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Shakespeare's Tragic Heroines: Personality And Status Versus Gender

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SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC HEROINES: PERSONALITY AND STATUS VERSUS GENDER

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ABSTRACT

Readings of Shakespeare's female characters as presentations of ideals – such as innocence – or as characters limited by the innate nature of their gender fail to understand the full personalities and challenges these characters have. The chosen characters are discussed in the pairings of Cordelia and Cleopatra (queens) and Desdemona and Juliet (high-status ladies) to show how this thesis's chosen female characters are presented through their individual statuses and personalities rather than their genders.

Keywords: Shakespeare's tragic women, Feminism in Shakespeare, Gender in Shakespeare, Status in Shakespeare

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Introduction

The role of this project within the vast literary criticism that is available on Shakespeare's plays – specifically, the available criticism on feminism and female representation within the plays – is to show how the primary markers of identity that Shakespeare presents in his female characters are their statuses and individual cultures. The female characters in these plays are varied in their freedoms, their love lives, their families, and their friendships, but they are all shown to have individuality. They make choices even when their choices are limited, and they fall in love even when their love is condemned or controlled. This individuality despite the circumstances is what shows that Shakespeare considered his female characters controlled – or at least, attempted to be controlled – by their statuses rather than by their gender. When I refer to gender throughout this thesis, it will be in reference to the reading that Shakespeare presented his female characters with what he might have assumed were innate feminine qualities. Gender itself does not denote personality faults or limitations; instead, the limitations seen in the plays have a deeper tie to the status of particular female characters.

Some feminist criticism of Shakespeare has critiqued the way that women are portrayed in Shakespeare's plays, offering a more limited reading of the characters that reduces them to their gender or representations of themes the male characters are meant to learn. This project seeks to respond to arguments such as the following:

> Unlike his classical forebears, Shakespeare did not use women as ideal models of the tragic experience. Rather, his heroines are ciphers upon which the tragic impulses of the plays' male characters are enacted. As the true nature of his heroes becomes

> manifest, Shakespeare's women, defined as they are against their masculine counterparts, disappear into submission, madness or suicide (and sometimes a messy combination of all three). (Turner & Newman 16)

While the argument made here does attempt to give proper consideration to Shakespeare's female characters, I will argue, to the contrary, that the deaths of Shakespeare's women - including those chosen in this project - are not due to the submission of the characters, and their deaths are not in response to the helplessness of their gender, but rather, the helplessness of their situation. These women do not disappear into their deaths, or the shadow of their respective tragic heroes, instead, they stand in their personalities and as markers of their circumstances. It would be incorrect to see Shakespeare's women as mere representations of a thematic journey or as two-dimensional due to their gender. If there are limitations to the female characters within Shakespeare's plays, it is not due to their gender but rather to where the women stand within their culture. In *Shakespeare and Women*, Phyllis Rackin responds to the critique of Shakespeare's female characters by studying them through various historical contexts – from the original time that they were written, to the current Western interpretations of the characters. When observing the way gender was treated in Shakespeare's time, Rackin writes,

> Inequalities between men and women were taken for granted. Sanctioned by law and religion and reinforced by the duties and customs of daily life, they were deeply embedded in the fabric of culture. However, the gender hierarchy in Shakespeare's time coexisted with a hierarchy of status and rank, which was also rationalized by theology, and by history as well. The hierarchy of status and rank was just as firmly embedded as the gender hierarchy, and, like the gender hierarchy, it was sanctioned

> by law and religion and reinforced by customary behavior. As a result, the fact that male superiority was taken for granted does not mean that every woman was subordinate in every way to every man or that many women did not occupy positions of authority and power that would be considered exceptional even today. (Rackin 27)

The gender hierarchy Rackin describes and its role in the varied cultures of Shakespeare's plays – and in Shakespeare's life – would have undoubtedly influenced his perception and imitation of women's lives and struggles. Shakespeare's female characters are indeed shown to have their choices limited, but it is an added strength to their characters – an extra layer of characterization – that these women manage to rebel, grow, and choose despite any restraints they might face. If the male and female characters are to be compared on their presentations within the plays, it is a testament to Shakespeare's female characters if they must face more strife when struggling for their choices.

To accomplish the purpose of this project – showing that the primary ways women act in Shakespeare's plays are due to the character's culture and status rather than generalized female qualities – this project will focus on the pairings of Juliet and Desdemona as opposed to Cleopatra and Cordelia. The purpose of these pairings is to present two queens – Cordelia and Cleopatra – versus two women of high status, but not royal standing – Juliet and Desdemona. Each of these characters is unique in the way they interact with their families, their loves, and their environments, but there are clear connections throughout their plays that relate the women in the pairs to one another. When these connections are examined, it becomes clear that they are not present due to these characters' commonality as women, but due to their limitations within their cultures. Juliet

and Desdemona – despite being completely different women – face the same struggles when trying to make choices for their lives and their loves. The uniqueness of each woman testifies to the fact that their gender does not rule their individuality, and their ability to make choices – no matter the tragic ending of said choices – but instead is a presentation of their strength of character. Cordelia and Cleopatra are another pair that are vastly different characters, but their shared statuses as queens allow them different choices and routes for their lives. The way they speak and interact with others in their respective plays shows clear signs of a higher status. The cultural differences between Cordelia and Cleopatra versus Juliet and Desdemona allow their fates to be re-examined in light of their respective societies and social statuses, rather than simply defining them by their gender.

In order to fully understand these characters within the respective plays, as well as their place in their cultures, this project will examine their relationships with their fathers, love interests, and other women within the plays. To define the primary marker of identity as status, it's important to define what the status of the chosen female leads is – which this project will do through the pairings of Cordelia and Cleopatra versus Desdemona and Juliet – and to also see how those statuses affect the interpersonal relationships of the characters with others within their plays. To borrow from Michael Bristol's paper "Character Studies*"*: "Full engagement with the richness of [Shakespeare's] dramatic characters is a necessary if not sufficient condition for reaching an understanding of his works" (Bristol 52). To view the female characters of Shakespeare's plays as mere representations or symbols of women would be an injustice to the character study they demand. The only mark of femininity that resides within Shakespeare's women resides in the circumstances and culture they are written into; therefore, this project will study the individuality of the

chosen females, their existence within their cultures, and their relationships with other characters within their plays.

Within the first section of this project, the chosen female characters' relationships with their fathers will be examined; specifically, the confrontations they have with their fathers. The intention for this section is to show the limitations the female characters face within their patriarchal relationships and how they still have individuality within these restrictions. Desdemona and Juliet face demands and expectations from their fathers but still manage to advocate for themselves and their chosen loves. They do not disappear into their father's expectations but operate within the expectations of their status by attempting to find ways of changing their duties to their fathers to their chosen husbands. Cordelia, as a princess and then a queen, has a different confrontation with her father. Rather than discussing a love interest, Cordelia stands for her honor and faces banishment. She can do so while also elevating her status from that of a princess to a queen. Cleopatra is not shown with a father figure at all and, therefore, her status as a queen in respect to other Shakespearean monarchs will be studied. The second section of this thesis will examine the chosen characters' relationships with other female characters within their respective plays to show how the differing status of the characters affects the difference between the way female characters are portrayed. By looking at how women of lower status are treated in comparison to Desdemona and Juliet – such as the Nurse and Emilia – it becomes clear that each female character has traits and freedoms specific to their status. Finally, the third section of this thesis will examine the female characters and their corresponding male leads. A common reading of Shakespeare's female characters is that they are representations of the male characters' experience – whether Cordelia represents Lear's

madness or Desdemona represents Othello's death of innocence. By examining the chosen female characters' relationships with their corresponding male leads, this project seeks to show the individuality that each character has within their statuses and relationship to one another. Cordelia is treated as more of an equal to Lear upon her return, and Cleopatra is often treated with more regard than Antony. Desdemona and Othello are shown to have a mutual admiration of one another, just as Romeo and Juliet treat each other with the same youthful wonder. Throughout the three sections of this project, the chosen female characters will be observed within their respective statuses, and as individuals within their respective relationships in order to show that the primary marker of their identity is their status rather than any stereotypes of their femininity.

Fathers and Daughters

While this thesis focuses on the pairings of Juliet and Desdemona versus Cleopatra and Cordelia, this section will compare the relationships of Cordelia and Lear versus that of Desdemona/Brabantio and Juliet/Capulet. I will analyze the scenes within each of these plays where the respective characters have a confrontation with their fathers. The idea here is that Cordelia's status – as a princess and then a queen – changes the nature of her relationship with her father in comparison to Desdemona and Juliet's relationships. Shakespeare shows a connection between his female characters in their conflicts with their fathers while also showing the difference in their statuses and individuality by the way these arguments end for the characters. Despite these differences, the resounding truth of these scenes is that the female characters seemed to be the moral favorite when compared to their fathers. They do not operate as a representation of morality, but rather, their characters are shown to have greater moral strength than their fathers. It is not Lear who is portrayed to be right when he banishes Cordelia, nor is it Brabantio who is favored when he disapproves of Desdemona's new husband.

