdemona.

While the same sex bond between Emilia and Desdemona functions lovingly but separately, without negatively interfering in their marital relationships, the relationship between Iago and Othello supplants and perverts their marital commitments. Near the middle of the play, Iago and Othello stage what appears to be a mock marriage, kneeling and vowing devotion to each other. It is at this point that Othello chooses Iago over Desdemona, and puts into action the series of violent events that lead to the tragic deaths at the end. Othello assures Iago that he will not change his mind about Desdemona, saying, “my bloody thoughts with violent pace / Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love”

(3.3.461-462). Epically comparing his “bloody thoughts” to the “Pontic Sea” (3.3.456), and then kneeling, Othello initiates this ceremony with a tone of grandeur. He continues, “by yon marble heaven, / In the due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words” (3.3.462-464). The religious and marital connotation of the words, “heaven,” “reverence,” “sacred vow” and “engage,” -- even though they reference Othello's vow to kill Desdemona--complemented by Iago's kneeling with him, work together to create the feeling of a sacred ceremony.

Iago takes the initiative to solidify this bond between them, kneeling with Othello, beckoning to the heavens to “Witness that here Iago doth give up / The execution of his wit, hands, heart / To wronged Othello's service” (3.3.468-470). The whole scene seems reminiscent of the exchange between Antonio and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, when Portia gives her wedding ring to Bassanio to pass on to Antonio, saying, “Then you shall be his surety. Give him this / And bid him keep it better than the other” and Antonio responds, “Here, Lord Bassanio, swear to keep this ring . . . (5.1.253-255). Although it is much more subtle, the passing of the ring from Antonio to Bassanio testifies to the bond, similar to a marriage, shared between them, and the necessity for it to end as Bassanio begins his life with Portia. As Bassanio hands Antonio his wedding ring, he releases his friend into marital life. However, this exchange of vows between Othello and Iago acts as a refusal to choose heterosexual marriage over male friendship and stands as a deterioration of male bonds because of Iago's falsity.

While Iago's motives may be based in a love for Othello, his jealousy and malice spread, infect, and destroy Othello's and Desdemona's marriage, as well as the bond between the two men. Iago tells Othello, "I am your own for ever" (3.3.482) with a ringing finality.

In his own marriage, Iago voices the utmost misogynistic sentiments. He tells Emilia, generalizing about all women, "You are pictures out of door, / Bells in your parlours; wildcats in your kitchens, / Saints in your injuries; devils being offended, / Players in your housewifery, and hussies in your beds" (2.1.113-115). While his acerbic comment may not be meant as a serious manifesto of the masculine misconception of women, he effectively outlines the contradictory perception of women as "saints," "devils," and "hussies."

Iago continually expresses complete mistrust in women and a view of sexuality as a corrosive force that needs to be constantly fought. Like the sonnet speaker in the "dark lady" sonnets, Iago emphasizes the need for reason to govern sexual desire. He scoffs, "Virtue? A fig! 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are the gardeners" (1.3.316-318); by invoking the image of the garden, Iago implies the need for the domestication of natural but somewhat chaotic sexual impulses. He argues that "our wills," or lust, act as the controlling force over our bodies and that in order to live in "virtue," one must overcome these urges. Without a gardener, the plants in a garden would become wild, overrun with weeds and completely disorganized; Iago emphasizes the necessity for rationality to curb the wild and untamed sexual

“will,” asserting control in order to perpetuate life and with it order and stability. He continues, “If the beam of our lives had not one scale of reason to peise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts” (1.3.322-326). This “baseness of our natures” targets sexuality as the primary negative component of humanity, unlike Othello's identification with the “base Indian,” which refers to the more accurate “baseness” of these two characters in their ability to wrongfully accuse and mistreat their wives.

Despite being considered a threat, Desdemona goes from being her father's discarded “jewel,” to Othello's discarded “pearl” without much of a chance for self-driven initiative. Like Hero, Desdemona withstands great abuse from her father, horrendous and irrational accusations from her husband, and in the face of all of this overwhelmingly negative and disparaging male force, she has only one consistently loving and loyal bond, and that is with her female friend, Emilia. Like Beatrice and Paulina, Emilia takes on a role that is feminine yet almost knightly, standing up for the honor and chastity of her wronged mistress, even in the potential and eventual loss of her own life.

I find Emilia, like Beatrice and Paulina, to be one of Shakespeare's most interesting, complex, and dynamic female characters, because unlike the idealized and chaste Desdemona, she begins to bridge the gap between genders as she demonstrates a generally masculine ability to speak frankly about sex, as well as

to hold a somewhat crude but bluntly truthful opinion about the relationships between the sexes. Neely says that Emilia “combines sharp-tongued honesty with warm affection. Her views are midway between Desdemona's and Bianca's and between those of the women and those of the men.”<sup>4</sup>

Emilia shows a frankness about sexuality, admitting the potential faults in both genders, but also specifying, “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” (5.1.84-86). She continues, “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” (5.1.91-94). Surprisingly, Emilia applies the sexualized economic imagery of “treasures” to men, when it is so often used to represent women. Also, while men tend to turn the entire female body into an object, like Othello's use of “pearl,” here Emilia specifically “treasures” only the part of men that would lead to reproduction. She reclaims sexual desire for women, claiming that they have the same “palates” “as husbands have,” applying the language of eating that has also so often been used as a vulgar metaphor for sex, and normalizing it as a natural characteristic of both men and women.

