Hannah Sayer December 4th, 2017

Professor Culhane Shakespeare and the Law

The Triumphs and Shortcomings of Women in Shakespeare

Women are well represented in William Shakespeare's plays. This is a wonderful surprise, considering that even today, women are not given such a generous portrayal in the arts. Many films today only feature one or two women, and limit their role to a supportive girlfriend or a protagonist's mother. People grow accustomed to seeing women pigeonholed into these roles, which is why many cite to Shakespeare's works as a triumph of feminine inclusion. Among them, he represents women in a diverse range of relationships, careers, and personalities.

Today, a common measurement of a movie meeting the standards of female representation is the Bechdel Test, created by author and comic artist Alison Bechdel. To pass, a movie only has to meet two qualifications. It must feature at least two named female characters, and at some point these women must talk to each other about something other than a man. It requires only bare minimum of female involvement, and mainly succeeds in exposing how few works can meet even such a low bar. Shakespeare initially seems like a master of inclusion, for how many different women he features. However, the Bechdel Test exposes where he fails— his women do not talk to each other about anything except men. Their lives are ruled by men, their actions are indirectly controlled by men, and even characters who seem like they would seek independence always end up caught up in a man's storyline. Both *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure* succeed in portraying incredibly strong and driven female characters. Unfortunately, these women do not get a chance to prove themselves to the audience and readers, because their stories are ultimately controlled and limited by the surrounding male characters.

King Lear would, in his day, be planning on passing down his kingdom to his oldest son. However, he has only daughters, so in a refreshing turn, women get to hold the power. Most thrilled about this are Lear's two oldest daughters, Goneril and Regan. They will do absolutely anything for power, and lack any sense of a conscience or morals. With their ruthless nature, they seem impossible to take down.

Until, that is, they kill each other fighting over a man.

This is baffling. We know Shakespeare came up with the plot himself, because this does not happen in the original King Leir story. It exemplifies how although Shakespeare was intent upon including women in his work, he believed men were the most important aspect of their lives. In writing a tragedy and attempting to create a plot so harsh or devastating that it would provoke a woman to kill her own sister (who was fighting on the same side as her), the colossal disaster he implemented was "they both had a crush on the same guy." Neither Goneril or Regan had a long emotional history with Edmund, or even a genuine connection with him, especially since they were both married to other men at the start of the play. No, they both casually liked a man for a couple of months, and two casualties became of it.

However, prior to this belittling demise, Regan and Goneril are impressively crafted characters. Shakespeare spoke to equality by creating two brutally intense women, why defy the common trope of royal ladies who only care about dresses and parties. Regan is arguably the most violent character in the play. In Act III Scene 7, she is a central perpetrator of Gloucester's torture. She first suggests they "Hang him instantly" (III.vii.5), and once Gloucester is bound to a chair, Regan begins tauntingly plucking out hairs from his beard. Once a duel ensues, she beck-

ons her husband, “Give me thy sword. A peasant stand up thus!” (III.vii.98). She immediately stabs and kills the servant, empowered by a thirst for destruction and an accompanying villainous pride. She even later wishes they had gone further and killed Gloucester too: “It was great ignorance, Gloucester’s eyes being out, to let him live.” (IV.v.10).

Goneril is just as merciless as her sister, and can take credit for the gruesome idea of gouging out Gloucester’s eyes, initiating the crusade against her father, plotting to kill her husband, and ultimately killing her sister. Women with the sheer aggression of Goneril and Regan certainly were not common in 17th century plays and literature. This demonstrates that when it came to the obscenities and horrific capabilities of man, Shakespeare believed women were not excluded. *King Lear* contains several lines about how evil women can become:

> If she live long
> And in the end meet the old course of death,
> Women will all turn monsters. (III.vii.123)
>
> Proper deformity shows not in the fiend
> So horrid as in woman. (IV.ii.73)

The women in this play prove they have the power to be villains just as despicable as the men, displaying a rare take on gender equality. Even though the view that women can be vile too does not look particularly flattering, it still reads as somewhat refreshing. Underneath the surface of two outrageous villains, we receive the message that women are multi-faceted, complex in thought, powerful, and ruled by the same dark urges as men. If Cordelia had succeeded as a politician or if her character had more time on stage, *King Lear* would ultimately make an impressive, well-rounded statement about women. But because Cordelia is written out of the major-

ity of the story, the play takes a step neither forward nor backwards, but perhaps sideways, with its ultimate statement that women can be just as evil as men.

Cordelia may be the most tragic character of the play. She shows impressive potential in the first act, exposing her father, Lear, for his conceited, illogical contest. But since Lear is too egotistical to take criticism, he impulsively casts his most capable daughter out of the kingdom. It takes three acts to find out what becomes of Cordelia, and when we do see her again, she has a few scenes healing and saving her father, but is then abruptly hung and killed. Her death hurts more than the nine others featured in this play, because of *King Lear*'s four truly loyal, innocent characters (Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool), Cordelia is the only one explicitly murdered. This brings an interesting and somehow overlooked aspect of the play to the table. In *King Lear*, all of he women are murdered. It is difficult to make an argument for equal treatment of women in the play when none of them even survive its duration. Of course, it remains impressive that Cordelia spoke up to her father. However, with such moments, what matters equally to the action is its depicted consequence. Nothing positive becomes of Cordelia speaking up. In fact, it's the very reason she has to leave the play for so long.