Before Desdemona enters the scene in the first act of *Othello*, the play focuses on her marriage to Othello and the question of her part in it. Brabantio is warned of Desdemona's marriage and, as a result, accuses Othello of using untoward methods to woo her. Specifically, he states: "Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds / By what you seem them act. – Is there not charms / By which the property of youth and maidhood / May be abused?" (1.1.192-195). Along this same line of thought, involving bewitchment and trickery, Brabantio later states: "O, thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter? Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!" (1.2.80-81). Brabantio seems to

be unable to conceive that Desdemona has fallen in love with Othello willingly. He places the blame on Othello, on enchantments and charms. The supernatural seems more believable to him than the natural act of falling in love, showing his lack of faith in Desdemona's autonomy. This disbelief in Desdemona's ability to make her own choices leads to the stunning speech by Othello. Here, the audience can perceive how Desdemona is viewed by a character that isn't her father. Othello says,

> When I did speak of some distressful stroke
> That my youth suffered. My story begin done.
> She gave me for my pains a world of [sighs]
> She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange.
> 'Twas pitiful. 'twas wondrous pitiful.
> (1.3.179-186)

The Folger editors chose the quarto word "sighs over the Folio term "kisses." The term "sighs" implies that Desdemona gave Othello a listening ear and also empathy in response to hearing his stories and pains. The term "kisses" takes the empathic portrayal of Desdemona further, showing her as an initiator of the romantic relationship. If Desdemona both sought Othello out and kissed him when she heard his tales, she actively sought out a romantic connection with him. This further disproves Brabantio's assumptions about his daughter, that she was wooed and coerced by Othello. Instead, here we see Othello describe Desdemona's empathy and, possibly, her will. She found in Othello someone who she felt for, and acted on that affection by first offering him kisses, and later marrying him in secret.

Othello goes on to describe a relationship that is filled with mutual admiration. When speaking about Desdemona's attention to him, he states,

> But still the house affairs would draw her [thence]
> Which ever as she could with haste dispatch
> She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
> Devour up my discourse.
> (1.3.170-174)

Othello shows how Desdemona participated in the mutual relationship, but also how she initiated it. Brabantio's assumptions about Desdemona are directly countered by the truth; she is capable of choosing Othello and initiating a relationship with him. When Desdemona enters the scene, she must stand in front of her father, her husband, and a group of powerful men to defend herself and her new marriage. This moment – that would undoubtedly have required bravery – is where Desdemona gives a speech on duty and her obligatory relationships:

> My noble father,
> I do perceive here a divided duty.
> To you I am bound for life and education.
> My life and education both 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.

(1.3.208-219)

The divided duty that Desdemona describes is between her husband and her father, and while she acknowledges a respect to both, she aligns herself to her duty to her husband. Desdemona shows loyalty to Othello as her husband and states that this loyalty is honor-bound. It should be remembered during this scene that Othello has recently stated how Desdemona sought him out at the beginning of their relationship. She measured her housework and her time with him, balancing her duties and her love. The choice to love Othello and to marry him were both made by Desdemona without any trickery that her father believes to be present. Desdemona says, before this group of men, that she must profess her duty to Othello because he is her husband, but it was Desdemona who initiated this love, romance, and eventual marriage. Desdemona held her duties to her father while she still owed them, but stepped out and chose whom her loyalty would belong to by seeking out Othello. She manages to stay within the limits of her status and womanhood – by being a good daughter until her loyalty is moved to her husband – while also managing to have autonomy over who she loves and lives with. In Desdemona, Shakespeare shows a female character who can live within the bounds set for her while also managing to craft her own choices. If Brabantio is meant to be read as the unfavored moral character in this scene – which, since his racist stances are mirrored by the play's unarguable villain, Iago, this would seem to be the case – then his understanding of Desdemona should be read as a misrepresentation. It seems that Shakespeare is showing a father who assumes that his daughter is incapable of choosing herself because said father holds a biased view of women. Brabantio sees Desdemona as incapable of choosing because his view – which

seems to be based on societal and cultural expectations of women – is that women of Desdemona's standing would not be capable of marrying a man in secret. In the article "Designing Goddesses: Shakespeare's Othello and Marian Nowiński's Otello Desdemona," Sabina Laskowska-Hinz writes: "Shakespeare designs Desdemona as if she were an embodiment of both the innocent love, Venus Caelestis and passionate love, Venus Naturalis: how her character is described in the first Act makes one share Othello's initial conviction that his wife is truly of divine nature" (Laskowska-Hinz 2). This ideal of Desdemona that Brabantio has is disproven at the start of the play, and as he's disproved, so should the idea that Desdemona is simply a figure – whether it is a figure of innocence or beauty or the ideal daughter. As it's clear that Brabantio's stances on Desdemona and Othello are to be discouraged, so should his understanding of Desdemona's relationship to her gender – that she is nothing but the faithful daughter he expects her to be.

In her book *Wooing, Wedding, & Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays* Irene G. Dash makes the following connection between Desdemona and Juliet: "In *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, women, exercising their independence, defy their fathers as well as the mores of their society" (Dash 1). It seems, however, that Desdemona's intention is not to simply deny her father and the societal expectations of her. Rather, Desdemona initiates a romantic relationship with Othello and marries him in a way that avoids her father's direct forbiddance. Desdemona seems to understand that her father would deny her this marriage, so she realigns her duty to Othello by constructing a secret marriage. She does not defy her father and society but uses her understanding of her cultural ties to tie herself to Othello. Her duty, which once was to her father, is now to her husband. That she is not defying

society is shown by all the other people in the play's reactions to the marriage. People like Cassio and Emilia approve of the marriage until Iago destroys everything.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet attempts to beg her father – Capulet – to not force her into a marriage with Paris but is met with his refusal. Juliet, like Desdemona, has already married her chosen partner in secret but chooses a different route to retain what she desires. It seems that Juliet is unable to claim – as Desdemona did – that she must first honor her husband. It could be due to Juliet's age that she cannot choose her husband beyond her father and must instead resort to trickery and faking her death. It seems that there is an age before a woman's duty is to her husband rather than her father. Capulet is shown to even be reluctant for Juliet to marry Paris at the beginning of the play, having the following conversation with Paris:

Capulet

But saying o'er what I have said before.

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.

(1.2.7-11)

This first-act conversation is drastically different than the Capulet we see in Act 3, who demands his daughter's marriage at the threat of no longer supporting her. Dash argues that this difference in Capulet's attitude to Juliet's ability to marry is due to other events in the play; specifically, the death of Tybalt. Dash states, "Love and protectiveness of the female child yield to familiar perceptions of woman as property and procreator. The father who, in

Act I, sought to postpone his daughter's marriage, must in Act III think of legality and inheritance. He must replace his murdered male heir, his nephew Tybalt, and Juliet must furnish the progeny" (Dash 74). Capulet's change in attitude may be due to his nephew's death, but may also be due to being defied. Capulet places value in Juliet's consent during his conversation with Paris, but when he is faced with Juliet's direct disobedience, he lashes out:

> To answer "I'll not wed. I cannot love.
>
> I am too young. I pray, pardon me."
>
> But, an you will not wed, I'll pardon you!
>
> Graze where you will, you shall not house with me.
>
> Look to 't; think on 't. I do not use to jest.
>
> Thursday is near. Lay hand on heart; advise.
>
> An you be mine, I'll give you to my friend.
>
> An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets,
>
> For, by my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee,
>
> Nor what is mine shall never do thee good.
>
> (3.5.197-206)

Capulet succumbs to becoming the forceful patriarch in a scene that is emotionally turbulent for Juliet and the audience. Capulet goes from worrying about Juliet's youth to reminding her of her status as his property. He reminds Juliet that he can give her away to his friends or to the streets, which is a starkly different stance from Capulet's concerns over Juliet at the beginning of the play. Capulet's original take – that Juliet is too young to marry – to his reminder that he has the ability to remove her from his home shows that

even his stance on her marriage is one that is status-bound. Juliet is pressured into a marriage by a pressured father, who now faces that his young daughter must marry due to Tybalt's death. Within his threat, Capulet references Juliet's own statement that she is too young to marry, opposing it by insisting that she marry. This reference to Juliet's statement on her youth could be seen as a direct call back to Capulet's own concern, showing how the circumstance has altered his position, rather than Juliet's gender or age.

Capulet now has to abandon his previous belief that Juliet was too young to marry, while Juliet – despite being informed by her father to marry Paris – still chooses to be with Romeo. The societal expectations that are placed upon her by her father and her cousin's death do not shake her resolve to be with her, now, husband. There seems to be a comparison in Act 3, scene 5 between father and daughter – Capulet and Juliet. Capulet has altered his stance on Juliet's duty while Juliet's love and loyalty remain rooted in the same place – with Romeo. She remains steadfast despite what her father expects of her. Juliet, like Desdemona and Shakespeare's other female characters, exists outside of being mere symbols or products of their gender. In "We see our own Juliet: The many faces of Shakespeare's heroine" Margreta de Grazia writes: "Hamlet in the graveyard contemplating a skull and Juliet on a balcony holding a rose: these are Shakespeare's two great icons, the one of thought, the other of desire. Like icons, both characters exist in multiple semblances. Hamlet's are invariably ideational; Juliet's, however, tend to be embodied" (Grazia). Any depiction of Juliet's longing seems to be about her age, or to the fact that she is a character who experiences love and lust like many characters throughout Shakespeare's plays. She is not simply the longing figure of female desire.

Shakespeare places Juliet in a situation similar to Desdemona's: she is a high-class lady who is secretly married to someone of her choosing. It is Desdemona who insists her marriage outweighs her duty to her father, but Juliet does not speak out about her duty to Romeo but rather adheres to a scheme in secret. Her plotting could be due to Romeo's banished status, begging the question of if Romeo were not banished, would Juliet have claimed the same duty to her husband as Desdemona did, or if Juliet and Romeo are too young for her to owe him duty over Capulet. Either by Romeo's status or Juliet's age, Juliet is left with fewer choices than Desdemona leading to her plot that leads to her death. Despite this difference, both characters choose their spouses within their restraints and maintain their choices after confrontations with their fathers. Also, as in Desdemona's case, Capulet's furious shift lowers his moral status, while Juliet's steadfastness seems less morally suspect than her father's fury.

