Eve's Legacy: The Fates of Young Women in Shakespeare's Tragedies

by

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Introduction

The fate of most young women in sixteenth and early seventeenth century England, as well as in Shakespeare's comedic plays, is marriage. In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom observes that, "If there were an Act VI to Shakespeare's comedies, doubtless many of the concluding marriages would approximate the condition of Shakespeare's own union with Anne Hathaway" (88). It is impossible to know the extent to which Shakespeare's married life influenced his work, but there are certainly hints that the marriages which supply his comedies' happy endings might prove less than blissful: Katharine gives into Petruchio's suit only after she has been exhausted by his persuasive tactics (including starvation); Portia hears from Bassanio's own mouth that his devotion to her is nothing compared to his love for Antonio; and prolonged harmony between Beatrice and Benedick seems most unlikely.

If Shakespeare's comedies present difficult (though perhaps somewhat typical) marriages as the happiest ending and best case scenario available to his young, female heroines, then his tragedies offer a much darker look at the worst that may befall such young women. The following work is an analysis of four of Shakespeare's best known, tragic female characters: Juliet of *Romeo and Juliet*, Ophelia of *Hamlet*, Desdemona of *Othello*, and Cordelia of *King Lear*. All of these young women are failed dramatically by the patriarchal social systems responsible for ensuring their well-being. In order to understand the forces at work behind these systems and their failures, it is necessary to take a brief (non-comprehensive) look at the attitudes toward women – particularly young, attractive women – which influenced Western culture before and during Shakespeare's time.

In *A History of Women: Silences of the Middle Ages*, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber summarizes the pervasive fear of female sexuality present in medieval Western Christianity:

> *Women, through whom death, suffering, and toil came into the world, were creatures dominated by their sex. So taught the Bible and patristic tradition. To control and punish women, particularly their bodies and their dangerous, disruptive sexuality, was therefore man's work. (13)*

For medieval clerics, who wrote and disseminated religious teachings on womanhood but who lived completely isolated from any real women, female sexuality was particularly threatening. The religious teachings which resulted from this fear warned men to protect themselves from the temptations of womankind, which could corrupt both their bodies and their souls. In "The Clerical Gaze," Jacques Dalarun references the method St. John Chrysostom and Odo of Cluny used to remind their monks that feminine beauty is not only mortal but merely skin-deep:

> *"If men could see beneath the skin, the sight of women would make them nauseous… Since we are loath to touch spittle or dung even with our fingertips, how can we desire to embrace such a sack of dung?" It seems never to have occurred to the Abbot of Cluny that the same noxious substances might also lurk beneath the rougher exteriors of male bodies. (20)*

This fearful attitude toward female sexuality led to an obsessive adulation of female virginity, embodied by Mary: a woman who conceives miraculously, fulfills her duties as the mother of Christ, and is rewarded by the raising of her uncorrupted physical body into heaven at the time of her death: "thou that didst not suffer corruption by union of the flesh shall not suffer dissolution of the body" (the *Pseudo-Melito,* qtd. in Warner 85). The early Church stressed that Mary's virginity was preserved not only in conception, but also post partum and in partu. That is, Mary physically remained a virgin even after the birth of Christ, despite her marriage to Joseph, and her hymen or "maidenhead" remained intact even through childbirth (Carroll 6). It was believed that physical corruption of a virgin defaces the work of the Creator; the maidenhead is natural and not to be destroyed (Warner 73). To the first leaders of the Church, "sexuality… represented the gravest danger and the fatal; they viewed virginity as its opposite and its conqueror… It is almost impossible to overestimate the effect that the characteristic Christian association of sex and sin and death has had on the attitudes of our civilization…. the soul dies in lust as the body rots in death" (Warner 50).

Mary, therefore, is mankind's savior from the temptations of women, and the answer to Eve, who broke Adam – the image of God – "as if he were a plaything" (Tertullian, qtd. in Warner 58). This medieval Mary/Eve dichotomy served "not to hold Mary up as a model for other women but rather to banish her to an inaccessible heaven where virgins can give birth yet remain inviolate." Regular women were doomed to follow in the footsteps of Eve, "mother of all dying things by nature," rather than Mary, "mother of all living things by grace" (Dalarun 27). Because women were seen as physically and spiritually inferior to men, as the channel through which sin and death entered the world, it was believed that they were incapable of directing their own spiritual growth and pursuing their own best interests. These responsibilities fell to men who

"shared with God and with the law of the land the difficult but necessary task of guarding women" (Casagrande 89). It was, therefore, the obligation of the patriarchal system to protect women and ensure their well-being.

By the early modern period of Shakespeare's life and career, these medieval attitudes and fears about women persisted but were tempered by the new and increasingly important Protestant doctrine of companionate marriage. The humanist concept of spiritual equality between men and women also influenced people's understanding and expectations of marriage (McDonald 261). Yet, while husbands were encouraged to treat their wives kindly and guide them gently, men were still considered to have a "natural" authority over women, and at their marriage ceremonies women were subjected to the Church of England's *Homily on the State of Matrimony*, which taught them to yield to their husbands. In "Men and Women: Gender, Family, Society," Russ McDonald notes that some historians believe the *Homily* was necessary because wifely disobedience was widespread; he quotes Susan Amussen's observation that, "No one questioned women's subordination to their husbands – they just sometimes refused to give it" (260).

Despite women's attempts to exert their influence at home and in society, mistrust of the female body (and its influence upon the female mind) remained. As late as 1658, the Dutch medical writer Levinus Lemnius harkens back to the early church fathers in his troubling assessment of the impact of menstruation:

> *… a woman's mind is not so strong as a mans…. If any man would more neerely have the cause of this explain'd and desires a more exact reason; I can find no nearer cause that can be imagined, than the venim and collections of humours that she every month*

heaps together, and purgeth forth by the course of the moon…. the Heart and Brain are affected with the smoky vapours of it, and the Spirits both vitall and animal, that serve those parts are inflamed… (qtd. in McDonald 255)

It may seem that such ideas about women's "humours" causing weakness of mind, body, and spirit would be disproved by (or at least temporarily set aside during) the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. However, in 1568, Edmund Tilney published a dialogue on male superiority and female submission – and dedicated it to his Queen (McDonald 260). Considering that even Elizabeth I was subjected to such teachings on womanly submission, it becomes clear that marriage was indeed a challenging estate for women and gives insight into the troubling unions which take place at the ends of Shakespeare's comedies.

His young heroines take on the task of meeting and marrying suitable husbands – a venture neither simple nor easy, given the risk of marrying during a time when women were at least theoretically expected to obey their husbands unconditionally, and divorce was rarely an option. The young women in Shakespeare's comedies frequently must find ways around their parents' preferences for their daughters' marriages; Russ McDonald notes that, "Like most writers of comedy, Shakespeare usually sympathizes with the daughter" (268). But what happens when the normal course of events takes a darker turn, and these daughters find themselves in more dangerous circumstances? A close examination of Juliet, Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia suggests that again, Shakespeare sympathizes with the daughters.

These young, female characters all struggle to make their way in impossible circumstances: patriarchal systems which demand their full obedience without upholding the obligation to protect

them. All four of these young women are under the guardianship of fathers who are unreasonable at best and tyrannical at worst; furthermore, all four fathers disregard the rules of the patriarchy they represent, refusing to pass their grown daughters into the custody of husbands, or disregarding their daughters' best interests in marriage. This results in the young women attempting to navigate the difficult path from childhood (father's house) to adulthood (husband's house) on their own, without paternal support or loving guidance. Additionally, they are haunted by the lingering association of sex, sin, and death that can be traced back to Eve and the Fall. Male obsession with their sexuality follows Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona, ending only with the saintly Cordelia in *King Lear* (though her apparent chastity fails to save her).

As these characters approach their tragic fates, they are portrayed as deeply sympathetic. In the plays, traditional roles are reversed, so that the downfalls of Shakespeare's tragic young women are brought about primarily by the sins of the men around them, rather than their own perfidy. The men who hold these women's fates in their hands become suspicious, vengeful, jealous, murderous, and mad by turns. Their wives and daughters fight for self-preservation despite unstable circumstances, but succumb to tragedy in the end, buried under the weighty collapse of the social order that is supposed to protect them.

In the pages that follow, this failure of the patriarchy will be traced through *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* (in the chronological order suggested by *The Norton Shakespeare*), and finally culminate in *King Lear*, where Cordelia takes on the role of redeemer and ends the chaos through her death. As the young women in the plays endure the consequences of their femaleness, it is apparent that they are true heirs to Eve's legacy of suffering and mortality.

Juliet: "Yet a stranger in the world"

Juliet has become a symbol of tragic love in Western culture, and she is perhaps the most romanticized of Shakespeare's female characters. As the young woman who sacrifices all – family loyalty, social approval, and finally her life – out of love for the son of a rival house, Juliet has earned the reputation of a young woman who places passion above all else.

However, stepping back from the popular mythology that has grown around *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* to consider the text itself, it becomes clear that while Juliet is without question inexperienced and naïve, she is not a wholly imprudent young woman who carelessly casts her lot with Romeo. Though Juliet experiences passion, she is not entirely dominated by it; at several moments during the play, she demonstrates an aptitude for decisive action intended to secure her own interests. Juliet, then, is headstrong but not foolish. Her tragedy results from her extreme youth, and the failure of authority figures who should have her best interests at heart. In "Tragedy and the Crisis of Authority in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet," Peter C. Herman asserts that the play is not a tragedy about fate, but "a tragedy about the failure of authority, as virtually everyone in this play charged with ensuring the well-being of the young betray their trust and end up contributing to Romeo and Juliet's destruction" (105). Juliet is the victim not of fate, but of the patriarchy and its representatives: the Nurse, Friar Laurence, and Lady and Lord Capulet.

The latter of these is the first to speak of Juliet, in Act 1, Scene 2, before the girl herself appears. We see Capulet responding to Paris's request for Juliet's hand in marriage, as he tells the suitor:

My child is yet a stranger in the world;

She hath not seen the change of fourteen years.

Let two more summers wither in their pride

Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride. (1.2.8-11)

Paris argues that, "Younger than she are happy mothers made" (1.2.12), revealing a disturbing bit of information about the accepted age for matrimony in the Capulets' Verona. Juliet's father counters, arguing that "too soon marred are those so early made" (1.2.13). He recognizes that to marry his daughter off while she is still a child would be to put her in jeopardy. In the second quarto version of the play, this is followed by the additional lines: "Earth hath swallowed all my hopes but she,/She's the hopeful Lady of my earth." This seems to indicate that while Juliet is now an only child, she had siblings who died. Is Capulet cautious about giving his daughter in marriage at such a young age because his own child bride, Juliet's mother, lost sons and daughters that were conceived while she was still too young to bear them? Shakespeare leaves us to guess, but the text is explicit about Capulet's hesitancy to permit Juliet's betrothal to Paris, and also about Lady Capulet's own early marriage and motherhood (which is discussed further below).

In "Coming of Age in Verona," Coppélia Kahn observes that Capulet's reference to Juliet as "the hopeful Lady of my earth" reveals his desire that Juliet "will not only survive motherhood, but produce healthy heirs for him as well." *Fille de terre* – French for "Lady of the earth" – is the

French term for heiress. Juliet is her father's only legacy, and he seeks to protect his progeny (12). Considering all that Juliet means to him and everything at stake for the Capulet family, her father proves disturbingly feeble in his resistance to Paris' suit. Even after he argues that girls who become mothers too early are apt to be "marred," he concedes:

But woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart;

My will to her consent is but a part,

And, she agreed, within her scope of choice

Lies my consent and fair-according voice. (1.2.14-17)

Capulet is uneasy about seeing Juliet wed before she has reached fourteen years of age, but if Paris can convince the girl, he will give consent. This scenario makes clear the extent to which Juliet's life and well-being rest in her own young hands from the very beginning of the play, before tragic events are set into motion. Juliet must be the guardian of her own best interests and decide, at age thirteen, whether or not she wishes to marry Paris. However she may strive to rise to the circumstances and take control of her life, she is not prepared to make her own way in the world at such an early age. Her father and, by extension, the entire patriarchal system that is obligated to protect her in exchange for her submission, fails Juliet in the opening act of the play – before she has even appeared onstage.

Juliet makes her initial entrance in Act 1, Scene 3, in the company of her Nurse and her mother. It quickly becomes apparent that Juliet has been raised primarily by the Nurse, as it is she

(rather than Lady Capulet) who is able to reckon Juliet's age to the hour, and who is also able to reminisce Juliet's early childhood through a series of anecdotes. Coppélia Kahn aptly sums up the relationship between Juliet and her nurse:

> *With regard to Juliet, the Nurse is… a surrogate mother within the patriarchal family, but one who is, finally, of little help in assisting Juliet in her passage from child to woman. She embodies the female self molded devotedly to the female's family role. The only history she knows is that of birth, suckling, weaning, and marriage; for her, earthquakes are less cataclysmic than these turning points of growth. (14)*

Despite her role as the primary model of womanhood in Juliet's life, the Nurse is an embodiment of the patriarchy and its values. This is revealed in one of her cherished anecdotes, which demonstrates both her devotion to Juliet and a troubling inability to separate her charge's individual well-being from the expectations of the larger, male-dominated culture. The Nurse's story recalls of a young Juliet:

> *For even the day before, she broke her brow,*
>
> *And then my husband – God be with his soul,*
>
> *A was a merry man! – took up the child.*
>
> *'Yea,' quoth he, 'dost thou fall upon thy face?*
>
> *'Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit,*

Wilt thou not, Jule? And, by my halidom,

The pretty wretch left crying and said 'Ay.' (1.3.40-46)

By the Nurse's reckoning, Juliet was not quite three years old when this incident took place, yet she was already socially aware enough to answer 'Ay' and leave the room crying when her Nurse's husband asked whether she would be obliged one day to fall on her back rather than her face. Kahn states that the "…Nurse finds the point of the story in the idea that even as a child, Juliet had the 'wit' to assent to her sexual 'fall'; she takes her 'Ay' as confirmation of Juliet's precocious fitness for 'falling' and 'bearing' (14).

