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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em,” states Malvolio in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and one is inclined to use the same words in describing one of the most influential and creative dramatists, William Shakespeare, himself. We keep returning to Shakespeare not only because of the 38 plays he penned, but also because of his unique, unmatched way with words which to this day resonates with critics and audiences alike. This year, 2014, marks the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth and this issue of *Gender Forum* will focus on how gender is addressed in works of Shakespeare in honor of this event.

2 Jim Casey examines in his paper the various expectations placed on male bodies in the early modern period, the repeated challenge of 'proving' one's masculinity, and the various critical reactions to violent action in Shakespeare's plays. Casey argues that early modern ideas regarding 'manhood' and the gendering of bodies have been misinterpreted by many recent critics, and the myths of gender *renversement* and masculine anxiety have been greatly overstated. In contrast, he argues that the complex relationship between the body and the construction of manhood has been downplayed, while the important sociocultural expectation of masculine bodily sacrifice has not been fully appreciated. Furthermore Casey argues that most critics diminish the significance of masculine service and death, stating that the connection between honor and violence extends beyond the aristocracy and provides an important foundation for early modern English society.

3 In her article Charlotte Fiehn discusses the courtship of Cordelia in Shakespeare's masterpiece *King Lear*, arguing that when Cordelia confounds her father's desire for flattery in Act I, Scene 1, it not only defines the parameters of legitimate parent-child relationships for the play, but that her response to Lear's test, the momentous answer, “nothing” (1.1.96), affirms the legitimacy of natural law and primogeniture. Additionally Fiehn postulates that Cordelia's reply allows her to stress a duty to her future husband, leading to a second test of love that bears out Cordelia's position on the responsibilities of a wife. The Kings of France and Burgundy must consider whether they will marry Cordelia without the benefit of her dowry, reckoning her value solely on the basis of her character. Fiehn's paper explores the representation of marriage in *King Lear* in both this instance and in the relationships of the primary and secondary plots. It examines marriage as a central if often overlooked element

within the broader tragedy, and as a means by which Shakespeare considers the broader legitimacy and illegitimacy of relationships.

4 According to Jennifer Flaherty, Paula Vogel's dark comedy *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* is similarly probing, examining the isolation of women past and present through her reinvention of the characters in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Flaherty argues that rather than creating a heroic Desdemona who defies her fate, Vogel chooses to depict an environment in which such a character would be impossible. Instead, Vogel creates a silly, spoiled, and promiscuous Desdemona who attempts to subvert the patriarchy that controls her. Flaherty continues her argument by discussing how displacement is used by Vogel to demonstrate the painful limitations of female agency. In her paper Flaherty argues that the feminism of *Desdemona* does not demonstrate empowerment, enlightenment, or equality, but is replaced with a kind of negative empathy, concluding that Vogel asks her audiences to say 'no' to constraints on female agency and 'no' to female complicity and isolation. By not saving Desdemona, Vogel invites her audiences to save themselves.

Manhood Fresh Bleeding: Shakespeare's Men and the Construction of Masculine Identity

By Jim Casey, Arcadia University, United States of America

Abstract:

This essay examines the various expectations placed on male bodies in the early modern period, the repeated challenge of “proving” one’s masculinity, and the various critical reactions to violent action in Shakespeare’s plays. Early modern ideas regarding “manhood” and the gendering of bodies have been misinterpreted by many recent critics, and the myths of gender renversement and masculine anxiety have been greatly overstated. In contrast, the complex relationship between the body and the construction of manhood has been downplayed, while the important sociocultural expectation of masculine bodily sacrifice has not been fully appreciated. The connection between honor and violence extends well beyond the aristocracy and provides an important foundation for early modern English society, but most critics diminish the significance of masculine service and death.

1 At the end of *Coriolanus*, when Tullus Aufidius and Caius Martius Coriolanus return to Corioles after abandoning their invasion at the gates of Rome, Aufidius accuses Martius of treason and tells the men of Corioles, “He has betrayed your business, and given up, / For certain drops of salt, your city, Rome— / [. . .] He whined and roared away your victory, / That pages blushed at him, and men of heart / Looked wond’ringly each at others” (5.6.93-102).¹ Incredulous, Martius cries, “Hear’st thou, Mars?” to which Aufidius responds, “Name not the god, thou boy of tears” (5.6.102-3). This is stunning. Martius Coriolanus acquired his *agnomen* by almost superhuman martial feats in the very city where he is being accused of unmanliness. Singlehandedly, he has fought within the city gates and, as he reminds Aufidius, defeated many Volscians, including the general himself. How, then, can Aufidius so brazenly impugn his manhood? What is perhaps more stunning, however, is the critical reaction to this moment. Almost universally, critics read Martius’ reaction to the appellation “boy” as a signal of his castration or emasculation. For example, Bruce Smith claims that the contrast between open and closed bodies prompts “Coriolanus to imagine his stabbing death at the hands of the Volscies as an act of emasculation” (16). Janet Adelman argues that the language here “represents a kind of castration” (121n), and Coppélia Kahn appears to agree with Aufidius’ assessment of Martius as something less than manly: “this god is but a boy, finally, a ‘boy of tears’” (*Estate* 158). But Martius’ actual words are “Cut me to pieces, Volscies. Men and lads, / Stain all your edges on me” (5.6.112-13). Martius is not imagining emasculation; he is inviting annihilation. Nor does he fear a violent encounter. He says that

¹ All quotations of Shakespeare’s plays are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et al.

he wishes he “had with him six Aufidiuses, / Or more, his tribe, to use [his] lawful sword” (5.6.128-9).

2 The interpellation of this warrior as a “boy” demonstrates the (perhaps unjust) nature of a socioculturally inscribed gender identity. Martius has “proved himself a man” (1.3.15) in combat countless times, but that manhood is not incontrovertible. Despite demonstrating his manliness again and again, despite submitting himself to over twenty-five wounds, despite vanquishing all his enemies, Martius’ masculinity is not assured. This episode demonstrates the interminability of corporeal interpretation. Bodies are texts. They can be read and re-read. And since manhood is inscribed on the body, manhood can be read and re-read. Thus, Martius must constantly demonstrate his manliness in order to remain *a man*. This essay considers the effect of continual masculine action on characters such as Martius Coriolanus. It examines the various expectations placed on male bodies in the early modern period, the repeated challenge of “proving” one’s masculinity, and the various critical reactions to violent action in Shakespeare’s plays. Early modern ideas regarding “manhood” and the gendering of bodies have been misinterpreted by many recent critics, and the myths of gender *renversement* and masculine anxiety have been greatly overstated. In contrast, the complex relationship between the body and the construction of manhood has been downplayed, and the important sociocultural expectation of masculine bodily sacrifice has not been fully appreciated. The connection between honor and violence extends well beyond the aristocracy and provides an important foundation for early modern English society, but most critics diminish the significance of masculine service and death.

3 In *Coriolanus*, Caius Martius is considered Rome’s greatest warrior, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that he is “wont to come home wounded” (2.1.106). Another wound on Martius’ body is an occasion for joy, as is demonstrated when Menenius asks Volumnia if her son has been wounded. She responds proudly, “O, he is wounded, I thank the gods for’t!” To which Menenius replies, “So do I, too, if it be not too much. [. . .] The wounds become him” (2.1.108-10). The two then enter into a mutual blazon of Martius’ myriad wounds, recounting every injury and adding the most recent wounds to the tally. Menenius concludes the cut-accounting with an almost unbelievable sum: “Now it’s twenty-seven. Every gash was an enemy’s grave” (2.1.141-2). One would think that a warrior who has been wounded almost thirty times would be considered incompetent. In contrast, we might look at Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two*, where we learn that Tamburlaine is either charmed or an exceptional fighter; he has “conquered kings / And with his host marched round about the earth,” yet he is “Quite void of scars and clear from any

wound” and has “by the wars lost not a dram of blood” (3.2.110-13).² But the wounds of Martius do not mark him as a poor fighter; rather, they distinguish him as a valiant warrior. His wounds sign him as male and provide demonstrable proof of his manhood: as a record of his willingness to face grave physical peril in battle, they literally inscribe his masculinity on his body and present an indelible record of his martial acts.

4 Page DuBois envisions wounds as emblematic of both a masculine martial superiority and of loss and castration. In the case of *Coriolanus*, she sides with the critics mentioned above, suggesting that his wounds make Martius “like a woman in his vulnerability” (197). Yet Martius’ scars exemplify the difference between female vulnerability and male vulnerability, the former passive, the latter active. As Kahn observes, feminine vulnerability marks the female body as a passive object of violent penetration, but masculine vulnerability figures the male body as an active agent of self-fashioning; in this paradigm, male wounds represent

the most problematic, self-cancelling figuration of masculinity in the Roman works. The Latin word for wound is *vulnus*, the root of “vulnerability.” In an obvious sense, wounds mark a kind of vulnerability easily associated with women: they show the flesh to be penetrable, they show that it can bleed, they make apertures in the body. But through the discursive operations of *virtus*, wounds become central to the signification of masculine virtue, and thus to the construction of the Roman hero. (*Roman* 17)

If Martius’ body is vulnerable to wounding, it is because he consistently exposes it to physical danger. He chooses to be vulnerable and this agency is wholly male. As Gail Kern Paster notes, Martius may bleed, but he is in control of his body: “Such blood is voluntary in two senses: it is shed as a result of action freely undertaken, and it is shed virtually at will, ‘the blood I will drop’” (97). In fact, his identity is so grounded in military sacrifice and achievement that the images and metonymical associations he makes often turn him into an instrument of war, as when he cries, “O’ me alone, make you a sword of me?” (1.7.76). According to Ralph Berry,

To regard the sword-symbol as phallic here is rather a necessity than an arabesque of criticism. I do not know what the line means as a literal statement. But Coriolanus seems to have an awareness of the emblematic potency of “sword.” I suggest that the

² Despite his unwounded status, Tamburlaine also seems to view wounds, or at least an attitude of indifference toward them, as a sign of manhood. This quote comes from a speech in which Tamburlaine is trying to convince his sons that “A wound is nothing, be it ne’er so deep. / Blood is the god of war’s rich livery” (3.2.115-16). As long as it is not crippling (“be it ne’er so deep”), a wound is not to be feared; it is the appropriate dress of the warrior. To prove his point, he cuts himself. Earlier, he has declared that “he shall wear the crown of Persia / Whose head hath deepest scars, whose breast most wounds” and whose character the willingness to “wade up to the chin in blood” (1.3.74, 84). Wounds are figured as interconnected to manliness and honor. Similarly, in act 3, scene 5 of Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Bonduca*, Decius cries, “More wounds, more honour” (122).

line can only have a symbolic meaning, that war which Coriolanus came to as an adolescent made him a man, and supplied him with a sense of sexual maturity [. . .]. (302)

Berry is correct about the emblematic potency of sword here; otherwise, I believe he is entirely wrong. Not only is there no “necessity” in regarding the sword as a phallic, there is little cause, other than the post-Freudian tendency to read all swords as phallic. Sometimes a sword is just a sword. Obviously, this image of Martius as a sword is not literal, but figurative, as he is lifted above the soldier’s heads, like a sword. But it is martially, not sexually, figurative. Although the wars may have “made him a man,” I do not think that this passage suggests anything about Martius’ sexual maturity. If we are to attach a Freudian interpretation to this line, then Martius’ self-association with a sword reveals an impulse more closely aligned to *destrudo* and *Thanatos* than to *libido* and *Eros*. In the context of his address to the soldiers, a sexual reading makes almost no sense. Martius is choosing men to join him in his assault on Aufidius. In this situation, Martius becomes a weapon in the service of Rome. Depending on the textual decisions one prefers,³ Martius seems either to be imagining himself as a sword to be wielded by the men, or urging his select soldiers to become swords themselves. Because the entire speech is directed outward—“If any such be here [. . .]” (1.7.67)—I prefer the second reading. Martius is raised by the men, like a sword. He asks the men, “[Do you make a sword of] me alone, make you a sword of me?” The “me alone” seems to be an invitation: Do you make a sword of me alone? Make swords of yourselves too. His praise of each of them, “If these shows be not outward” (1.7.77), as equal to four Volscians suggests a moment of pride in them as soldiers, not a moment of narcissism or self-adulation.

