Alex Pepe

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Professor Fitter

Shakespeare II Term Paper

In the time of Shakespeare, the traditional role of women was that of squalid sub-human. Women did not have any sort of rights whatsoever, and indeed were more seen as the property of men rather than living, breathing human beings. The only real way for women to make any sort of living for themselves was to either get married off to a rich man, or sell their bodies to prostitution, a practice that Shakespeare would have seen on a daily basis at the Globe Theater, with the prostitutes situated at the back of the pit where the groundlings stood (Fitter 38). Shakespeare, being one to go against the grain on more occasion than one, wrote very strong feminine characters into his plays, ones that stick in the mind and stay there as paragons of both feminine wiles and grace. His characters break the mold of the expected for their very strong opinions and presences onstage, and are often put there to garner a reaction from the groundlings for these features of his feminine characters. As well, his female characters tend to be those in high positions of power, or if not are highly respected in their own right by the men of the play. While there are misogynistic male characters within Shakespeare's plays, their opinions are indeed their own, and not those of Shakespeare himself. The mere presence of strong and commanding women within the pages of his play scripts speaks stronger than any misogynistic rant that any of his misogynistic characters could put forth. Shakespeare's presentation of women across multiple plays and multiple characters within them is that of highly intelligent and witty people with strong morals and values, an idea completely perpendicular to that of the mainstream idea of women during his own time period.

Macbeth is a play that is full of strong and highly important female characters right down to the minor characters. If any female was removed from any part of this play, the play itself would collapse without their presence. The action of the play is set rolling from the very first scene, where the audience sees the Three Witches planning to meet again "when the battle's lost and won" (1,1,4). The titular character's name is mentioned while they are doing so, and indeed it

is the Three Witches that deliver to Macbeth “upon the heath” (1,1,7) the prophecy that he will become first “the Thane of Cawdor[…]that shalt be king hereafter!” (1,3,53). Without this feminine presence, Macbeth would not have had the initial wherewithal to set out on his self-destructive path to kingship. In essence, these three give birth to tragedy, and as such can hardly be ignored. These three are so important, that they are mentioned multiple times in the play once the prophecy has been told, and indeed they make a reappearance to tell the newly crowned Macbeth of the signs that his reign will come to an end. This new prophecy displays the wiles of the Three Witches in full prominence, for the language they use is that of a very circuitous nature. They speak of things that must be supernatural, such as “The Great Birnam Wood[…]shall come against him” (4,1,105) when his reign as king is near its end, and as Macbeth later fatefully learns these supernatural foresights are all too true, all too late. As the Three Witches sow chaos, so do they sow the downfall of that chaos to a tragic and traditionally Shakespearean ending: blood everywhere and multiple deaths. These characters are the crux of the play as it were, and are so important that Roman Polanski, in his 1971 film version of this play, takes liberties with them in the very final scene of the film. He shows Donalbain, the brother of King Duncan's son Malcolm, limping towards the Witches lair to glean for himself a prophecy of kingship, completing the never-ending cycle of violence present in the play and giving life to Macbeth's words that violence “will return to plague the inventor” (1,7,10) as Malcom claims the throne through violence as Macbeth did before him, the Witches would surely give Donalbain a prophecy along similar lines, allowing them to sow further chaos.

Lady Macduff is by all merits a minor character in comparison to other women within this play, however the scenes that she appears in in this play are rather riveting when one seeks to dissect them. In act four, scene two, Ross is talking to Lady Macduff about her husband's disappearance. Ross is by all means a manipulative character, but when Lady Macduff condemns

her husband's departure and paints him as a man with no “Wisdom? To leave his wife, leave his babes, his mansion and his titles” (4,2,8), even Ross must recoil at her opinionated display of justified maternal rage. Justified, for in the very same scene Macbeth's murderers appear to murder Macduff's wife and children, proving Lady Macduff all-too correct (4,2,88). Before that happens however, she is talking to her son about Macduff's disappearance, and her son says a few very enlightening things that reveals a facet of Lady Macduff that is rather hard to ignore. She tells her son that Macduff is dead, but he points out that “If he were dead, you’d weep for him,” (4,2,67) thus he must not be dead and she knows it somehow. However, because she decries Macduff when she is talking to Ross, this may be more indignation towards his disappearance rather than a lack of mourning for him. Lady Macduff is opinionated enough and intelligent enough to be able to hold her own as an individual thinker in a time where women were not considered intelligent, and their opinions were not worth much to men, thus the significance of this seemingly minor character and her seemingly minor scenes that are easy to miss in passing. Her death of course brings forth Macduff’s rage, which proves to be instrumental in the downfall of Macbeth in the end, further exemplifying the importance of her appearance in the play.