After Othello exposes his growing irrational jealousy, Emilia amends her eating conceit for the relationship between the genders, remarking about men: “They are all but stomachs, and we all but food. / They eat us hungrily, and when they are full, / They belch us” (3.4.100-103). The frank humor of her statement is

---

4 Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 115.

entertaining but also disturbing in its implications about the state of romantic relationships between men and women. Unlike Iago, who places the eating power with women, Emilia cites men as having the ultimate power to consume women, and then reject them, and Emilia's view turns out to be the more accurate one for the play.

As the final scene unfolds, the heterosexual marital bond deteriorates, but the bond between the two women remains strong, revealing the deep level of love and loyalty between them. Even though she is technically her servant, Emilia acts primarily as Desdemona's best friend and only true advocate. Emilia rants, expressing an anger and bluntness completely denied to the idolized Desdemona: "Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company?" (4.2.141). By asking this question, "who keeps her company?" Emilia reveals the absurdity of Othello's accusation, but also seems to imply that perhaps Emilia herself is the one that keeps Desdemona company, therefore exonerating Desdemona from Othello's accusation, but also emphasizing the bond between these women that supersedes Desdemona's official marriage. As Emilia dresses the bed with the wedding sheets, and helps Desdemona to undress, Desdemona appeals to her, saying, "If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of these same sheets" (4.3.23-24). This scene between the two women seems genuine, touching, and sad. As women would perhaps help each other to dress before a wedding night, here Emilia helps to prepare Desdemona for her death bed. Their communication here, as Desdemona expresses her fear and Emilia vents her anger, reinforces the honesty

that is completely missing from so many of the heterosexual relationships.

Because Desdemona's character is made to be impeccably giving, virtuous, and selfless, she is unable in the final scene to stand up for herself more than modestly. Desdemona's final words are cryptic and difficult to interpret. While she has so long defended herself against Othello's wrongful accusations, when Emilia asks, "who hath done this deed?" she replies, "Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!" (5.2.133-134). Why she absolves Othello and blames herself seems inexplicable. This final request, "commend me to my kind lord," comes across as almost sickeningly forgiving. Emilia, on the other hand, takes on a confrontational power that is a much more satisfying expression of the audience's anger with Othello and Iago. She cannot believe the betrayal of Iago, repeating "My husband?" several times (5.2.153), and when he threatens her, she strongly replies:

Thou hast not half that power to do me harm  
As I have to be hurt. O gull, O dolt,  
As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed--  
I care not for thy sword, I'll make thee known  
Though I lost twenty lives. Help, help, ho! Help!  
The Moor hath killed my mistress. Murder, murder! (5.2.169-174).

Emilia takes the aggressive power from the men, claiming that they do not have the "power" to "hurt" her, that only she herself possesses the ability to "be hurt." While the option to completely avoid "hurt" never appears, at least Emilia works to give herself some agency within an incredibly frightening, male dominated situation. Despite the threats on her life, she valiantly continues, playing the brave role of the only person willing to expose the truth. She lambastes Iago, "O

murderous coxcomb! What should such a fool / Do with so good a wife?"

(5.2.240-241), a point that seriously resonates within this play of virtuous wives and horrible husbands.

Emilia dies in a moment of love for her friend, and she uses her final breath to uphold Desdemona's wishes, lauding, "Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor. / So come my soul to bliss as I speak true. / So, speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2.256-258). Here is a moment in which female "speaking" becomes intimately connected to literal death; the end of voice so often associated with marriage in the comedies is physically ended in the death of Emilia, literally killed by her own husband for refusing to accept wifely silence and speaking out against him.

In *Othello* Shakespeare carries issues of male jealousy over from *Much Ado About Nothing*, but he resolves them in a dreadfully tragic way, without providing a redeeming model for marriage, even if he provides a model for love in the relationship between the two women. Neely also makes the distinction between *Othello* and the comedies, saying, "The comic resolution of male with female, idealism with realism, love with sex, the individual with society is aborted. The play concludes, not with symmetrical pairings off and a movement toward marriage beds, but with one final triangle: Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello dead on wedding sheets."<sup>5</sup> This image, of the three bodies dead on the wedding sheets, is indeed a powerful one, especially because of the inclusion of

---

5 Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 135.