5 In addition to Berry, there are other critics who offer Freudian readings of Coriolanus. See, for example, Robert Stoller’s “Shakespearean Tragedy: Coriolanus” (especially 267) and Charles Hofling’s “An Interpretation of Shakespeare’s Coriolanus” (especially 421-24). and there may be some justification for associating Martius with a phallus. He is described as a man “Who sensibly outdares his senseless sword / And, when it bows, stand’st up!” (1.5.24-5). I read such passages through a militaristic lens, but I have no problem with critics who suspect a double entendre at work here. My difficulty with most psychoanalytic readings of Coriolanus is that they almost always lead to an assertion of Martius’ castration. For example,

³ In the Folio, the line reads, “Oh me alone, make you a sword of me:” The Oxford *Textual Companion* attributes the “Oh” to scribal change and alters the text to read “O’ [Of] me alone” (Taylor, et al. 595). This is the most common emendation I found, but Phillip Brockbank, following Tucker Brooke (unwisely in my opinion), assigns the line to the soldiers and renders it, “O me alone! Make you a sword of me!”

in Adelman's oft-quoted examination of the "make you a sword of me" quote, she argues that Martius' "whole life becomes a kind of phallic exhibitionism, devoted to disproving the possibility that he is vulnerable" (111). Adelman adopts Brockbank's punctuation for "O me alone! Make you a sword of me!" but she attributes the line to Coriolanus rather than the soldiers. Adelman does not cite her source for this reading in her "Anger's My Meat" article (or in any of the article's various afterlives), and I could not find an edition that combined this punctuation with this speaker (it is not used or listed in the Arden, Cambridge, Oxford, or Norton editions, nor in older versions by John Dover Wilson, A.L. Rowse, or Tucker Brooke). Of course, the two interpolated exclamation points make Martius' statement more self-descriptive and phallic and thus make Adelman's interpretation much more plausible. I disagree. After all, Martius' wounds, and his display of them, expose and perhaps even exalt his vulnerability. The very vulnerability of his body is what proves his manhood: he is vulnerable to attack, his body is susceptible to wounding, but he is a man—he can take it. Adelman's claim that an association with the phallus makes Martius' death "a kind of castration" (121n) seems to misconstrue the warrior's final act. Rather than representing a loss of manhood, Martius' vulnerability here confirms his manhood.

6 I believe the consistent misreading of the conclusion of *Coriolanus* stems from a prevalent misunderstanding of early modern attitudes toward the body and masculine gender. Many critics describe the male body in Shakespeare's England as site of extreme instability and masculine anxiety. Stephen Orgel, for example, argues that "For us the entire question of gender is controlled by issues of sexuality, and we are quite clear about which sex is which"; for the early moderns, however, Orgel claims that "the line between the sexes was blurred, often frighteningly so" (13). Basing their interpretation of gender on the work of Thomas Laqueur, critics like Orgel perceive an ontological proximity between the biological sexes and suggest that masculine anxiety results from the fear of being turned *back* into woman. Laqueur claims that "The boundaries between male and female" were those of "degree and not of kind" (115); in this model, women were merely inferior versions of men.

7 Critics who support this reading of early modern gender often cite the story of Marie Germain, who, according to Montaigne, was raised as a woman, but "Straining himself in some way in jumping," turned into a man when "his masculine organs came forth" (69). Patricia Parker, for example, recontextualizes the story within Montaigne's larger work, noting that the account of Marie Germain was inserted into an essay from Book 1 entitled "De la force de l'imagination." Parker comments on the importance (in the essay and thematically) of the final example of sexual transformation here, the story of Iphis (from

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8). According to Parker, we should not forget that Montaigne is talking about the suggestive power of the imagination. Shakespeare is not Montaigne, but I have no problem with Parker's arguments up to this point. When she suggests that these stories should be understood within the discussion of male impotence and anxiety, however, I am afraid I cannot agree. The tale of impotence does not immediately follow, as she implies; instead, there is a commentary of the stigmata of religious individuals such as St. Francis. Yet even if the story of impotence did directly follow, impotence has nothing to do with Marie Germain. Germain has no problem with his member, nor should his story or the story of Iphis be read as an indication of a masculine fear of transformation. After all, both these tales tell of *women* changing into men, not the other way around. These events, like the stories they accompany, are simply unusual occurrences that Montaigne found interesting. Like the common people Montaigne mentions later, critics who insist on reading Marie Germain as an allegory of male anxiety have "been so strongly seized that they think they see what they do not see" (70). Moreover, Marie Germain becomes a male not through gender performance, but through physiological change. She becomes male because her *body* becomes male. This emphasizes the primacy of the body in gender-formation. Additionally, Laqueur's degree-not-kind view of early modern sexual biology has been largely discredited. As Elizabeth Foyster observes, one-sex model theorists like Laqueur fail to distinguish between "elite male medical thinking or theory, and popular belief or practice" (28). Helkiah Crooke and other early modern writers clearly divide human bodies into two distinct sexes, as Smith, Paster, Adelman, and others have all shown.

8 Nonetheless, very good scholars continue to repeat this fiction in order to promulgate the myth of universal male anxiety. Orgel, for example, noting that "Medical and anatomical treatises from the time of Galen cited homologies in the genital structure of the sexes to show that male and female were versions of the same unitary species" (13), argues that stories such as that of Marie Germain expose the early modern male's fear of physical gender reversal. According to Orgel, the discourse of early modern "scientific" gender teleology operates within a larger political agenda that attempts to vindicate male domination of women; he suggests that "The frightening part of the teleology for the Renaissance mind, however, is precisely the fantasy of its reversal, the conviction that men can turn into—or be turned into—women; or perhaps more exactly, can be turned *back* into women, losing the strength that enabled the male potential to be realized in the first place" (14). But this supposed early modern fear of reversal is mostly a postmodern creation. Men of the early modern period, in general, did not imagine effeminization in terms of physical reversal, and certainly did not

express their worries about such a bodily reversal. In fact, in their separate discussions of the case of Marie Germain, Orgel, Parker, and Stephen Greenblatt all ignore the fact that it is the girls of the village, and not the men, who fear changing sexes. As Montaigne reports, “In this town there is still a song commonly in the girls’ mouths, in which they warn one another not to stretch their legs too wide for fear of becoming males, like Marie Germain” (870). Men may have been threatened by “unruly women” or “tribades” (homosexual seductresses),⁴ and may have been alarmed by the possibility of these women penetrating the categorical boundaries of maleness, but they do not appear to have been worried about *becoming* women themselves. As Orgel himself admits, “those transformations that are attested to as scientific fact work in only one direction, from female to male” (13). Of course, Parker claims that the “rhetoric of insistence” (361) in these texts of transformation demonstrate considerable unease through their unequivocal declarations, and thus instead of displaying confident affirmations of the stability of the male body, these works reveal numerous men who protest too much. This is possible, of course, but why must all assertions of masculine assurance be taken as bluff and bluster while expressions of anxiety are accepted at face value? Parker points out that Montaigne’s examination of the power of imagination proceeds from the story of Marie Germain to an extended discussion of impotence:

[. . .] the essay that incorporates this striking anecdote [of Marie Germain] moves from the resonant teleology of women’s desire to be provided with the *virile partie* to precisely the imperfections of that “part,” to preoccupation not with transformation from the imperfect female to the perfect male but with a form of its *renversement*, the imperfection and defect (*deffaut*) of male impotence. (343)

She notes the abundance of failed “instrument” tales in the *Essais*, and situates Montaigne’s impotence fixation within what she describes as a wide-spread preoccupation with male impotence in France that spans “an extraordinary range of texts” (345). But impotence is not the same as physical *renversement*. An impotent man still has his instrument, whether or not it works correctly. In fact, Montaigne’s anecdotes all conclude with the restoration of sexual virility, reiterating the very material presence of the “honorable member” (73). These men have not been physically reversed. They do not become women, nor are they castrated eunuchs. In truth, their bodies undergo no significant physical change.

9 This suggests that concern over gender boundaries and what Mark Breitenberg calls “anxious masculinity” have both been overstated. Men were not afraid of spontaneously turning into women, despite the prevalent cultural force of gender construction. In fact, I

⁴ For a discussion of “unruly women,” see Penny Gay’s *As She Likes It*, especially 1-16; for a short discussion of the tribade, see Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations* (74).

suspect that most men in the early modern period hardly ever thought about their gender on a conscious level, much like today. Men may have their masculinity questioned in Shakespeare's plays, but drama is, after all, a medium of conflict. The problem with much recent criticism is the tendency to take a challenge of manhood as an indication of anxious, ambiguous, or troubled masculinity when this may not necessarily be the case. For example, in *1 Henry 6*, Talbot is challenged by the Countess of Auvergne, who declares him her prisoner and asks,

Is this the scourge of France?
Is this the Talbot, so much feared abroad
That with his name the mothers still their babes?
I see report is fabulous and false.
I thought I should have seen some Hercules,
A second Hector, for his grim aspect
And large proportion of his strong-knit limbs.
Alas, this is a child, a seely dwarf.
It cannot be this weak and writhled shrimp

One could read this passage as an indictment of Talbot's manhood, but I think that would be an incorrect reading. Certainly, Talbot seems to belittle his own power, telling her that he is only "Talbot's shadow [. . .] but the smallest part / And least proportion of humanity" (2.3.45-53). He admits that his "weak and writhled" shrimp-like body might indeed be contained by the Countess, but the men in his army, who are "his substance, sinews, arms, and strength" (2.3.63), are too great for her to entrap. Later in the scene, after she has been cowed by his military force, the Countess calls him "Victorious Talbot" (2.3.67) and a "great warrior" (2.3.82). She may have challenged his masculine identity earlier in their encounter, but words alone cannot defeat an army, and words alone cannot rob a warrior of his manhood. Thus, the supposed masculine anxiety of Talbot is *projected* here, not present in the man himself.

10 Talbot's manhood is not located solely in his body, which may be captured or grow old, but manhood also cannot be entirely separated from the male body. In life and on the stage, a man must not only possess a male body, but he must also use it like a man, which means exposing that body to extreme danger and potential destruction. Men who, like Talbot, offer their bodies up to violent action are celebrated as men. For example, in a passage of *Pierce Penilesse* (1592) that probably refers a performance of *1 Henry 6*, Thomas Nashe exclaims,

How would it haue ioyed braue *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, to haue his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least,

(at seuerall times) who in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. (F3R)

Nashe's laudatory lines behold Talbot not in any of the many engagements where he defeats the French, but when he is "fresh bleeding." Like Coriolanus, Talbot authenticates his manhood through willingness to fight and bleed. Butler claims that "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Trouble* 33). To a certain extent, this is true, yet gender identity is not *solely* constituted through performative expressions; rather, gender identity is constituted primarily through corporeal realities. Each gendered act is prescribed and proscribed by physical bodies.⁵ Early modern male bodies represent appropriate sites for violent engagement and as such bear the cultural expectation that they will act honorably and submit to a world of violence. It is in this milieu of possible masculine destruction that men "prove" their manliness and connect the body they were born with to the gender that body represents. Thus, the only way the "unrough youths" of the rebel army in *Macbeth* can "Protest their first of manhood" (5.2.10-11) is with sword and shield. Similarly, in *Coriolanus*, Volumnia proudly explains how

To cruel war I sent [Martius], from whence he
returned, his brows bound with oak. I tell thee,
daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he
was a man-child, than now in first seeing he had
proved himself a man. (1.3.14-18)

Manhood must be "proved" by bodily risk. Butler advocates rethinking of the materiality of the body "as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect" (*Bodies* 2). Shakespearean bodies can read them as an effect of a patriarchal structure that commits male bodies to violent self-sacrifice in the service of the state and society.