Lady Macbeth is much lauded and infamous as a highly intelligent and manipulative character in this play. She can both read and write (1,5,1), a fact which is rather unheard of for women in Shakespeare’s time. She is made out to be smarter than the king, for he says that “there’s no art to find the mind’s construction in the face” (1,4,13), but in another line she is described as telling Macbeth “your face is a book” (1,6,73), ergo she can read thoughts on faces and the king cannot. Most importantly, she is very doggedly and unashamedly brazen in her ability to shape her husband into doing what she wishes him to do. Without her prodding, Macbeth would never have acted upon the Three Witches prophecy (1,7,35). He only commits

when she assaults his manhood, saying “when you durst do it, then you were a man” (1,7,56), wrapping him around her finger quite easily. And finally it is her competence that accomplishes the completion of the murder plot when Macbeth is unable to continue, mocking him once more for being “infirm of purpose” (2,2,72). She is considered by Macbeth to be his equal, and this is coming from a deranged killer that Macbeth just simply is. Shakespeare himself must agree, for he has both Macbeth as well as Lady Macbeth acquire the same mental degradation and compunctions from killing the king; they both acquire Post Traumatic Stress Disorder the very evening that the king is killed, and as the play continues both of these highly intelligent characters are rendered to mere beasts by the machinations of the demons within their own minds. This odd sense of equality in both Macbeth and his wife in their twin descent into lunacy is a very perverse way of proclaiming their equality as intellectuals, for both characters are intelligent enough to feel remorse for their conjoined act against god, and both characters are eaten alive by the guilt. This in and of itself is a rather important point to make, for with it Shakespeare is displaying women as being susceptible to precisely the same mental traumas as men, bringing their equality into the realm of the psychological.

As a play, *Othello*’s main focus surrounds women and men’s view of them, and through this misogynist lens Shakespeare displays his most interesting women yet. Desdemona is a main character of the play, married to the titular character in secrecy to the outrage of her father, whose “belief of it oppresses [him] already!” (1,1,159). This alone sets her aside from the expectation of women in Shakespeare’s time, for usually women were betrothed by their fathers to someone of high ranking and wealth in order for the entire family to move up in social ranking. Desdemona however marries out of love, and has the audacity to do so without her father’s permission. When Othello is accused of bewitching her through magic to make her his bride, it does not take much more than her word to set things right, looking upon Othello and

proclaiming “here’s my husband” (1,3,213), and she and Othello remain together by her own will. Not only is she a character strong in word, she is a character that is strong in constitution as well. When Othello tells her to put their marital sheets upon the bed in act four scene three, she is convinced that she will die if she complies, but she does so anyway. With the aid of her servant Emilia, she begins to undress in preparation (4,3,37), and this means that she is undressing in front of a room full of a thousand people or more onstage. Shakespeare would be aware of this however, and in writing this into the play he does not mean to turn her into a sexual being, rather choosing to radically humanize her. The song she sings as she undresses is one of deep sorrow at her coming death by her lover’s hands (4,3,42), and it forces the men in the audience to look past her body and see her as not only a naked woman, but a human being. In doing so, Shakespeare forces the audience to subvert their first impulse to categorize her as a sex object by suppressing their sexual desire. Not only this, but Shakespeare writes her to be loyal to her lover even in death, for she seems to come alive again to shout that it was not her husband that had killed her, but “a guiltless death” she dies (5,2,150) so that Othello does not get thrown in jail for killing her. This needless devotion in the face of her lover-turned-killer puts on full display the love she had for Othello, and how she believed in him even while he was smothering her with his pillow.