Emilia. The ill-fated marriage bed consists not only of the husband and wife, but also of the wife's closest female friend, the only person that believed and loved her with a indefatigable commitment. The final image forcefully emphasizes the tragic loss of virtuous women to the unfounded but pervasive male fears of female sexuality, as well as the potential strengths of same-sex bonds despite the dissolution of all others.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### **Holding Hands: Friendship, Jealousy, and Redemption in *The Winter's Tale***

In *The Winter's Tale*, female sexuality continues to be as frightening to the male characters as it has always been, but at the same time, it holds the only potential for redemption and healing. The children repair the damage of their parents' generation, while also presenting a new type of romantic relationship that embraces female sexuality and voice without male anxiety or jealousy. The steadfast bonds of female friendship attain a new and more assertive level, as Hermione and Paulina achieve what Desdemona and Emilia are tragically unable to do; they find a way not only to survive, but also to repair the damage done by Leontes' rage, reassembling the family, although with the irreversible and tragic loss of Mamillius.

The first act effectively outlines the issues surrounding sexuality, jealousy, romance and friendship that continue throughout the play. Opening with a conversation between Archidamus and Camillo, the play immediately emphasizes the importance of a legitimate male heir to the king, and consequently introduces both the source of Leontes' ensuing jealousy, as well as its eventual cure. In the very first scene, Archidamus lauds the “unspeakable comfort of your young prince, Mamillius” (1.1.29-30).<sup>1</sup> Camillo describes him as “one that, indeed,

---

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997). 1.1.29-30.

physics the subject, makes old hearts fresh” (1.1.33-34). This ability to “physic” or heal becomes increasingly important as Mamillius acts as the remedy that finally cures Leontes of his madness, although it costs Mamillius his life. The power of children to make “old hearts fresh” can also be seen in the end of the play, when the union of Perdita and Florizel brings the long separated bonds between Leontes, Hermione, and Polixenes back together; the play is framed in the first and last scenes with the emphasis upon the revitalizing power of children.

The relationship between Leontes and Polixenes focuses on the loss of their innocent childhood bond when they enter the adult world, corrupted by female sexuality. They address each other as “brother” (1.2.4) several times in their initial exchange, enforcing this idea of their closeness from youth. Reminiscing about their childhood together, they fantasize about an idealized masculine world devoid of female sexuality, or sexuality at all. Polixenes expresses his desire “to be boy eternal” (1.2.66) and says, “We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i'th' sun, / And bleat the one at th'other. What we changed / Was innocence for innocence” (1.2.69-71). Hermione's obvious sexuality, visible in her pregnant body, confronts the kings, tearing them away from this fantasy of masculine innocence. Janet Adelman explains that “the sexualized female body is the sign of male separation and loss” and the site or proof of “original sin” for these men.<sup>2</sup> Hermione challenges the kings' accusations when she responds, “Of this make no conclusion, lest you say / Your queen and I are devils” (1.2.83-84).

---

<sup>2</sup> Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 221.

Othello often refers to Desdemona as a “fair devil,” and Hermione's protest against being portrayed as a “devil” here exposes the male characters' unfair tendency to both desire and condemn women for their sexuality.

In this scene, the connection between female voice and male anxiety about female sexuality becomes exceptionally clear. At first, Leontes himself orders Hermione, “Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you” (1.2.28), showing his intense desire for control over her voice and metaphorically over her sexuality. Initially, he approves of her arguments, exclaiming, “Well said, Hermione!” (1.2.33), but as she continues to persuade Polixenes, Leontes suddenly becomes intensely and obstinately jealous. Visibly pregnant, Hermione confronts Leontes with her sexual power both in the image of her body, but also in the strength of her words.

In a display of flirtatious wit, Hermione hints at the connection between speech and sexual “potency” saying, “A lady's 'verily's / As potent as a lord's” (1.2.50-51). This implication that both female speech and sexuality are as “potent” as men's holds dangerous implications in Leontes' distrustful mind. In a moment of sad irony, Hermione jokes to Polixenes that if he does not willingly agree to stay, he will “Force me to keep you as a prisoner” (1.2.53), not knowing that she herself will soon be the real “prisoner.” In a display of lighthearted sexual humor, she warns Leontes, “You may ride's / With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs ere / With spur we heat an acre” (1.2.96-98). Unfortunately, he does not take her lesson, and the more that he acts out in violence against her, the more he loses her and his children.

Leontes claims that Hermione's success convincing Polixenes to stay is second to only one other moment of articulation when,

Three crabbed months had soured themselves to death  
Ere I could make thee open thy white hand  
And clap thyself my love. Then didst thou utter,  
'I am yours for ever.' (1.2.104-107).