11 Certainly, there are other expressions and counter-expressions of manhood in Shakespeare—*militis gloriosi*, Machiavellian opportunists, Bruce Smith's "saucy jacks," and others—but these challenges to masculine heroism, actually work to reinforce the mythic and cultural power of the "real man" in the plays, who submits his body to the realm of masculine violence. Smith argues that "The effect of all these parodies is to empty the masculine ideals in question of their content, to expose them as only so much posing" (56), but this ignores the *actions* of Shakespeare's men. Can Talbot's manhood be considered a "pose" if he dies in his posturing? Are his masculine ideals really emptied out in content? Are audiences supposed to

⁵ Butler addresses this issue in her 1999 Preface to the anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*; see especially vii-xxvi.

view the masculine paradigms of Hotspur or Prince Harry as hollow simply because Falstaff cannot live up to them? I think not. Simply because jigs follow the tragedies, or saucy jacks and fools play at being warriors, or the Nine Worthies are satirized in *Love's Labour's Lost*, or Falstaff's catechism declares honor a mere scutcheon, a word, air (*IH4* 5.1.133-8)—these things do not mean that audiences should dismiss Hotspur's elevation of honor or ignore the myriad other characters who, like King Harry, "covet honour" (*H5* 4.3.28). Honor and manhood are intimately connected. To be a man means to brave injury and death for the sake of honor.⁶ More importantly, this masculine code requires a bodily sacrifice for the good of the community. Like Talbot, the honorable man must be prepared to die for the sake of others. As Brutus says in *Julius Caesar*,

If it be aught toward the general good,
Set honour in one eye and death i'th' other,
And I will look on both indifferently;
For let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honour more than I fear death. (1.2.86-91)

C.L. Barber has noted that "honour" is most often connected to social rank, and especially to the gentry (330), and class consciousness certainly contributes to notions of honor and virtue, but it would be a mistake to relegate expectations of bodily sacrifice to the codes of a warrior-class, aristocratic elite. All male bodies participate to a greater or lesser extent in the period's violent self-formulation and all men experience the great leveling of death and bodily destruction. I do not mean only that the higher orders are brought low, as is suggested by Cleopatra when she says in *Antony and Cleopatra*, "Young boys and girls / Are level now with men" (4.16.67-8). This kind of leveling plays with the metaphorical images of death's detruding power, lowering individuals to an equal level both physically (in their graves) and metaphysically (in the underworld). Cleopatra, who has just lost her lover, claims, "The odds is gone / And there is nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting moon" (4.16.68-70). In contrast, violent masculine death elevates even common men to a kind of nobility, moving them from the common file into the category of "proven" men. Those who fight with King Harry in *Henry 5*, for example, will be remembered precisely because of the destruction they invite upon their bodies. Before Agincourt, the king declares, "if it be a sin to covet honour / I am the most offending soul alive" (4.3.28-9); yet he does not reserve that "sin" for the

⁶ Mark Thornton Burnett suggests that the early moderns saw virtue a subcategory of honor, although both were powerful and transformative influences on men (201); Smith links virtue to learning (50). For this essay, I am interested in the way virtue is conflated with honor in terms of masculine ideal. Specifically, I want to emphasize the way that the very words are intricately tangled with notions of manhood. As Kahn notes, "the very etymology of *virtus* is gender-specific. [. . .] Shakespeare plays on the derivation of virtue from *virtus*, in turn derived from *vir*—Latin for man" (*Roman* 14).

aristocracy alone, but rather extends the opportunity for honor to nobleman and commoner alike when he says,

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he that today sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day. (4.3.60-7)

A man may “gentle his condition,” but he must be prepared to bleed, and even die for it. In this, masculine bodily expectations cross all class boundaries. Some may dismiss Harry’s “The fewer men, the greater share of honour” (4.3.22) as mere rhetoric, part of the ruling class’ maintenance of power, delivered to improve the morale of the exploited troops and to prevent desertion. But if the king does not really mean what he says, if these words are mere oratory, if, in fact, “The better part of valour is discretion” (*IH4* 5.4.117-18), then why does Harry not simply withdraw? Why personally fight at all? In *Macbeth*, Duncan directs the battle from afar, and in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Octavius refuses to meet Antony in single combat. Like these two rulers, Harry could choose not to proffer his body. Logically, intellectually, there is no reason for the king personally to fight at Agincourt. In truth, the rational thing would be to withdraw. Yet if he did withdraw, safely removing his body from the fight, then he would then risk the intolerable stain of effeminacy.

12 This demonstrates the deep-structural power of this sociocultural expectation. Even the nobility are not exempt. In fact, Shulamith Shahar notes that, historically, this ideological impetus particularly impacted those in the upper orders, so that “In the nobility, elderly women indeed outnumbered men because of the frequency of violent death among males” (79). This suggests that politicized claims regarding the hegemony of the power elite cannot be consistently applied in terms of masculine destruction. On the other hand, notions of honor and bodily sacrifice are not solely the concern of the aristocracy. We see this in Act 2, Scene 3 of *2 Henry 6*, when Horner the armorer and his apprentice Peter fight to the death with sandbag-weighted staves in order to establish their “honesty.” Foakes calls this fight a “comic duel” (44), but Horner might disagree. These men are commoners, and their encounter is certainly set in contrast to the duels of courtiers. It is even possible that their combat has been staged for the entertainment of the gentry: Margaret confesses that she has left the court “purposely” to see the quarrel tried (2.3.52-3). But the men face real physical danger and Horner dies nonetheless. Peter may succeed in this fight as a result of his former-master’s

drunkenness, but the bout itself emphasizes the need for all men to possess physical strength and soldierly prowess.⁷ Shakespeare's plays consistently demonstrate the need for such masculine power, sometimes by showing the benefits of male puissance, sometimes by showing the disastrous consequences of manly lack. As Jonas Barish contends,

Shakespeare clearly believes in valor, in manly readiness, in military prowess. These qualities matter because the world we inhabit contains lawless, self-serving, aggressive human beings, ready to use others as means, ready to push them around whenever others seem to stand in the way of their own private purposes or private pleasures. (121)

Shakespeare's plays present honorable manhood as the opposition of both private persons pursuing "private purposes or private pleasures" and state institutions pursuing nationalistic agendas. Thus, even in the plays that feature no overt depictions of war, the leviathan movements of states and other political entities can be seen along the fringes, giving intimations of intrigues and machinations beyond the scope of the drama: Norwegian armies march past, Ephesian Dukes condemn Syracusan merchants to death, sea captains rob Illyrian galleys of their cargo, providential tempests turn Turkish fleets.

13 It is within this martial world that Shakespeare's males establish their manhood. Like the living men of early modern England, the reality of masculine gender identification involves the ever-present potential of bodily harm. Critically, masculine engagement with violence in the plays has been downplayed or denigrated and manhood itself has become synonymous with hegemonic oppression or anxious overcompensation. When a character like Martius Coriolanus dies, he becomes critically castrated, diminished and removed from conscious significance. For example, Linda Bamber believes that

The deaths of Macbeth and Coriolanus, like the deaths of the history heroes, are lacking in general significance. They do not, like the deaths of Hamlet and Lear, reaffirm us in our humanism, our sense of the value of our lives to us. Macbeth and Coriolanus simply exhaust the possibilities of their mode; they repeat themselves until, like Marlowe's Tamburlaine, they are dramatically played out. Then they die. Whereas Hamlet's story culminates at the time of his death, Macbeth and Coriolanus's stories simply end. In retrospect, we might say that Coriolanus has repeatedly fought battles and abused the commoners and Macbeth has killed and killed and killed. (96)

⁷ Jennifer Low suggests that duels and mock duels reveal the interconnectivity of manhood and social rank and that an awareness of this distinction is indispensable for an understanding of gender (see her *Manhood and the Duel* for more on this). Rather than *defining* masculinity, however, I would argue that rank complicates that definition. As the above conflict demonstrates, even low-born men participated in deadly, manhood-affirming contests. Like the defendant in a high-born duel of honor, as described in Vincentio Saviolo's *Vincentio Saviolo His Practise* (1595), Peter is "both accused and constrained to fight" (BB2V).

This may be true for some audience members, but even if they did not move Bamber, the deaths of Macbeth and Martius Coriolanus are certainly not “lacking in general significance” to Macbeth and Martius themselves. These deaths are not insignificant as much as they are invisible.⁸ Leonard Digges, in his *Stratoticos* (1579), urges the soldier to “keepe and preserue his Armour and weapon as one of his members” (L1V). This transforms the weapon into an appendage, but it also makes the man an extension of the weapon. As Elaine Scarry suggests, “Although a weapon is an extension of the human body (as is acknowledged in their collective designation as ‘arms’), it is instead the human body that becomes in this vocabulary an extension of the weapon” (67). This metonymical process effects the moral erasure of the male body by making men into non-living entities: it is much easier to attack the “muskets” or the “pikes” than it is to murder human beings. This repetitive cycle is cultural and, unfortunately, still has not been dramatically played out. In retrospect, we might say that the Shakespeare’s men are compelled to perform their acts of manhood, where they die and die and die.

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⁸ Elisabeth Bronfen argues that “Because they are so familiar, so evident, we are culturally blind to the ubiquity of representations of feminine death. Though in a plethora of representations feminine death is perfectly visible we only see it with some difficulty” (3); but representations of male death are just as difficult to see because audiences *expect* males to die, especially in plays where war features prominently. Male bodies die in war all the time. They are acceptable sites of violence and as such can easily disappear from view.

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‘Sure I shall never marry like my sisters’: The Measure of Marriage in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

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Abstract:

When Cordelia confounds her father’s desire for flattery in Act I, Scene 1 of *King Lear*, she her love “according to my bond” (1.1.102) and so defines the parameters of legitimate parent-child relationships for the play. These relationships are not all that Cordelia defines, though. Her response to Lear’s test, the momentous answer, “nothing” (1.1.96), affirms the legitimacy of natural law and primogeniture. It also allows her to stress a duty to her future husband, leading to a second test of love that bears out Cordelia’s position on the responsibilities of a wife. The Kings of France and Burgundy must consider whether they will marry Cordelia without the benefit of her dowry, reckoning her value solely on the basis of her character. Indeed, the immediate context of the first love test is the apparently quite aggressive courtship of Cordelia and the prospect of her marriage. This paper explores the representation of marriage in *King Lear* in this instance and in the relationships of the primary and secondary plots. It examines marriage as a central if often overlooked element within the broader tragedy, and as a means by which Shakespeare considers the broader legitimacy and illegitimacy of relationships.

1 This paper explores marriage in *King Lear*, a theme that, like many others within the play, Shakespeare measures through a series of parallels. The courtship of Cordelia by the Kings of France and Burgundy, for instance, creates a second love test to define the proper basis for marital bonds, contrasting to Lear’s false reckoning of the parent-child bond immediately prior. The subsequent marriage of Cordelia to the King of France compares, as well, to the marriages of her sisters, of which Cordelia herself very heavily criticizes following her explanation of her perceived responsibility to her father. The representation of adultery – Edmund’s with Goneril and Regan, and Gloucester’s with Edmund’s mother – likewise has a bearing on the discussion of marriage and receives attention through parallels. Shakespeare also invites comparison of Edgar and Edmund on their respective legitimacy and illegitimacy – states defined by Gloucester’s relationship to each of their mothers, which Gloucester himself discusses in Act 1, Scene 1. Even Edmund himself, in declaring his treachery, makes reference to his bastard state and the context of it, his father’s relationship to his mother and thus the adulterous relationship, thus defined by Gloucester’s existing marriage (Edgar emerges as the elder of the two sons anyway) and his violation of his marital bond in the most outright sense. As Jannette Dillon comments in her summary of *King Lear*, Cordelia’s response to her father’s love test is what sets in motion an “extended examination of how bonds are maintained or broken between human beings” (104). The emphasis,

however, is predominantly upon personal bonds, not political ones (the political emerges as secondary), with paternal and marital bonds together taking center stage. The most tested bonds within the play are between husband and wife, and father and child. Kent's is really the only "bond of service" (104) other than, perhaps, Oswald's to Goneril, and Edgar's to Lear and then his father in the disguise of Poor Tom. As the parallel to parent-child relationships, marriage represents an important context for understanding gender roles and sexuality within the play.