As distressing as this recollection and the Nurse's attitude in telling it may be to an audience or possibly even to Lady Capulet (who asks the Nurse to stop talking and hold her peace), the Nurse finds it amusing enough to tell as second time:

'Yea,' quoth my husband, 'fall'st upon thy face?

Thou wilt fall backward when thou com'st to age,

Wilt thou not, Jule?' It stinted and said 'Ay.' (1.3.57-59)

This fond remembrance of Juliet's childhood is cut short by Lady Capulet's introduction of Paris as a potential husband for her daughter. Lady Capulet asks Juliet, "How stands your disposition to be married?" Juliet responds, "It is an honour that I dream not of" (1.3.67-68). Though Juliet is about to meet Romeo and enter into a hasty marriage with him, she is not at this

point actively seeking a groom. Juliet does not fantasize about acquiring a husband; matrimony is not something she desires for its own sake.

Lady Capulet interprets Juliet's hesitancy as childishness when her daughter should be embracing womanhood, motherhood, and family duty. She instructs Juliet:

Well, think of marriage now. Younger than you

Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,

Are made already mothers. By my count

I was your mother much upon these years

That you are now a maid. (1.3.71-75)

This confirms Paris' assertion that girls even younger than Juliet are "mothers made" (whether or not they are indeed "happy" remains debatable), and reveals two key pieces of information about Lady Capulet. The first is that she was already a mother by the time she had reached Juliet's current age of thirteen years; assuming that Juliet was conceived in wedlock, Lady Capulet would have been married around age twelve. This means that the age difference between mother and daughter is approximately twelve to thirteen years, and offers a possible explanation as to why the Nurse has been so necessary as an elder, maternal figure in Juliet's life. The second is that Lady Capulet does not wish to spare Juliet her own fate of early wifehood and motherhood. This indicates that either she genuinely sees nothing amiss with such a situation or, resentful of her own unfortunate early marriage, she believes it unfair that Juliet is allowed to remain a maid

at the ripe old age of thirteen. While her initial remarks instructing Juliet to begin thinking of marriage might indicate the latter, her following description of Juliet's suitor Paris suggests that she finds her daughter's marital prospects to be romantic and exciting. She tells Juliet to:

Examine every married lineament,

And see how one another lends content;

And what obscured in this fair volume lies

Find written in the margin of his eyes.

This precious book of love, this unbound lover,

To beautify him only lacks a cover. (1.3.85-90)

This giddy and girlish attitude toward the handsome Paris indicates emotional immaturity on the part of Lady Capulet. This is understandable considering that she is, at most, twenty-six years old and has most likely led an extremely secluded life within the Capulet household. If she became Capulet's wife while still a child, it is reasonable to assume that Lady Capulet herself was mothered to some extent by the Nurse. Juliet, then, is trapped within her father's house and has, as her female role models, a mother who has been little more than a child herself through Juliet's own childhood, and a Nurse who finds humor in her beloved three-year-old charge's dismay at the thought that she will soon be required to fall on her back in submission to a husband.

While the Nurse doesn't seem troubled by Juliet's early awareness of and dismay over her womanly lot in life, an Elizabethan audience may have felt differently. In "'Too soon marr'd': Juliet's Age as Symbol in *Romeo and Juliet*," J. Karl Franson stresses that:

> *The notion that Elizabethan couples married young has been challenged recently by social historians. Although the setting of* Romeo and Juliet *appears to be early 14th Century Italy, Shakespeare's cultural model is primarily Elizabethan England, where physical maturity developed later than it does today: girls matured at 14-15, boys at 16-18. Youths under 15 were still considered children. The earliest legal age for marriage, the age of consent or discretion, was 14, but early teenage marriages were rare, and in the few cases on record, the children were either not formally betrothed or not allowed to consummate their vows until much older. (245)*

Franson continues to say that contemporary health manuals taught Elizabethans that early marriage and its consummation were permanently damaging to young women's health, impaired young men's physical and mental development, and produced sickly or stunted children. The general view was that motherhood before age sixteen was dangerous and, "as a consequence, 18 came to be considered the earliest reasonable age for motherhood, and 20 and 30 the ideal ages for women and men, respectively, to marry." The actual average age of marriage for Elizabethan women was twenty-five to twenty-six, while the average age of marriage for men was twenty-seven to twenty-nine. Shakespeare's own daughters, Susanna and Judith, married at twenty-four and thirty-one, respectively (246).

This being the case, Elizabethan theatre-goers likely would not have found Lady Capulet's early marriage or marital arrangements for her daughter to be either natural or responsible, and they may not have considered the Nurse's recounting of Juliet's early distress at being expected to marry and "fall on her back" to be entirely humorous. Though the Nurse is portrayed as a comic character, the troubling implications of her commentary on Juliet's childhood are a hint that this play, which begins in similar fashion to Shakespeare's comedies, is headed for a darker conclusion. The emphasis on Juliet's extreme youth is equally foreboding, and unique to Shakespeare's telling of the tragedy. In his "primary source, a long narrative poem by Brooke, she is 16 (or nearly so), and in another English version he might have known, the translation of a *novella* by Bandello, she is almost 18, yet in both accounts she is still considered too young for marriage" (Franson 244). Shakespeare deliberately chooses to portray Juliet as not quite fourteen, and just under the legal age of consent. By frequently citing her youth – so extreme as to be shocking – the text emphasizes her victimization at the hands of her family and society, and her extraordinary poise and strength as a child thrust into womanhood too soon.

It is worth noting that the discussion of potential marriage to Paris is a catalyst for the frenetic pacing of the play, which will build until the title couple's double suicide. In her introduction to *The Oxford Shakespeare Romeo and Juliet*, Jill L. Levenson states that when Lady Capulet and the Nurse prompt Juliet to begin thinking of marriage, she "accommodates herself to social conventions which take no account of the transitional period she has begun; her mother and nurse expect the child to turn into a woman without delay" (26). In doing so, they plant the possibility of imminent marriage – something she had not dreamed about up to this point – in Juliet's mind, and spur her into prematurely making choices about matrimony that end with tragic consequences.

The balcony scene (Act 2, Scene 2), which takes place after Juliet has met and become attracted to Romeo, shows us a girl who is bold but also calculating as she takes charge of her own marital prospects. Apparently before she realizes that Romeo is in the orchard listening, Juliet voices her view on the lovers' situation:

O Romeo, Romeo,

wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name,

Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet. (2.1.74-78)

This is a girl who is able to not only imagine, but voice – if only to herself – Romeo's defiance of his father and a union between herself and the son of her family's greatest enemy. Barring Romeo's willingness to cut ties with his father, Juliet proposes the idea of leaving her family and entering into marriage without the consent of an appropriate male relative. Carolyn E. Brown, in "Juliet's Taming of Romeo," describes her in this scene as "a self-willed, courageous, intelligent young woman who initiates and controls action in her struggle to preserve her integrity and autonomy in a world that is hostile to women" (333). Brown asserts that on a primary level, Juliet is musing to herself about her love for Romeo, "showing that the strength and purity of her love allow her to look beyond the externals of names and feuds to an appreciation of Romeo's

spiritual essence." Yet, she argues, Shakespeare is elusive about whether or not Juliet knows of Romeo's presence below her balcony, leaving the possibility that,

> *Juliet only pretends not to see Romeo and takes advantage of the darkness so that she can be more forward and can assume a typically masculine position of power, proposing to Romeo rather than waiting for him to act. She inverts the marriage vows and asks him to make the sacrifices required of women: he is to give up his name and leave the protection of his father's home and take her as his new protector (339-340).*

This is the first of several instances in which the play reverses traditional masculine and feminine roles, presenting a dominant Juliet and a passive Romeo. Even if Juliet is truly unaware of Romeo's presence, her words are daring. When Romeo makes himself known, Juliet warns him that her kinsmen will murder him if they see him. This implies that members of the Capulet family are likely nearby, in which case Juliet takes a great risk by giving voice to her love for Romeo. She knows how her kinsmen will react to her declarations of passion for a Montague, yet she does not censor herself.

This blunt honesty is also apparent in her dialogue with Romeo. While Juliet experiences the infatuation of a teenaged girl, she makes clear that she will not be overwhelmed by it. She is fully aware that infatuation can hamper her judgment, telling Romeo:

> *Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say 'Ay',*

And I will take thy word. Yet if thou swear'st

Thou may prove false. (2.1.132-134)

Juliet goes on to tell Romeo that she has shown herself to be "too fond," and that he will think her behavior "light"; she wants him to know that despite her feelings for him, she is not willing to compromise herself nor to be cheaply bought. When Romeo swears his undying love, she responds:

Well, do not swear. Although I joy in thee,

I have no joy of this contract tonight.

It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden,

Too like the lightning which doth cease to be

Ere one can say it lightens. (2.1.158-162)

Unlike Romeo, who is prematurely swept away by desire (just as he was with the beautiful Rosaline, forgotten upon his meeting with Juliet), Juliet realizes that they are being rash and that her situation is potentially dangerous to her honor and possibly her life. In Act 3, Capulet is revealed to be capable of extreme rage and possibly violence against his daughter when she thwarts him; Juliet, presumably aware of the danger to herself, is willing to gamble on matrimony but nothing less. She rebels against her parents by choosing a Montague, but she is willing to take a

great risk only for an honorable marriage – the idea of marriage having just been encouraged by her mother and the Nurse only hours before. Romeo asks her, "O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?" and she challenges him, "What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?" (2.1.167-168). When he responds that he can have her faithful vow of love in exchange for his, Juliet takes the opportunity to test the extent of Romeo's devotion, directing him toward a matrimonial conclusion:

If that thy bent of love be honorable,

Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow,

By one that I'll procure to come to thee,

Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite,

And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay,

And follow thee, my lord, throughout the world. (2.1.185-190)

Juliet proposes marriage again, and this time there is no possibility that she is musing only to herself. Romeo agrees, and so Juliet has arranged her own marriage with a man of her own choosing. This is a hasty resolution for a girl who so recently stated that she had no dreams of marriage; it raises the question of whether Juliet's actions are due entirely to her new infatuation with Romeo, or if she simply decides that choosing Romeo for herself, in the limited time she has, is better than succumbing to the match with Paris. Juliet's determination to control her own destiny is apparent from Act I, Scene 5, when she sends the Nurse to learn about Romeo and states, "If he be marrièd,/My grave is like to be my wedding bed" (131-32). Juliet will have her own choice of

husband (Romeo) or no man at all; and though Romeo is not married, her words foreshadow the tragedy of their hasty union. At the time in their lives when they should rightfully be escorted to their marriage bed, Juliet and Romeo will instead be laid in their graves.

As Juliet retreats to her bedroom and the company of her Nurse, Romeo makes his way to Friar Laurence for advice and support. It is at this point that control of the situation is first taken from Juliet's hands and given into those of the churchman. Romeo finds Friar Laurence collecting medicinal herbs, which suggests his wisdom in their uses and his ability – which will fully reveal itself as the play unfolds – to manipulate healing, life, and death in an almost supernatural way. Gathering his plants, the Friar observes:

The earth, that's nature's mother, is her tomb.

What is her burying grave, that is her womb… (2.2.9-10)

These two succinct lines both encompass the triangle of sex, sin, and death that was a key element of medieval Christian religious belief, and foreshadow the end awaiting Juliet and Romeo. To associate burial grave with womb is to understand the human lifecycle as a result of the Fall instigated by Eve; due to woman's sin, humanity is sentenced to be born, suffer, and die. Juliet and Romeo, brought forth from the "fatal loins" cited in the Prologue, are destined to take their place in the burying grave of the earth. This is a continuation of the theme raised in Act I, Scene 5, when Juliet states that, "My grave is like to be my wedding bed" (132).

As an authority figure to Romeo and a representative of the Church, Friar Laurence's duty is to caution the young people against acting on impulse and instead encourage them to fulfill their duties to religion, society, and family. Instead, he agrees to Romeo's request for a secret marriage, in the hope that it will eventually reconcile the feuding houses of Montague and Capulet:

In one respect I'll thy assistant be;

For this alliance may so happy prove

To turn your households' rancor to pure love. (2.2.89-91)

Like Juliet's mother and the Nurse, Friar Laurence fails to place his charge's best interests above all else, and to uphold his duties as an authority figure. Where Friar Laurence's motive of peace between the families is loftier than the Nurse's desire for a wedding or Lady Capulet's licentious admiration of Paris, the end result is the same. Just as Juliet should be protected from dangerously early marriage and motherhood, Romeo should be protected from an impulsive marriage that is unsanctioned by his family. Friar Laurence fails in his responsibilities.