Leontes' recounting of Hermione's ideal moment combines the male desire for control over both her voice and her sexual body. Claiming the sense of power, Leontes' stresses "I could make thee open thy white hand" (1.2.105), an image with some latent sexual violence. This image of the white hand holds the threat of the statue that Hermione will eventually become, but it also has a sense of the aggressive male desire to enforce itself over female sexuality and "white" chastity. Because female speech carries so much sexual weight in the plays – women are perceived as sexual threats when they display articulate ability – Leontes finds Hermione's statement that renders her into his possession to be her most admirable moment of speech. It is as if as she swears herself to him verbally, she is also granting him complete sexual dominion over her. Similarly, her "hand" and voice are linked in Leontes' perception of her sexuality here, and it is when Hermione "gives her hand to Polixenes" and speaks with him privately that Leontes is immediately overcome with jealousy. Leontes sees Hermione and Polixenes "paddling palms and pinching fingers" (1.2.117), and the action of their hands symbolizes sexual intercourse in Leontes' mind. These small liberties in hands and in speech transform into signs of momentous sexual betrayal to Leontes, and he suddenly turns to his son and asks, "Mamillius, / Art thou my

boy?" (1.2.120-121).

Unlike Polixenes' idealizations of childhood innocence, Leontes feels so degraded by Hermione's perceived sexual betrayal that he imagines himself as painfully regressing. Looking at his son, Leontes says, "methoughts I did recoil / Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched / In my green velvet coat; my dagger muzzled" (1.2.156-158). The especially negative connotation of "recoil" reveals the unpleasantly jolting effect that this vision of himself as a child causes in Leontes. Questioning the paternity of his son is so disturbing to him, that Leontes expresses feelings that hint at a fear of castration or at least of sexual regression to a point of impotence, using the image of a "dagger muzzled." Adelman explains Leontes' reaction: "Seeing himself in his 'unbreech'd' son may temporarily relieve Leontes of the guilt associated with the use of his own dangerous ornament (1.2.155, 158), but it must simultaneously recall the period when he himself was not securely differentiated from his mother."<sup>3</sup> By attributing to Leontes an anxiety toward his own "mother," Adelman recognizes the level of discomfort that Leontes associates with maternity, and it also extends to his feelings of disconcertion toward Hermione. Mary Ellen Lamb explains that

the term "muzzled," appropriate to a dangerous beast, reinforces a sense of aggression implicit in early modern masculinity. Leontes's representation of his muzzled dagger of early boyhood implies that since that time, his masculinity, as represented by his now unmuzzled dagger/phallus, has become able to bite its master, to become an instrument of self-aggression rather than of love for another.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 226.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Ellen Lamb, "Engendering the Narrative Act: Old Wives' Tales in *The Winter's Tale*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*," in *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 40, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 529-553. MLA International Bibliography, EBSCOhost.

Leontes finds Hermione's sexuality threatening and corrosive, worrying about her influence over their son, but he also reveals intense discomfort with his own sexuality and a need to defend his "masculinity" that is deeply driven from his childhood, long before Hermione entered his life.

Combined with Polinexes' nostalgia for the innocence of childhood, these two men render female sexuality as corrupting male innocence, while overpowering and rendering male sexuality into childlike innocuousness. Like the male leads before him, Leontes' greatest fear is "a cuckold's horn" (1.2.271), and he uses vile, violent, and degrading imagery when talking about female sexuality in an apparent attempt to defend or comfort himself. First, he compares the cuckolded husband to a man that has found "his pond fished by his next neighbour" (1.2.196), using a metaphor that equates female sexual organs to male-owned property. Immediately after raging against Hermione's inexcusable alleged transgression, he then reduces her betrayal to normalcy, arguing that because female adultery must be so widespread, men are united in a kind of cuckoldry solidarity: "there's comfort in't, / Whiles other men have gates, and those gates opened, / As mine, against their will" (1.2.197-199). He estimates that the "tenth of mankind" (1.2.199) has been wronged by their wives, continuing, "From east, west, north, and south, be it concluded, / No barricado for a belly" (1.2.204-205). He reduces the beautiful, eloquent, and intelligent Hermione to an abysmal level of degradation and objectification when he tries to convince Camillo to agree, "My wife's a hobby-horse" (1.2.278). In his condemnation of

his wife, Leontes shows a real desire for solidarity and support with other men. He imagines himself one of many male victims, and he tries to goad Camillo into joining his tirade. This desire for and valuing of male bonds over heterosexual romantic or marital relationships occurs frequently (Antonio/Bassanio, Benedick/Claudio, Othello/Iago), but consistently fails to offer the happiness or satisfaction that the male figures anticipate.

As the male bonds dissolve leading to the deaths of Mamillius, Antigonus, and the exile of Camillo, the female bonds turn out to be life-saving. Leontes claims that he wouldn't "Sully the purity and whiteness of my sheets" (1.2.329) unless he was sure of his wife's infidelity, recalling Othello's violent murder of his innocent wife on their wedding sheets. He only avoids this fate because of the intervention of Paulina, who cares for Hermione secretly. Without even talking to or confronting this man who was like a "brother," Leontes orders Polixenes to be poisoned and killed.