2 Marriage is vital to Lear and his division of his kingdom and thus vital to the play's principle plot. As Ronald Cooley argued in his study of primogeniture in *King Lear*, the rightful transfer of Lear's property is not to his daughters, in any case, but to the elder of his son-in-laws – in this, the Duke of Albany. Cordelia, for instance, limits her duty to and love for her father in terms of how she will also bind herself to a husband. She defines her love for Lear in very precise terms, "According to my bond, no more nor less" (*King Lear*¹ 1.1.102), explaining the extent to which her father has warranted her obedience and love in having "begot me, bred me, loved me" (1.1.106). Her duty, though, to "Obey you, love you, and most honor you" (1.1.108), she undertakes in an intriguing fashion. Rather than obeying her father, who entreats her to perform, to "heave/ [her] heart into [her] mouth" (1.1.100-101), Cordelia demonstrates a seeming lack of obedience by refusing the command to perform and moving to criticize her sisters, perhaps to explain her apparent lack of obedience. Her criticisms, though, must also draw attention to gender roles and marriage. She asks "Why have my sisters husbands if they say/ They love you all?" (1.1.109-10). She draws attention at once to the performance, to what her sisters have said, and likewise what the part function of having a husband. She insists: "Sure I shall never marry like my sister's/ To love my father all" (1.1.114-115). The recognized responsibility of Goneril and Regan, as wives, is to not only love their father but to love their husbands by virtue of the respective bonds. Implying a passive transfer of loyalties, too, though, for women, Cordelia argues that it is the responsibility of her husband, a "lord" (1.1.112) to "carry/ Half my love with him, half my care and duty" (1.1.112-113). Marriage is the means of defining gender roles and personal responsibility alongside the parent-child bond that Lear and Gloucester emphasize in their interactions. Act 1, Scene 1, for instance, contains two love tests. The first is the test that concentrates on parent-child relationships – Lear attempts to test his daughters' love to determine how to divide his kingdom between them. The second love test, however, is the

¹ Hereafter referred to by abbreviation, KL.

one that allows Cordelia to obtain a loving husband. When Cordelia responds to her father, declaring that she loves him according to her “bond” (1.1.102), she clarifies the nature of that bond according to the understanding that, as a woman, she has two roles, not one. She must perform her role as a daughter in conjunction with being a wife. Her language also stresses how she will function as a wife. Her role, she suggests, will be to share in her husband’s cares and to share hers with him. Indeed, she insists that “[t]hat lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry/ Half my love with him, half my care and duty” (1.1.11-12). Although Cordelia speaks of care and duty, not suffering, considering the role of women, for instance, *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus*, Catherine Belsey suggests that, “[i]f women are to become consenting partners for men perhaps one condition is that they too must endure pain without protest” (134), they must bear suffering with an awareness that it is their duty. Cordelia’s statement, her measurement of the marital bond, seems to imply this. Certainly, considering marriage and paternal bonds as parallels, Shakespeare shows Cordelia sharing in her father’s cares and then suffering for him with a sense that it is her duty. The parameters of gender relationships are thus decided, with the sense of love, care, and duty divided for women between fathers and husbands, husbands expected to “take [the] plight” and actually “carry” the responsibility of maintaining those aspects of their wife’s duties. Because of the division, though, Cordelia also rightly defines her role as that of a caring daughter and a caring wife; she is to share the burden of her father and her husband, to provide support to both but to provide support equally between them. When she marries, she is to transfer a portion of her love – a half, in her estimation – to her husband and thus to parallel the parent-child relationship with the husband-wife relationship, the inevitable comparison between child and wife status, embedded in the parallel and stressing the husband’s autonomy, their authority, as comparable to that of a father. To the extent that Goneril and Regan betray their father and violate their bonded relationship to him, it thus is consistent that they violate their marital bonds – to some degree, they are the same.

3 The opening of Act 1, Scene 1 is particularly rich in its reference to marriage. The conversation between the Dukes of Gloucester and Kent establishes Lear’s mercurial nature and his penchant for preference through reference, not with reference to his daughters but by alluding to his relationships with his sons-in-law. “I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall” (KL 1.1.1-2), Kent affirms, in the opening line. Gloucester’s response, “It did always seem so” (1.1.3) and his allusion to the “division of the kingdom” (1.1.4) emphasize that Lear has long-intended and long-debated how to divide his kingdom between his children – as dowry for his daughters, but for the benefit of their husbands. Just

as Kent and Gloucester have begun to discuss “which of the dukes [Lear] values most” (1.1.4-5), however, the second (parallel) evaluation begins. Kent calls upon Gloucester to speak of his relationship to Edmund (“Is not this your son...?” (1.1.8)). Gloucester’s response answers the question in terms of his relationship to Edmund’s mother as well as Edmund. “His breeding, sir, hat been at my charge” (1.1.9-10) is a response that squarely stresses both a parental responsibility but also a profoundly sexual one with Edmund’s mother. “[B]reeding” (1.1.9), in fact, is a loaded term here and Gloucester has “blushed” (1.1.10) to acknowledge his responsibility for “breeding” (1.1.9) Edmund. Breeding not only makes the obvious allusion to sex, even in a bestial, somewhat degrading fashion, but it alludes specifically to a function of marriage. For Gloucester, marriage plays a vital role because it not only provides him with his legitimate son Edgar (legitimate in every sense, as it turns out), but his adulterous relationship also brings about Edmund, whose destructive capacity and malevolent nature seem inexplicably linked to his bastardy. As Gloucester proceeds to explain, his second son, Edgar, is a product of his marriage. Edgar, in fact, is bred “by order of law” (1.1.19) and thus within the bonds of marriage. Gloucester does not blush to speak of this or even of the “good sport” (1.1.23). Rather, his embarrassment links predominantly to the extramarital nature of Gloucester’s relationship to Edmund’s mother, as well as to her fault probably more so than his – that Edmund’s mother had “a son for her cradle ere she had a husband/ for her bed” (1.1.15-6). Indeed, Shakespeare addresses the circumstances of Edmund’s conception and birth to emphasize the problems of sexuality and marriage defined by gender. The social stigma of illegitimacy is certainly one of these problems and something that Edmund himself addresses when he declares “Nature” (1.2.1) as his goddess, and questions why “should I/ Stand in the plague of custom, and permit/ The curiosity of nations to deprive me” (1.2.2-4). Clearly, he alludes to a lack of social status and an associated stigma – the social assumption that an illegitimate child, a bastard, is somehow dishonest and “base” (1.2.10). As Alexander Leggatt suggests, “Edmund’s being born at all was a social offense” (151) and although Gloucester initially declares an equal love for his sons (KL 1.1.17-18), “there is something anomalous...about Edmund, and Gloucester’s jocular evasiveness about acknowledging him” (Leggatt 151). In a sense, as Leggatt argues, Edmund’s illegitimacy – the latent relationship to sexuality, to nature, and his emergence outside the bonds of marriage – gives him a dubious status; “As Lear is and is not king, Edmund is and is not Gloucester’s son” (151) because of his conception outside of marriage.

4 The exchange between Gloucester and Kent precedes the entrance of Lear and the rest of the court. When Lear enters, echoing the discussion about the rivalry of the dukes of

Albany and Cornwall for Lear's affections, Lear himself mentions to the rivalry between France and Burgundy in pursuit of Cordelia. Lear's intention to divide his kingdom and the rivalry between France and Burgundy both cause considerable uncertainty in Lear's court according to Gloucester's observations, too. As Lear's daughters have waited to hear what dowry they are to receive, France and Burgundy have "Long in our court...made their amorous sojourn" (KL 1.1.51), waiting "to be answered" (1.1.52) as to which of them will win "the youngest daughter's love" (1.1.49). Yet, as with the apparent rivalry between Cornwall and Albany, much about this exchange is problematic. At once, Lear speaks of "The two great princes" (1.1.49) as rivals for Cordelia's love. This suggests, of course, that the two men have both courted Cordelia and that they appeal to her on an emotional level. The reference to her "love" (1.1.49) seems also to stress love as the desired basis for marriage for each of the princes. It suggests they each have pursued Cordelia in the hope of winning her love as opposed to her dowry. Yet, of course, the later exchange between Burgundy and France shows this to be incorrect. Similarly, Lear's language implies that Cordelia has at least some autonomy in choosing a husband. The basis of the rivalry is her love. Yet, Lear undercuts ideas both of love and of Cordelia's autonomy when he insists that the princes "here are to be answered" (1.1.52) at the division of the kingdom and when Lear has "a constant will to publish/ Our daughter's several dowers" (1.1.46). A paradox is not difficult to identify in the allusion to Cordelia's love and self-determination, alongside references to Lear's publication of her dowry (material value) and his apparent command of the situation in which the princes will "be answered" (1.1.52). Although Cordelia does seem to have some choice – Lear acts as though she does – the underlying reality is heavily material and practical. The actual choice falls to which of the two suitors accepts her with her dowry, just as the actual choice of land portions, the division of Lear's kingdom, falls to Lear. He has, according to his own declaration, divided the kingdom up already (1.1.39-40). Before his daughters even deliver their performances, he admits, he also intended that Cordelia should receive the largest portion because he loves her the most (1.1.38-9). Act 1, Scene 1 thus reveals various issues of gender, power, and autonomy. In a position of authority, maintaining the dual role of king and father, Lear proposes to force his autonomy beyond natural bounds. As Alexander Leggatt argues, Lear actually seeks to impose a fantasy of his daughter upon his actual daughter. In the opening scene, even, Cordelia "is not real" (Leggatt 145) to her father. Instead, he has asserted his inflated conception of his authority – as her father and king – to construct "a version of her in his mind" (145). He develops a fantasy that she "loves him totally" (146) and even to the extent that a potentially incestuous undertone

emerges. Indeed, Leggatt identifies such undertones in two separate instances: first, when Lear refers to “hot-blooded France” (KL 2.2.401), declaring something of a sexual jealousy; and second, when, in madness, he declares that he “will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom” (4.6.194).

5 Throughout the play, and most obviously in his madness, Lear has an indistinct notion of his own autonomy and he speaks with many contradictions, of awarding the loyalty of his son-in-laws and rewarding the love of his daughters. Lear speaks of his daughters demonstrating their love to earn a larger portion of his kingdom but he also declares that he is simply publishing Cordelia’s dowry and handing over the dowry of his other daughters, part of their inheritance that he long ago apportioned. Harry Jaffa and Alexander Leggatt imply that Lear may well have already divided his kingdom among his daughters, the love test being a simple performance. Lear also suggests that Cordelia will choose a husband. As Lear misjudges Cordelia’s value, the Kings of France and Burgundy must each reckon Cordelia’s value as a prospective spouse and Cordelia herself must act on an understanding of value. The reckoning of France and Burgundy resolves the second love test of the play in Act 1, Scene 1, and the validity, the truth of Cordelia’s reckoning, as well. As France insists, the play clearly demonstrates that “Love’s not love/ When it is mingled with regards that stand/ Aloof from th’ entire point” (1.1.275-277). Cordelia, of course, is also “herself a dowry” (1.1.278). The King of France also appeals to Cordelia as “most rich being poor” (1.1.290), “most loved” (1.1.291), and the situation being “lawful” (1.1.293). The lawfulness of the marriage between France and Cordelia proves lawful, too, as Cordelia returns to restore order to England and likewise restores a kind of order to her father. When she meets with Kent in Act 4, Scene 7, Cordelia is swift to provide commands to store her father, identifying elements as they should be seen, too; the “weeds...memories of those worser hours” (4.7.8). She also appeals to proper order, beseeching that the “kind gods/ Cure this great breach in his abused nature” (4.7.16-17). Although indirectly, her appeal to nature – quite different from Edmund’s – is clearly to the right or natural order of things, the, dominant theories of social order in Shakespeare’s day, it is nonetheless ironic within a play that sees such an inversion of the proper order (Calderwood 8). Still, at the beginning of the play, Lear demonstrates an unconscious adherence to the natural order. As Jaffa suggested in his study of Act 1, Scene 1, Lear has fulfilled his role as king and brought England to an unparalleled peak of political significance and stability. Allowing that “Shakespeare regarded monarchy as the best form of government” (Jaffa 405), Jaffa insists that the unification and pacification of England is the “supreme object of monarchical policy in the English histories” (405). Although Henry V

represents the only king actually to have come close, Jaffa argues that Lear has at least established himself as “head of a united Britain” (405). Such is the prominence of Lear’s England that even the historic rival nations of France and Burgundy, representing “the world” (405), appear as suitors for Lear’s youngest daughter – and not even his eldest daughter, who, by rights, according to primogeniture, is heir to his kingdom. As Jaffa expresses it, “[n]ever in the histories does Shakespeare present his native land at such a peak of prestige and political excellence” (405), the potential of Cordelia’s marriage certainly playing a part in affirming that portrait. The love test, then, as Jaffa also argues, refuting the likes of Coleridge and A.C. Bradley, is also part of the portrait and part of the pretense. While both Coleridge and Bradley argue that the first scene, Act 1, Scene 1 of *Lear*, is little more than “an absurd fairy tale” (407), Jaffa outlines the extent to which the division of the kingdom is actually pretense and “part of a larger system of pretenses within the scene” (407). Cordelia appears to have the choice of husband, of who she marries, but the decision ultimately does not fall to her. It is another pretense, perhaps part of the same pretense as the love test, but Lear is still the one who makes the choice and material interests dictate the decision. Lear will choose for her and such is Lear’s expectation for the love test, he has likely already decided how to divide his kingdom, affording Cordelia and her husband the largest portion. Indeed, as Mary Beth Rose observes in her study on gender representation in the English Renaissance, a married woman, in fact, had limited “agency and identity” (293). For instance, women could not bring legal suit and they only “kept nominal possession of any land she owned, her husband [retaining] the rights over and profits from it” (293). This, too, has bearing on the division of Lear’s kingdom and is a problem of Act 1, Scene 1, too. Lear first speaks of awarding his daughters’ dowries, transferring them to their husbands, his son-in-laws. Only after declaring this intention, does he introduce the love test and speak about rewarding his daughters, letting them win their portion, through their expression of love.