Cordelia's status – as a princess during her initial confrontation with her father – changes the tone and nature of the conversation she has with Lear from that in the confrontations that Desdemona and Juliet endure. Lear demands a declaration of love from his three daughters, receiving false ones from Goneril and Regan. When he gets to Cordelia, she gives an honest response at the risk of losing her inheritance:

> You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
> I return those duties back as are right fit:
> Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
> 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.]
>
> (1.1.106-115)

Cordelia lists similar duties to her father as Desdemona listed toward Brabantio, but Cordelia does not profess that she has a greater duty to her future husband. In fact, this confrontation does not involve Cordelia's chosen suitor, but rather it is the currency attached to the love of her father. Cordelia sees her sisters' declaration that their father has all their love as a falsehood, stating that they owe their husband a portion of this love. To Cordelia, the distribution of love is directly tied to duty. She cannot say she only loves her father if she were to have a husband, but it should still be noted that she returns to her father after she is married. Therefore, just because Cordelia cannot guarantee her father all her love, does not mean that she does not love him. Rather, she refuses to overexpress herself to maintain her honesty and what she is duty-bound to give. Lear treats this declaration of love as a trade: her words for his land. Cordelia refuses to trade her love like currency, as her love is bound to her duty as a daughter. Considering Shakespeare's ongoing criticism within his plays and sonnets (famously in Sonnet 130) of the use of false, flowery language, Cordelia can be seen as the moral favorite in this scene. Her tie to honor over falsehood adds to her strength in character, and her higher status – that of a princess in this opening scene – allows her to show her honorable traits openly before her father. In his paper "Character Studies," Michael Bristol describes Cordelia's decision to deny her father's request for a love declaration by stating: "Faced with choosing between a gift that will leave her perpetually indebted and maintaining her integrity, Cordelia decides

defending her independent personhood is the better alternative" (Bristol 60). Cordelia's choice does seem to be one made with integrity, but it does not seem to be made from a wish for independence. In fact, before her banishment, it does not appear that Cordelia or her sisters suffered from a lack of independence. Cordelia has a choice of suitors, and while she faces banishment for her choice of words in this opening scene, it is not implied that such a choice has ever been presented to her before. Rather, her decision surprises her father with Lear saying "How, how Cordelia? Mend your speech a little" (1.1.103). It does not seem as though Cordelia has to leave her father to gain her independence, nor do her actions later in the play imply that she wishes to leave Lear at all. Rather, when she is able, after she becomes a queen, she returns to assist him. Rather than seeking independence, Cordelia seeks honor and – to borrow Bristol's term – integrity.

Cordelia accepts her father's banishment before giving away her honor, before choosing the King of France to be her husband. Cordelia is not shown to consider her suitor or her possible future marriage while having this initial confrontation with Lear, so her decision to choose her honor over land or title is made with no shown expectation of a future marriage or queendom. In Roy Shafer's article "Cordelia, Lear, and Forgiveness," Shafer states regarding these scenes, "Shakespeare is also showing … that Cordelia is steadily keeping her eye fixed on her future. Despite all, she remains focused on what she is emotionally ready to become: a woman desired by and loving toward another lord … Shakespeare shows her to be standing up for her emancipation from the confinement of daughterliness" (Shafer 401). It doesn't seem that the intent of this scene is for Cordelia to separate herself from Lear or from her daughterliness. In fact, when Cordelia is married and leaves her princess status for queen status, she returns to Lear with an army and

support. While Lear does seem intent on possessing his daughter's love, Cordelia's refusal appears to be from a desire to maintain the authenticity of her love. Cordelia does not strive to run from her father, or to run toward a husband, but strives to maintain her duty and honor – a trait she carries throughout the play, from her time as a princess to her time as a queen. Cordelia is presented in this initial scene in comparison to her sisters who lie for power, and her father who has grown greedy from his constant exposure to it. Her choice here – to deny her father in favor of truth and integrity – grants her the strongest character in the room.

Cleopatra – Queendom Without a Patriarch

While the main subject matter of this chapter is the relationships the chosen female characters have with their fathers, this section will take a look at Cleopatra's status as a queen outside of a relationship with a family patriarch. Unlike Cordelia, Cleopatra is a queen for the entirety of her play and is presented without a confrontation with her father. It is possible that Cleopatra does not have a scene where she has to confront, argue, or struggle against her father because her status allows her to exist outside of the expectations of a patriarch. Studying Cleopatra as a queen rather than simply as a woman elicits a deeper understanding of her motivations and the motivations of others toward her throughout the play. Sali Said in her article "The Question of Culpability in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra," "She is a queen. In other words, she is considered to be a 'threat' to male dominance and authority as well as a figure of emasculation" (Said 2). It does seem that Cleopatra's power holds great sway in her relationships with men throughout the play, and while her power may be a threat to men within the play, it doesn't seem as though Shakespeare is using Cleopatra as a figure of emasculation alone. Cleopatra's status as a

queen is a part of her character rather than something that makes her a symbol within the play. She does not represent emasculation, nor does she simply represent female power. She is a female with power, which alters the way she interacts with other women and men throughout the play. Cordelia, as a princess, can communicate with Lear differently than either Desdemona or Juliet, but Cleopatra, who is a queen from the start of her play, is not presented with having a family figure like a father questioning her authority or choices. Instead, the play can portray Cleopatra as a lover who endures a love that is tragic on a political level.

Cleopatra faces strife in her political life because her expectations are outside of the family and home and are on the political level. It's true that, like Juliet, Cleopatra dies by suicide. Here, we see her also make a choice to choose death over constraint. While Cleopatra faces less restraint and limitations than Desdemona and Juliet from her family's side, there is still an attempt to control her on a political level. Like Juliet, Cordelia, and Desdemona, Cleopatra – with little to nearly no choices left – can make her own decision in a turbulent moment. Cleopatra faces the loss of dignity and power, and her death seems to be as much a strategic move as it is a tragedy. Before deciding to die, Cleopatra states, "this mortal house I'll ruin, / Do Ceasar what he can. Know, sir, that I / Will not wait pinioned at your master's court / Nor once be chastised with the sober eye / Of dull Octavia" (5.2.61-65). She directly ties destroying her body to defying Ceasar, implying that her death is not only her choice but one made as an act of rebellion. As her body is made into a representation of Rome's triumph, she decides to destroy the "mortal house" so that Ceasar may not use it – use her – as a symbol of his own power. In *Shakespeare and Women*, Phyllis Rackin addresses a held sixteenth-century stereotype as "the assumption that

women are always and everywhere the same, immune to the historical contingencies of time and place" (Rackin 117). She goes on to state that "of all Shakespeare's female characters, the figure who seems to offer the most unmanageable resistance to those stereotypes is Cleopatra" (Rackin 117). It is not just Cleopatra's attitude and dress that are unique, but her level of power. Juliet chose her death just as Cleopatra did, but the difference in the way they lived, and the reason they chose to die, can be found in the power that Cleopatra's status as the Egyptian queen grants her. It is Cleopatra's station that allows her to defy stereotypes about women, not because her marriage does not affect society, but because her station allows her to redefine what a woman's status should be. She is dangerous in that regard and faces hostility from those within the play who would define her as a whore and as having "a gipsy's lust" (1.1.19).

Cleopatra rules her interpersonal relationships as she does her kingdom and uses her body and emotions to elicit reactions and to hold control. Her being a woman leads other characters throughout the play to attribute her influence over Antony to her sexuality and sensuality – hence, the gypsy's lust remark – yet it is Cleopatra's existence as a queen that leads her to maintain control of those around her through almost theatrical means. An example of this can be seen as early as the play's third scene. Antony is soon to leave to return to Rome, and Cleopatra – enlisting an almost theatrical level of emotion – claims to be close to fainting. She states: "Help me away, dear Charmain! I shall fall. It cannot be thus long; the sides of natures / Will not sustain it" (1.3.17-19). It is not until she's able to confirm that Antony will return to her, that she claims that she is better, showing that she has maintained this interaction on her own terms. Antony, throughout this scene in Act 1 Scene 3, can initially not speak without Cleopatra interrupting him with her assumptions

and fears. She has control of the conversation and by the time Antony speaks, he is reassuring her: “Hear me queen: The strong necessity of time commands / Our services awhile, but my full heart / Remains in use with you” (1.3.52-55). Cleopatra has command over Antony by using her natural tendency toward influencing other characters through her command of emotions, even false emotions. Sali Said comments on Cleopatra’s command of men, saying, “Cleopatra is conscious of how male Roman characters think of women and their nature, if she gives them an excuse based on her nature as a woman, all will immediately forgive her and believe her” (Said 10-11). It might be possible that Cleopatra utilizes the assumptions men have against her as a woman, but it could be argued that Shakespeare is saying that it is her nature as a queen to command others around her, including through their emotions. This is similar to when Lear, who is also a monarch, demands the emotional declaration of his daughters. Here, with Antony, Cleopatra is seen doing the same. She utilizes theatrical means by faking a faint, but she still prods Antony into stating he’ll return to her. Unlike Lear, Cleopatra is shown using emotions to move Antony, while Lear lets the false emotions of two of daughters move him. Cleopatra is also not shown to be mad as Lear is by the end of her play, but rather to possess the ability to move others with her ability to inflict emotions and utilize her words. Shakespeare gives another example of a ruler who can utilize their words to move others within *Henry V*. Henry is able to utilize speech to rally his men before battle, showing how Cleopatra’s ability to move Antony – and later her ladies during their death scene – with her words can be contributed to her status as a monarch, rather than her innate nature as a woman.