This failure of the social order to do its duty by Romeo and Juliet culminates in Act 3, when the questionable judgment of Friar Laurence and the outrageous behavior of Capulet lead directly to the play's tragic conclusion. Mistaking Juliet's despair upon Romeo's banishment for grief over her cousin Tybalt's death, Capulet hastily decides to cheer his daughter by marrying her to Paris. His sudden, thoughtless rush to see Juliet wed provides a moment of wry humor as he sets the wedding date:

Capulet: But soft – what day is this?

Paris: Monday, my lord.

Capulet: Monday. Ha, ha! Well, Wednesday is too soon.

O' Thursday let it be. O' Thursday, tell her. (3.4.17-20)

This is reflective of the compressed sense of time which is present throughout the play. Romeo and Juliet are impetuous teenagers, and their headlong rush into marriage may be excused by their extreme youth. The adults around them, however, should know better – yet even Capulet, who previously demonstrated an understanding of the risks which accompany early marriage, now attempts to rush Juliet into a union with Paris. This sudden changeability on his part reflects the instability of the play's Verona, its feuding families, and the unpredictable, rapidly changing circumstances around Juliet and Romeo. The adults who ought to serve as models of responsible behavior instead contribute to the creation of an increasingly chaotic environment around the young lovers. We have seen that Juliet recognizes the danger of all this haste as early as Act 2:

… too rash, too unadvised, too sudden,

Too like the lightning which doth cease to be

Ere one can say it lightens. (2.1.158-162)

She may have attempted to slow the course of action at that point, but by the time of Romeo's banishment and her forced betrothal to Paris, it is too late; adult authority figures have increased the pace and raised the stakes through their irresponsible decisions (the Nurse encouraging the clandestine relationship between Juliet and Romeo, Friar Laurence agreeing to marry them secretly, Capulet forcing Juliet into a hasty union with Paris). Levenson asserts that the young lovers' unwavering devotion to each other is made all the more intense by their sense of urgency: "Together passion and contingencies accelerate the irregular phases of progress or regression for both protagonists" (28).

Under this pressure, Romeo collapses (literally lying on the floor), and from Tybalt's death onward, Juliet must face a rapid series of difficult decisions entirely on her own. Even before he takes leave of Verona, Romeo is unable to reassure Juliet or take decisive action; he continues to thwart traditional gender expectations by remaining passive. "Romeo condemns his own effeminacy at Mercutio's death" (Levenson 27), lamenting, "O sweet Juliet,/Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,/And in my temper softened valour's steel" (3.1.108-110). This shame over his own impotence prompts Romeo to take his only decisive action in the play: the ill-advised revenge killing of Tybalt. When this results in his banishment, the Nurse chides him for responding by lying on the floor, weeping, and her chastisement for his inability to "rise" and be a man – like Romeo's own reference to "softened valour's steel" – can be read as having sexual as well as emotional implications: "Stand up, stand up, stand an you be a man/For Juliet's sake, for her sake, rise and stand," the Nurse admonishes him. Friar Laurence echoes her disgust at Romeo's "effeminate" behavior, asking him, "Art thou a man? Thy form cries thou art./Thy tears are womanish, thy wild acts denote/The unreasonable fury of a beast" (3.3.108-110). Romeo may look like a man, but his uncontrollable weeping makes him womanish, and his inability to think or

behave reasonably makes him akin to a wild animal (this juxtaposition of the failures of woman and beast revealing a troubling attitude about women's humanity and aptitude for reason).

Meanwhile, Juliet's own grief over the banishment leads her parents to believe that she is excessively mourning her cousin Tybalt, and that marriage to Paris is the best way to cheer her. Capulet is certain that Juliet will meekly accept a marriage commanded by him, telling Paris, "I think she will be ruled/In all respects by me. Nay, more, I doubt it not" (3.4.13-14). When Juliet, who remains fully capable of both reason and decisive action, surprises her father by graciously but firmly insisting that she will not marry Paris, Capulet instantly flies into a rage:

> *… Mistress minion, you,*
>
> *Thank me no thankings, nor proud me no prouds,*
>
> *But fettle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next*
>
> *To go with Paris to Saint Peter's Church,*
>
> *Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither. (3.5.151-154)*

This is merely one day after Capulet tells Paris that his daughter is too young to be a wife, and should wait at least two more years before marrying. It is not concern for Juliet, then, but anger over her failure to bow instantly to his ill-advised and hasty decision that enrages Capulet. Despite his apparent retraction of previous concerns, Capulet's frothing rant reveals that the issue of Juliet's tender age is still in his mind, as he mocks her:

And then to have a wretched puling fool,

A whining maumet, in her fortune's tender,

To answer 'I'll not wed, I cannot love;

I am too young, I pray you pardon me!' (3.5.183-186)

In "The Tragedy of Old Capulet: A Patriarchal Reading of *Romeo and Juliet*," Martin Goldstein observes that, "The fact is that Juliet, in this scene, has never given her youth as a reason for objecting to the marriage. In the difficult circumstances fate has placed her, she has found it necessary to equivocate, at times to lie, but for the wife of Romeo to say that she is too young to marry is more than she could do" (235). Juliet certainly never tells Capulet that she "cannot love" due to her age; he invents this on his own. Peter C. Herman supports this view in "Tragedy and the Crisis of Authority in Shakspeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

While marriage manuals and other writers of domestic affairs often insisted that children needed to consult their parents before marrying, these texts evidence a long, vociferous tradition deploring forced marriage and warning of its consequences. Old Capulet is on the wrong side of that tradition, and the fact that he adds "I am too young" to Juliet's list of objections (something she herself does not mention) suggests that we are meant to view his actions as transgressing the cultural expectations of parenthood. In short, Old Capulet fails in his obligations to his daughter by first deciding in favor of the

match with County Paris, even though he knows Juliet is too young, and then demanding that she marry against her will. (101)

After Capulet's explosion, Juliet begs her mother to intervene with the betrothal, foreshadowing the tragedy that will result from it as she warns, "Delay this marriage for a month, a week;/Or if you do not, make the bridal bed/In that dim monument where Tybalt lies" (3.5199-201). If no one disrupts this sequence of events, Juliet's grave will indeed be her wedding bed. After she is refused by her mother, Juliet beseeches the Nurse, "Comfort me, counsel me" (3.5.208). She is a thirteen-year-old girl who has met and secretly married the son of her parents' mortal enemies, known her beloved cousin to be murdered by her husband, seen Romeo banished, and been violently forced into a new betrothal with a man she has never met, all within the span of forty-eight hours. These events would be an unbearable weight for anyone, and Juliet is still a child, "yet a stranger in the world," to use her father's words. She is desperately in need of support and reasonable advice, and she turns to her Nurse – the only member of the Capulet household who clearly loves her and who knows the full scope of recent events. In response, the Nurse states bluntly that Romeo is banished and will never come back to challenge Juliet's new marriage (and even if he did return, it would have to be secretly), so she should go ahead and marry Paris (3.5.213-221). The Nurse caps her argument in favor of marriage to Paris by telling Juliet that her second husband is an even better catch than her first:

I think you are happy in this second match,

For it excels your first; or if it did not,

Your first is dead, or 'twere as good as he were

As living hence and you no use of him. (3.5.222-225)

Herman asserts that, "The Nurse's departure from social convention (let alone her endorsement of bigamy) has two immediate consequences. First, the bonds between her and Juliet are completely severed." Second, "the Nurse's betrayal will ultimately lead… Juliet to the Friar and ultimately to suicide" (104-105). Having lost faith in the Nurse, Juliet withdraws her confidence and lies about her reason for visiting Friar Laurence, claiming that she is going to confession before marrying Paris.

The Friar responds to Juliet's desperation by concocting an equally desperate plan. Seeing only that she possesses strength and determination beyond her years (and beyond Romeo's capacity), he overlooks Juliet's vulnerability and encourages her extreme impulsivity, proposing the riskiest venture she has yet undertaken:

Hold, daughter, I do spy a kind of hope

Which craves as desperate an execution

As that is desperate which we would prevent.

If, rather than marry County Paris,

Thou hast the strength of will to slay thyself,

Then it is likely thou wilt undertake

A thing like death to chide away this shame,

That cop'st with death himself to scape from it;

And, if thou dar'st, I'll give thee remedy. (4.1.68-76)

Juliet dar'st. She resolves to drink the potion given to her by the Friar, and keeps her plan secret from her parents and the Nurse. Once again, Juliet is daring to the point of recklessness, but not unaware of the risk she is taking or its potential consequences. She experiences intense fear, questioning every aspect of the plan she is about to undertake, and considers calling her parents or the Nurse back to comfort her. Before she swallows the contents of the vial, Juliet contemplates an array of possibilities:

What if this mixture do not work at all?….

What if it be a poison which the friar

Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,

Lest in this marriage he should be dishonored

Because he married me before to Romeo?….

How if, when I am laid into the tomb,

I wake before the time that Romeo

Come to redeem me? There's a fearful point. (4.3.23-31)

She does not ask why the Friar has this mysterious and dangerous potion immediately at hand, which in itself is troubling, but she clearly realizes that there is potential danger in drinking it. Fully aware that any number of elements could go awry, Juliet makes her decision and holds to it resolutely, sending away her family and drinking the Friar's potion. Goldstein laments the girl's courage: "If only Juliet at this point had burst into tears and blurted out the truth! Alas, she is not a child anymore, and she will die for it" (237). As a woman, Juliet inherits Eve's legacy of death.

In "Love, Sex, and Death in *Romeo and Juliet*," Clayton G. MacKenzie questions Friar Laurence's equal resolution in upholding his end of their plan. Despite the Capulet family's extreme anguish upon believing that Juliet has died, the Friar continues with the charade and sees to Juliet's burial in the family vault. "What seems… interesting here," observes McKenzie, "is that the friar constructs his role in this process in an entirely secular manner…. Friar Laurence lies, schemes, misleads, falsely sanctions, and performs funereal obsequies for a being he knows is not permanently dead – and, as far as we can tell, he has not the slightest twinge of conscience about all of this" (36-37). Once again, the Friar fails in his religious and social obligations.

However, even the morally questionable Friar appears clear on the wrong that Capulet has done his daughter by forcing her into the betrothal with Paris. "The most you sought was her promotion," he chides the grieving father, "For 'twas your heaven she should be advanced,/And weep ye now, seeing she is advanced/Above the clouds as high as heaven itself?" (4.4.98-101). If only the Friar had challenged Capulet earlier rather than waiting to harangue a bereft man, Juliet's tragedy may have been circumvented.

Instead, Friar Laurence's extremely risky plan fails. Juliet's previously expressed fear comes true; she awakens alone in the tomb, her husband dead by her side. There is no poison left in Romeo's cup, and the only way for Juliet to follow through on her resolve to commit suicide rather than live without Romeo is to stab herself with his dagger. Without hesitating, she carries out the act: "O happy dagger,/This is thy sheath! There rust, and let me die" (5.3.168-169).

Friar Laurence had hoped that Juliet would be reborn to an earthly life of "marriage and sex and children" with Romeo (McKenzie 35). This is not to be; as she predicted, Juliet's grave is to be her wedding bed. When Paris believes Juliet to be dead, he foreshadows her imminent, actual death (and also the scene of Gertrude at Ophelia's grave that we will see in *Hamlet*), placing flowers on her tomb and saying, "Sweet flower, with flowers/thy bridal bed I strew" (5.3.12-13). Instead of the wife of Romeo, Juliet becomes the bride of death, and is penetrated by it in her metaphorically laden suicide. Through her means of dying, Juliet assumes a masculine role one final time. In the essay "Cordelia as Prince: Gender and Language in *King Lear*," Gayle Whittier explores the significance of stabbing and poisoning as means of death. In *King Lear*, the androgynous Goneril kills a servant with a sword and then "dies a phallic suicide, stabbing herself as if she were a defeated general." Regan, on the other hand, "dies of poisoning which manifests itself like early pregnancy. 'I am not well,' she says, then is 'sick, o sick…'" (Whittier, 391). By this interpretation, Romeo is feminized by his mode of death. Completely draining his phial of poison, he leaves Juliet no method but to stab herself – a courageous but also gruesome act that, like much of her life, is incongruous with societal expectations for a young girl. Levenson asserts that Juliet "kills herself with manly resolve, admitting 'no inconstant toy nor womanish fear' (4.1.119)." (27). Juliet's death by dagger is eloquently explored by McKenzie:

> *Juliet's summoning of deathly nuptials thus represents an untypical approbation of youthful marriage with Death, a symbolic affirmation, perhaps, that the male values that so compellingly have controlled and ordered her world are not the only arbiters of her actions and destination. Her choices may be limited but she asserts, with repeated vigor, that she has a choice and that its consequences are less uncomfortable than a host of masculine voices would have us believe…. It is she who summons Death, she who willingly breaks the bands of life, and… she who wrests her destiny from the Veronese patriarchy that has for so long sought to interpret the world for her. (33)*

Such a patriarchy promises care and protection for those have little or no agency, namely women and girls. When the patriarchy in Verona attempts to enforce its control over Juliet without meeting its obligations to her, she must assume authority over herself. The result is Juliet's valiant but ultimately tragic effort to seize control of her own life and take on decidedly adult decisions at too early an age; though she possesses the courage and determination of a grown woman, Juliet's life experience and knowledge of the world are those of a thirteen-year-old girl. She is still a child, and an Elizabethan audience would have recognized her as such. Juliet needs time to grow into womanhood with guidance, support, and protection from caregivers who have her best interests at heart; instead she is rushed prematurely into adulthood with only her childlike mother, her domineering father, the Nurse, and Friar Laurence to advise her. She is repeatedly failed by these adults and the patriarchal system they represent. *Romeo and Juliet*, then, is less a tale of star-crossed love than a tale of society's monumental failure to fulfill its responsibilities to this remarkable young girl.