6 When Cordelia confounds her father’s desire for flattery in Act 1, Scene 1, though, she expresses her love “according to my bond” (1.1.102) and introduces the problem of natural and real relationships and responsibilities to Lear’s world of pretense. Her response to Lear’s test, the momentous “nothing” (1.1.96), affirms the legitimacy of natural law and primogeniture. It stresses a duty to her future husband and her duty to her father. Yet, the statement also grounds the political situation and ends the pretense of Lear’s love test. Cordelia forces a second test of love that reinforces her position on marital bonds and leads to the exposure of Lear’s pretense even further, exposing his pretense about marriage even in terms of the material elements. Rather than having a marriage negotiated based on her

material “price” (1.1.225), the value of her dowry, Cordelia wins a husband who recognizes her as something more than Lear’s “best/ object” (1.1.246-7), valued, as her sisters are, by Lear’s false measure. She earns a husband who reckons her value beyond the material (“She is herself a dowry” (1.1.278)). Her other suitor, of course, reveals that he valued only her “fortunes” (1.1.288). Much as Lear falsely measures love, Burgundy pursues a prospective bride based only on her perceived material value. Cordelia’s judgment on this, too, is that materialism and egotism should have no place in serious courtship and certainly no such bearing on a marital bond as Burgundy allows (“Since that respect and fortunes are his love,/ I shall not be his wife” (1.1.288-9)). As Jaffa outlines in his study, too, though, “it is striking that, although Goneril and Regan have been married for some time, they have not yet received dowries” (411). Although Jaffa argues that perhaps the kingdom division is intended to “gain the support of the major powers in the kingdom” (411), he establishes that Cornwall and Albany “represent the geographical extremities of Britain” (411). What Lear divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan, too, the Fool observes that “Thou hast pared thy wit o’ both sides, and left nothing i’ the middle” (1.4.207). Each of the relationships – and especially marital relationships – derived from materialistic and egotistical desires contribute to the chaos and the breakdown of social order in *King Lear*. Cordelia’s marriage to the King of France is the principle depiction of a positive marital relationship, but in contrast to this, too, the marriages of Goneril and Regan, and even Gloucester’s marriage and his extramarital relationship, represent the negatives of marriage. Indeed, although the representation of these marriages is largely secondary within the play as a whole, key scenes reveal that both Goneril and Regan strive to manipulate their husbands, as Edmund manipulates his father and brother. In Act 3, Scene 7, Cornwall gives instructions to Goneril to “Post speedily to my lord, your husband. Show him this letter,” which Goneril does. Although Cornwall is a dominant and malicious figure within the play, as well, he is as much a cuckold as his brother-in-law.

7 Goneril and the Duke of Albany prove very much at odds. In response to Goneril’s bid to manipulate him, to incite him to take action against “the army that was landed” (4.2.5), Albany reportedly “smiled” (4.2.6) and essentially revealed knowledge of his wife’s treachery. He identifies his wife’s coming as “The worse” (4.2.7) and calls Oswald, his wife’s representative “sot” (4.2.10), having “turned the wrong side out” (4.2.11). Shakespeare thus begins the final pronouncement on Goneril’s marriage and brings about the dissolution of her marriage. In response to these revelations and accusations, Goneril proceeds to disparage her husband openly, as if to declare her own preference for Edmund and demonstrate her

treachery the more clearly. She describes a “cowish terror of [her husband’s] spirit” (4.2.15) and contends that her husband is guilty of inaction, he “dares not undertake” (4.2.16). Although this is not a fair accusation, Goneril takes sides against her husband in this moment, demonstrating her disloyalty in decisive action. As if to demonstrate the kind of action she expects of her husband but does not see, she acts to protect Edmund. “Then shall you go no further” (4.2.14), she says to him, to further affirm her disloyalty in the action, actively defying her husband and supporting Edmund with a single step. Were Goneril loyal to her husband, too, or at all deferential to his authority, she would do nothing to support Edmund so openly, in the company of servants and even in the face of her husband showing some awareness for her preference. The social elements of the scene bear consideration, as well. This is, after all, no private dialogue between husband and wife. There is no parallel in this exchange to, say, the interactions between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, when the latter accuses her husband of unmanliness and incites him to take action. The open defiance and the defiance, even more particularly, in front of low-order servants is such that strikes a harsher blow. The openness of the defiance and the social aspect determine that Goneril’s is an act of direct disobedience towards her husband in violation of the bonds of marriage. Indeed, Goneril proceeds to defy her husband with outright deception. In speaking of her husband’s “cowish terror” (4.2.15) she proceeds to suggest that “He’ll not feel wrongs/ Which tie him to an answer” (4.2.16-17). She suggests as much that he equivocates as that he disagrees with the course of action and suggests that she may yet persuade him (“Our wishes on the way/ May prove effects” (4.2.17-18)) even as she sends Edmund away, “[b]ack...to my brother” to “[h]asten his musters and conduct his powers” (4.2.19). She also speaks again to the act of deception she will undertake, providing a show of loyalty to her husband, a performance, as much as she previously did with her father. “I must change names at home,” she declares, “and give the distaff/ Into my husband’s hands” (4.2.19-20), the use of the word “distaff” (4.2.20) even somewhat echoing the ceremony attached to the love scene where she undertook a similar “change” of name and show of loyalty. While Shakespeare does not provide much guidance as to what those bonds are, as he conceives them for the play’s context, Cordelia clearly refers to the need to obey her father and then parallels her duties as a daughter with her duties as a wife. The consequences for this breach of loyalty are also tremendous. Goneril moves from defiance of her husband to an apparently adulterous relationship with Edmund. At least, the sense of a lustful attachment is apparent.

8 The Duke of Cornwall, by contrast, tends to side with his wife, determining to pursue sustained action against Lear and later Cordelia and the King of France. The relationship

between Cornwall and Regan is no less destructive and unnatural, however, in terms of what it achieves. Indeed, Cornwall's death is as much a result of the destructive force of his marriage. It occurs, of course, as he is "going to put out/ The other eye of Gloucester" (4.2.86-7). His involvement with Goneril and Regan, with their treachery and their unnatural activities, is that much more direct. Gloucester intervenes in various scenes and speaks alongside his wife, to her intent. In Act 2, Scene 2, for instance, Gloucester intervenes in the dispute between Lear and Regan concerning Kent and the behavior of Regan's servant. He undertakes to restore order: "Keep peace, upon your lives!" (2.2.49), with a tremendous immediacy. His language is decidedly violent. "He dies that strikes again" (2.2.50), he declares, before he asks, "What is the matter?" (2.2.50). In a sense, he demonstrates a readiness to act without waiting to consider the particulars of the circumstances. He commands, of course, that the men "[s]peak" (2.2.52) but Oswald is notably "scarce in breath" (2.2.53) and Cornwall's attitude is such that he identifies and potentially insults Kent as "a strange fellow" and a "tailor" (2.2.57). He also clearly responds to Kent's apparently uncouth nature and his loyalty towards Lear. "You beastly knave, know you no reference?" (2.2.71), showing his emphasis on status again. Of Kent, Cornwall accuses that he is "some fellow/ Who, having been praised for bluntness, doth affect / A saucy roughness and constrains the garb / Quite from his nature" (2.2.100-103). He proceeds to order his punishment in spite of Lear's protests and the telling feature of the exchange and Cornwall's manner is that he adopts the kind of regal and entitled tone of his wife and sister-in-law. He rises to meet their enjoyment of power, which, in itself, is beyond the natural order, beyond what is reasonable and measured according to social expectations for women. So too is the treatment of Kent by Cornwall, with inevitably parallels Regan and Goneril's treatment of Lear and Gloucester. Cornwall orders that Kent be put into the stocks and repeats the accusation that he is a "stubborn ancient knave" (2.2.136). Even as Kent protests his age, that he is "too old to learn" (2.2.138) and serves the King (2.2.139), Cornwall shows that he shares in his wife's ruthlessness. Without acknowledging Kent's plea and warning that it is "too bold malice" (2.2.141-2), Cornwall does not relent but orders "he sit till noon" (2.2.146). Regan, of course, then shows her loyalty and unity with her husband. "Til noon?" (2.2.147) she queries, adding that Kent shall sit in the stocks "Till night...and all night, too" (2.2.147), calling Kent, also, her father's "knave" (2.2.150). The same lack of mercy, of compassion, brings about Cornwall's death when he and Regan together goad each other in the blinding of Gloucester, too. Their lack of compassion is what they have in common and is a demonstration that causes, in effect, much of the disruption of the play. Even Lear's madness

traces to Cornwall and Regan more directly than to Goneril and her husband, whose rejection is less decisive. Lear, after all, sees the rejection of his authority and sees proof of his daughter's deception when he observes Kent in the stocks. The Fool comments that Kent "wears cruel garters" (2.4.10) and has received treatment better suited to animals ("Horses are tied/ by the heads, dogs and bears by th' neck, monkeys by th' loins, and men by th' legs" (2.4.10-12)). Kent then provides the quite decisive evidence that Cornwall and Regan have demonstrated unnatural tendencies. "It is both he and she," (2.4.17) Kent insists, and it is the "son and daughter" (2.4.18), both genders, "Jupiter" (2.4.23) and "Juno" (2.4.24). The stress is very much upon both genders having violated the natural order within those bonds of marriage. Jupiter and Juno are respectively the male and female ruling deities and thus the stress is upon both genders and higher authority, but also a false, fictional authority, because Shakespeare is aware of Christianity, though his characters are not. The order violated is also the same that, in its true form, dictates Lear to be the true king and Cordelia to be his true daughter, even as, technically, per the laws of primogeniture, Goneril and her husband should inherit Lear's lands (McNeir 188-9). The same natural order determines Lear's abdication (and the division of his kingdom) to be a violation of natural law (Dillon 105); he severity of Macbeth's crime as he murders Duncan – his kinsman and his king. Cornwall and Regan, though, in this broader context of *King Lear*, represent the ultimate unnatural couple. Their relationship, their partnership, brings only destruction – both of their deaths, Cornelia's death, and Gloucester's decline as well. Perhaps ironically, as a couple, they undertake to destroy the paternal generation – Kent, Lear, and Gloucester – rather than undertaking to produce any heirs promote stability and peace. Lear, of course, does not moderate his reckoning of the incident's importance, but it is clear enough that Shakespeare embeds irony into the declaration that "Tis worse than/ murder/ To do upon respect such violent outrage" (2.4.26-28). Telling, too, is Kent's retelling of the interaction between Cornwall and Regan in response to Goneril's letter. Reportedly, "they read" (2.4.39), "[t]hey summoned up their meiny...and attend/ The leisure of their answer, gave me cold looks" (2.4.40-43).