While Leontes' male friends stand up for Hermione and try to abate Leontes' anger, they also express a deeply misogynistic and often violent desire for control over women. Even though Antigonus defends Hermione and argues with Leontes, when discussing the hypothetical situation of Hermione's infidelity he disturbingly expresses desires to control female sexuality by targeting his own daughters. He claims that if Hermione proves to be untrue, he will have his three daughters, that are only young children still, pay the intense punishment: "If this prove true, they'll pay for't. By mine honour, / I'll geld 'em all. Fourteen they shall

not see, / To bring false generations” (2.1.148-150). Showing an unbelievable inability to separate female identities, Antigonus assumes that if one woman demonstrates infidelity, even his own daughters are completely untrustworthy. He turns this image of physical violence even on himself, claiming that he would rather castrate himself, than allow his daughters to bear illegitimate children: “They are co-heirs, / And I had rather glib myself than they / Should not produce fair issue” (2.1.150-152). The possibility for women to “not produce fair issue” continually reappears as the primary fear of both men and, surprising enough, women. Shakespeare does seem to show a sense of comedic retribution, as Antigonus is later eaten by a bear, implying that his atrocious attitudes are not excused in this tale.

While the play shows the disintegration of male bonds between Polixenes and Leontes, Camillo remains a positive figure as a loyal servant and friend, demonstrating dedication and caring for both kings. When Camillo transfers his allegiance from Leontes, Polixenes says, “Give me thy hand. / Be pilot to me, and thy places shall / Still neighbour mine” (1.2.447-449). The giving of hands signifies important exchanges in this scene, Hermione's to Leontes, Hermione's to Polixenes, and now Camillo's to Polixenes, even though they represent very different moments. Hermione seems to give her hand to Leontes as a submission or a concession of ownership, and Leontes sees her same action to Polixenes as a grave betrayal and a symbol of secret sexual indiscretion. The giving of hands between Camillo and Polixenes; however, acts as a sign of caring and loyalty, a

mutual expression of commitment and trust.

The marriage between Hermione and Leontes highlights the danger of miscommunication and the folly of unfounded masculine paranoia because, like many men in earlier plays, Leontes is incapable of trusting Hermione despite her unwavering virtue and chastity. Their situation is both more complicated and more tragic because of the fact that they have children, although their children eventually also serve as their salvation. In this play, Shakespeare expands the masculine potential to wreak destruction because jealousy no longer only affects the couple, but also endangers the entire family, including the completely innocent children. Leontes' role as a father expands his capacity to cause tragedy, but it also puts him in the unique position to do penance, and to eventually reassemble some of his family.

Leontes believes Hermione's sexuality to be so corrosive that it would endanger even her children. He takes his son from her, saying, "Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him. / Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you / Have too much blood in him" (2.1.62-64). In this moment, Leontes admits that he is actually concerned more with Hermione's "blood" or influence on Mamillius than with Polixenes'.<sup>5</sup> A character whose name stresses a connection to the maternal, Mamillius, represents the importance of the relationship between mother and son. His death results from "the attendant loss of maternal presence,

---

<sup>5</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 225.

without which –his death tells us-- we cannot live.”<sup>6</sup> Leontes tries to separate himself and his children from Hermione, inadvertently causing the death of his son, the sixteen year loss of his daughter, and the barren and miserable extended winter without his wife.

Juxtaposed to Leontes' irrational anger, Hermione's calm, cogent responses emphasize her superior disposition. In the face of all of Leontes' hateful raging, Hermione simply asserts, “I must be patient till the heavens look / With an aspect more favourable” (2.1.108-109). She demonstrates a quiet bravery and adherence to truth, while showing a propensity for deferring to higher powers. In the trial scene, Hermione stands up for her own honor, boldly saying, “innocence shall make / False accusation blush, and tyranny / Tremble at patience” (3.2.28-30). She stands for the power of female “innocence” over male “tyranny,” a lesson that repeatedly appears in the wronging of innocent wives like Hero and Desdemona by their tyrannous husbands. Differentiating between types of love, Hermione claims that she only showed Polixenes the platonic love of friendship, “a kind of love as might become / A lady like me; with a love, even such, / So, and no other, as yourself commanded” (3.2.62-64). The idea that “love” can be “commanded” by men appears unquestionable, especially since Leontes commands it and then persecutes Hermione because of it.

While Leontes continues to accuse her, she says, “You speak a language that I understand not” (3.2.77). The issue of “language” as a sign of power or

---

<sup>6</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 223.

sexuality in both men and women continues to reappear throughout the play, although its significance changes. Like Claudio and Othello, Leontes never believes his wife's words. He tells his son, "Yet they say we are / Almost as like as eggs. Women say so, / That will say anything. But were they false" (1.2.132-134). He suffers for his wrongful belief that women are "false" and "will say anything" because he loses his family and later becomes dependent on Paulina's words and advice for many years. It is only after the death of Mamillius that Leontes believes the oracle's proclamation of Hermione's fidelity. In his stubborn refusal to listen to his wife, he loses his entire family. Adelman points out that Leontes "has in effect exorcised female generativity and achieved the all-male landscape he thought he wanted,"<sup>7</sup> but he soon realizes the magnitude and value of what he has lost.