Ophelia: "I think nothing, my lord"

Ophelia is unique amongst the female characters examined here, in that she alone strives to fully conform to patriarchal demands. Juliet, Desdemona, and Cordelia all blatantly thwart their fathers' expectations. Ophelia, in contrast, sublimates her sense of self in an attempt to fulfill the contradictory expectations of her father, brother, and lover. This eventually leads to her descent into madness, at which point even her insane ravings serve as a reflection of the world that has constrained and oppressed her beyond bearing.

In "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism," Elaine Showalter notes that Ophelia is widely portrayed in art as a symbol but infrequently examined as a critical study. Showalter cites R.D. Laing's work on female schizophrenia, *The Divided Self*, in which Lang claims that Ophelia, even in her madness, is merely an empty space:

> *"In her madness there is no one there… There is no integral selfhood expressed through her actions or utterances. Incomprehensible statements are said by nothing. She has already died. There is now only a vacuum where there was once a person." (qtd. in Showalter)*

This association between Ophelia and nothingness recurs throughout the text, and is particularly emphasized in the Mousetrap scene (Act 3, Scene 2). While waiting for the play (within the play) to begin, Hamlet speaks lewdly to Ophelia, then asks her what she thinks he

means. She attempts to rebuff his inappropriate behavior by replying, "I think nothing, my lord" (3.2.106). Hamlet's response to this is, "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (3.2.107). The word "nothing," in this context, is equated with both Ophelia's female body and her female lack of autonomous thought; she has nothing between her legs, and nothing in her mind. Showalter, like Laing, asserts that this nothingness defines Ophelia's character:

> *To Hamlet, then, "nothing" is what lies between maids' legs, for, in the male visual system of representation and desire, women's sexual organs, in the words of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, "represent the horror of having nothing to see." When Ophelia is mad, Gertrude says that "Her speech is nothing," mere "unshaped use." Ophelia's speech thus represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court.*

If there really is nothing to Ophelia, this presents a unique challenge to critical study of her character. Showalter observes that in feminist theory, the literary madwoman is frequently "a heroine, a powerful figure who rebels against the family and the social order; and the hysteric who refuses to speak the language of the patriarchal order…" While there is a sibylline aspect to Ophelia's mad ravings as a reflection of the social order around her, the definition of madwoman as feminist heroine does not encompass Ophelia's function in the play. Rather, Ophelia's mad speech comes to her and through her as a direct result of her interactions with the "patriarchal order." While her rantings can certainly be read as incriminations of the men surrounding her at the Danish court, they are not a refusal of the patriarchal order but a jumbled recounting of its power over her. Ophelia does not, then, qualify as a feminist heroine, but she does serve a crucial

function within *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Ophelia is a mirror, a blank surface that reflects the flaws and failings of the other characters and their society back to them, and to the audience.

To the men in Ophelia's life, she has no identity or purpose of her own, but is rather a vessel for their honor and pride. This is apparent from the moment Ophelia first appears in Act 1, Scene 3. The scene opens with Laertes instructing his sister to write to him while he is away; when she asks him if he doubts that he will hear from her, his response is not a logical continuation of their conversation but a warning against his sister becoming overly familiar with Hamlet. The issue of Ophelia's relationship to Hamlet is clearly very much on her brother's mind:

For Hamlet and the trifling of his favour,
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward not permanent, sweet not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,
No more. (1.3.5-8)

This warning, the first reference in the text to a relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia, appears to come from a place of intrusive but genuine brotherly concern for a younger sister. However, Laertes continues:

Then weigh what loss your honor may sustain
If with too credent ear you list his songs,

Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open

To his unmastered importunity.

Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,

And keep within the rear of your affection,

Out of the shot and danger of his desire. (1.3.29-35)

Laertes warns his sister that "best safety lies in fear" (1.3.3). His brotherly concern for Ophelia's safety, and especially for the family honor which depends on her chastity prior to and then within marriage, verges on paranoia and an inappropriate preoccupation with his sister's sexuality. This emphasis on fear of dishonor is reflective of sixteenth century English society where, according to Diane Elizabeth Dreher in "Dominated Daughters," "Men may add honor to their names by noble deeds and accomplishments, while women may only defend the small shred of honor they have, which once gone is irrevocably lost." A woman's only source of virtue is her chastity, and once that is lost – or perceived to be lost – she becomes worthless as a potential bride and brings dishonor to herself and her family.

Ophelia responds that she will take Laertes' warning into account, but warns him in turn against showing her "the steep and thorny way to heaven/Whilst like a puffed and reckless libertine/Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads…" (1.3.47-50). This knowing, sisterly counsel against her brother's hypocrisy is a glimpse at an Ophelia who, while not rebellious, is a perceptive and responsive young woman who has not yet been pressured to the brink of madness. According to Dreher:

Ophelia realizes that not all male authority figures practice what they preach… Although young and inexperienced, Ophelia most assuredly is not simple. She does not lack intellect, nor does she automatically take everything at face value.

This sane, rational Ophelia is not wary enough of Hamlet to please her father and brother. When Polonius asks Ophelia what she has just been discussing with Laertes, she responds merely that it was "something touching the Lord Hamlet" (1.3.89). This simple remark is enough to send Polonius into a lecture on maidenly virtue, and he accuses Ophelia of not understanding what behavior "behoves my daughter and your honor" (1.3.97). Whether or not Hamlet's actions towards Ophelia truly have been questionable or inappropriate, this tirade clearly indicates that Ophelia does not have a nurturing relationship with a loving father. If anything, Polonius' easily provoked anger harkens back to Lord Capulet's rage at Juliet when she informs him that she does not wish to marry Paris. Both fathers treat their daughters as chattel and expect absolute obedience.

Ophelia does not reveal the details of her interactions with Hamlet, but tells Polonius merely that Hamlet has honorably offered her his affections. Polonius responds by scornfully demanding to know whether she believes Hamlet's affection is genuine. Flustered at finding her relationship with Hamlet harshly scrutinized by her brother and then by her father, Ophelia falters and responds, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (1.3.104). Polonius insists that he will teach her what to think, telling her to consider herself a "baby" incapable of judging Hamlet's sincerity for herself, and that if she doesn't follow her father's instructions in all matters she will render Polonius a "fool" (1.3.99-112). This infantilizing of Ophelia is the first step in reducing her to a state of nothingness in which she can be molded without resistance into any shape desired by

the men who surround her. Polonius' lecture does not strengthen Ophelia against Hamlet's advances, but weakens her by causing her to distrust her own instincts and judgement.

Ophelia's self-doubt and fear, fostered by her brother and father, become apparent during her next appearance in the play. During Act 2, Scene 2, Ophelia runs to Polonius in a panic after Hamlet bursts in on her while she is sewing. The sudden appearance of a suitor who appears to have descended into madness, in one's private closet, would be enough to shock and upset even the calmest and steadiest young woman; to Ophelia, this behavior from Hamlet seems proof of her father's recent warnings. She gives Polonius a detailed description of Hamlet's behavior:

Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyvèd to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosèd out of hell
To speak of horrors, he comes before me. (2.1.79-85)

"Mad for thy love?" Polonius asks in response. Suddenly, Ophelia's father appears to consider that Hamlet might really be in love with his daughter. If Polonius believes that a dirty and disheveled appearance combined with a facial expression which appears "loosed out of hell/To speak of horrors" is evidence of true love, it is no wonder that he teaches Ophelia to fear Hamlet's advances; this concept of love is terrifying. Ophelia continues to describe Hamlet's state to her father:

He took me by the wrist and held me hard,

Then goes he to the length of all his arm,

And with his other hand thus o'er his brow

He falls to such perusal of my face

As a would draw it. Long stayed he so. (2.1.88-92)

If ever there were a time for Polonius to warn his daughter against truly disturbing behavior by Hamlet, this would be it. Instead, he interprets Hamlet's bizarre actions as "the very ecstasy of love" (2.1.103). He questions Ophelia about her recent behavior towards Hamlet, and she tells her father that "…as you did command/I did repel his letters and denied/His access to me" (2.1.109-111). This leads Polonius to place responsibility for Hamlet's condition on his daughter because, not knowing that Hamlet's mania is an act, he believes Ophelia's rejection "hath made him mad" (2.1.112). Such an assertion not only imparts to Ophelia an extremely troubling understanding of what love and loving behavior mean, it holds her accountable for Hamlet's actions and mental state to an unreasonable extent. The message given to Ophelia is that acceptance of Hamlet's affection is dangerous to her; rejection of Hamlet's affection is dangerous to him. She therefore has no viable option and is caught in an impossible situation that is, literally, maddening. Furthermore, she has found herself in this situation because she followed her father's explicit instructions to reject Hamlet. The scene closes with Polonius dragging the distressed Ophelia to Gertrude and Claudius, so that they may know she is the cause of Hamlet's erratic behavior.

Polonius' audience with Gertrude and Claudius produces a plan that is one of the play's most disturbing plot elements. They agree to test the theory that Hamlet is mad with love by using

Ophelia as bait; she will wait for him in the lobby where he is known to pace, while Claudius and Polonius spy on the young couple from behind a tapestry. Before leaving Ophelia in Hamlet's path, Gertrude tells her, "…Ophelia, I do wish/That your good beauties be the happy cause/Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues/Will bring him to his wonted way again" (3.1.40-44). This hope for Hamlet's recovery is a heavy burden to place on a confused young woman who is at the same time trying to preserve her honor and obey her father in all things. Furthermore, Ophelia's ability to discern what is moral and what is immoral may be confused by her ostensibly upright and respectable father's insistence that she assist him in deceiving and manipulating Hamlet.

The ensuing encounter between Ophelia and Hamlet quickly turns ugly when she attempts to return his love tokens. Since Polonius never explicitly instructs his daughter to return Hamlet's gifts and letters, it is possible that she decides upon this action by herself. Frightened by her previous confrontation with Hamlet in her closet, and by the dire warnings she received from her father and brother, Ophelia may well believe that severance of her relationship with Hamlet is the only way to keep herself safe. Hamlet's response to Ophelia's rejection is to insist that he never really loved her, and to cruelly accuse her of being unchaste – the very stain on her reputation which Ophelia fears most. Worse, if Ophelia has indeed been unchaste, the illicit sexual relationship was most likely with Hamlet himself, in which case he holds their intimacy against her as evidence of her wantonness. He then launches into a torrent of verbal abuse mixed with warnings about the dishonest nature of men which echo the lectures she received from Polonius and Laertes:

Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves, all. Believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where's your father? (3.1.122-130)

Hamlet's reference to Polonius at the end of this rant may indicate that he suspects her father's influence in Ophelia's rejection of him, or possibly that he senses Polonius' spying presence in the lobby. On the other hand, he could be implying that Polonius is needed to look after Ophelia. Why isn't he there, to remove his daughter from the sullying influences of men? Either way, this mention of Polonius must bring Ophelia's father to her mind just as Hamlet's words reinforce what Polonius told her at the beginning of the play – that Hamlet is dishonest and not to be trusted. Yet even as Hamlet warns Ophelia against the errant nature of men, he continues to heap abuse on her and on women in general:

God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't. It hath made me mad. (3.1.142-146)

Hamlet projects his feelings about Gertrude's behavior onto Ophelia, and uses her as an easy target for his disgust at his mother's hasty remarriage. While this is clear to the audience, it is not clear to Ophelia; she believes that Hamlet hates her, and she now has it from his own mouth

that she is the cause of his madness. She becomes extremely upset, declaring, "O woe is me,/T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" (3.1.159-160). Still, Polonius disregards his daughter's mental and emotional state, insisting to the unconvinced Claudius that Hamlet truly is mad with love, and again planning to spy on Hamlet to hear what he might confide in Gertrude.

This second attempt at spying costs Polonius his life; an enraged Hamlet, believing it is Claudius behind the arras in Gertrude's room, runs him through with a sword. Thus, as a result of Polonius' and Hamlet's irresponsible behavior, Ophelia suddenly finds herself completely alone. Her brother is overseas, and her father has been murdered by her former lover. All of the men who instructed her and forced her dependence are gone; she is left with no further guidance (however misdirected) from them, no support, and no remaining sense of her own identity. In "Reading Ophelia's Madness," Gabrielle Dane asserts that this is the moment when Ophelia loses her sanity. She is not plagued by voices or demons, but by an utter silence she has never experienced before:

> *Providing "succor" for male anxieties, serving as a screen onto which men might project their fantasies, a passive body on, around, and through which they might enact their dramas, Ophelia's discrete identity seems to disappear from the story. Male voices fill her head, guiding her very thoughts. When the voices' directions become increasingly muddied, she grows more and more confused, more sundered from any sense of personal identity… Then suddenly … the voices stop. Confronted with such a thunderous silence, Ophelia becomes mad.*

In her desperate attempts to obey and appease Laertes, Polonius, and Hamlet, Ophelia completely loses any sense of distinct self she may have had. She cannot recall the advice she

received from them to guide her, because the conflicting and contradictory demands merely cancel each other out. In reporting Ophelia's madness to Gertrude, Horatio notes that one of the symptoms is incoherent speech that seems to lack any real meaning. He says,

> *… Her speech is nothing,*
> *Yet the unshapèd use of it doth move*
> *The hearers to collection. They aim at it,*
> *And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,*
> *Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,*
> *Indeed would make one think there might be thought,*
> *Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (4.5.7-13)*

The men around Ophelia believe her mad talk is nonsense, not recognizing it as a garbled regurgitation of recent events and the constant stream of contradictory advice and warnings she experiences up until the time Hamlet kills Polonius. Men interpret her speech to "fit to their own thoughts," each assuming his own understanding is affirmed by Ophelia's "winks and nods and gestures." With no discernable personality of her own, she merely reflects the disorder of the world around her. Claudius believes Ophelia's singing and ranting "…springs/All from her father's death" (4.5.72-73). This is the simplest and easiest explanation, but Claudius fails to acknowledge that Ophelia's clear references to her grief over Polonius are mixed with blatant sexual innuendo which is more probably a reflection of her relationship with Hamlet:

> *By Gis and by Saint Charity,*

Alack, and fie for shame!