`Cleopatra has been portrayed unfavorably due to Antony’s loss at the Battle of Actium and her role in retreating, I would argue that her retreat is another portrayal of a monarch

that prioritizes her people. Said gives details on why Cleopatra might have retreated from this battle:

> Since she is not much involved in the Caesar/Antony military equation and is on the battlefield only for support, it is very likely that Cleopatra had independently planned to keep fighting until she was sure that Antony's army had gained the upper hand. When they reach that stage, she pulls back to Alexandria, avoiding further human losses on her side as well.
>
> (Said 5)

It would be fair to say that Cleopatra's retreat was due to choosing her people over Antony's victory, showing that even though she is viewed by others within the play as a woman with whose main trait is her personality, her priority is still with her people as their queen. Said continues with her analysis of Cleopatra's departure from the battle of Actium by discussing why Cleopatra might have lied to Antony about her retreat:

> When she discovers that Antony has followed her, Cleopatra resorts to lying when explaining her departure to him. Had she told him the truth, he would likely have become angry with her, for it would appear as though she had abandoned him when in fact she left the warzone because she did not see a need for her to remain there as a client queen. Therefore, the best way to justify her action was to think of something naturally excusable in a woman – fear – so it would appear to be an act of escape rather than a pre-planned retreat.
>
> (Said 5)

To say that Cleopatra was using the excuse of fear to avoid Antony's anger would also contribute to the argument that as a monarch, she is inclined to influencing the emotions of

others in her favor. Seeing Cleopatra's retreat as an act of dishonor seems inconsistent considering that, by the end of the play, she choses honor and death over betraying Antony and her people. When Caesar requests that Cleopatra kill Antony in Egypt, she does not betray him, showing that she is capable of loyalty to Antony. It seems likely then, that during the Battle of Actium, her retreat did not occur due to a lack of loyalty to Antony, but from a greater loyalty to her people. Shakespeare depicts Cleopatra primarily as a queen, and secondly as a woman.

Women and Women

When discussing Shakespeare's intentions with his female characters, it is imperative to discuss women within the chosen plays other than the female lead. Looking into how these other women are portrayed can show the different ways Shakespeare portrays women based on their differing status within one play, as well as how his women are individuals outside of archetypes, and can highlight components of the lead female characters' personalities that exist outside of their interactions with the male leads of these plays. Seeing what makes these characters different from each other helps to show how Shakespeare does not contain women into one category, while also placing his female characters into status groups and altering their behaviors based on those dimensions. Status's effect on the female leads of the chosen plays is most evident when two women of different statuses are compared within the same play, as it shows how they are treated according to their status rather than to their gender.

One of the most interesting female-to-female relationships in Shakespeare's works is that of the friendship between Desdemona and Emilia. Emilia, who is directly appointed to be Desdemona's handmaiden, could be described as nothing less than Desdemona's friend. It is this friendship, after all, that conquers the trickery and lies spread by Iago by the end, as it leads to Emilia, through an act of loyalty, clearing Desdemona's name:

> What did thy song bode, lady?
>
> Hark, canst though hear me? I will play the swan
>
> And die in music.

> Willow, willow, willow.
>
> Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor.
>
> So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true.
>
> So speaking as I think, alas, I die.
>
> (5.2.295-301)

Emilia's death scene is marked, most notably, by the reference to speaking "true," as it compares her directly to her husband, who she is both turning in and defying. Where her husband is the villain of the play, operating through lies, Emilia ends the play and his lies with an insistence on truth, for the love of her friend. Emilia, in her final moments, shows that she is not merely a wife that has serve her husband, as her loyalty in the end belongs to Desdemona, and their love for one another allows for a place for truth to reside. Before Desdemona's death, Emilia, in the First Folio, unpins Desdemona. The beauty of Desdemona and Emilia's friendship lends a palpable significance to this scene, leading to readings of the meaning of the song and the women's actions. One such reading can be found in Denise E. Walen's Unpinning Desdemona" regarding "Desdemona's unpinning as Emilia prepares her for bed":

> While the song alludes to themes of infidelity, madness, melancholy, and death, it also functions practically to cover the rather complicated business of unpinning and unlacing various articles of cloth which constituted the dress of an aristocratic Englishwoman. The undressing itself symbolizes Desdemona's vulnerability and innocence.
>
> (Walen 490)

In addition to the undressing symbolizing Desdemona's vulnerability, I would argue that it also shows that she is able to be vulnerable in Emilia's presence. Possibly, the inclusion of Emilia undressing Desdemona is meant to show their closeness, while also maintaining the difference in their status. Emilia undresses Desdemona, an act that reflects her position. Still, it should be noted the closeness that the included presentation of the undressing presents. Another significant scene of truth and loyalty within the play occurs once again between Desdemona and Emilia, a scene referred to as the Willow Scene. In this scene, Shakespeare clearly depicts two women from different walks of life – one the lady, one the maid. Desdemona sings the Willow song, leading to Desdemona asking about the wife from the songs' infidelity:

Desdemona

Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

Emilia

Why, would not you?

Desdemona

No, by this heavenly light!

Emilia

Nor I neither, by this heavenly light.

I might do 't as well I' th' dark.

(4.3.67-76)

There are signifiers of status difference during this conversation through Emilia's speech, with short words that might imply a lower status, but still – Emilia's wit is sharp. While she would not cheat on her husband in the "heavenly light," she'd do so in the "dark."

Desdemona, who is younger and newly married, seems appalled by the idea of a women cheating on her husband. But Emilia, whose husband is unkind and disloyal, seems unbothered by the suggestion. It's clear that Desdemona does not look down upon Emilia, as their vulnerability with each other and Desdemona's request for Emilia's advice shows the depth of their friendship; therefore, their differing views do not seem to imply that one of these women is morally superior to the other. Rather, the difference seems to be Emilia's personal experience and her lower status. Emilia is able to jest about sexuality and infidelity because her lower status grants her more freedom than Desdemona has. Emilia further discusses infidelity in marriage:

> Let husbands know
> Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,
> And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
> As husbands have. What is it that they do
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
> I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
> It is so too. And have not we affections,
> Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
> (4.3.104-113)

Emilia uses the word "we," possibly referring to all women or asking Desdemona about the two of them directly. Emilia does not believe her situation with Iago is unique, and that other women – possibly Desdemona – might feel the same desires she does. While Desdemona is resistant to the idea of betraying Othello in this manner, it's still notable that

she allows Emilia to openly discuss these desires and does not condemn her for her generalized use of "we." Rather, she dismisses Emilia by saying, "Good night, good night. God me such uses send, / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend" (4.3.116-117). Desdemona would rather fix her marriage then introduce further betrayal, but she does not dispute the idea that Emilia – and possibly women – might have the same desires as men. Desdemona also does not refute that men commit infidelity against their wives, but rather states that she would rather react to the bad in marriage by attempting to mend it. This is opposite to Othello's reaction by the end of the play, where – when he believed Desdemona was unfaithful – he reacted with violence. Desdemona does not believe that bad should be met with more bad, but she does not fault Emilia for her jests or desires.

Emilia and Desdemona's relationship is one built from mutual love and connection. They are two women together in a place that is not their home. Their most notable differences appear in the form of their statuses and Emilia's well of experience. It's interesting that they both have a role in their relationship where they are the – to use a loose term – leader. Emilia is in Desdemona's service from a status standpoint, but Desdemona sees Emilia as the expert in marriage and marital relations. Emilia's marriage is not an ideal one, yet Desdemona still listens and asks Emilia for advice out of respect toward Emilia as the more experienced of the two. Dash writes on the women's two marriages: "Shakespeare contrasts the mutual respect between the newlyweds with the imbalance relationship in a long-standing marriage" (Dash 111-112). It does not seem, however, that Emilia's marriage is tainted because of how long she is married. She is notably married to a villainous man, and a misogynistic one at that. Emilia is not a victim of a long-lasting marriage, but rather is the character who triumphs by the end of the play, as she reveals the villain.

Another view of the Willow scene is given in Lisa Hopkins article, “The Women’s Room: The Last Plays,” “the willow scene in Othello … [is a] scene in which Desdemona speaks to Emilia with an openness and freedom which she certainly cannot find with her husband … [S]he positions herself as part of a diachronic community of women bonded together by powerlessness and bad treatment of men” (Hopkins 58). This paper discusses how Shakespeare focused on a space for men, both mental and physical, through his plays. But how, toward the end of his life, his last plays seemed to attempt to find a space for women. Hopkins shows that one suggested space is a nunnery, though it is depicted as almost a last option - chosen from a lack of choices. When discussing the Willow scene specifically, Hopkins sees the space Emilia and Desdemona reside in as a place of created sanctuary – or an escape from Iago and Othello. It does not seem that Desdemona is attempting to escape Othello, despite her growing worry for their marriage. Instead, she goes to Emilia because she views her as the expert in marriage, giving respect to Emilia’s experience. Shakespeare presents a low-status woman and portrays her with wit, loyalty, and sensuality. Desdemona, who is a higher status woman, does not express her sexuality as freely, but she still listens to Emilia and does not deny that women might desire the same things as men. Her hesitation, and any innocence she has, seems to be from her status and personality rather than her gender. After all, what is witnessed in the willow scene is Desdemona’s continued search for stories and knowledge. At the beginning of the play, Othello describes Desdemona asking about his stories, and here, she continues to ask Emilia about hers. The relationship between Emilia and Desdemona highlights the women’s characters more, as it shows two women from different social standings finding

commonality and differences within each other. Emilia is shown to be loyal and witty, while Desdemona is curious and good-natured.

Juliet does not find her way into married life into later into the play, and even then, is never openly married within her family or society. Still, like Desdemona, she is depicted receiving advice from an older woman of lower status. The Nurse from Romeo and Juliet is also shown to be witty and have a more sensual side like Emilia. These traits, or crude humor and open sexuality, could be more accessible to women of a lower status. Higher status women have higher restraints on their speech and sexual behaviors, but by depicting less-constrained women – such as Emilia and the Nurse – as wielding such speech freely, it could be implied that all women are capable of such thoughts and feelings. The Nurse is more free to express these jokes, while Juliet and Desdemona – with their youth and sheltering – have more of a watchful eye upon them. In the first Act of the play, Lady Capulet asks Juliet if she could marry Paris:

Lady Capulet

The fish lives in the sea, and ‘tis much pride

For fair without the fair within to hide.

That book in many’s eyes doth share the glory

That in gold clasps locks in the golden story.

So shall you share all that he doth possess

By having him, making yourself no less.

Nurse

No less? Nay, bigger. Women grow by men.