As Leontes' power wanes, Paulina's waxes; like Beatrice and Emilia, Paulina occupies an essential space within all of the crisscrossing gendered entanglements because she speaks, exposes, and defends the truth, while exemplifying a loving model in her loyalty and commitment to Hermione. She tells Hermione, "These dangerous, unsafe lunes i'th' King, beshrew them! / He must be told on't, and he shall. The office / Becomes a woman best. I'll take't upon me" (2.2.33-35). Recognizing and assessing the danger of the situation, Paulina acts like a knight taking on a valiant quest, pledging to act as Hermione's "advocate" (2.2.42). She even comforts the male jailer, saying, "Do not you fear.

---

<sup>7</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 227.

Upon mine honour, / I will stand twixt you and danger” (2.2.69). She anticipates her encounter with Leontes, claiming, “I’ll use that tongue I have. If wit flow from’t / As boldness from my bosom, let’t not be doubted / I shall do good” (2.2.55-57). Unlike the eloquence of Hermione that creates humorous puns and persuasive logic, Paulina demonstrates a simple but sincere use of female speech that is completely based in feeling “as boldness from my bosom.”

Paulina exemplifies the power of female voice to expose the truth and to defend feminine virtue. Like Beatrice or Emilia, Paulina has a more liberated and confrontational voice than the victimized wife. She stresses the ability of words to work as a salve, saying, “I / Do come with words as medicinal as true, / Honest as either, to purge him of that humour / That presses him from sleep” (2.3.36-39). Unfortunately, Leontes takes Paulina's verbal affront as offensive, and repeatedly challenges her husband, “canst not rule her?” (2.3.47). Continuing in her role as a feminine defender, Paulina boldly claims, “And would by combat make her good, so were I / A man, the worst about you” (2.3.61-62). This sentiment is very similar to the one that Beatrice expresses when she says, “O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place” (4.2.303-304). Frustrated by being denied the freedom of physical confrontation available to men, these women fight for their female friends through compelling and brave verbal challenges.

Leontes picks up on this assertive confrontational aspect of Paulina's voice, calling her “A mankind witch” (2.3.68). He sees her authoritative attitude as masculine, presenting her as a female aberration. Leontes also connects her

outspoken demonstration with salaciousness and a complete gender reversal, saying, “A callat / Of boundless tongue, who late hath beat her husband, / And now baits me!” (2.3.92-94). Her “boundless tongue” threatens anarchy in the household, making Paulina a dominating shrew that would “beat her husband.” Calling her a “callat” also specifically links her “boundless tongue” to boundless sexuality. The synecdoche of “tongue” highlights and represents this one element of Paulina to stand for her entire being; it reduces and epitomizes her to her speech and extends judgment based solely on her words to her entire moral character.

This judgment changes drastically after Hermione's death. Once proven true, Leontes holds Paulina's counsel in the highest regard. It is also important that she has been widowed at this point, fitting in with the assertion that maids and widows have a liberty in speech that is denied most wives in the plays. Leontes regrets that he did not follow her “counsel” (5.1.52) and tells her “Thou speak'st truth” (5.1.55). It is only after the death of his wife and son and the abandonment of his daughter that Leontes is able to recognize the truth in Paulina's words and his own wrong-doing. Paulina holds real power over the king, who swears he will never marry but with her permission (5.1.70). Essentially, Paulina watches and influences Leontes during Hermione's absence, waiting for him to repent for the damage that he has caused.

Several comments come together as evidence to create the possibility that Hermione is alive and hiding with only the company of Paulina for the sixteen

years. When it is said that Paulina “hath privately twice or thrice a day, ever since the death of Hermione, visited that removed house” (5.2.95-97), Shakespeare opens up the possibility that Hermione has enacted a fake death, much like an extension of Hero's, and Paulina is the only person to know the truth. Leontes seems never to have seen the statue before, and Paulina's insistent warnings to him not to touch her because of wet paint (5.3.81) also hint at the possibility that Hermione has been alive and secluded all along with Paulina acting as her guardian and advocate. It is in fact Paulina that tells Leontes, “I say she's dead” (3.2.201)- she does not say “she is dead,” but specifically asserts herself as the authority on Hermione's state and elevates the power of female voice over the perceived reality of life and death. She retains complete control over Hermione's statue or body, saying, “for the stone is mine” (5.3.58). In the absence of marriage, Paulina claims ownership over Hermione, but this female bond is based in caring, unlike Leontes' previous controlling possessiveness. Paulina's protection of Hermione recalls when Emilia defends Desdemona by saying, “Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company?” (4.2.141). Female “company” continues to gain power from *Othello*, when it was touching but ineffectual, to *The Winter's Tale*, when it is actually life saving.