Young men will do't if they come to't,

By Cock, they are to blame.

Quoth she 'Before you tumbled me,

You promised me to wed.

So would I'a' done, by yonder sun,

An thou hadst not come to my bed. (4.5.57-64).

To attribute such verses to Ophelia's grief for her father is insensible and an indication of how deeply unaware – or deeply in denial – Claudius is where his family and court are concerned. In his essay "On Ophelia's Madness," Carroll Camden asserts that, "Though every kind of suggestion has been made to interpret practically every line in the play, we can be thankful that no one has suggested an Electra complex in Ophelia; she was not in love with Polonius." Ophelia does not go mad due to grief over her father's murder; she goes mad because the various losses inflicted upon her by the men in her life are beyond bearing, and leave her with nothing – not even a sense of herself.

It is entirely possible that one of these losses is her chastity, which Ophelia has been taught to think of as the sole source of her worth. It is never made explicitly clear whether or not Ophelia and Hamlet had a sexual relationship, but Ophelia's songs continuously return to the theme of a maiden used and then rejected by her lover. Later, at her burial, Laertes argues with the priest about the scant ceremony. The priest retorts,

Her obsequies have been as far enlarged

As we have warrantise. Her death was doubtful,

And but that great command o'ersways the order

She should in ground unsanctified have lodged….

Yet here she is allowed her virgin rites,

Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home

Of bell and burial. (5.1.208-216)

Though her death looks suspiciously like suicide, Ophelia is permitted the rites of the church, including burial in sanctified ground. Moreover, she is permitted the "virgin rites" accorded to an unmarried girl who dies young. The priest's juxtaposition of sanctified ground and virgin rites draws a parallel between Ophelia's questionable death and her questionable chastity; it is unclear whether she deserves either funerary accommodation according to the religious rules of the time. It is possible that Ophelia had a sexual relationship with Hamlet, and also possible that the men around her simply assume things that never actually took place. Just as the nature of Ophelia's death is unclear, so is her sexual status. It is, however, clear that (as with Juliet) Ophelia should be entering into the rites of marriage rather than the rites of death. Once again, a connection is made between wedding bed and grave, as Gertrude declares, "I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,/And not t'have strewed thy grave" (5.1.228-229).

Whatever relationship – physically intimate or otherwise – took place between the young couple, Ophelia's songs reflect the ways in which she was manipulated: First assured by Hamlet of his passionate love for her and likely convinced that he wished to marry her, then spurned and mocked by Hamlet, all while being told by her father and brother that Hamlet was seeking to rob

her "chaste treasure," Ophelia sings a mixture of all the confusing messages with which she has been bombarded.

Where in *Othello* Desdemona will sing, "Willow, willow, willow," before she dies, Ophelia literally meets her death in a grove of willow trees. Unlike Desdemona, who resigns herself to a destiny formed largely by her own choices, or Juliet, who actively chooses her death, Ophelia is as passive in death as she is in life. It is unclear whether she commits suicide or drowns by accident, as she neither seems to throw herself into the river nor fight its current:

> *There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds*
> *Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,*
> *When down the weedy trophies and herself*
> *Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,*
> *And mermaid-like a while they bore her up;*
> *Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,*
> *As one incapable of her own distress,*
> *Or like a native creature and endued*
> *Unto that element. But long it could not be*
> *Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,*
> *Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay*
> *To muddy death. (4.7.143-154)*

Camden notes that "the 'envious sliver' which lets her fall is that of a willow, "a tree linked in Shakespeare and elsewhere in Elizabethan literature with unrequited love." Abandoned by

Hamlet, drowning, Ophelia has been made completely helpless and then deserted by anyone who could rescue her. As J.M. Nosworthy observes in "The Death of Ophelia," the story of her demise as related by Gertrude certainly indicates that someone must have been an eye-witness, "who followed closely, observed minutely… And the incredible thing is that he apparently made no effort to rescue her." This same observation could be applied to Ophelia's situation at virtually any moment throughout the play; she is drowning, made helpless, and no one attempts to rescue her.

Whether or not her drowning is a suicide or an accident, death – along with its preceding madness – is the only real option left to Ophelia. She has been rendered incapable of thinking for herself and surviving on her own, and there is no one left to think for her. As stated by Gabrielle Dane,

> *Madness becomes Ophelia's last resort, her unconscious revolt. Indeed, what else is left her to do? Constituted to accept male command, how then, without it, can she act on her own behalf?*

Even in death, Ophelia is regarded not as a woman driven to tragedy but as a beautiful girl bedecked in flowers, "mermaid-like" in the water, singing snatches of old songs because she has nothing sensible to say. She is too empty even to recognize what is happening to her. In death, as in life, she serves as a mirror for Hamlet: blank without him, then identical to his reflection but reversed. Where Hamlet feigns madness, Ophelia truly descends into madness. Where Hamlet equivocates, contemplating suicide but lacking the resolve to go through with it, Ophelia meets her death with no apparent distress. It is only in madness and death that Ophelia is finally able to transcend the confines of her situation. While she has no identity or function of her own, Ophelia

reflects everything that might have been but never comes to pass: Hamlet's madness; Hamlet's suicide; Hamlet's happy ending, as Shakespeare's comedies generally end with the lovers' marriage. Ophelia is a vessel which takes the shape of the demands, expectations, and possibilities around her; like the water in which she drowns "like a native creature and endued/Unto that element," Ophelia possesses the ability to both reflect and flow into the shape of all men's desires.

Desdemona: "That cunning whore of Venice"

Shakespeare's comedies generally conclude with marriages; the drama ends before the audience can witness any disharmony which may arise after the couples are wed. In stark contrast to this comedic trope, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* opens with Iago and Roderigo plotting to destroy the wedded bliss of Othello and his new bride, Desdemona. While the couple celebrate their wedding night, innocent of the malice that their union has already provoked in the world outside, Iago sets them up for their coming fall.

In "Desdemona Unpinned: Universal Guilt in *Othello*," Julian C. Rice draws a parallel between the tragic fall of Othello and Desdemona, and that of Adam and Eve, stating that, "Both she (Desdemona) and Othello are as complacently confident as Adam and Eve were before Eve encountered the serpent, although it is the male half of 'mankind' who most directly confronts the evil in this play." Desdemona is in turn brought down by her love for Othello, which – due to the inability of those around her to imagine that a white woman of social standing could truly love a Moor – is misinterpreted as lust and perverse sexuality. Iago fills the role of the serpent who originally introduces and then promotes this heightened awareness of sex, employing lewd suggestions and bestial imagery when speaking to and about the newlyweds. There is no evidence that any illicit sexual conduct ever takes place; the downfall of Othello and Desdemona is brought about by slanderous talk that plays upon society's fears about their marriage specifically and sexuality in general.

The play's opening scene features Iago waking Brabanzio to alert him to his daughter's elopement. In doing so, he uses the crassest possible language:

Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul.

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram

Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise! (1.1.87-89)

Brabanzio, woken by the yelling and confused about what is happening, denies that his house has been robbed. Iago continues with, "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse" (1.1.112-113) and then, "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.117-118). From this first scene, Iago seeks to portray the couple as unnatural and united in lust rather than in love. He later tells Roderigo, "When she (Desdemona) is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice" (1.3.342-343). The implication is that sexual deviancy is the only reason Desdemona would marry "the Moor," and she will quickly come to regret her union with Othello.

Later, after the couple depart for Cyprus, Iago again conjures these unsavory images of Desdemona, this time for Othello's benefit. When Othello refuses to believe that Desdemona has been unfaithful and demands proof that he can see, Iago responds with, "Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,/Behold her topped?" (3.3.400-401). Iago tortures Desdemona's husband by forcing him to visualize his wife's alleged adultery. No one has actually seen Desdemona engaged in any illicit sexual act, but the men in her life have all vividly imagined it thanks to Iago's graphic descriptions. Othello, in a misery of doubt and self-loathing, eventually loses faith in his own perceptions and comes to believe that these conjurations of his wife's depravity are real. This tragedy is enhanced by an arc in which the audience comes to realize Desdemona's complete innocence, even as Othello begins to descend into jealous suspicion of his wife.

Othello, like *Romeo and Juliet*, features a couple who transgress the mores of their society to marry on their own terms. In "The Design of Desdemona," Ann Jennalie Cook explains that in Elizabethan England, marriage without parental consent was illegal for anyone under the age of twenty-one, and rarely tolerated by society even for couples who were over the age of majority. Queen Elizabeth I was reputed for her intolerance of secret marriages at court and required authorization of all unions (188-189). Therefore, Venetian society's reaction to the nuptials of Desdemona and Othello is perfectly in keeping with what would have been expected by Shakespeare's early seventeenth century audience. Based on this, argues Cook, "one cannot help wondering what sort of lovely, intelligent, well-bred young woman would steal out of her father's house to 'the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor'... " (188).

Desdemona is not desperate to be married to any partner, at any cost, for she has had other suitors – including Roderigo. The audience is given to understand that she is beautiful, young, noble, and the daughter of a wealthy man: clearly, a desirable bride. Yet Desdemona chooses the most unlikely of husbands and elopes with him in what Roderigo calls a 'gross revolt' (1.1.133). By the time she first appears, in Act 1, Scene 3, Desdemona's character is already in question; at this point, she has already chosen a socially inappropriate husband and proven herself capable of deceiving her father. This is in contrast to *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Shakespeare carefully structures the events leading up to the elopement so that it will not appear a brazen act of disobedience:

> *For example, Juliet is hardly more than a child, much younger than she is in the sources, and she is actively encouraged in her clandestine alliance by the Nurse who should have protected her. The feud rules out any hope of an open courtship, even though the lovers*

are virtually a perfect social match. And besides, by the time Romeo and Juliet marry, one has had ample opportunity to see and sympathize with the lovers.... Yet Shakespeare offers no extenuation for Desdemona" (Cook 189).

Othello and Desdemona are adults, not teenagers; they are old enough to know better, and to control their impulses. Furthermore, Desdemona and Othello are decidedly not a perfect social match. Othello is a foreigner, and black, and certainly not the husband Brabanzio has intended for his daughter. In fact, Desdemona's willful elopement seems so shocking and unlikely to Brabanzio that he accuses Othello of bewitching, drugging, and abducting her:

She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted
By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.
For nature so preposterously to err,
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
Sans witchcraft could not. (1.3.60-64)

Brabanzio is unwilling to believe that his daughter could willfully and sanely choose Othello as a husband, because such a choice on her part would mean that his understanding of Desdemona's character is deeply erroneous. This sudden revelation about her is exaggerated in its shockingness by the highly dramatic and highly public midnight audience before the Venetian senate. Brabanzio's cherished image of his daughter as passive and weak is completely shattered by Othello's description of their courtship and the testimony of Desdemona herself. Othello tells

the senate that Desdemona willingly gave him "a world of kisses" (1.3.158). He then describes Desdemona's initiation of the courtship:

> *… she wished*
> *That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,*
> *And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,*
> *I should but teach him how to tell my story,*
> *And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake. (1.3.161-165)*

Desdemona is more subtle with Othello than Juliet is with Romeo, but she nonetheless takes an active role in promoting Othello's suit. Shakespeare grants her a degree of latitude here; in "Shakespeare's Desdemona," S.N. Garner observes that this "scene is carefully managed so as to create sympathy for both Othello and Desdemona," demonstrate that they have both behaved with reasonable propriety, and reveal Desdemona's true character to be neither completely innocent nor corrupted:

> *Because Desdemona initiates the courtship, Othello is absolutely exonerated of Brabantio's charge. His cautiousness acknowledges the tenuousness of his position as a black man in Venetian society and is appropriate and even admirable. The Moor cannot be confident of Desdemona's attraction to him, and he undoubtedly knows that marrying him would isolate her from her countrymen. Recognizing Othello's reticence and undoubtedly its causes, Desdemona makes it clear she loves him but, at the same time,*

maintains a degree of indirection. Shakespeare does not wish to make her seem shy or overly forward.