(1.3.95-101)

Lady Capulet, Juliet's mother and a woman of the Venetian elite, speaks in poetic lines to describe marriage to Juliet. She uses rhyming couplets, which makes the Nurse's injected response all the more jarring audibly. By saying "women grow by men," the Nurse refers to how men get women pregnant. This interjected sexual quip that follows Lady Capulet's poetry shows plainly the contradictory characters that influence Juliet's life. In her paper "Lineaments of Nature" or Imprints of a Real World?: A View of Women in Shakespeare," Anand Prakash states the following regarding older female characters in Shakespeare's plays: "Generally speaking, men see in the adult woman a person who has outlived her utility as a sweet and youthful human object. There is no wonder that in Shakespeare middle-aged women are few and far in between, and in case they exist, they seem agonized and anguished" (Prakash 92). It would be a generalization to say that all older women portrayed in Shakespeare's plays are shown in strife, and while Emilia does die by the end of the play, she dies the play's conqueror and by choice. Her strife from her husband leads her to joke about infidelity, rather than mourn for his attention. As for Juliet's influences, she is, within her first scene of the play, presented with two older women. The Nurse jokes about Juliet's age – whether she is twelve or fourteen – for so long that Lady Capulet must interject "Enough of this. I pray thee, hold thy peace" (1.3.53). The Nurse does not appear to be in strife and is happy to jest. Prakash does find this distinction – between women of higher and lower status – and the way it affects their level of anguish: "[women's] selfhood is defined at the place only in terms of the role assigned to them. However, where society operates relatively less at the level of general rules and norms, as for instance in the life of commoners, women come out more as themselves than as carriers of patriarchy-laden distortions" (Prakash 98). This would explain the wit and, at times, good humor that seems

to be aligned with the Nurse and Emilia, but still seems to cast a generalization on Lady Capulet. Lady Capulet's insistence on Juliet's marriage to Paris could be compared to her husband's, however, rather than to an anguish that comes as a result of being an older women. As discussed in the Fathers and Daughters chapter, Capulet's view on Juliet's marriage changes from the beginning of the play from what appears to be a seen duty due to the death of Juliet's cousin. If Lady Capulet is anguished due to the duty of her status, then so is her husband, showing clearly how the marker of separation between the Nurse and Lady Capulet is their differing status.

Juliet has a differing relationship with her mother – Lady Capulet – then she does with the Nurse, which is made clear by the different reactions the Nurse and Lady Capulet have in face of Juliet's refusal to marry Paris. When Capulet – Juliet's father – leaves after demanding Juliet marry Paris, Juliet begs her mother for pity:

> Is there no pity sitting in the clouds
> That sees into the bottom of my grief? –
> O sweet my mother, cast me not away.
> Delay this marriage for a month, a week,
> Or, if you do not, make the bridal bed
> In that dim monument where Tybalt lies.
> (3.5.208-213)

Juliet seems to believe her mother has the ability to intercede on her behalf, implying that Lady Capulet has some amount of power when it comes to Juliet's marriage. Still, when Lady Capulet is faced with her daughter's begging, and her threatened suicide, she replies, "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word. Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee"

(3.5.214-215). It would seem that Lady Capulet agrees with her husband that Juliet should marry Paris and is choosing to side with him over her daughter. This could be why Lady Capulet's response matches Capulet's tone. Lady Capulet takes the familial warmth from their interaction by saying "I have done with thee," just as Capulet insists that Juliet would "hang, beg, starve, die in the streets" if she did not do as she was told and marry Paris. The Nurse, however, advises Juliet to marry Paris without demands or threats to take away her affection. The Nurse describes Juliet's choices:

> Faith, here it is,
> Romeo is banished, and all the world to nothing
> That he dares ne'er come back to challenge you,
> Or, if he do, it needs must be by stealth.
> Then, since the case so stands as now it doth,
> I think it best you married with the County.
> O, he's a lovely gentleman!
> Romeo's a dishclout to him. An eagle, madam,
> Hath not so green, so quick, so fair an eye
> As Paris hath.
> (3.5.225-234)

It seems as though the Nurse is trying to appeal to the higher-status Juliet, showing that Juliet, despite the age difference, has more authority here. The Nurse does not command but uses terms such as "madam" to Juliet to see what the Nurse believes is reason. While Lady Capulet takes away affection as punishment, the Nurse tries to sing Paris' praises so that Juliet will make the decision to marry him on her own. It seems that all the Nurse has

to use against Juliet is her words, and as shown with both Emilia and the Nurse, she has the wit to make her words work. Here, her praise of Paris does not work, but neither does Lady Capulet's refusal of affection or motherly comfort. Juliet, despite the limited position she is placed in, still makes her own decision regarding her marriage and her love.

Unlike he does with Desdemona and Juliet, Shakespeare does not give Cordelia a close friendship or a female figure to grant her advice. Rather, the other prominent female figures of her play are her sisters Goneril and Regan who are also presented as queens. While Cordelia chooses her honor and honesty above false poetry, Regan and Goneril tell their father falsehoods to gain their inheritance. Because Cordelia and her sisters are all of the same status – queens – Cordelia cannot be compared to other women in her play of altered status. Instead, I will evaluate the way that Cordelia's sisters – as opposing figures of queens – are presented and addressed as monarchal figures. To borrow from Michael Bristol in his paper "Character Studies":

> Goneril, let's say – living and moving before us. How well do we understand her point of view or Regan's, and, for that matter, does anyone acknowledge that the sisters are differentiated characters, each with a distinct point of view? Generally, we hardly even notice them as anything other than personifications of badness.
>
> (Bristol 59)

It's true that Goneril and Regan – within good reason – are often assessed as bad and given the roles of the villainesses of the play. Goneril and Regan's actions, however, are only possible due to the status that the opening scene grants them. Cordelia's return is possible due to her status as a queen, just as her sister's betrayal of their father is possible due to their respective monarch statuses. Rather than established them as "female evil," it would

seem that the play is further addressing the abuse of power and the corrupt way that it can be gained – seen clearly in how Cordelia, with the same power later attributed to her, choses to return to her father just as she initially chose to maintain her honor at the beginning of the play. Bristol is correct that Goneril and Regan should meet the same examination that Cordelia does, as there's a danger in seeing them as mere representations of female evil. It does seem, however, that the play seeks to critique the abuse and effect of power, and Goneril and Regan are affected by this threat. Goneril addresses her belief in the lack of limitations of her power when she speaks with Albany in the fifth act of the play:

Albany

Shut your mouth, dame,

Or with this paper shall I stopple it. – Hold, sir. –

Thou worse than any name, read thine own evil.

No tearing, lady. I perceive you know it.

Goneril

Say if I do; the laws are mine, not thine.

Who can arraign me for't?

(5.3.185-190)

Goneril is shown to face the same threat as Lear –doomed for believing she is above the law as she is in charge of it. The belief that she has no one to answer to addresses one of the plays primary themes of justice and implies that Goneril is succumbing to her power, but it also shows that – despite her gender – she, like her sisters, is able to hold high-status and character complications within their gender. This is shown in how Albany shows

disrespect to Goneril by telling her to be quiet, yet Goneril is still able to point out that Albany has no control over the laws like she does. Despite his negative view of her, she still has more power than he does due to her status.

Cordelia is not the only daughter that Lear misunderstands, for while he pushes Cordelia out in the first act, he attributes Goneril and Regan's nature to their womanhood. When Lear is left out in the storm in Act 3, he curses his daughters:

> Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
> Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
> Judicious punishment! 'Twas this flesh begot
> Those pelican daughters.
> (3.4.78-81)

Lear refers to himself as discarded by his daughters, and while he was discarded by Goneril and Regan, he was the one who discarded Cordelia. Lear also refers to his daughters as pelicans, implying that they all feed off him. The inclusion of Cordelia within the play could be read as Shakespeare's way of showing that Lear's statements about women as a whole are not meant to be read as true. Here, we see Lear claim to be fed upon by his own flesh – his daughters – but as the audience we understand that it is not the nature of all daughters – or even the nature of all of Lear's daughters – to betray their fathers. Rather what is shown is that Lear misjudged one daughter incorrectly and his own ignorance is what has led him to trusting the untrustworthy. Considering that Lear's judgment is put into question within the first scene of the play, Lear's judgement on others' characters – specifically his misogynistic comments about women and daughters – should not be read as the truth. Rather, they should be read as stereotypes that do not save Lear from his eventual

fate. After all, even if Goneril and Regan are pelicans, feeding off of their father, it is Lear's initial misjudgment that allows them to have more power over him, and even if he sees women as unfit to hold power, they still are able to.

Cleopatra, unlike Cordelia, is shown with multiple female characters throughout her play that are of differing status. Cleopatra is shown throughout *Antony and Cleopatra* with her ladies, presenting a group of women surrounding their queen. The idea that Cleopatra is depicted only by her sensuality is not a full view of her character, as she is almost respectful of the ladies that are shown to be with her for most of the play. In the article "The Question of Culpability in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra," Said writes: "the relationship between the mistress and her ladies-in-waiting is characterized by solidarity and positive politeness. [Cleopatra is] liberal and modest when she treats Iras equitably and when she grants Charmian and Mardian freedom of speech and choice" (Said 2). It's possible that Cleopatra's attendants bring about a more humane side of her, one that is not so regal, because they do not hold the underlying idea that her existence is a threat. They are depicted entering most scenes with Cleopatra in the play, so it can be inferred that they see the queen often enough to have a full human perspective on her. This might be why Cleopatra grants them certain liberties with their speech. It should also be a testament to Cleopatra's character that her handmaidens die with her and dress her beforehand. Cleopatra does not command Iras to die with her, but rather speaks to her on her intentions, taking the time to explain her reasoning despite the hurried situation:

> Now, Iras, what think'st thou?
> Thou an Egyptian puppet shall be shown
> In Rome as well as I. Mechanic slaves

> With greasy aprons, rules, and hammers shall
> Uplift us to the view. In their thick breaths,
> Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclouded
> And forced to drink their vapor.
> (5.2.253-259)

Cleopatra describes Iras' possible fate as though it is beneath Iras, using terms like "rank" and "gross" to depict something she seems to believe Iras is too good for. Cleopatra is not just worried about herself but has already imagined what would occur to her ladies if they do not take fate into their own hands. Iras, in a show of trust, responds to Cleopatra's depiction by saying simply, "The gods forbid!" (5.2.260). Iras appears to have complete trust in the queen, and when Cleopatra states "Bring our crown and all," Iras performs one last act of service and brings Cleopatra her clothes and dresses her for death (5.2.283). Cleopatra's use of the word "our" shows how she considers her place of death to be shared with her ladies, and how she considers her power a symbol for all of them. Cleopatra does not wear the crown for herself alone, and this could be why, when imaging what her capture would look like in Rome, she imagines what it would be like for Iras as well.