9 Cornwall's murder and the story of his decline, depend on further interaction between himself and Regan as a couple, again stressing the centrality of marriage. As in Act 1, Scene 1, the balance emerges between paternal bonds and marital bonds as the stress reverts to Goneril and Regan, and their behavior towards Lear. It is, however, in the presence of Cornwall and Regan, not Regan and Goneril that Lear demands to know "what reason" (2.4.144) he has to think that Regan is glad to see him, what proof there is, after all, of her affection. Interestingly, before Cornwall and Regan, too, Lear declares his own confused

sense of paternal and marital vows. He declares that “I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb/ Sepulch’ring an adult’ress” (2.4.146) as he challenges her “Sharp-toothed unkindness” (2.4.147) towards him. Lear, himself, equates paternal bonds to marital bonds; Regan’s betrayal of her father is a betrayal of her husband, in a sense, or at least to the point that Lear imagines that his own marital bond must somehow become invalidated. The further parallel in this reckoning, of course, is to Gloucester and adulterous relationship as well as his marriage, his earlier sense that his legitimate son had betrayed him and his conclusion that somehow a child born out of wedlock had no inherent lesser value than a child born within it. In the presence of her husband, again, though, Regan speaks about her father’s age and its significance. Marital and paternal bonds, in this, are again set on somewhat equal terms, essentially argued to be equal in the sense that Cordelia earlier suggested in Act 1, Scene 1. Alongside her husband and likewise with his presumed blessing, Regan, though, insists that “Nature in you stands on the very verge/ Of his confines” (2.4.165-66). It is the presence of Cornwall, too, and finally with his support, that Regan challenges Lear’s even more fundamental sense of natural order, declaring that he “should be ruled and led/ By some discretion that discerns your state/ Better than you yourself” (2.4.166-68), going so far as to ask that Lear “[s]ay you have wronged her” (2.4.170). She requests what Lear and potentially Shakespeare, too, consider a clear violation of the natural order or at least an affirmation of the unnatural state that Lear has brought about by abdicating his throne, renouncing his responsibilities as a king and thus, inadvertently, giving way to his authority and responsibilities as a parent. Cornwall’s confirmation of this, too, is that he acknowledges, “Fie, sir, fie” (2.4.185) and arguably adopts a position in relation to Regan that is comparable to Goneril’s. Indeed, Regan seems ready to outdo her husband in cruelty, as she did when Cornwall placed Kent in the stocks and she insisted that he should stay in them overnight, challenging her husband in the process. The extent to which gender roles emerge as problematic in this is perhaps not so readily explorable. It is difficult to determine the parameters of the relationships between Goneril and Regan and their husbands based on gender alone. On the one hand, the parameters seem sometimes consistent with the representation of gender within *The Taming of the Shrew*; implying that female subservience is preferable to a woman who bates and challenges her husband as Regan does; or, indeed, as Goneril defies her husband. Neither Goneril nor Regan are sympathetic characters and Regan’s involvement in Gloucester’s blinding would no doubt have triggered immense shock among a Shakespearean audience. Cornwall, however, seems to actively claim his wife and defer to her on occasion. He clearly claims her even as she demonstrates decided cruelty:

“‘Tis best to give [Lear] way. He leads himself” (2.4.341), he declares, ordering that Gloucester “[s]hut up your doors” (2.4.352). He responds to affirm his wife’s orders with these declarations and he then insists that “My Regan counsels well” (2.4.353), affirming that they are of like minds but also stressing their relationship, his ownership of her and apparent approval. A comparison emerges to the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in this, the latter having to literally relinquish her female state to commit acts of violence and cruelty herself. As Catherine Belsey argues, Lady Macbeth seeks to deny her gender constitutes, urging “evil spirits to ‘unsex’ her” (134). Yet, this urging, a perversion of “the meaning of manhood as a way of taunting her husband with cowardice” (134), is indicative of the lack of partnership. Regan experiences no such direct struggle with her gender, even as she goads her husband to remove Gloucester’s eyes. Goneril receives a curse by her father that essentially deprives her of gender status but rather to this effect. She, like Lady Macbeth, does speak disparaging about her husband and then seeks to replace him with Edmund, obvious allusions to adultery embedded in this violation of her marital bonds. The cruelty of both sisters, though, is still perhaps predominantly feminine in that it depends upon the neglect of their father and the goading of their husbands and Edmund to further acts of violence as the play progresses.

10 The parallel of paternal and marital bonds, of course, includes the further parallel of Lear and Gloucester’s situation – the situation with their children, legitimate and illegitimate. Lear’s expectation is that his daughters should be “tender-hefted” (2.4.193) and that they should “comfort” (2.4.196) and not “grudge my pleasures, to cut of my train” but rather, as “bond of childhood” (2.4.201), show the “effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude” (2.4.202). Gloucester’s expectation is likewise that his sons should be loyal and that his legitimate son should be the more loyal and honorable, the more valuable to him, because of his legitimacy. Like Lear, Gloucester calls out in the storm to Edgar, not realizing that he speaks to his son. He declares that he is “almost mad myself” (3.4.176) because he had a son “Now outlawed from by blood” (3.4.177) but Gloucester mistakes his sons, identifying the one as loyal when, in fact, he is not. With this, it is notable, too, that Cornwall, as Lear’s son-in-law, takes an increasingly active part in the humiliation of Lear as Goneril and Regan reject him. His blinding of Cornwall, in fact, parallels his part in casting Lear out into a storm, affirming the blindness of his father-in-law as he affirms Gloucester’s literal blindness. Similarly, Regan’s part in killing the servant who challenges Cornwall is also a parallel and a clear presentment of their relationship again, their partnership and its destructive capacity. It is through Regan’s actions that Cornwall is able to entirely blind Gloucester, learning the truth about Edmund as

he does calling for him: “Thou call’st on him that hatest thee” (3.7.108). Again, it takes Cordelia to reestablish the proper perspective on things and demonstrate not only how children should be to their fathers but how husband and wife should consider themselves bound to each other. In effect, she returns to England, at least in part, to claim an inheritance for herself and her husband; an inheritance that was hers due to her sisters’ treachery and that she presumably recognized from the first. In consoling her father, too, she restores parameters for kindness and respect, charging, though, that her sisters’ acts, as Kent also declared, extended beyond the bounds of what might have served as treatment for animals (“Mine enemy’s dog,/ Though he had bit me, should have stood that night/ Against my fire” (4.7.42-44)). Illegitimacy extends to marriage, though, too, and the treatment of husbands, in the scene immediately following this process of restoration. Edmund and Regan meet and Regan challenges Edmund as to his feelings for her and whether he does “not love my sister?” (5.1.10). Strikingly, too, Regan charges that he “Tell me but truly, but then speak the truth” (5.1.9), echoing her father in Act 1, Scene 1 again when she declares that “You know the goodness I intend upon you” (5.1.8). When he offers an answer, Regan also persists as her father did. Edmund declares that he loves Goneril in “honored love” (5.1.11) and then proposes that “That thought abuses you” (5.1.14) when she proposes a potentially illegitimate and unnatural bond, defying marital vows, between Edmund and Goneril. As such thoughts of illegitimacy in relation to bonds happened to abuse both Lear and Gloucester, so too, as Cordelia returns to England from France to restore order in Act 4, similar thoughts abuse Goneril and Regan both, bringing about their deaths. Edmund, too, demonstrates his illegitimacy and the unnatural nature of his own bonds with Goneril and Regan in having “sworn my love” to both sisters and ensured that “[e]ach jealous of the other as the stung/ Are of the adder” (5.1.64-65). That he yet cannot enjoy either one “If both remain alive” (5.1.67) again offers confirmation of the role that illegitimate relationships play between men and women. Such relationships are destructive, unsustainable – their role, if any, is to destroy, perhaps even to self-destruct, to lead to the destruction of their unnatural effects. Goneril and Regan act against each other – breaking their alliance and ultimately killing each other – because of their illegitimate desire for Edmund. Considering their fate, too, with respect to their marital bonds and how they behave in recognition of them, it is clear that Cordelia’s declaration in Act 1, Scene 1 must have particular bearing again. She declares, as much exposing the falsity of her sisters’ marriages as their declared love for Lear, “I shall never marry like my sisters to love my father all” (1.1.114), suspecting, perhaps, that her sisters neither loved their father nor their husbands to any manifest degree. Their distinct lack of

loyalty, plays to this idea. Cordelia, on the other hand, demonstrates that careful division of love when she returns. As Richard C. McCoy notes, even when she comes to his rescue, in an act of loyalty and kindness, their relationship is “fraught” (50), maintaining a certain formality, even as he finally recognizes her, “my child, Cordelia” (4.7.49) and himself as a “very foolish, fond old man” (4.7.60). Yet, Edmund’s role in this is also to finally undo all hope of reconciliation between Lear and his legitimate, loving daughter. As the product of an illegitimate relationship himself, he is a “thoroughgoing malevolence” (McNeir 188). He aligns with “Nature” but also seeks to undo all that is natural, subverting everything from legitimate relationships, as mentioned, including his brother’s to his father, but also, as McNeir argues in his study of Edmund, “the hierarchical laws of primogeniture and legitimacy” (188-189). Such laws are central to *King Lear*, too, as the legal or practical basis for Cordelia’s response to her father (nothing should persuade him to give her a larger portion of his kingdom than he gives to her sisters). The law of primogeniture determines that Lear’s kingdom should pass intact to the eldest of his children to promote the stability of the political and social orders as well, as the play’s tragedy suggests, as personal and familial stability, too.

11 With the parallels of paternal bonds with marital bonds so prevalent throughout *King Lear*, and with marriage, too, a dominant concept and problem within the drama, it emerges, finally, that marriage and the responsibilities of husband and wife are central to the play. Illegitimate marital relationships cause a degree of destruction at least comparable to that caused by the paternal bonds proved illegitimate. With Edmund as the ultimate form of illegitimacy – the product of adultery and the inciter of adultery, too – Shakespeare affirms, in part, what Lear declared about “the act of generation” (West 56). In Act 4, Scene 6, Lear declares against procreation and legitimate sexuality in favor of lechery because “Gloucester’s bastard son/ Was kinder to his father than my daughters/ Got ‘tween the lawful sheets” (4.6.116-118). Yet, because Lear’s judgment on this proves false, Shakespeare shows the bonds of marriage in fact, represent the only legitimate context for sexual desire. More than this, they are a guard against a force destructive to social order, represented by Edmund and even reinforced by Goneril and Regan, who demonstrate illegitimacy in their false declaration of their love for their father and their adultery with Edmund. Although Robert H. West elaborates on the relationship between sex and pessimism in *King Lear*, arguing how Edgar, Gloucester, Lear, and the Fool variously refer to sexuality in negative terms (Gloucester finally recognizing that his lechery in “a dark and vicious place” (5.3.206) lead to his blinding), he falls short of demonstrating how adultery is the underlying cause of the

destruction of the play's social order. Clearly, the indulgence of desires, especially sexual desires, beyond marital bonds, causes a particular darkness to emerge. There is evidence enough, in fact, for what Robert West calls "the sex horror" (57) of the play because Gloucester's adultery and later Goneril's and Regan's (even their false love declarations for their father, adulterous to their husbands) cause chaos and death. A contrast emerges, too, with Cordelia's own conception of spousal love and responsibility; this supporting the restoration of order at the play's conclusion, although it cannot also prevent her death. Her death stands as a final act of illegitimate and unnatural cruelty in a world dominated by such things, in which law is subverted on that principle and personal level. As the character with a double bond of legitimacy, too, her death also provides the final measure of a true marriage in an unnatural and chaotic context: it will not only restore peace but will achieve divine dimensions, with Cordelia's Christ-like death demonstrating the true depth of love's legitimate bonds.

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How Desdemona Learned to Die: Failed Resistance in Paula Vogel's

Desdemona

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Abstract:

Paula Vogel's dark comedy *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* is similarly probing, examining the isolation of women past and present through her reinvention of the characters in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Rather than creating a heroic Desdemona who defies her fate, Vogel chooses to depict an environment in which such a character would be impossible. Instead, Vogel creates a silly, spoiled, and promiscuous Desdemona who attempts to subvert the patriarchy that controls her. Vogel uses displacement to demonstrate the painful limitations of female agency, inviting audiences to see female resistance and oppression through Shakespeare's women. Her revised *Othello* does not 'correct' the darker plots of Shakespeare's play by 'saving' Desdemona and glorifying the female characters. Desdemona cannot triumph in Vogel's play, and the hope that the three female characters might rewrite the story in a positive way is futile. Although the women of Vogel's *Desdemona* are each doomed to fail at their respective attempts to escape the situations that control them, the text still maintains a feminist perspective. The feminism of *Desdemona* does not demonstrate empowerment, enlightenment, or equality—these positive elements are replaced with a kind of negative empathy. Referring to her play *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel argues that a play is not have to make audiences "feel good" to take a feminist stance—"It can be a view of the world that is so upsetting that when I leave the theatre, I want to say no to that play, I will not allow that to happen in my life" (qtd in Holmberg). Vogel's *Desdemona* is not a prescriptive, utopian image of what the world should be like for women. Similarly, the women themselves are not positive, successful heroes. Vogel asks her audiences to say 'no' to constraints on female agency and 'no' to female complicity and isolation. By not saving Desdemona, Vogel invites her audiences to save themselves.