Othello's own awareness of his tenuous position in Venetian society, and his uncertainty about Desdemona's attraction to him, will later be used as weapons by Iago; lack of confidence in his own desirability as a husband for Desdemona will prove Othello's fatal flaw, and result in his downfall and that of his new wife. He should have more faith in Desdemona, who clearly knows her own mind. When she appears before the senate to explain herself, Desdemona is obviously not the "maiden never bold" described by her father. Directly addressing Brabanzio, she is calm and collected despite her current circumstances, and straightforward in her defense of the marriage:

To you I am bound for life and education.
My life and education you do learn me
How to respect you. You are the lord of duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.181-188)

Here Desdemona is bold indeed, coolly defending her actions to her father before the most powerful men in Venice (and this is after she has been unexpectedly dragged from her marriage bed during the wee hours). Her words can even be interpreted as a challenge to Brabanzio's paternal

abilities; by stating that "My life and education you do learn me/How to respect you," Desdemona implies that Brabanzio has somehow taught her to observe her current level of respect (or disrespect) for him as an authority figure. This dialogue between father and daughter is a forerunner of the exchange that takes place when Cordelia straightforwardly informs Lear that her devotion to and love for him must be tempered by her devotion to and love for the man she will marry. Like Lear, Brabanzio is possessed of a delusional understanding of filial love and devotion; he believes that the place he occupies in Desdemona's life is so large as to leave no room for any other man – or, at least, no other man that Brabanzio has not explicitly approved for her. Whether due to his own willed blindness or to deliberate deception and concealment on the part of his daughter, he has missed the courtship which took place between Desdemona and Othello, though its setting was his own home. He is revealed to know his daughter and, indeed, the doings of his household, less well than he thought. Brabanzio does not take this well, and neither would an early seventeenth century audience. Desdemona has shown herself to be both willful and deceitful, and no careful construction of the scene can compensate for that.

This theme of the troubled and/or inappropriate father-daughter relationship that is so often featured in Shakespeare's plays is perhaps more apparent in *Othello* than in any other tragedy except *King Lear*. In "Unpinned or Undone? Desdemona's Critics and the Problems of Sexual Innocence," W. D. Adamson references the psychoanalytic view that Desdemona's attraction and attachment to the older and more experienced Othello is basically "Oedipal" in nature. (Technically, as a woman, Desdemona would have an Electra complex rather than an Oedipal complex – but the implication remains the same.) If that is the case, it perhaps suggests that she seeks from Othello the interest, attention, and engaging conversation that she doesn't receive from

Brabanzio. It is noteworthy that Othello's story-telling is what attracts Desdemona, given that the telling of stories is so often associated with parent-child relationships.

Whatever sparks Desdemona's initial interest in Othello, we learn that she enjoys a courtship which is, while clandestine, quite long by Shakespearean standards and certainly longer than that experienced by Juliet. Not only do Desdemona and Othello engage in apparently frequent conversation while courting, they share details of their lives; or, at least, Othello shares details of his past adventures. Desdemona knows her husband sufficiently well to explain why she feels secure enough with him to disregard the differences in their racial and social backgrounds, as well as the apparently significant difference in their ages. She knows enough of Othello to believe that he is the man she wishes to marry, despite the fallout with her father and Venetian society that are sure to follow – and she certainly seems capable of making her own decisions, without the need of any father figure to think for her.

Considering the rules of compatibility they break, there are hints that Desdemona and Othello are better matched than many Shakespearean couples. Not only do they become well-acquainted before their marriage, they enter into the union freely and un-coerced by family, society, or the extenuating circumstances which force Romeo and Juliet into a hasty union. Desdemona, though younger than Othello, is clearly over the age of majority and considered marriageable; again, we know that she has had other suitors. She is not a green girl, but a grown woman who chooses her own marriage with full understanding and acceptance of the foreseeable consequences.

Brabanzio is forced to suddenly realize all of this in the worst possible way: in the middle of the night, after having been woken suddenly and given shocking news, in front of an audience. Desdemona has made a fool of him, and Brabanzio's final words to Othello before he exits the

scene create a sense of foreboding: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see./She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.292-293). Despite Brabanzio’s sense that he has lost his daughter to Othello, he shares a bitter word of advice with the fellow man into whose keeping he reluctantly passes his only child. Brabanzio sows seeds of doubt in Othello’s mind, encouraging him not to trust his vision of Desdemona as loving wife, and to keep watch over her “if thou hast eyes to see.” By doing so, he lays the ground for Othello’s tormenting suspicions about his wife and gives Iago a weapon to use against the couple.

Iago’s understanding of Desdemona’s character surpasses that of her father. He knows that Desdemona will persist in helping Cassio, for she is a compassionate woman and she feels so secure in her marriage that it doesn’t occur to her to worry about Othello’s potential for jealousy. Iago depends on Desdemona’s unfailing virtue to “make the net” that will trap her, even as he works to convince Othello that Desdemona is untrustworthy:

... for while this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear:
That she repeals him for her body’s lust,
And by how much she strives to do him good
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall ensnare them all. (2.3.327-336)

This is not initially an easy task, as it quickly becomes clear that Othello has complete faith in Desdemona. Iago suggestively warns Othello to beware of jealousy (3.3.169) before Othello has even begun to feel jealous; this attempt to sow dissent initially fails. Othello, still confident in his wife and in his own worth as a husband, tells Iago that he has not the smallest fear or doubt concerning his marriage. After all, he says reasonably, Desdemona "had eyes and chose me" (3.3.193). There is no reason to doubt her loyalty or affection.

Iago only begins to make headway by switching tracks, temporarily veering away from the topic of Desdemona's virtue and focusing instead on Othello's insecurity regarding his status as a black man in Venice. Iago reminds Othello that he is Desdemona's social inferior, and that the match is unacceptable in the eyes of Venetian society. Echoing Brabanzio's warning to Othello, Iago tells him: "Look to your wife. Observe her well with Cassio" (3.3.201), who is considered a more socially acceptable match for Desdemona. This is the second time a fellow man has encouraged suspicion by warning Othello to watch his wife. Iago twists the knife, suggesting that when Desdemona finds herself in the company of a man "of her own clime, complexion and degree" (3.3.235), it is possible that she, "recoiling to her better judgement,/May fall to match you with her country forms/And happily repent" (3.3.241-243). Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona's love for him is evidence of her poor judgement and errant nature, and that once her lust is sated she will see that marrying him was a mistake.

Othello internalizes Iago's – and Venice's – beliefs about "blackness" being suggestive of moral inferiority. This is reflected in his language; when Othello speaks of the possibility that Desdemona has cuckolded him and brought shame upon him, he muses that, "My name, that was as fresh/As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black/As my own face" (3.3.391-93). Othello has

managed to maintain a reputation that is "fresh" and white despite his blackness. That Desdemona may have taken this from him and begrimed it, is unforgivable.

This is a turning point in the action. It is the moment when Othello stops seeing himself as Desdemona sees him, as a worthy and beloved husband; and begins to see himself as Iago sees him, as a man who is unworthy of Desdemona and a misfit in society – a stranger, "the Moor." According to Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All*, Cassio, in contrast, "is everything that Othello thinks he himself is not" (594). On a surface level, he is a much more suitable match for Desdemona. She, however, is sensitive and intelligent enough to see beyond surface qualities. Cassio, despite his apparent list of qualifications as a suitor, is unappealing. "He is both patronizing and condescending (boasting that "[t]he lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient"); and above all, he is a bad drinker, whose own eloquence deserts him for drunken mumbling…" (Garber 600). He possesses none of Othello's eloquence, refinement, or self-discipline. Desdemona, more than anyone in the play except (ironically) Iago, is able to look past surface appearances and perceive people's true character. She sees that her chosen husband possesses more fine qualities than any of the young and foolish men who are considered his social betters. Despite this, she persists in her determination to help Cassio. Desdemona is a genuinely compassionate woman who acts according to her own conscience rather than anyone else's expectations. She is willing to help a man in whom she has no romantic or sexual interest, simply because she does not wish to see him suffer an injustice.

Desdemona's virtues of insight and kindness are turned into vices and used against her by the devilish Iago. These reversals of appearance and reality are a thematic element which runs through the play; Andrew Dickson, in *The Globe Guide to Shakespeare*, states that, "The division between outward appearance and inner reality will prove a crucial – and increasingly malignant –

idea in *Othello*…" (333). Iago is able to convince Othello, a man respected by the Venetians and loved by his wife, that he is worthless due to his black skin. Iago, on the other hand, is a man whose white skin conceals a fiendish nature. According to Dickson, there was a long tradition in England of wearing black makeup "to represent evil or exotic characters for the medieval mystery and morality cycles" (331), and audiences' longstanding assumptions about color would have been challenged by *Othello*: "A black man is the tragic hero, the noble "Moor of Venice" for whom the play is named; it is a white Italian, Iago, who is the villain" (333).

Desdemona, unaware of this villain's determined efforts to dismantle her marriage, sees no reason to desist in her efforts to aid Cassio. This contributes to the desperate situation in which she finds herself during Act 3. Far from her home and her father, she has no support system save Iago, the very person conspiring against her marriage, and his wife Emilia, who unknowingly serves as her husband's accomplice. When Othello first becomes suspicious of Desdemona and she needs help finding her missing handkerchief, she turns to Emilia because there is no other woman on Cyprus who can act as her confidant. Desdemona walks directly into the "net" that Iago has set for her, largely because there is no other direction available. Garner states that:

> *Because Desdemona cuts herself off from her father and friends and marries someone from a vastly different culture, she is even more alone on Cyprus than she would ordinarily have been in a strange place and as a woman in a military camp besides. These circumstances, as well as her character and experience, account in part for the turn the tragedy takes.*

The handkerchief in question is, at first appearance, the most innocent of trifles. A white cloth embroidered with red strawberries, it seems too childish an item to cause a serious dispute

between a married couple. However, the back story that Othello reveals to Desdemona is more complicated and disturbing:

…There's magic in the web of it….
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful
Conserved of maidens' hearts. (3.4.68-73)

The strawberries are colored, then, by the blood of dead maidens, and Desdemona is in danger of joining their ranks. Garber asserts that, "The white handkerchief marked with red becomes – because Othello makes it so – another version of the white wedding sheets that are so often mentioned in the play" (611). Though the actual wedding sheets likely remain white, yet to be stained with the blood of Desdemona's virginity due to repeated interruptions of their marital conjugation, the spotted handkerchief is taken as evidence of her sexual exploits with other men. As Iago tells the audience in soliloquy, "Trifles light as air/Are to the jealous confirmations strong/As proofs of holy writ" (3.3.326-328). Othello, by now caught up in jealousy and suspicion, begins to lose his grip on reality. He threatens Desdemona over this mere trifle, convinced that its loss is proof of her faithlessness; in his mind, she has carelessly misplaced not a handkerchief but her sexuality.

Even as Desdemona realizes that her marriage is taking a dangerous turn, she has little choice but to remain with Othello, come what may. Brabanzio has disowned her, and we learn in Act 5, Scene 2 that he has died of grief over the elopement; she cannot return to her father's house. It appears that Brabanzio was right to be concerned that Desdemona's marriage to Othello would

be problematic, and he seems vindicated in the opinion that his daughter should not have ventured beyond the confines of her race and society. The irony in this is first of all that Desdemona's innocence is the result of her staid and sheltered upbringing by Brabanzio: "… nothing of her life in the rarefied atmosphere of Brabanzio's home and society could have anticipated this moment" in her marriage to Othello (Garner); and second of all that it is Brabanzio who first plants in Othello's mind the doubt that leads him to turn on Desdemona.

Othello is fallen far from the dignity he demonstrated before the senate in Act 1, but he would not have reached this low point on his own. The seed of doubt planted by Brabanzio has been nurtured and fostered by Iago. Like a devil who cannot force people to act but may persuade them to do his will, Iago convinces Othello that his worst imaginings are real. Othello – who no longer trusts his own eyes and has come to rely on the false imagery conjured by Iago – believes that he has the "ocular proof" (3.3.165) he insists is necessary to condemn Desdemona, and that he must kill her for the sake of justice.

During the Willow Song scene (Act 4, Scene 3), as Desdemona instructs Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed, she is hoping to travel back in time and "recover the brief happiness and harmony she and Othello shared when they were newly married" (Garner). Yet even as she prepares the marriage bed, Desdemona knows that her death is imminent. She asks Emilia to "prithee shroud me/In one of these same sheets"(5.1.23-24) and tells the story of Barbary, her mother's maid:

She was in love, and he she loved proved mad
And did forsake her. She had a song of willow.
An odd thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,

And she died singing it. That song tonight

Will not go from my mind… (5.1.26-30).

As Desdemona's wedding sheets become her "shroud," she follows the path forged by Juliet and Ophelia. This scene recalls Juliet's statement that, "My grave is like to be my wedding bed" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.132), and Desdemona's "song of willow" eerily echoes Ophelia's final songs and the river setting of her death. In his essay "On Ophelia's Madness," Carroll Camden notes that the willow is linked with unrequited love and betrayal in Shakespeare and other Elizabethan literature. Just as Ophelia sings while meeting her death in a grove of willow trees, Desdemona sings her despair over Othello's betrayal:

'The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,

Sing all a green willow.

Her head on her bosom, her head on her knee,

Sing willow, willow, willow.

The fresh streams ran by her and murmured her moans,

Sing willow, willow, willow…

Prithee, hie thee. He'll come anon.

'Sing all a green willow must be my garland.

'Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve' – (5.1.38-50)

Where Ophelia's songs imply (even in her madness) accusation against Hamlet, and her seemingly willing death removes her destiny from his hands, Desdemona's song places all blame

upon herself and exonerates Othello for the actions he will take. When Othello murders his wife, he tells her to, “Think on thy sins” (5.2.42). She responds that, “They are loves I bear to you” (5.2.43). Othello misinterprets this, believing that the “loves” to which Desdemona refers are men with whom she has been unfaithful to him. The reality is that Desdemona’s only wrongdoing has been to love Othello to the point of sacrificing her own life at his hands. When Emilia asks the dying Desdemona to name her murderer, she replies, “Nobody, I myself” (5.2.133). She claims full responsibility for the sequence of events that have led to her death.

Desdemona's willingness to protect Othello by refusing to name him as her murderer is proof enough of her loyalty as a wife. Adamson suggests that Desdemona, rather than Othello, may be the true tragic hero of the play. If her tragic flaw is blind devotion to Othello, then from a seventeenth century perspective she could be seen to get exactly what she has brought upon herself – and exactly what she deserves for betraying her father by eloping. This is echoed in her own song: “Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve.” Desdemona is a cautionary example for young women everywhere.

However, because Shakespeare has made her such a complex and sympathetic character, she is simultaneously much more than a cautionary tale. Adamson likens the innocent Desdemona to “human nature before the birth of guilt; like an unfallen Eve she does not know sexual shame, though unlike her, Desdemona definitely does know sexual passion already and thus cannot ‘fall.’” As for sexual passion, Desdemona may be attracted to Othello but she has certainly demonstrated ability to restrain herself; after all, the consummation of her marriage is interrupted twice, first by a summons to the Venetian senate and then by fighting in the streets of Cyprus. It is entirely likely that she remains a virgin on the night of her murder, despite Iago’s success at painting her as “that

cunning whore of Venice" (4.2.93). Adamson cautions against chauvinist interpretations of Desdemona's sexual proclivities, and assumptions about female sexuality in general:

> *… there are implicit assumptions about female sexual frailty reminiscent of the clerical antifeminists of the Middle Ages. This male critical bias in fact is a historical echo of the antifeminist – ultimately antisexual – attitudes Shakespeare portrays in characters like Othello, Leontes, and Hamlet, who embody the masochistic, guilt-laden residue of ascetic Augustinian Christianity passed on to Shakespeare's generation by the continental Reformation and Anglo-Catholicism alike.*

Like Ophelia, Desdemona is idealized in her death – another lovely corpse. Where Ophelia drowns wreathed in flowers, Desdemona lies on her wedding sheets, her skin unmarred by Othello's violence against her. In "Thinking About Women and Their Prosperous Art: A Reply to Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*," Martha Andresen-Thom offers this description of Desdemona:

> *…fixed forever in her alabaster beauty and her cold chastity, she personifies that marmoreal ideal of female perfection upon which Othello has felt so dependent that he kills the real woman to rescue that ideal. The real woman, as the bitter irony of later events shows him, had the living, speaking perfection he once saw in her… (264)*

Desdemona does not deserve to die, nor does she truly become an ideal version of herself in death. The living woman was as virtuous as Othello originally believed her to be, before he fell

under Iago's influence. Though Desdemona is able to transcend society's prejudices to choose Othello in marriage, he is unable to transcend societal expectations of and prejudices against women. Othello's fears and insecurities about her sexuality and his own ability to retain her affection and passion lead to both of their deaths. The entire tragedy of *Othello* hangs on two hinges: the damaging prejudice he encounters as a Moor in Venice, and the unfounded and irrational fear of female sexuality that harkens back to Eden and the original "fall" of humankind. To critics and interpreters of Desdemona, Adamson insists that "it is only too easy to take an honest woman for a whore if from the start we believe in 'the potential whore which exists within all women' or attribute 'potential' existence to anything whatever simply because it has not actually happened."

If Othello could see through society's prejudices against women and women's sexuality to the degree that Desdemona could see through Venice's prejudice against her husband, the play would have a very different ending. Instead, Othello falls for Iago's false visions – and "Falls," taking Desdemona down with him. It is Othello who is tempted and misguided to this Fall, yet Desdemona still plays the role of Eve in that she accepts the blame and punishment for his sins as well as her own choices, insisting that "Nobody, I myself" is responsible for her murder. If Desdemona is a cautionary example for young women, she is also an accusation against "the male half of mankind" referenced by Rice. Though the play is titled *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, it is perhaps Desdemona's plight which makes it truly tragic.

Cordelia: "See better, Lear"

The Tragedy of King Lear, more than any other Shakespearean tragedy, focuses on the father-daughter relationship. The concerns of daughterly love, loyalty, and obedience play out on the largest stage we have yet seen; in the world of *Lear*, a father's excessive need for love and unswerving devotion destroys his family and nearly destroys his kingdom. The play is set within the context of an unstable society, brought to the verge of collapse by its title character's choices and actions. Cordelia, then, is a young woman in the direst possible circumstances.

These circumstances are laid out in the very first scene; the aged king has decided to retire, abdicate his throne, and divide the kingdom between his three daughters. The largest portion will ostensibly be granted to the daughter who professes to love him most, but it is clear that the result of this contest is predetermined. "Now, our joy," Lear entreats Cordelia, "Although our last and least… what can you say to draw/A third more opulent than your sisters?" (1.1.78-85). Cordelia has been saved for last because she is the youngest daughter, but also because her words are expected to serve as the culmination of praise. Her inheritance, and the welfare of the kingdom, depend upon her ability and willingness to not only profess her love for Lear, but to outdo the obsequious adoration of her elder sisters.

This initial scene alerts an audience that all is not well in the kingdom, or with Lear himself; by abandoning his kingly responsibilities and then dividing his kingdom in the most reckless and unorthodox manner imaginable – to bestow it upon daughters, no less – he dismantles the social order and risks chaos. Why? Because despite his power and prestige, he craves his daughters' love so desperately that he needs to hear it expressed in opulent terms. This craving is unimaginable from Lord Capulet, Polonius, or Brabanzio; they desire their daughters' obedience, not love, and

certainly would not trade their power for words of affection. Yet Lear, who is in the most powerful position of all as King of Britain, is weakened by his obsessive need to hear his daughters profess their adoration of him. His willingness to bequeath the largest share of his kingdom to Cordelia, in exchange for her assurance that she loves him the most, signals a dangerous break with custom and the set system of inheritance.

While Lear's motives are questionable, there are valid reasons for him to grant Cordelia preference over her sisters. In "Cordelia as Prince: Gender and Language in King Lear," Gayle Whittier observes that Cordelia is the only one of Lear's children "morally worthy" to inherit his kingdom and rule it well. She is clearly the most honorable and principled of his offspring,

> *... yet in a realm where male primogeniture is the custom, she suffers the double indemnity of being both female and last-born. Her status as the least of three opens into a further ambiguity, for the third place she occupies mythically signals her special spirituality, but historically marks the final defeat of Lear's probable ambition to have a son. (387)*

Whittier continues to say that the "wrongness" of Cordelia's gender is particularly striking to an audience, given her clear status as the most-deserving child: "She is heir half-apparent" (388). As Whittier states, Cordelia's "third place" is of spiritual significance in that it links her to the Trinity. It is worth noting that Cordelia's situation also recalls a theme which runs through the family stories of Genesis, in which disorder is created by a younger – and sometimes more worthy – child superseding an elder sibling: Jacob and Esau; Rachel and Leah; Joseph and his brothers; Cordelia and her sisters.

Lear's instinctive belief that Cordelia is the worthiest of his children is correct, but the bizarre way in which he proposes to name her as primary heir only further destabilizes his already tenuous situation: that of a (seemingly) widowed and aging king with no son. If it is accurate that Cordelia, as Lear's youngest child, represents his final failed attempt to father a son, he does not seem to hold it against her. Rather, he seems to have placed all of his hopes on this last child and kept them there even after she turned out to be a girl. For Lear to grant this young, unmarried woman the privileges and responsibilities of an eldest son is a guaranteed risky venture in their patriarchal society. A love contest, then, is perhaps the worst possible way to ensure a smooth and uncontested transition of power from father to daughter.

In "'An excellent thing in woman: Virgo and Viragos in King Lear," Catherine S. Cox asserts that "in the absence of male progeny," Cordelia out of necessity must serve as "a stand-in for (Lear's) eldest son." She considers Cordelia's affront at being asked to compete with her sisters in "so ludicrous a game" to reveal a "masculine sense of entitlement, as if the 'bond' she and Lear share should rightly ensure her place as Lear's successor…" (150). Cox's theory suggests that Cordelia's privileged and non-traditional role at her father's court long pre-dates the love contest. While such a scenario could play a role in Cordelia's choice to refrain from participation, there is also evidence that she is troubled by the very concept of the competition and repulsed by her sisters' exaggerated and false professions of love for their father. She refuses to demean herself by attempting to outdo her sisters, declaring:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less. (1.1.90-92)

Cordelia's claim to love her father "according to my bond" recalls Desdemona's audience before Brabanzio and the Venetian senate. Just as Desdemona insists that, while she loves her father, a married woman also owes love and allegiance to her husband, Cordelia continues:

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all. (1.1.94-103)

Cox takes this literally, claiming that Cordelia's concept of relationship is "defined not by eros or affection, but strictly by 'bond' and she plans to divide her 'love' in half…" (148). However, as we will see, there is ample evidence throughout the play that Cordelia loves her father deeply. She herself says that, "I am sure, my love's/More ponderous than my tongue" (1.1.76-77). Her speech, then, is not actually an attempt to coldly quantify love, but to illustrate the absurdity of Lear's demands.

Cordelia's comments regarding fathers and husbands refute Lear's insistence that his daughters love him above all, and her sisters' exaggerated claims of adoration (made in front of their own husbands). Barbara C. Millard, in "Virago with a Soft Voice: Cordelia's Tragic Rebellion in *King Lear*," observes that not only does going last in this contest put Cordelia at a distinct disadvantage (how can anyone surpass the declarations of Goneril and Regan?) but that she is also probably astute enough to realize that her "dowry of a larger third would ensure the

enmity of her sisters and guarantee the strife Lear wished to avoid." Whether or not Lear wished to avoid strife is debatable; dividing the kingdom according to which daughter loves him most is hardly an objective means for deciding who will rule after him. Either way, that Cordelia's remarks on these matters come across as a grudging statement of duty, rather than a practical truth, perhaps indicates that she is correct and self-aware in her initial claim of ineloquence. Her intentions may be good, but she fails to convey them to her father.

In "Cordelia Absent," Arnold Isenberg observes that with Shakespeare, verbal reticence and emotional reserve are usually indicators of sincerity; that the outward expression of feeling "is in inverse relation to its depth" (188):

> *If Shakespeare has any standing with us as a psychologist, we should believe that there is some connection between silence and emotional force. For speech is show; and the show of feeling is, in Shakespeare, perhaps not always false but always suspect…. Cordelia, who does not protest too much nor even half enough, communicates her sincerity by that quality alone – as if her unwillingness to declare her love were sufficient proof of it. (188)*

If Shakespeare values silence, the inverse is true of Lear. When Cordelia is unable or unwilling to voice her filial love, Lear interprets her silence as coldness and a rejection of the favor he offers her. However much he loves Cordelia, Lear does not understand her. He fails to recognize the true value of her understated profession of bond – and so he passes her over, selling himself and his kingdom for the false coin proffered by her elder sisters, who take full advantage of Lear's inability to distinguish between the real and the counterfeit.

It is possible that Goneril and Regan understand their younger sister's intentions, but they certainly are not about to come to her aid. They have as strong a grip on the situation as Cordelia does, and eagerly grasp the opportunities it presents. Just as Lear attempts to play his daughters with his love contest, the two eldest are willing to use their aging father's weaknesses to play for their own advantage, as evidenced by the following exchange:

Goneril: *You see how full of changes his age is; the observation*
we have made of it hath not been little; he always loved our
sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her
off appears too grossly.

Regan: *'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.*

Goneril: *The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash;*
then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the
imperfections of long-engraffed condition, but therewithal the
unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.
(1.1.287-297)

Goneril and Regan may be morally repulsive, but they are quick on the uptake, and the above conversation imparts to the audience several key pieces of information: First, even they believe that Lear's decision to endow them as his heirs shows "poor judgment." Second, Lear has "ever but slenderly known himself"; he lacks full awareness of his behavior and motivations, and is likely ignorant as to what he is setting in motion by disinheriting Cordelia and handing the kingdom over to her vile sisters. (If Lear doesn't understand himself, or Cordelia for that matter,

it also appears that he doesn't know the true natures of Goneril and Regan. This exacerbates his shock and despair when they eventually cast him out into the night.) Third, Lear has always been inclined to rashness (an inclination that worsens as he ages), and probably relies heavily on his advisors for guidance and temperance. When Lear disowns Cordelia, his advisor Kent bluntly warns him of the consequences:

… To plainness honor's bound,
When majesty stoops to folly. Reverse thy doom,
And, in the best consideration, check
This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgment,
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least;
Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds
Reverb no hollowness. (1.1.144-153)

As it appears that Cordelia and Kent are his most sensible and direct voices of reason, it bodes ill for Lear and Britain that he banishes them both. When Lear asks Cordelia what she can say to him to earn a third of the kingdom more opulent than that of her sisters, she replies that she can say "Nothing" (1.1.88). Lear warns her that, "Nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.89). This prophecy is fulfilled; Lear grants nothing to his youngest and most worthy daughter, and he in turn ends up with nothing, homeless, his wealth and kingdom lost to him forever. He does not have the foresight to realize that by banishing Cordelia, he is also banishing himself from the peaceful and comfortable old age he desires.