Cleopatra's relationship with her ladies shows how she is trusted and has gained loyalty outside of her romantic relationship with Antony and provides a view of a queenly relationship that is not shown from Cordelia in *King Lear* – a relationship with subjects. Their relationship shows that, despite the hostile way her rule is viewed by some characters throughout the play, her own people are shown to be loyal to her. More importantly, Cleopatra is shown giving them respect back, and seeing her crown as an extension of the respect she believes her people deserve. She does not let Iras die, after all, without granting

her a token of physical affection. Cleopatra offers Iras a piece of her physically, like a gift, stating: “Come then, and take the last warmth of my lips” (5.2.345). The ladies are not shown being able to give Cleopatra advice or being noted to be as close as Emilia and Desdemona are, but there is still loyalty between them. It is the difference between being a lady and a queen that distances the relationship more, not the idea that Cleopatra is a femme fatale who is uncaring of others. She, in her dying moments, is shown giving respect to the women who were with her throughout the play, and in their dying moments, grants them a piece of herself.

Cleopatra’s dying moments shows how she views herself and her people as above the Romans, showcasing Egyptian pride that exists above the status difference between Cleopatra and her ladies. Still, there is a clear difference between Cleopatra and her ladies throughout the play. Even though the ladies are often depicted entering the scene with Cleopatra, they speak substantially less throughout the play. Meanwhile, Cleopatra can enter rooms giving commands such as, “Give me some music – music, moody food / Of us that trade in love” (2.5.1-2). And her command is met with, “The music, ho!” which the play shows is said by “All” (2.5.3). While it’s true that the ladies are shown to be loyal to Cleopatra, there is a clear difference in their statuses and the effect it has on their characters within the play. Desdemona and Juliet are seen to have different relationships with women of lower class in their plays, with Desdemona finding a close confidant in Emilia and Juliet listening to the Nurse’s advice. Cleopatra, instead, holds her ladies close physically, but does not have the same lax companionship the lower-status ladies – Juliet and Desdemona – do. The closest Cleopatra gets to her ladies is within their death scene, where she groups

them together with her, as they are all Egyptians. Cleopatra and her lady's death become a resistance, and Cleopatra dies with her people.

The Female and Male Leads

It seems imperative – when defining Shakespeare's primary marker of difference as status rather than gender – to view the female and male leads in relation to one another. Shakespeare's female characters have often been discussed as influences for the male leads in plays, or, as representations of a certain archetype of female. An example of this can be seen in Roy Shafer's evaluation of Cordelia's "no cause" response to Lear, and her almost immediate forgiveness: "her responses could be constructed as that of a symbolic 'good girl' bypassing the issues of guilt, punishment, and forgiveness by automatically absolving the offender of responsibility" (Shafer 394). Granting Cordelia the archetype of "good girl" or as a symbol at all seems to negate the dimensions of Cordelia's response and her evident sense of honor and honesty. Rather then view these female leads as representations, this chapter will directly compare the female and male leads to evaluate the differing or similar statuses, and what differences are left between them that might exist outside of status.

Desdemona – as it has been established in the previous chapters – is an elite Venetian lady who traded her duty for her father for a duty to her husband. She sought Othello out and fell in love with him through his stories and his acts of bravery. Othello is a well-respected general who, despite stating that he cannot speak well, is shown to be smart and well-spoken. The way that Desdemona and Othello are viewed in comparison to one another is most clearly seen in the first act when Brabantio demands a meeting with the Duke and council in response to Desdemona and Othello's marriage. It is clear, within the meeting, that Othello is respected by the Duke and council for his brave deeds in war, as

after Othello explains how Desdemona fell in love with him, the Duke responds: “I think this tale would win my daughter, too” (1.3.197). Still, Brabantio insists that Othello coerced Desdemona. Two layers of misconception exist here from Brabantio. The first, that Desdemona is capable of being tricked where as the play clearly depicts her as an initiator of the relationship. The second, that Othello would coerce her, despite the play showing him to be a respected and honorable general. Both assumptions are quickly shown to be incorrect, the first through Desdemona and Othello’s explanation of the start of their romance, and the second through the Duke’s and Desdemona’s impressions of Othello. It can be assumed, once again, that Brabantio’s assumptions should be viewed as false. The next evaluation should be, then, what Brabantio’s assumption of Othello stems from if Othello is a well respected general. It is clear that the answer is Brabantio’s racism, which is the weapon that Iago – the play’s villain – wields throughout the play to create dissonance between Othello and Desdemona. Desdemona, in an act of bravery, aligns herself to Othello from the beginning of the play. She – a high-status Venetian lady – and Othello – a respected general – could be viewed as being similar in status, but Iago poisons Othello throughout the play to push onto him the concept that he is less than, or even beastly. Shakespeare does not seem to promote this as the truth of Othello, just as he shows clearly that Brabantio’s assumptions about Desdemona are incorrect. Another example of the misconception of Othello is shown through the style of speech in the third scene of Act one, where the Duke requests Othello to go onto his next assignment:

> **Duke**
>
> You must therefore be content to slubber the gloss of your new fortunes with this more stubborn and boist’rous expedition.

Othello

The tyrant custom, most grave senators,

Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war

My thrice-driven bed of down. I do

A natural and prompt alacrity

I find in hardness, and do undertake

This present wars against the Ottomites.

(1.3.259-268)

Despite the entirety of the third scene of act one being in spoken in poetry, the Duke is clearly shown to break this pattern here by speaking in prose. In response, Othello responds back in poetic form. The direct contrast of speech pattern between the Duke and Othello shows how the assumption that Othello is crude or beastly is an incorrect one. Desdemona and Othello are both shown to be misunderstood at the beginning of the play, and Iago carries these misconceptions like weapons throughout the plays' events, leading to the eventual tragic ending.

In the way that Iago's beliefs about Othello are meant to be viewed as a weapon wielded by the villain, so are Iago's beliefs about Desdemona. In the beginning of Act two, Iago mocks his wife and women, starting by stating, "You are pictures out of door, bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players in your huswifery, and huswifes in your beds" (2.1.122-125). Desdemona questions Iago on what a deserving woman would be, and when she finds that he has nothing kind to say, she tells Emilia, "Do not learn of him Emilia, though he be thy husband" (2.1.177-178). Desdemona, who is shown to be loyal to her husband and to her friend, tells her

friend not to listen to Iago's words, even if he is Emilia's husband. This shows that Desdemona's loyalty does have a limit and is not just a product of her gender. Sneha Chakraborty discusses in the article "The Moor of Venice: Critically Analyzing Othello Based on Race, Colour, Gender as the Social Constructor, and the Facilitator to Kill Desdemona" the affect that gender roles have on the tragic ending of the play: "We need to understand the futile lives of the women as a replaceable entity and the beholder of honor. The fate of a woman was decided without even giving her a chance to explain her position … A husband could neither trust his wife nor keep his characteristic weakness and cultural difference in check" (Chakraborty 76). There seems to be a double misconception that Iago forces upon Othello to lead to the plays end: one of misogyny and one of racism. To say that Othello innately believes that Desdemona is a whore capable of cheating would be to discredit his initial detailing of her character at the beginning of the play, where he showed how she gave him empathy and respect for his stories. Just as Othello is tricked into considering himself a beast, he is tricked into viewing his wife as a whore, but neither of these views are meant to be considered as the correct one by the viewer. Chakraborty continues to discuss gender roles in Othello and their contribution to the plays tragic ending by stating, "One can argue that Othello was written at a time when the identity of the women remained an extension of their spouses and by the moralistic yardsticks, they surrounded themselves with" (Chakraborty 76). To refer back to the Willow scene – which is discussed in detail in the second chapter of this thesis – Desdemona is shown seeking out the advice of Emilia, who is not a moralistic yardstick when it comes to fidelity in marriage. Even though Desdemona and Emilia are close friends, Desdemona's sense of honor and honesty seems to match Othello's, not as an extension of his own, but as a trait

she initially admired in him from the beginning of the play – possibly because she recognized it in herself. In Desdemona's introductory scene, she is shown to share the bravery that Othello is credited with by the Duke and the council. It does not seem that she is ever credited as being an extension of Othello, but rather, as an ideal partner for him – just as he seems to be the ideal partner for her. It does not seem as though it was the innate response to gender roles that led to Othello not trusting Desdemona, as, in the confrontation within act four, Othello is shown asking Desdemona multiple times if she is not a whore:

Othello

Are not you a strumpet?

Desdemona

No, as I am a Christian

If to preserve this vessel for my lord

From any other foul unlawful touch

Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

Othello

What, not a whore?

Othello

Is 't possible?

Desdemona

O'heaven forgive us!

(4.2.93-102)

Desdemona is shown to still hold her sense of duty for Othello, herself, and her Lord. It is clear that Othello is who has been misled, shown in his continued questioning through

Desdemona's insistence that he is wrong. In response to Othello's doubt, Desdemona cries for heaven to forgive them both, showing how her heart and allegiance remains the same, and that despite Othello's misconception of her, she still desires him – and their marriage – to be saved. It could be said that Othello is being aggressive with his questioning here, or it could be read as his self-doubt. Desdemona pleads with him, and Othello hears her pleas. This reading is supported through the first act's interaction with the council, where – when Desdemona's father says Desdemona was bewitched – Othello gives a testament that Desdemona's will was her own. Othello shows early in the play an understanding of Desdemona's individuality and her strength of will, meaning that his assumption of her infidelity would not have been born from his conception of her gender.