1 Analyzing women and authority in Shakespeare, Juliet Dusinberre notes that Shakespeare's plays offer "consistent probing of the reactions of women to isolation in a society which has never allowed them independence from men either physically or spiritually" (92). Paula Vogel's dark comedy *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* (1994) is similarly probing, examining the isolation of women past and present through her reinvention of the characters in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Rather than creating a heroic Desdemona who defies her fate, Vogel chooses to depict an environment in which such a character would be impossible. Vogel creates a silly, spoiled, and promiscuous Desdemona who attempts to subvert the patriarchy that controls her. By exploring Shakespeare's female characters in their relationships with men and each other, Vogel uses *Desdemona* to interpret *Othello* in the same way that her later play *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) reworks Nabokov's *Lolita*. In *Desdemona*, Vogel demonstrates failed resistance instead of progressive achievement by creating a flawed heroine who attempts to defy an even more flawed

patriarchy. Relying on her audience's expected familiarity with the plot and characters of *Othello*, Vogel alters key aspects of the text to call attention to the limitations and pressures that define the lives of women, not only in early modern literature and culture, but also in her own time.

2 After examining historical and textual female agency in response to slander in "Why Should He Call Her Whore? Defamation and Desdemona's Case," Lisa Jardine concludes:

In history, agency is a dynamic, in relation to women and to men (both men and women have acted, have been acted upon). It is this historical agency which I have been concerned to retrieve, in theory as well as in practice. In my exploration of *Othello*, I have not been able to give back to Desdemona power to accompany her activity. (34)

Like Jardine, Vogel uses the character of Desdemona to explore the possibility of female agency (both on the stage and off). As a playwright who adapts Shakespeare's plays, however, Vogel has a power that Jardine does not. As a critic, Jardine is limited to the text of *Othello*; she can only analyze Desdemona's actions (or lack thereof) and compare them with the actions of carefully selected historical figures. While Jardine is able to make a strong case for the historical agency of women in early modern England, the textual agency of Desdemona's character remains problematic. In her examination of Desdemona's agency, she cannot re-write the actions of a literary character, and she must acknowledge that "in spite of her private protestations of innocence, Desdemona does nothing formally to restore her now 'actually' impugned reputation" (31). By appropriating Desdemona from Shakespeare's text, Vogel can "give back to Desdemona power to accompany her activity" (34) if she so chooses. But instead of rewriting the plot of *Othello* to give Desdemona additional agency (or even a stronger voice), Vogel chooses to emphasize the social limitations that keep Desdemona from exercising her agency.

3 In an interview with Arthur Holmberg about her 1998 play *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel explains that "for me, being a feminist does not mean showing a positive image of women" (qtd. in Holmberg 1). Vogel's approach counters the emphasis on positive models that characterizes another revision of *Othello*, Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. Sharon Friedman explains that the positive female 'selves' in *Goodnight Desdemona* offer women readers a chance to identify with Shakespeare's female characters as selves rather than others:

MacDonald's play challenges the institutional power of the theater to reproduce stereotypical roles for women, and the authority of the academy to perpetuate and naturalize these roles with interpretive strategies that preclude personally and politically engaged readings. (Friedman 122)

Friedman's enthusiasm for "personally and politically engaged readings" is tied to the idea that reinterpreting female characters as positive rather than "stereotypical" allows contemporary women to identify with them (122). This instinct leads critics to identify with or advocate for particular characters, such as when Carol Neely names herself an "Emilia critic" in *The Woman's Part* (213). In her study of the word "whore" in Shakespeare's canon, Kay Stanton asks her readers to consider how "women should own the term whore," offering a selection of Shakespearean characters to choose from: "Should we like Desdemona consider the word to be so foreign to our lived experience that we can barely speak it? Should we like Emilia not be intimidated from saying the word?" (99). Stanton rejects those characters in favor of Bianca, who treats the word "as a stance of male-constructed female representation that travesties the majesty of our sexual power" (100). Friedman, Neely, and Stanton reinforce the idea of a prescriptive approach to altering Shakespeare by building positive role models out of Shakespeare's heroines. Vogel's approach is conversely negative and descriptive. Although Vogel's Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca resist the cruel behavior of Othello, Iago, and Cassio, they are not painted as paragons of virtue. Instead of demonstrating heroic behavior that defies their circumstances, they fall into destructive behavior that serves as a reflection of their environment; it is impossible for them to act otherwise. Vogel's versions of the Shakespearean characters are selfish, violent, lustful, and insecure.

4 Vogel's pessimism undercuts the optimism that characterizes studies of *Othello's* female characters by authors such as Neely and Stanton. Rather than depicting Emilia and Bianca as strong women that take steps to overcome the misogyny generated by characters such as Iago, Vogel's text argues that they are just as ineffectual as Desdemona because they too are trapped in a society dominated by male power. The pessimism of Vogel's play does not make it anti-feminist. Like many feminist critics, she turns a critical eye on subjects such as female agency and autonomy, male and female sexual objectification, and patriarchal oppression. The darker spin that she gives these issues in her play is more of a comment on women's position in society than it is a comment on women's characters. Vogel explains that, for her "being a feminist means looking at things that disturb me, looking at things that hurt me as a woman. We live in a misogynist world, and I want to see why" (qtd. in Holmberg 1). By transforming the female characters of *Othello*, Vogel draws attention to the darkest impulses of men and women, real and fictional, past and present.

5 As Vogel's play moves towards the inevitable conclusion of Shakespeare's tragedy (the death of Desdemona), it invites the audience to explore its own complicity in

Desdemona's death. In each production of *Othello*, the audience is asked to sympathize with a character who murders his own innocent wife, to find him a tragic hero rather than a villain. At the heart of this is what Marvin Rosenberg calls "the problem of Othello." Rosenberg asks, "How can he be both noble and a murderer? What kind of sympathy, what empathy, can he evoke?" (5). In an interview with Simi Horowitz, Vogel acknowledges her own willingness to overlook Othello's actions: "I empathize with Othello more than Desdemona. I am crying for a man who killed his wife because he believes he was cuckolded. How can I, as a woman, possibly understand that? But I do" (qtd in Horowitz 3). Vogel's plays challenge preconceptions of audience empathy, asking audiences to see characters such as Lolita or Desdemona as subjects. Vogel describes being drawn to *Othello* and *Lolita* "as a young feminist, an ardent feminist, so drawn in and wrapped up in empathy for Othello and Humbert Humbert" and wondering "How would a woman writer do this? Could a woman writer write something where our empathy would be evenly located?" (qtd in Clay 1). In *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel gives a retelling of a Lolita-esque story that encourages the audience to empathize with both the Lolita figure (Li'l Bit) and the Humbert figure (Uncle Peck). Vogel struggles similarly with the issue of equal empathy in *Desdemona*, asking her audience to respond to both the Desdemona character and the absent Othello by acknowledging the different degrees of fault and victimization in *Othello*.

6 Vogel's text demands that audiences reconsider their own preconceptions about the culpability or innocence of Shakespeare's characters. Desdemona's guiltless chastity is crucial to the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The determination with which Othello investigates Iago's claims, demanding "ocular proof," gives credulity to the idea that Othello is justified in ending Desdemona's life if she is proved guilty (3.3.376). As he watches Desdemona sleep, just before he ends her life, he rationalizes that "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). Othello justifies his actions by arguing that he is preventing future crimes, not avenging past wrongs. He only expresses remorse for his actions when he realizes that Desdemona is guiltless. Vogel's *Desdemona* dramatically alters this crucial element by presenting a heroine who is anything but chaste. In Shakespeare's play, Othello declares "I had been happy if the general camp...had tasted her sweet body, so had I nothing known" (3.3.344). In Vogel's adaptation, Othello gets his wish.

7 Vogel's Desdemona spends Tuesday nights in Bianca's brothel, where she has slept with most of the garrison (everyone but Cassio, the one man Othello suspects). While Vogel's Othello is actually the "cuckhold" (4.1.191) that Shakespeare's Othello believes himself to be, the play clearly states that Cassio is "the only one" (Vogel 14) that Desdemona

has not betrayed her husband with. Although Vogel's Desdemona might be guilty of countless charges of adultery, Othello still kills her for the one act she has not committed. By not giving Othello the justification of discovering his wife's activities, Vogel emphasizes that innocence and chastity are not necessarily the same thing—while Desdemona has violated her marriage vows, she is still innocent of the charges that Othello and Iago bring against her. Desdemona's unique combination of guilt and innocence forces the audience to confront their own biases. As Marianne Novy points out, "the play asks, among other things: 'Do we feel different about a husband killing a wife who is really unfaithful? Should we? In what ways should we feel the same?'" (73). By giving the audience "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity, Vogel puts the audience in Othello's position, challenging them to consider their own complicity in Desdemona's death.

8 Vogel presents Desdemona's aggressive sexuality as an act of resistance, albeit unsuccessful. Feeling frustrated by her life, her marriage, and her position in society, Desdemona rebels in the only way that she can—through her body. She feels liberated by her sexual adventures, as though she can achieve her dreams of travel and adventure through sex with men who have traveled and fought. In an attempt to explain this feeling to Emilia, Desdemona describes it as a way to satisfy her "desire to know the world" (Vogel 20). She achieves this vicarious travel as:

They spill their seed into me, Emilia—seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me; I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind—oh, how I travel! (Vogel 20)

Because sex is the only power that Desdemona holds, she has no qualms about using it as a means of escape from her physical and mental environment. In both her visits to the brothel and her marriage to Othello, Desdemona tries to use her body to break free of the limitations that Venetian society has imposed on her. She describes her reaction to Othello's skin as hopeful that "If I marry this strange dark man, I can leave this narrow little Venice with its whispering piazzas behind—I can escape and see other worlds" (20). She is disappointed, however, to learn that "under that exotic façade was a porcelain-white Venetian" (20). Sexual desire, for Vogel's Desdemona, is tied with the idea of escape. She uses men to escape Venice, both literally and figuratively. But her attempts are always unsuccessful. Othello's exoticism is only skin-deep, and the men she sleeps with in Bianca's brothel don't come from "a thousand lands"—they are Venetian soldiers, including Iago.

9 Marianne Novy argues that “the relationships that [*Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*] scrutinizes are those between women” (Novy 70). But to disregard the influence that the male characters have on the women of the play is to leave many of their most fundamental motivations unexplored. While it is true that the male characters never actually appear on stage, their influence resonates in every aspect of the women’s behavior. The majority of the play’s action is driven by the male characters, from the opening scene (in which Emilia steals the handkerchief for Iago) to the closing scene (in which Desdemona prepares for bed on the night of her death). Vogel’s women define themselves through their relationships to the men in their lives. Desdemona is a “daughter of a senator” (17), a wife, and a victim, but she never establishes an identity of her own. Emilia is a servant and wife who longs for the day that Iago makes her “a lieutenant’s widow” (14). Bianca, the only female character to survive Shakespeare’s play, wants to trade her identity of ‘whore’ for that of ‘wife’ and live with Cassio in a “cottage by th’ sea, wif winder-boxes an’ all them kinds of fings” (38). Shifting the focus to Shakespeare’s female characters only serves to emphasize the restrictions on female agency in *Othello*.

10 In *The Woman’s Part*, Carole McKewin explains that “with no family or friends, Desdemona and Emilia are alone in a military camp, where masculine conceptions of honor define what a woman is” (128). Vogel’s play echoes the idea of female isolation in an environment that is controlled by men. When Vogel’s Emilia tries to convince Desdemona that men use women like they might use inanimate objects, she is reflecting the Shakespearean Emilia’s statement that men “are all but stomachs, and we are all but food;/ They eat us hungrily, and when they are full,/ They belch us” (3.4.98-100). The male characters in *Othello* frequently attempt to use the women for their own benefit. Iago uses Desdemona’s life as a tool in his own complex game of vengeance and manipulation, which is only possible because he uses his wife to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief. Cassio uses Desdemona as a means of recovering his position. Othello uses Emilia to find out information about Desdemona, and when she does not respond as he expects her to, he refers to her as a “bawd” (4.2.20). Immediately following this scene, Emilia attempts to make sense of the confusion of jealousy and adultery by asserting:

Let husbands know their wives have sense like them...
And have not we affections
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.91-101)

This ties together the theme of use and abuse that runs throughout the play, and the eye-for-an-eye pragmatism that characterizes Emilia's speech is in keeping with the practicality that Emilia expresses when she states that she would "make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch" (4.3.70). *Othello* presents men as subjects who evaluate the current situations and react to them, while women are often viewed as prizes, temptations, pawns, and other objects.