Hermione's death forces Leontes to mourn her, live without her, and ultimately to realize her true value to his life. A combination of Hero's illusory and Desdemona's real death, the plan to fake Hermione's death is never revealed to the audience, and remains ambiguous in the end, granting her a heightened

sense of awe and power. Neely writes, “Idealization is effected when dead mothers are ritually buried and mourned and their memory cherished,” and also points out that “Paulina is the only mother in the romances who does not undergo a real or apparent death, and the fact that her sexuality and her motherhood are dramatically invisible confirms the romances' requirement that mothers be dead.”<sup>8</sup> It seems to be true that Paulina's power is heightened as her identity as wife ends, and then subsides again once she is married to Camillo and is reestablished as a sexual figure.

This potential secret bond between women reveals one of the many ways that female characters form support systems to withstand the oppressive force of male jealousy and violence. Unlike Emilia and Desdemona, Paulina and Hermione find a way to survive masculine rage, protecting themselves and then even reestablishing their previous lives once the storm of jealousy has passed. Or, more specifically, Hermione finds a way to reestablish her life with the help of Paulina, who loses her own husband. After Paulina awakens her, Hermione says she has “preserved” (5.3.127) herself to see Perdita again, adding a new dimension of female love to the entire scenario. Because she loves her daughter, and with the help of her female friend, Hermione lives for sixteen years in secrecy and solitude. She never directly speaks to Leontes in the end, although we are told by Polixenes that “she embraces him” (5.3.112). Even after Leontes' proclaimed attempts for atonement, Hermione seems reluctant to speak out to him again, only

---

<sup>8</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 174-175.

addressing her daughter.

Leontes' decision to marry Paulina to Camillo at the end of the play is a complicated one. Neely claims that “this marriage is offered as final testimony to the equality and mutuality of Leontes and Paulina”<sup>9</sup> because Leontes says “Thou shouldst a husband take by my consent, / As I by thine a wife. This is a match, / And made between's by vows” (5.3.136-38). However, instead of a testament to their equality, I would say that this final marriage is Leontes' way of asserting his power, and returning Paulina to a safely domestic and subordinate position. Leontes has the final word of the play, and Paulina's complete lack of a verbal response speaks to the subduing and silencing power marriage has on so many female characters. Leontes addresses Camillo, saying, “Come, Camillo, / And take her by the hand” (5.3.144-145), giving the power and initiative of the marriage over to Camillo, and leaving Paulina completely without a say.

The new generation of lovers offers some hope and solace in their ability to avoid the jealousy that plagues their fathers. Florizel leaves behind the major preoccupations of Leontes; he seems unconcerned about being cuckolded, and he values his relationship with Perdita over fulfilling a role as legitimate male heir to the kingdom. At the same time, Perdita shows a boldness in her verbal sexual assertions, and Florizel does not consider her voice or her sexuality to be threatening. The entire scene of the sheep-shearing contains an atmosphere of youth, energy, and sexuality that stands in harsh contrast to the coldness and

---

<sup>9</sup> Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, 208.

loneliness of Leontes' court. Adelman argues that “Shakespeare achieves the recuperation of the maternal body and the attendant turn from tragedy to romance by immersion in the fertile space of a decidedly female pastoral,”<sup>10</sup> and it is indeed true that the love between Perdita and Florizel completely changes a play that seemed to be heading only toward tragic endings.

Perdita is eloquent, but in a markedly meek and unthreatening manner that may result from her youth and undeveloped sexual identity. She uses connotatively acquiescent words like “blush” (4.4.12), “swoon” (4.4.13), and “tremble” (4.4.18). Her change of clothing empowers Perdita to a new height of articulation when she says, “me, poor lowly maid, / Most goddess-like pranked up” (4.4.29-30). Dressed up as the queen of the harvest, she remarks on her own transformation, admitting, “Sure this robe of mine / Does change my disposition” (4.4.134-135), and her moment of enhanced articulate assertiveness offers a glimmer of her potential to become a woman much like her own mother. Using the metaphor of “pale primroses, / That die unmarried ere they can behold / Bright Phoebus in his strength” (4.4.122-124), she expresses her desire for marriage and sexual consummation, but she also emphasizes her own current position of innocence. Her metaphor depicts women as stationary, powerless flowers to be acted upon by the “strength” of the masculine sun, and strongly implies a sense of latent power and untapped sexual development. The intense transience of the flowers stresses the fleeting nature of innocence in the face of imminent

---

<sup>10</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 228.

experience, and Perdita occupies a borderline space between childhood innocence and adult sexual experience. The loss of innocence here is happily anticipated, unlike Polixenes' and Leontes' sad account of sexual maturation as corruption and loss.