Desdemona and Othello's relationship is established as one of mutual respect and endearment. Desdemona's alignment of her duty as a wife seems to be a match for Othello's sense of honor, showing that both characters have a strong sense of virtue and bravery. They are alike in their virtuous traits, and while Desdemona is seen to carry her virtue to the end of the play, it is Othello's sense of honor that has been twisted. Othello and Desdemona seem to be an evenly matched couple due to personality traits – such as honor and bravery – and within their respective statuses. What leads to the tragic ending, and Othello inevitably killing Desdemona, seems to be a result of the racial prejudice thrown against Othello throughout the play that inevitably twists his mind and his rage. He is told that he is a beast, and by the end, acts against his wife in a beast-like way. Iago works throughout the play to misconstrue the truth of Othello's status, turning it from a that of a respected general, to something corrupted by racism.

While Desdemona and Othello's status difference is marked by the racism Othello faces, Juliet and Romeo are both high-status individuals who are shown to be young and quick to declare their love for one another. Romeo begins the play in love – or at least, believing himself in love – with another girl named Rosaline. To borrow from Irene D. Dash, it does appear that "Shakespeare's intention … was to show Romeo's immaturity at the opening of the play so to reveal his growth as well as Juliet's as the drama progresses" (Dash 78). What is yet to be seen is whether Romeo's growth and maturity is true or if it's what Romeo perceives in himself. When Romeo and Juliet meet, Romeo immediately is taken with Juliet:

Romeo

If I profane with my unworthiest hand

This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Juliet

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,

Which mannerly devotion shows in this;

For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do tough,

And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

(1.5.104-111)

Romeo, in their meeting scene, initiates the poetic wooing, which Juliet later indulges in on the balcony. Here, Juliet utilizes her wit and obvious intellect to say that, by simply touching palms to each other, Romeo would initiate intimacy that is like a kiss. This

exchange, like all future exchanges between Romeo and Juliet, makes their comparable wit clear. Juliet is able to quickly counter Romeo and turn his words to mean something new. Juliet, like Romeo, is shown to be young at the start of the play but is not portrayed with a love interest that she quickly forgets upon meeting Romeo. This difference, along with her initial show – and continued show – of intellect might be presented to validate Juliet's feelings for Romeo. Dash writes, regarding Juliet's age, that: "Shakespeare's insistence that Juliet be fourteen, rather than sixteen or eighteen, indicates his wish to catch that wonderful, struggling age before docility begins" (Dash 86). Juliet, like Romeo, is surrounded by characters of differing statuses that show how various levels of status allows for a greater ability in sexual and romantic freedom. Dash sees a learned docility as something women gain, but it seems the play shows Romeo at a stage of immaturity that prefaces learning what is expected of him as well. He seeks out Juliet, and curses when he finds out she is a Capulet, implying that he would also not be encouraged to seek out this union: "Is she a Capulet? / O dear account! My life is my foe's debt" (1.5.131-132). They both face consequences for pursuing one another, as Juliet is told by her parents that she must wed Paris or she will be thrown from her home, and Romeo is banished for murdering Juliet's cousin. While their sins are different, they both face consequences due to pursuing each other, and face lessons on what is expected of them in their shared statuses. Rather then directly face these consequences, however, Romeo and Juliet continue to strive for one another, creating a plot that eventually leads to their deaths.

Within their final plan, Romeo and Juliet seem to be granted a new status – together – as high-status individuals and as adults. Before their deaths, they were shown as being young, with Romeo's immaturity being clear through his immediate love of Rosaline and Juliet's

immaturity being declared by both her mother and her Nurse. It seems that the moment Romeo decides to die, he reaches a new status as a man. In his confrontation with Paris, before Juliet's grave, Romeo states:

> Good gentle youth, tempt not a desp'rate man.
>
> Fly hence and leave me. Think upon these gone.
>
> Let them affright thee. I beseech thee, youth,
>
> Put not another sin upon my head
>
> By urging me to fury. O begone!
>
> (5.3.59-63).

Romeo declares himself a man and refers to Paris multiple times as a youth. Romeo, although he is not officially dead yet, has decided that he is a dead man walking. He is ready to fight to reach his grave with Juliet. After Romeo is dead, and Juliet along with him, their fathers stand before their grave and declare:

> **Montague**
>
> But I can give thee more,
>
> For I will ray her statue in pure gold,
>
> That whiles Verona by that name is known,
>
> There shall no figure at such rate be set
>
> As that of true and faithful Juliet.
>
> **Capulet**
>
> As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,
>
> Poor sacrifices of our enmity.
>
> (5.3.309-315)

It seems, that within their deaths, they have both reached a new status together. Alive, they were immature high-status children. Dead, they are high-status adults. Juliet, who was once condemned for refusing to marry Paris, is now remarked as being true and faithful. She is also noted as being Romeo's "lady," showing how their marriage is only acknowledged upon their deaths. Romeo and Juliet's fates, immaturity, and growth seems to be an evolving, yet shared, trait from the plays beginning to end.

Rather than focus on Cordelia's relationship with her husband, this chapter will focus on her relationship with Lear. This relationship, and its initial interaction in the play, was examined first in the Fathers and Daughters chapter, but in this section I seek to understand what the play is saying is the difference between Lear and Cordelia as individual monarchs. When Cordelia is banished by Lear, she is a princess under her father's command, both as his daughter and as his subject. When she makes the choice to return, she returns a queen, and Lear's equal. Lear broke their initial tie as father and daughter, granting Cordelia independence as a monarch and as an individual without a family patriarchal tie. Cordelia, within the fourth act of the play, returns to Lear's country to find and assist her father:

> O dear father,
>
> It is thy business that I go about.
>
> Therefore great France
>
> My mourning and importuned tears hath pitied.
>
> No blown ambition doth our arms incite,
>
> But love, dear love, and our aged father's right.
>
> Soon may I hear and see him.

(4.5.26-32)

Cordelia returns Lear's equal in status, but not in monarch's state of mind. Here, Cordelia shows initial empathy for her father and his growing insanity. This is the first time that the Cordelia is directly shown since her initial refusal to declare her love for Lear, so the contrast between her refusal and her clear love for her father is all the more vivid. In the article "Lear's Warrior Daughter: A Feminist Reading of Cordelia," Carena Sulzer writes,

> The only characters in *King Lear* that show an impressive degree of love and loyal attachment are Cordelia, Kent and, perhaps to a lesser degree, Edgar … When actually reading the text, we find that *King Lear* is not so much about parental love as about the love that children (eventually) bear their fathers despite continuous exposure to bad parenting or the love a liegeman like Kent bears his sovereign. (Sulzer 117)

In the case of Cordelia, the love that she bears for her father is not found later in the play but is present from the first scene. It is her dedication to duty and honor that leads to her initial response to Lear at the beginning of the play, and her return later in the play is made up of that same sense of honor as well as her love. Cordelia stated at the beginning of the play that she could not love her father completely once she was married because she would owe her husband some of her love, but now that she's married, she shows that her husband does not have all her love either. She continues to exhibit the sense of love-bound duty she had from the beginning of the play, making her a constant figure of honor compared to the other monarchs rotating loyalties and sanity – specifically that of her sisters and Lear. Cordelia, now a monarch like her father was at the beginning of the play, has the traits that Lear himself is portrayed – and seems to be criticized within the play – as lacking. She

holds her honor at the beginning of the play, refusing to speak falsehoods to her father, and by Act four, she returns to her father in a display of loyalty. Cordelia's sisters – Goneril and Regan – are also queens that, through the course of the play, have the same power that Lear was presented with at the beginning. Sulzer seems to be correct that Cordelia is one of the only characters within the play – certainly the only character between her sisters and father – that shows love and loyalty. It seems that Cordelia in her queendom still holds the virtues she showed in the beginning, proving that those traits were not expressions of her gender – or even presentations of it – but of her character.

Cordelia's reunion with Lear is set during a war with her sisters, where Cordelia's army is soon to be in battle. In this scene, Cordelia requests Lear walk with her. Sulzer describes Cordelia's decision to take this walk with her father as follows: "At the end of Act IV … Cordelia … goes for a little walk with her Dad to restore his health. Thus neglecting the pressing business of warfare, her act of love and charity renders her an easy prey for her enemies. She is captured and shamefully hanged" (Sulzer 124). Cordelia's walk with her father is undoubtably requested out of love and an empathy that she shows for Lear, but how Cordelia's army lost is not shown directly in the play. Rather, it is mentioned in Act V, before – within the third scene of the Act – Cordelia and Lear are shown already captured:

Cordelia

We are not the first

Who with the best meaning have incurred the worst.

For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down.

Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown.

Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

Lear

No, no, no , no. Come, let's away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds I' the' cage.

(5.3.4-10)

Even after the capture, Cordelia states that – if she were by herself – she could "outfrown" fortune, or that she would fight against her capture if she were not worried for her father. The reference to fortune implies that the loss was suffered from fate, so it would have occurred without direct fault that Cordelia takes credit for. She shows that she has been cast down for her father: that she is a woman of action and not words alone, as she seems in the first act. Lear, in response to Cordelia asking if they should see her sisters, responds that they should go to prison and rejoice in their reunion. Here, it shows that it is Lear that prioritizes his relationship with his daughter rather than a victory. While Cordelia is who requests to walk with her father during a time of war, it does not directly show that this was prioritized over the battle, or that it led to the eventual loss. Cordelia shows loyalty to her father by using her army as a method of attempting to remove oppression from Lear, proving her honorable, but her loss does not appear to be her fault. Rather, it is Lear's initial act in the play – the removing of Cordelia and trusting of his false daughters – that leads to the play's tragic ending. Cordelia's honor is something that no other monarch in the play is presented with, showing that her strength of character is not tied to gender, but rather a part of her character that makes her a virtuous queen.