11 Vogel's play ironically inverts the typical representation of a female sexual object that is admired and desired by the men; instead, women are the admirers or critics who view men as objects. Where Desdemona herself is compared to inanimate treasures such as "monumental alabaster" (5.2.5) in Shakespeare's play, Vogel presents a playfully bawdy Desdemona who fondles a hoof-pick and quips that a man of that size "could pluck out my stone" (9). She teasingly asks Emilia if her "husband Iago [has] a hoof-pick to match?" and laughs when Emilia replies that "the wee-est pup of th' litter comes a'bornin' in the world with as much" (Vogel 9-10). Similarly, Desdemona delights in "demurely" mentioning to Bianca that "Emilia must constantly mend" Othello's undergarments because "he's constantly tearing his crotch-hole somehow" (29). In Vogel's *Cyprus*, the men are as objectified as the women are, and Desdemona delights in her sexuality, believing that she is using the men more than they are using her.

12 On the surface, the sexual gaze that Desdemona directs at Othello seems to represent the shift in female desire that critics such as Hélène Cixous call for—a "multileveled libidinal energy shaped by female bodily drives that find their way into the style of feminist writings" (qtd. in Freedman 115). Vogel's Desdemona demonstrates a desire for sex and a visual appreciation of the male form; her behavior attempts to reverse the objectification that Shakespeare's Desdemona is subject to. But her gaze, which she uses to turn men into objects of lust or mockery, lacks the "potency...the omnipotence of gazing, knowing" that characterizes the male gaze as described by Luce Irigaray (Warhol and Herndl 430). Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca can observe men, discuss them, even desire them, but they do not have the social power to control them. While Ann-Marie MacDonald gives Desdemona both the envy/desire of Othello's gaze *and* Othello's power to act on it, Vogel's Desdemona expresses desires, but she lacks the power to effect real change. She tries to escape Venice by marrying Othello, to escape the confines of her marriage by cuckolding him, and to escape Othello's jealousy by planning to leave with Ludovico. But despite these repeated attempts, Vogel's Desdemona cannot escape the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

13 Just as Othello, Cassio, and Iago control the action of Vogel's play without appearing onstage, Desdemona's impending death is crucial to Vogel's dramatic structure, although the

audience never sees her murder. Vogel relies on the audience's knowledge of *Othello* to establish a strong sense of dramatic irony in many of her characters' lines. When Emilia refers to Othello's questions about the handkerchief as "just a passing whim" (Vogel 7), the audience understands that Othello's jealousy is strong enough to drive him to murder. As Desdemona giggles about the barbarity of displaying bloodied bridal sheets for "half the garrison" (Vogel 8), it is hard to avoid thinking of the "tragic loading of this bed" from Shakespeare's *Othello* (5.2.363). Emilia warns Desdemona that Othello will kill her if he finds out about the time that she has spent in Bianca's brothel, but Desdemona pays little attention to the prediction. Her flippant protest that "nothing will happen to me. I'm the sort that will die in bed" is meant to assuage Emilia's fears (Vogel 12). Instead, it serves as a reminder to the audience that Othello will murder Desdemona "in bed" (Vogel 12) that very evening. Like John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* and Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters*, Vogel's *Desdemona* hinges on the audience's knowledge of *Othello* to emphasize the tragedy to come.

14 When Emilia pleads "M'lady, don't go to your husband's bed tonight. Lie apart—stay in my chamber" (Vogel 44), the danger resonates with Desdemona as well as the audience. Her naïve plan is to feign sleep when her husband comes to her room that night, and then leave the next morning for Venice. Her hope that "surely he'll not harm a sleeping woman" (Vogel 45) serves as a reminder that Othello wakes Desdemona with a kiss and asks her "Have you prayed tonight?" (5.2.26) before he kills her. As Desdemona prepares for bed, the audience cannot help but realize how close she is to her own death. As the curtain falls, Emilia asks if Desdemona would like her to "brush your hair tonight? A hundred strokes?" (Vogel 46). This ritual of brushing Desdemona's hair serves as a countdown until the moment when Desdemona must exit to her chamber. As Emilia reaches the ninety-ninth stroke, the play ends in an abrupt blackout, which implies that, as the theater puts out the lights, Othello will "put out the light" (5.2.8). The inevitability of tragedy is clear, despite the many changes that Vogel makes to the character of Desdemona. Vogel's Desdemona is acutely aware of the danger she is in, and she has a plan to escape Cyprus—yet she still suffers the same fate as Shakespeare's Desdemona.

15 The failure of Vogel's Desdemona to break free of the tragic pull of the plot of *Othello* can be attributed as much to the women in the play as the men. Vogel's Emilia states that "women don't figure into [men's] heads...that's the hard truth. Men only see each other in their eyes" (Vogel 43). But the female characters in *Desdemona* are similarly guilty of overlooking the feminine sphere in favor of the masculine. Vogel's Desdemona might have

been saved if she had embraced a true friendship with Emilia or Bianca. As Marianne Novy argues:

Hiding out in Bianca's brothel until she can leave Cyprus would actually provide the best opportunity for Desdemona to survive, but she doesn't understand the need for this until too late, since Emilia doesn't give her enough information until after Bianca has left in a rage over Desdemona's supposed affair with Cassio. (75)

Even if Desdemona could be saved by information from Emilia, as Novy argues, Desdemona's behavior has already alienated her before the play's opening scene. Unlike Shakespeare's Desdemona, who does nothing to deserve the theft of her handkerchief, Vogel's Desdemona delights in mocking and annoying Emilia. She strings her along with false promises of promotions and occasional gifts of discarded clothing, and she demands Emilia's "confidence" in return (14). Desdemona's brief acknowledgement of Emilia's honesty and value when she gives Emilia an expensive ring comes across as too little, too late. By the time the two women form a true bond, the chain of events leading to their deaths has already been set in motion.

16 Vogel's play does not make the argument that Desdemona is the only female character incapable of developing successful friendships with other women. The antipathy between Bianca and Emilia that is briefly explored by Shakespeare is revisited and expanded in Vogel's drama. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the only encounter between Emilia and Bianca occurs just after Cassio's death, when Emilia cries out "O fie upon thee strumpet," and Bianca replies that she is "no strumpet, but of life as honest/As you that thus abuse me" (5.1.121-3). In Vogel's play, Emilia dismisses Bianca as "a small town floozy with small town slang" (Vogel 25). Vogel's Bianca echoes Shakespeare's by initially defending herself to Emilia by claiming "Aw'm as 'onest a woman as yerself!" (26). The antipathy between the two characters continues throughout the play, with each woman claiming to know more about Desdemona, Cyprus, even religion. Similarly, Bianca begins the play with a genuine affection and respect for Desdemona. When Emilia attempts to shame Bianca into leaving the palace, Bianca responds:

Aw likes yer lady, whefer you think so or not. She can see me as Aw am, and not ask for bowin' or scrapin'—and she don't have to be nobby, 'cause she's got breedin', and she don't mind liking me for me own self—wifout the nobby airs of yer Venetian washerwomen! (Vogel 26)

But Bianca's initial friendship with Desdemona is not strong enough for Bianca to trust her when Bianca (like Othello) begins to suspect that Desdemona is sleeping with Cassio. Rather than serving as an example of a friendship that transcends class barriers, Desdemona and

Bianca's relationship devolves into a brawl in which they attack each other with a hoof-pick and a broken wine bottle. All of the women in *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* are just as doomed by their failure to form honest and loving relationships with each other as they are by their relationships with men. The differences between Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca are such that Desdemona is unable to truly connect with either of the women, and the others feel nothing but resentment towards each other. Paula Vogel explains that "*Desdemona* shows how women participate in a social system that does not allow them to bond. We bond with our husbands and our class structure rather than with each other" (qtd in Holmberg 1). There is no indication that these women could ever form a supportive female community, and their interaction provides no defense against tragedy.

17 While Shakespeare's Desdemona and Emilia have a closer relationship than Vogel's, giving *Othello* at least one genuine female friendship, they are unable to use that friendship to avert Shakespeare's tragic ending. Carole McKewin argues that the conversation between Desdemona and Emilia in 4.3 "reflects the texture of...oppression. Their language is imbued with frustration and evasion" (128). This conversation is the one scene in Shakespeare's text that Vogel adapts directly, and the scene in *Desdemona* that most directly contradicts the characterizations of *Othello*. At this point in the text, Desdemona, who has been pondering the adultery that her husband has accused her of, asks Emilia if she would "do such a deed for all the world" (4.3.66). Emilia, ever pragmatic, answers that "the world's a huge thing: it is a great price for a small vice" (4.3.67). Instead of portraying the contrast between the innocent and devoted Desdemona and the practical Emilia, as Shakespeare does, Vogel reverses their opinions on the issue of adultery and explores the implications that these changes have for each of the characters. In Vogel's version, Emilia is the one who argues that she would not commit adultery "for all the world," and it is Desdemona who states that "the world's a huge thing for so small a vice" (Vogel 19). Shakespeare's Emilia justifies her answer by describing the benefits that her husband could receive in return for her unfaithfulness. Vogel's Desdemona, however, does not speak of gaining "the world" for her cuckolded husband—she wants it for herself. Vogel's Desdemona longs to travel to "other worlds—worlds that we married women never get to see" (19) and break free of the limitations that society has imposed upon her.

18 Vogel's Emilia, by contrast, has little use for travel, sex, or even her husband. Her marital fidelity comes not out of love or loyalty to Iago, but out of concern for the rules laid out by the "Holy Fathers and the Sacraments of the Church" (18). As the play progresses, however, these rules become increasingly blurred in Emilia's mind. After learning that Iago

has been visiting Bianca's brothel, Emilia gives up any pretense that she might have had about the sanctity of the bond between Iago and herself and fully commits to her decision to leave him. Desdemona explains Emilia's unhappiness by blaming her relationship with Iago, stating that "he's been spilling his vinegar into her for fourteen years of marriage, until he's corroded her womb from the inside out" (28). There is an element of truth to these charges, for Emilia describes her sexual experiences with Iago as cold and lonely, a battle of wills in which she vows "not to be there for him" (43). The play makes it clear that, although Emilia hates her husband, she devotes most of her time to begging for Desdemona to secure small promotions for him from Othello, and Desdemona sometimes consents. These requests, however, do not serve as an example of the love and loyalty that Emilia feels for her husband. They are the result of Emilia's cold determination to become "a lieutenant's widow" and help herself to "what's left, saved and earned, under the mattress" (14) instead of leaving it for Iago to keep after her death. Emilia's resistance is less obvious than Desdemona's blatant infidelity, but it is present in the character's fervent desire to outlive or escape her husband. The futility of Emilia's dream is made apparent by Vogel's use of dramatic irony—the audience understands that Emilia will escape Iago only through her death later that evening, when he kills her for defending Desdemona against his charges. While resistance is possible in Vogel's depiction of Cyprus, success and triumph are not.

19 Vogel uses displacement to demonstrate the painful limitations of female agency, inviting audiences to see female resistance and oppression through Shakespeare's women. Her revised *Othello* does not 'correct' the darker plots of Shakespeare's play by 'saving' Desdemona and glorifying the female characters. Desdemona cannot triumph in Vogel's play, and the hope that the three female characters might rewrite the story in a positive way is futile. Although the women of Vogel's *Desdemona* are each doomed to fail at their respective attempts to escape the situations that control them, the text still maintains a feminist perspective. The feminism of *Desdemona* does not demonstrate empowerment, enlightenment, or equality—these positive elements are replaced with a kind of negative empathy. Referring to her play *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel argues that a play is not have to make audiences "feel good" to take a feminist stance—"It can be a view of the world that is so upsetting that when I leave the theatre, I want to say no to that play, I will not allow that to happen in my life" (qtd in Holmberg). Vogel's *Desdemona* is not a prescriptive, utopian image of what the world should be like for women. Similarly, the women themselves are not positive, successful heroes. Vogel asks her audiences to say 'no' to constraints on female

agency and 'no' to female complicity and isolation. By not saving Desdemona, Vogel invites her audiences to save themselves.

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