Perhaps because of her innocent and uncorrupted nature, Perdita articulates sexual desire without arousing jealousy or madness in her partner. Perdita expresses her desire to cover Florizel with flowers, and when he asks, “What, like a corpse?” she responds, “No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on, / Not like a corpse-- or if, not to be buried, / But quick and in mine arms” (4.4.129-132). Rejecting the controlling love that turns so many women into corpses (Desdemona, Hero, and Hermione), Perdita and Florizel embrace a love that is more liberated, especially in speech. Unlike other male characters, Florizel refreshingly appreciates Perdita's moment of outspokenness saying, “When you speak, sweet, / I'd have you do it ever” (4.4.136-137). By embracing Perdita's speech, Florizel accepts and welcomes her sexual nature and completely avoids the jealousy and malice that runs rampant in characters like Othello and Leontes.

Florizel demonstrates his love for Perdita both in speech and action, unlike many of Shakespeare's other male characters. Vowing, “For I cannot be / Mine own, nor anything to any, if / I be not thine” (4.4.43-45), he easily gives himself over to Perdita with the possessive language often reserved for male possession over women (as between Hermione and Leontes), and displays absolutely no fear of cuckoldry or betrayal. There seems to exist a higher sense of equality between

this young couple – the Old Shepherd remarks, “I think there is not half a kiss to choose / Who loves another best” (4.4.176-177). Florizel takes Perdita's hand and says,

I take thy hand, this hand  
As soft as dove's down, and as white as it,  
Or Ethiopian's tooth, or the fanned snow that's bolted  
By th' northern blasts twice o'er (4.4.348-351)

Unlike the previous image of Leontes forcibly opening Hermione's hand to him, Florizel takes Perdita's hand along with her speech, and pledges himself equally into her possession as well. However, this image of her hand introduces a subtly unsettling element because, despite their seemingly harmonic relationship, the “white” color and the coldness of “snow” elicit an image similar to the statue of Hermione or the corpse of Desdemona. Florizel also alludes to “Jupiter / Became a bull” and “Neptune / A ram” (4.4.27-29), situations that assert male dominance in the most negative sense, as they are both stories of male abduction of women. The harmony of their relationship may come at the price of female submissiveness, seen through Perdita's general timidity of voice. When the Old Shepherd asks Perdita if she loves Florizel as much, she begins, “I cannot speak / So well, nothing so well, no, nor mean better . . .” (4.4.367-368), demonstrating a lack of general articulate assertiveness. After being cruelly confronted by Polixenes, she says, “for one or twice / I was about to speak” (4.4.430-431), implying that she could not.

On a more optimistic note, Florizel values love over inheritance, saying, “From my succession wipe me, father! I / Am heir to my affection” (4.4.467-468).

By valuing his “affection” for Perdita over his “succession,” Florizel continues to break from the disastrous entanglements of Leontes and Polixenes. Although he does not have to live out this pledge, because Perdita is actually a princess, his willingness to do so reveals an aspect of his character that may make their relationship happier and more free from suspicion than Leontes' and Hermione's.

The end of the play is complicated because it contains both positive and negative aspects of love, relationships, and marriage. Unlike in *Othello*, Shakespeare offers Leontes the chance for repentance and reunion with his family after sixteen years, although he has lost his only son forever. While the possibility for men to change appears hopeful, it is problematic that Hermione is only brought back after the years of her sexual prime have passed, and she is welcomed back as a greatly reduced threat. Paulina, a woman of remarkable voice and strength, is silently married off, assigning her to a more suppressed role as a wife to Camillo.

On the other hand, Florizel and Perdita offer a great deal of hope; Florizel demonstrates a novel acceptance and even appreciation of Perdita's voice and sexuality. Perdita is generally a less verbally assertive character than previously threatening women like Hermione, but she expresses an acceptance and even anticipation for sexuality that reveals her potential to become a woman and wife like her mother. *The Winter's Tale* combines the tragedy of *Othello* and the lighthearted tone and happy ending of *Much Ado About Nothing*, as Shakespeare offers a renewed view of marriage that requires concessions, compromises, and

sometimes penitence, but also offers hope for love, sexuality, and new life.

## Works Cited

- Adelman, Janet. "Marriage and the Maternal Body: On Marriage as the End of Comedy in *Measure for Measure*." In *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Measure for Measure*, edited by Richard Wheeler. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999.
- Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Barber, C. L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959.
- Cressy, David. *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Lamb, Mary Ellen. "Engendering the Narrative Act: Old Wives' Tales in The Winter's Tale, Macbeth, and The Tempest." *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 40, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 529-553. MLA International Bibliography, EBSCOhost (accessed April 26, 2009).
- Maus, Katherine Eisaman. "Sexual Secrecy in *Measure for Measure*." In *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Measure for Measure*, edited by Richard Wheeler. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999.
- Montrose, Louis. *The Purpose of Playing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Neely, Carol Thomas. *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet 129," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. *The Winter's Tale*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989, OED Online, Oxford University Press. 10 April 2009 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.