Cleopatra is the next example of a queen presented in Shakespeare's plays, and in this section, I will write about her relationship with Antony. Antony is a ruler of Rome, but

his duties – for the first half of the play – are shared with Octavius Ceasar. Cleopatra is the sole ruler of Egypt, and while Antony faces a divided duty between Cleopatra and Rome, Cleopatra aligns her duty to Egypt throughout the play. To borrow from Bhim S. Dahiya in the introduction of the book *Women in Shakespeare: A Post-Feminist Review*, there seems to be a presence of "Cleopatra's resolve [and] Anthony's lack of resolution" (Dahiya x). Antony's divided nature – or his lack of resolution – eventually leads to him requesting for Octavius to allow him to live in Egypt or Athens:

Ambassador

Lord of his fortunes he salutes thee, and

Requires to live in Egypt, which not granted,

He lessens his requests, and to thee sues

To let him breathe between the heavens and earth,

A private man in Athens. This for him.

Next, Cleopatra does confess thy greatness,

Submits her to thy might, and of thee craves

The circle of the Ptolemies for her heirs,

Now hazarded to thy grace.

By this third Act of the play, Cleopatra is also sending a request to Ceasar. Her request, however, is more aligned with her country and less about her as an individual. She says that she will submit to Caesar so long as her descendants can maintain the rule of Egypt. Caesar's response to Antony and Cleopatra's request seems to favor Cleopatra:

Caesar

For Antony,

I have no ears to his request. The Queen
Of audience nor desire shall fail, so she
From Egypt drive her all-disgraced friend,
Or take his life there. This if she perform,
She shall not sue unheard. So to them both.
(3.12.14-28)

Caesar gives an automatic dismissal of Antony's request, instead going almost directly into responding to Cleopatra's. He gives her an ultimatum – to kill Antony in Egypt or drive him from her land. Although Caesar has the upper hand with Cleopatra in this interaction with her messenger, his address to her rather than to Antony implies that Cleopatra has more power than her lover. Caesar tells Cleopatra that she can kill or banish Antony because he understands that she has the power to do so. After sending away Cleopatra's messenger, he commands Thidias to win Cleopatra over from Antony:

Caesar
From Antony win Cleopatra. Promise,
And in our name, what she requires; add more,
From thine invention offers. Women are not
In their best fortunes strong, but want will perjure
The ne'er-touched vestal. Try thy cunning, Thidias.
Make thine own edict for thy pains, which we
Will answer as a law.
(3.12.33-39)

Caesar sends Thidias to deliver a second message to Cleopatra. If she is to betray Antony, then she will have more than what she requested. Caesar also gives a biased opinion to Thidias, that women are likely to break their vows, and even desperate virgins will do so if they are in dire circumstances. The implication here is that Cleopatra is far from a virgin, and she is desperate. Despite holding this opinion, however, Caesar is shown appealing to Cleopatra through two separate means to dispel of Antony. Once through the original messenger, and secondly through dispatching Thidias. This implies that Caesar has acknowledged that Cleopatra is capable of betraying Antony, and that he does not truly think she would immediately betray Antony upon the first messenger's offering. Caesar, by sending Thidias, shows that he thinks Cleopatra would need further convincing, almost countering the idea that he thinks she – and women in general – are capable of easily breaking their vows. The interaction with the messengers and Caesar shows that Cleopatra, as a queen, holds more power than Antony on a political level, and that despite Caesar holding biased views against women, that power over Antony remains. Caesar still is dismissive of Antony's request and responds directly to Cleopatra and sends a second messenger to attempt to guarantee her compliance. Despite Caesar stereotyping Cleopatra's gender, he still grants her a better deal than Antony, showing that his regard is tied tighter to her status than to her gender.

Antony's death scene at the end of the fourth act highlights the way that their respective statuses affect their relationship. Antony gives the first occurrence of his repeated dying words when he states: "I am dying, Egypt, dying. Only / I here importune death awhile until / Of many thousand kisses the poor last / I lay upon thy lips" (4.15.22-

25). Here, Antony says that he would intercede with death so they may kiss before death takes him. A similar sentiment is expressed by Cleopatra further in the scene:

Antony

I am dying, Egypt, dying.

Gives me some wine, and let me speak a little.

Cleopatra

No, let me speak, and let me rail so high

That the false huswife Fortune break her wheel,

Provoked by my offense.

Antony

One word, sweet queen:

Of Caesar seek your honor with your safety – O!

Cleopatra

They do not go together.

(4.15.48-55)

Cleopatra states that she would defy fortune, like how Antony would defy death. Antony was a ruler in his own land, but his shared power means that he is not the only person that completely represents his country – like Cleopatra represents hers. In his repeated death lines, it's clear that Antony recognizes that, referring to Cleopatra as "Egypt." Still, both Cleopatra and Antony have experienced political power in the world, and when they have failed politicly, they look to exercise power in relation to the divine. They are able to relate to one another on their desires to exercise control over the supernatural and natural world, but Cleopatra has one extra layer of this exertion than Antony shows – she refuses to set

aside her honor. Antony, in the previously discussed scene of Act three, barters with Caesar to grant him stay in Egypt or Athens. Cleopatra, when requested by Antony to request her honor and safety from Caesar, states that the two do not come together. In other words, she cannot keep her honor if she requests her safety. Cleopatra does not make the same request as Antony and barter for pardon with Caesar; rather, she chooses death over being paraded in the streets of Rome. It seems that Cleopatra's desire to maintain her honor stems from her being Egypt's sole political figure of power. If she is disrespected, so is Egypt. Still, despite their different levels of held monarchal power, Cleopatra acknowledges Antony's rule of men after his death:

Cleopatra

O see, my women,

The crown o' th' earth doth melt. – My lord!

O withered is the garland of the war;

The soldier's pole is fall'n; young boys and girls

Are level now with men. The odds is gone,

And there is nothing left remarkable

Beneath the visiting moon.

Charmian

O, quietness, lady!

Iras

She's dead, too, our sovereign.

(4.15.72-80)

Cleopatra states that – upon Antony's death – all that he led are now no better than boys and girls. She expresses that Antony was a great leader, referring to him as "the crown o' th' earth." Her final line, before, fainting, is that there is no one who can move these men left alive. It should be noted that after Cleopatra declares that no remarkable leader is left, she faints. The faint is not her final death scene, but Iras's line declaring that Cleopatra is dead too seems to reflect Cleopatra's own words. While Cleopatra faints from grief, and Iras could mean that Cleopatra is dead inside now that her lover is gone, the reflection of Iras's words in response to Cleopatra's gives the implication that now that Antony and Cleopatra are dead, there are no great rulers. Even in this speech that Cleopatra gives for Antony after his death, there seems to be a reminder of Cleopatra's status as a queen and her effect on her people as well. Despite the criticism that Cleopatra receives throughout the play for her sexuality and her gender, her death scene still focuses heavily on her status and the way that it affects her view on power and her country. This is seen more clearly when directly compared to Antony, who – while male – receives a lower deal from Caesar and dies with only Cleopatra acknowledging his death as that of a monarch. Cleopatra's death, however, is shown with Antony referring to her as a queen, along with her ladies regarding her as a monarch and dying with her as well. I will reference a point I made at the introduction of this thesis – that the deaths of the chosen female characters are not due to their gender and do not allow them to disappear into the male main character. Cleopatra's death is given its presence on stage in comparison to Antony's, and it is her death that is presented in the aftermath of their love story.

Conclusion

This thesis has worked against attributing personality flaws or limitations to gender, and showing how the limitations experienced by the chosen characters are more closely tied to their specific social statuses. In this thesis, these social statuses include those of two queens and two high-status women: specifically, Cleopatra and Cordelia versus Juliet and Desdemona. In order to present these characters in their individuality, and to examine the plays' focus on status over gender, I've detailed the chosen characters' relationship with their fathers, their male leads, and other female characters. I will borrow from Phyllis Rackin to summarize the intention of this thesis:

> Our own experience of Shakespeare's women is conditioned not only by the accumulated tradition of Shakespeare scholarship and reception but also by the present history of the world in which we live: both of these histories help to shape our experience of the plays, whether we study them in an academic setting, see them on stage or screen, or read them in the privacy of our own rooms. Both of these histories will need feminist intervention in the twenty-first century.
>
> (Rackin 5-6)

To grant Shakespeare's female characters the proper examination, we must first consider the significance of their status rather than their gender. This is clearly seen in the control Cleopatra and Cordelia hold over their respective love lives when compared to Desdemona and Juliet, and how, despite their status difference, Desdemona and Juliet still fight for the

love that they desire. Their personalities remain their own, even if their romantic interests are met with more turmoil. This shows that their gender does not determine their personalities, and that they remain strong in their individual characteristics despite the boundaries that their statuses dictate. To read Cleopatra solely as a presentation of a femme fatal, or Cordelia as a representation of Lear's madness is to simplify their characters and to avoid considering them as queens, which Shakespeare clearly does. Cordelia stands up to Lear within the first act of the play, and Cleopatra dies with her subjects following her, while Antony dies surrounded by Cleopatra and her people – all Egyptians. To read Desdemona as the presentation of innocence and Juliet as solely a willful youth would dismiss the sacrifice and bravery it took for these women to marry their chosen romantic interests. Desdemona seeks out both Othello and Emilia with a curious mind that exists outside of the strict definition of innocence, and Juliet marries Romeo in secret under the threat of opposing families and a disapproving father. Shakespeare's women exist as people, constantly showing their ability to rebel and question their surroundings. It is their statuses that marks their limitations and boundaries, presented clearly in how, even when they appear to confirm to stereotypes of their gender, their statuses must be respected or addressed first.

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