Emilia is a character with duality, as she is presented at first for the audience’s vitriol. She discusses with Desdemona the fickleness of men and how often they cheat on their women, rationalizing that if they are allowed to do so and society sees it as acceptable, then women should be just as free to do this in equal favor, for “the ills we do, their ills instruct us so” (4,3,115). This would have branded her as a “shrew” back in Shakespeare’s time, for her brash form of equality would have made the men in the audience bristle. Indeed it was true that men were not always faithful to their wives back in those days, and the thought that their wives may or may not be faithful to them either would be a thought that would terrify and anger them. Thus,

when Emilia suggests as such, the theater would be awash in booing and catcalling by offended men. However, later in the play, Shakespeare turns this vitriol towards the character into admiration in a stroke of genius; by establishing Emilia as an outspoken shrew, he gives her enough power to denounce her own husband when it is revealed that Iago was directly behind Othello's madness that took the life of Desdemona. She cannot accept it at first, but when push comes to shove, she and denounces him with fire, proclaiming "may his pernicious soul rot half a grain a day" (5,2,190). She denounces him to his face, revealing her part of Iago's plot to Othello. Her act of solidarity in the direct face of her subversive husband would propel her to the status of a heroine in the eyes of the audience, where once there was only vitriol and narrow glances. This displays the stroke of genius that Shakespeare had when designing these female characters, for Emilia's outspokenness earns her both onerous cries and amorous approval in equal parts from the audience.

Bianca, as described by the play's character list, is "a woman from Cyprus in love with Cassio" (p 3). In keeping with the theme of men in this play belittling women and calling them easy whores, Cassio boasts to Iago about how much of a slut Bianca is, and how much sex they have, as well as how he would never marry her (4,1,146). One who is not paying attention would take Cassio's words at face value and assume that Bianca is in fact a slut with no redeeming merits, but in doing so one misses Shakespeare's grand design by a very wide margin. Playing into the misogyny of the men in the play is in fact the very opposite thing that an active reader should do. In the scenes where Bianca appears she comes as a neglected lover to Cassio, and she comes as a very accusing and slighted woman, complaining to him of "lovers' absent hours" (3,4,197). One could draw a parallel between her and Emilia in the fact that she seems to be very shrewd. Despite the fact that Cassio has not visited her in some time, she nonetheless agrees to take the handkerchief he has found and copy the pattern. This proves her to be not only loyal

despite her lover's prolonged absence, but trusting despite the origins of the handkerchief being glossed over by Cassio's discovery of the handkerchief "in [his] chamber" (3,4,216). In the next scene she appears in however, she is indignant in regards to Cassio's continued avoidance of her, and she puts her foot down. She tells him that she will no longer wait for him, and to "come when you are next prepared for" (4,1,177), which she makes plain will be never. Despite her character description, she does not let her love get in the way of what she needs, and in this manner Shakespeare fleshes her out to be a very strong and independent character that just happens to be caught in a bad position with a man who does not treat her as well as he should. This flies in the face of Cassio's earlier lambasting and boasting, for it shows that Bianca is about as much of a whore as Desdemona is. Indeed, when Cassio dies, she mourns for him just as any other lover would mourn for their newly dead partner, "O Cassio, Cassio, Cassio" (5,1,90), and in doing so she displays her true and unadulterated love for him despite his continuously low opinion of her. Her true purpose in the story lies in act four, scene one, where Othello overhears Cassio speaking of her like a whore and mistakes the topic of conversation to be about Desdemona. Without her, Iago's plot would never have worked, but Bianca is far more than just a whore as Shakespeare makes plainly clear in her demeanor and high level of shrewdness.

King Lear is a play that is absolutely dominated by female characters, and indeed the very crux of the conflict of the play is initiated by them. Lear's three daughters Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan are all central to the plot and of equal importance. When it comes time for Cordelia to proclaim to her father her faith and willingness to serve, Cordelia tells him that she loves him only as much for what he has done for her, "no more and no less" (1,1,101). In comparison, Cordelia's proclamation pales in comparison to the veritable odes that Goneril and Regan pour into the King's ears, and Lear does not take lightly to Cordelia's true but sparse proclamation. He removes her dowry and all rights to his kingdom, and sends her off to be married to whoever will

take her, but through all this Cordelia is very much so unrepentant. She does not seek to make amends with her father for her own words, and thus she stands by them stoically “for which [she] is richer” (1,1,265). She does not feel the need to throw herself at her father’s feet in a display of servitude, because in her devotion to him she is stoic but stalwart. Later in the play, upon hearing of her the troubles her father is facing at the behest of her sisters, she comes back in full force to aid him like an avenging spirit. Despite her father’s abject rejection of her, she stands by him, insisting she has “no cause” (4,5,31) to be angry with him. She proves herself to be a highly powerful woman who knows when to stand up for what she believes, and when to forgive. This distinction makes Cordelia the strongest woman in this play. Indeed, the entire reason that the play is considered a tragedy is because Cordelia dies at the end, sending Lear back into his maddened state at the very last with no hope for return.