The value of sight, literally and figuratively, recurs throughout *King Lear*. In declaring her love for Lear, Goneril oddly declares that he is "Dearer than eye-sight" (1.1.54). While almost anyone would hold dear the ability to see, the value of sight in the context of *King Lear* includes the ability to foresee the results of one's own actions. (This plays out physically when Gloucester, who is as blind about his sons as Lear is about his daughters, has his eyes put out by Regan and Cornwall.) When Kent is banished, he warns, "See better, Lear; and let me still remain/The true blank of thine eye" (1.1.158-59). Lear refuses to see better and he dismisses the two advisors, Cordelia and Kent, who function as his eyes. He willfully blinds himself and dangerously places his trust in Goneril and Regan.

Lear's risky love game having gone awry and his soundest advisors removed, the world of the play tips from instability into chaos. This disorder is personified in the character of the Fool, who serves as a sort of substitute for the sensible Cordelia during her long absence from the stage. From the banishment of Cordelia and Kent in Act 1 to Cordelia's reappearance in Act 4, Lear's court jester serves as his only loyal companion and, ironically, his only voice of reason.

Mark Berge, in "'My Poor Fool is Hanged': Cordelia, the Fool, Silence and Irresolution in *King Lear*," notes that the Fool occupies a place of privilege; in his role as jester, he is permitted to speak irreverently without censure. Like Cordelia, the Fool presents the truth to Lear "in precise terms" (Berge) and without embellishment; but unlike Cordelia, the Fool is at liberty to openly state what Lear most needs to hear – disguised as jokes and foolishness – without fear of repercussions. Though the Fool cannot make Lear outwardly acknowledge his own folly, there is evidence that Lear regrets his banishment of Cordelia and treats his faithful jester as a surrogate for his youngest daughter. When they take shelter from the storm, Lear says to the Fool:

Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?

I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?

The art of our necessities is strange,

That can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.

Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart

That's sorry yet for thee. (3.2.66-71)

This is a "crucial moment" for Lear (Berge), as it is the first time he expresses concern for anyone other than himself. Though Lear does not outwardly acknowledge his responsibility for their situation, he pities his Fool and he pities Cordelia, for whom he has "one part in my heart/That's sorry yet for thee." Lear's desperate situation makes "vile things precious." With the storm raging violently both outside of and within himself, even a vile hovel seems a welcome source of shelter, and the daughter he formerly reviled seems worthy of his consideration. Later, Lear refers to the Fool as, "you houseless poverty" (3.4.27). In "Cordelia and the Fool," Thomas B. Stroup argues that,

Lear might refer to Cordelia in the same terms, for had he not given her nothing for dowry and shut her out of doors, even as he himself is now shut out?.... And does not his distraught mind at this moment agonizingly recall his sin against his daughter? He made her a houseless poverty, and the Fool is her image before him, her alter ego. *(130)*

This possible development of conscience on Lear's part is, tragically, too little too late. Cordelia is banished, the kingdom is in the hands of Goneril and Regan, and Lear himself is a

"houseless poverty." The Fool, loyal to Lear but unable to remedy these dire circumstances, gives in to despair:

Lear: We'll go to supper i' the morning.

Fool: And I'll go to bed at noon. (3.6.76-78)

Berge interprets this comment as the Fool resigning himself to Lear's degeneration: "Lear's preceding utterance emphasizes the inversion of values in his world: 'We'll go to supper i' the morning.' The Fool echoes this sentiment with the surrender of his final line." Despairing of common sense, the Fool gives in to the disorder in both the kingdom and Lear's mind, and then disappears from the play (Berge). Stroup claims that the Fool departs because he is no longer needed; as "Cordelia's deputy," the Fool has served as the king's conscience and when "finally, all passion spent, the King sleeps, his personified prick of conscience is no longer necessary" (130). Whether or not the prick of conscience is necessary to the king at this point, the Fool's work is done; Cordelia makes her re-entry shortly thereafter.

Barbara C. Millard, in "Virago with a Soft Voice: Cordelia's Tragic Rebellion in *King Lear*," asserts that the destruction has been so thorough that not even Cordelia can do anything by this point: "Since there is no patriarchal order after Lear's abdication and subsequent madness, all his daughters' actions, however motivated, can only contribute to the chaos." A complete breakdown of law and order is inevitable. Berge states that Lear's decision to abdicate "introduces a grievous wound both to society and to order." If anything, this is an understatement; Lear's rash and irresponsible actions don't merely introduce a wound to order, they destroy it entirely and create a sacrificial crisis in its wake. With the rules of inheritance and societal boundaries removed,

and the aged king having willingly stepped down from his throne, the largely corrupt younger generation is left to battle each other for power and wealth.

According to René Girard, "Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another's throats" (272). The inheritance system of male primogeniture is deeply problematic; as noted above, it hands wealth, land, and power down to the eldest son, regardless of his fitness to rule. The inherent flaws of this system are highlighted by *King Lear*: The current king, presumably the heir of his own father, is dangerously impulsive and arguably unfit to rule. When there is no eldest son to inherit from him, it results in a power vacuum that further jeopardizes the stability of the kingdom. There *is* a firstborn daughter who could potentially inherit in the absence of a son, but Goneril is clearly unfit to rule for reasons that have nothing to do with her sex. Cordelia, the only child of Lear worthy of inheriting his kingdom, has the weakest legal claim as his youngest daughter.

Despite these flaws, male primogeniture is ideally intended to provide a smooth transition from one reign to the next by preventing the loss of cultural distinctions described by Girard. The traditional declaration of, "The king is dead; long live the king!" succinctly sums up the way in which this system is intended to function. It informs the nation that there has been a transition of rule but assures that the dynasty will proceed smoothly, without risk of civil war. This is not what happens in *King Lear*. The king is still alive, but he refuses to rule. He introduces the concept of competition for the kingdom to his daughters, and the two eldest proceed to battle for both power and precedence with Edmund until they are dead. The subplot of Edgar's disinheritance and Edmund's ascension mirrors the main plot and reinforces the theme of boundaries – particularly those guiding inheritance – failing, breaking down, and leading to chaos and ruin. According to

Girard, "The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions – that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order" (272). When too many people attempt to occupy the same place in society (the throne, or Edmund's bed), order crumbles and can only be restored through sacrificial violence.

Cox asserts that "even before Lear imposes his sentence" on her, it is clear that Cordelia will ultimately be sacrificed for her moral principles (152). According to Cox, Cordelia's status as an exile sets her apart as a spiritual individual who "is no longer… fully integrated into the secular world once the choice is made to serve a higher spiritual purpose" (151). Cordelia, in addressing Lear honestly despite the cost to herself, takes a moral stand. She fails to convert her father to her way of seeing, and whether her approach to refuting the love contest is ideal can be debated; but Cordelia takes a stand in Act 1 and refuses to back down. In this way, she certainly fits the mold of the saint who defies expectations, clings to cherished beliefs, and withdraws from society. However, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that Cordelia is to play not just the role of saint, but of redeemer. In yet another transgression of boundaries and reversal of roles, the world of *King Lear* is put to rights by the death of a young, female Christ figure.

Whittier notes that Cordelia's position as the third child indicates her "special spirituality." She further states that Sigmund Freud designated Cordelia as the necessary death in *King Lear* "which must be chosen and accepted," and that if he is correct,

> *… her corpse may even symbolize the death of death itself… In her deposition from the gibbet, she and Lear manifest an unlikely Pietà, the old, distracted man, sullied by eighty years of life, standing in for the serene Virgin Mary. (393)*

Whittier isn't the only critic to examine the religious implications of this final scene; in "Inverting the Pietà in Shakespeare's King Lear," Katharine Goodland similarly states that "instead of the bereaved mother embracing her son's body, we witness the aged father cradling his daughter's." Goodland continues the comparison between Lear and the Virgin Mary, noting that in medieval Passion plays, an inconsolable Mary "angrily questions God and asks death to take her." Lear is similarly disconsolate after Cordelia's execution, which immediately follows her loving restoration of both his sanity and his hope. When Lear regains sanity and is reunited with Cordelia, he describes himself as a condemned man, and Cordelia as a saint:

You do wrong to take me out o' the grave
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead. (4.7.45-48)

Lear does not believe that he is deserving of mercy or salvation, telling Cordelia,

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not. (4.7.73-76)

After his abuse at the hands of Goneril and Regan, who have no cause to hate him, Lear fully expects that Cordelia, the daughter he truly wronged, will despise him. He is a defeated man

at this point, having lost his kingdom, his wealth, his home, and – he believes – the love of all his children. He has nothing to live for and, viewing his own death as both justice and release, volunteers to drink poison. He "still does not fathom Cordelia's love for him" (Berge) and is surprised by her magnanimity. Lear embraces this unexpected and undeserved redemption, and is overcome with joy. He believes that he has been permanently reunited with Cordelia, and no longer cares about anything else. His happiness is nearly manic, to the point that he is willing to accept even imprisonment as long as he is allowed to remain with his beloved youngest daughter:

…Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues… (5.3.8-13)

Lear doesn't realize that his redemption requires a sacrifice. Cox posits that order can only be restored to the world of *King Lear* by the removal of all three daughters and a "changing of the guard" that restores Lear's squandered power back to the control of responsible men, represented by the play's male survivors: Edgar, Kent, and Albany. This restoration of patriarchal values reinforces the idea that women – particularly women who are allowed too much power and freedom – are dangerous to the social order. Yet in the upside down world of *King Lear*, civil disorder is originally brought about not by a woman, but by Lear's own poor decisions; and said order is eventually restored by a forgiving and self-sacrificing female savior. As Cordelia prepares

for her reunion with Lear in Act 4, she states, "O dear father,/It is thy business that I go about" (4.4.24-25). This is a direct echo of Jesus in the temple, when he asks, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49, NKJV). Cordelia's service to her earthly father, Lear, is of an unearthly nature. In an inversion of traditional roles that is perhaps more radical than any other in the play, the wise young daughter serves as instructor and redeemer for her aged father.

Cordelia's "special spirituality," hinted at in Act I, comes to full fruition with her death in Act 5. *The Norton Shakespeare* clarifies that when Lear declares, "…my poor fool is hanged!" (5.3.304), he is using "fool" as a term of endearment. This draws a final parallel between Cordelia and Lear's beloved Fool; it also connects both Cordelia and the Fool with the concept of the "holy fool" in Christianity – one whose radical spirituality is belied by seemingly foolish behavior. *Encyclopedia Brittanica* defines "holy fool" as a figure who "holds the truth of the gospel, in the disguise of folly, before the eyes of highly placed personalities: the worldly and the princes of the church who do not brook unmasked truth." Unable to perceive the truth of Cordelia's words in Act 1, Scene 1, Lear comes to full understanding of his youngest daughter's self-sacrificing love only after it is too late to save her.

Lear's jubilation at his loving reunion with Cordelia abruptly ends with her hanging. In the play's final inversion of "natural" order, "Shakespeare takes this worst kind of death – the death of the child before the parent – and pierces us with it. He makes us watch as the enfeebled and wracked father mourns over his daughter as those on stage stand helplessly by" (Goodland). Unlike Lord Capulet's chagrin at realizing his complicity in Juliet's death, Hamlet's sudden claim that he loved Ophelia (something he apparently only realizes upon the shock of her death), or Othello's shame in the wake of Desdemona's murder, Lear's grief comes across as raw and pure:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones;

Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so

That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever!

I know when one is dead, and when one lives;

She's dead as earth… (5.3.256-260)

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,

And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,

Never, never, never, never, never! (5.3.305-307)

The final scene of *King Lear* is so intensely painful that Goodland claims it "is perhaps the most devastating in all of tragic drama," and acknowledges that Samuel Johnson found it so agonizing that he could hardly bear to look at Cordelia's demise. Then, of course, there is Nahum Tate's revision of the play in which Lear and Cordelia both survive; this now infamous rewrite was immensely popular in its time. Audiences want Lear and Cordelia, perhaps more than any other tragic figures in Shakespeare's canon, to be granted a happy ending.

Despite all of the accolades granted to *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear* may very well be Shakespeare's greatest tragic love story. Lear is a deeply flawed character, but his greatest flaw provokes compassion and sympathy: he loves his daughter Cordelia so deeply, and craves her admiration so intensely, that he risks even his kingdom to hear her reciprocal love expressed. When he fails to understand Cordelia's meager words for what they are – a profession of her love and

duty, and an assurance that the depth of her love cannot be expressed in pretty speech – his grief and rage destroy them both.

Holding Cordelia's corpse in his arms, Lear laments that, "Her voice was ever soft,/Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in a woman" (5.3.272-273). It is an irony that, had Lear appreciated Cordelia's gentle words from the beginning and not demanded the kind of florid but empty speech we hear from her repulsive sisters and so many of Shakespeare's male characters (Polonius, Laertes, Iago), she would not have had to die. Perhaps one reason that the ending of *King Lear* is so uniquely painful and unfulfilling is that its final return to the patriarchal status quo is not worthy of the price paid by its heroine. Cordelia, like Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona before her, deserves more than what she is given by a world of men who should "see better."

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