Goneril works as a pair with Regan in their treachery against Lear, but both sisters have their own traits that cause them to stand out as individuals rather than a pair. They are equally as cruel towards the king as the other, but it is Goneril who begins the treachery against him. Lear first goes to stay with Goneril after the splitting of the kingdom is divined and settled, but Goneril is determined to shrink the king’s power until he has absolutely nothing. With him he has brought a hundred knights of his own as his escort, but she refuses to house them, claiming their “manners show like a riotous inn” (1,4,250) in a show of equal parts solidarity and cruelty. The former is reminiscent of Cordelia’s resolve against her father but in a much more perverse form in Goneril. Lear leaves to go stay with Regan, but she is on Goneril’s side, insisting that he give up his men. Together, Regan and Goneril wear down the terms until Lear has no servants left at all, and he storms out into the night. Goneril’s treachery is the first seed that causes Lear’s madness throughout the play in this manner. Later, when Albany her husband, condemns her and Regan’s actions as “not worth the dust that blows in [her] face” (4,2,40), Goneril shows the

audacity to take control of her husband's troops to rally against the invading French. When he protests, she is unrepentant and stalwart in her resolve to see her plot through to the end. At the end, when Edmund's treachery has been revealed and her husband still survives, she poisons Regan so that she cannot have Edmund, and kills herself to escape the repercussions of her and her sister's actions. Throughout the play Goneril is extremely self-centered and in most cases takes the initiative over her sister, including the initiative in determining her own death. Despite her being a villain, Shakespeare's representation of her still categorizes her as an extremely strong woman with clear dominion over men, which was again unheard of in Shakespeare's time.

Regan herself is equally as cruel as Goneril, but is independently so. When Gloucester is found helping Lear escape to Dover, she and her husband Cornwall punish him brutally. She eggs on Cornwall as he gouges out Gloucester's eye, and when a servant steps in and wounds Cornwall, she kills him with her own muscle (3,7,98). It is Regan who orders Gloucester be thrown out of the castle to "let him smell his way to Dover" (3,7,113) instead of mercifully killed so that he will fumble about in blindness to a slow death. Cornwall is bleeding badly from his wounds, and in the playscript he is led offstage with Regan's help. However, in the 1998 film version, director Richard Eyre chose a more ambivalent ending to this scene; Regan pauses as Cornwall reaches for her, but she ultimately leaves the room without him as he bleeds to death on the table. This is indicative of a more cruel and relentless Regan. Indeed, as soon as Cornwall dies, she seeks to make Edmund her lover, with no further thought to Cornwall at all other than "my lord is dead" (4,6,34). In this manner, she is more led by her passions than Goneril is, because she is not only bloodthirsty, but is lust-craven as well as she seeks Edmund directly after her husband's death. One can argue that this representation of woman is Shakespeare playing into the norm of his time a little more than he normally does in his representation of women, however Regan is still quite her own character, and evidences multiple times that she will fight

anyone to gain what she wants. This sense of independence goes well above and beyond the normal representation of women in this time period, leaving Shakespeare ahead of the pack once more.

Shakespeare never writes an extraneous woman into his plays. Time and time again, the women involved in his plays always have a sense of humanity that is far beyond the normal representation of women in his time period, for no matter if they are on the side of good, on the side of evil, or are simply caught in the middle, they always have their own individual goals and refuse to be trodden upon. Even women that tend to be ignored such as Lady Macduff, the women who are written off as whores like Bianca, or the women who are simply lumped together into the same sentence like Goneril and Regan. All of these faults in Shakespearean criticism fall more upon the bearing of modern day misogyny rather than Shakespeare's own words lacking in instrumental and foundational power. If one were to remove even one of these women from any of the aforementioned plays, the plays themselves would become corrupted and broken beyond repair, for they each play a crucial part in the individual play that concerns them. Shakespeare's women are distinctive, defined, and interesting. He goes beyond the call of duty of his own time period to bring to the table extraordinarily characterized women that defy all then-modern conventions.

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