Mariana from Shakespeare's "problem" comedy *Measure for Measure* is introduced as bright and complex, but winds up being another woman to fall short of being an inspiring character. She and Cordelia have remarkably similar storylines in this sense.

1. A woman is given a promise for what her future is going to look like: Cordelia is going to rule over at least a portion of England; Mariana will marry Angelo.

2. The man responsible for this decision changes his mind at the last minute, and the woman is sent away: Cordelia speaks out and has to leave Lear's kingdom instead of ruling it; Mariana loser her wealth in a shipwreck and Angelo refuses to marry her. "[He] left her in tears and dried not one of them with his comfort." (III.i.251)
3. She lives away from the other characters, and remains absent for the majority of the play: Cordelia moves to France; Mariana moves to a "moated grange" by herself.
4. She is called upon to join the play's action again, specifically in the fourth act.
5. Upon reunion with the man who cast her out in the first place, she forgives him without question and saves his life. The last Cordelia appears in Act One her father disowns her, and she never speaks of that moment again. She returns to the play to heal him. Mariana, after being left in tears, next sees Angelo to sleep with him (thus nearly forcing him into marriage), and she convinces Isabella to plead for his life and save him from punishment for the crime he committed.

Cordelia and Mariana are strong characters and brave women. We sympathize with them and root for them. However, their admirable nature is pierced with a gaping hole. They both kept their mouths shut and and did not question the men in their lives for shunning them. Then they forgave these men instantly, as soon as these men were ready to take them back. When a pattern like this occurs, it cannot be attributed to a weakness in the character herself; it belongs, rather, to the author who penned her.

It seems that Shakespeare's gender constricted his ability to portray a woman's perspective. Maybe it is merely coincidental that these characters are both women. But it reads as gen-

der-specific, like an overarching view on the female mentality. A view that women exist for men, and live at the whim of the men ruling their lives, in this case, a father an an ex-fiancé (also note that Cordelia did not marry for love. There were two men present when her father disowned her, and she left with the one who would accept her without a dowry). It feels like a view on gender because there is no obvious example of the reverse. I have not seen a Shakespeare performance in which a man was sent out of the majority of the play because a woman told him to leave, or where a man was forced into isolation because one woman stopped loving him. I have not seen a Shakespeare play where a man unconditionally forgave and saved a woman who wronged him. However, there are so many women in this circumstance. Even *The Merchant of Venice*'s character Portia, one of the most intelligent women among all of Shakespeare's works, is portrayed in this way. She tells her lover Bassanio that if he ever gives up his ring, she will end their marriage and she will never talk to him again. Sure enough, he quickly gives up the ring to a kind lawyer who helps him, and even so, Portia takes him back. The women of Shakespeare know nothing but forgiveness.

Of all the pardons Shakespeare's women grant, one resonates as the most surprising, and the most heartbreaking. It comes not from any of these three women, but from *Measure for Measure*'s Isabella. When Isabella is first introduced, she has her own ambition to which she devotes extreme commitment: becoming a nun. She shows bravery in every scene, and always stands her ground when faced with conflict. When Angelo, the effective ruler of Vienna, sentences her brother to death, she goes to argue with him and defend her brother. Later, her brother asks her to compromise her morals, so she stands up to him too.

Although Isabella is clearly aspirational and independent, she lives through the play as a pawn of the Duke (and his alias, the Friar) and Angelo. Angelo pressures Isabella into sexual intercourse with him. He does so by threatening to kill her brother, saying she must choose. And worse, he does so while preaching to the public that sex out of wedlock is a crime of the highest form. After all of this, when Angelo is finally exposed to the public and prepared to face a death penalty, Isabella pleads for his life. She does this at the conviction of Mariana, who wants to marry him even after what he did both to her and Isabella, with her spoken reasoning being "They say the best men are molded out of faults, and, for the most, become much more the better for being a little bad." (V.i.435).

"A little bad"? Angelo committed a crime that he himself deemed punishable by death. He devastated the lives of at least two women with his selfishness. The Duke proved without a doubt to everyone that he was a hypocrite and a pervert, and yet, he faced no consequence at all. "What corruption in this life, that it will let this man [Angelo] live!", said Isabella, only one act prior to pardoning him (III.i.258). He did not necessarily need to be killed in a play considered a comedy. However, his actions should not be condoned, especially at the hands of resilient women who seemed to turn on all of their morals quite suddenly in Act Five. His quick forgiveness is not comedic— it is unsatisfying. Equally frustratingly, the well-developed characters of Mariana and Isabella are entirely abandoned in favor of Angelo's freedom.

This is not the last event of the play. Isabella's brother is revealed unharmed when she previously believed he was killed, and the Duke shows that he was lying about his death all along (not too long after the Duke revealed he was lying about his identity as well). Lucio, a friend of Isabella's is sentenced to prison and possibly death for sex out of wedlock. The Duke

declares to everyone that he is going to marry Isabella, and makes a strange speech thanking and forgiving everybody in the vicinity for their recent actions. He clearly deems himself the hero of the story, and with that, claims Isabella, the pretty heroine, as his own.

Isabella does not say a word throughout all of this. Her final words in the play are her pardon for Angelo— a pardon to a man who attempted to take her life goals and her brother away from her. Throughout the remainder of the play, including this assumption of marriage, Isabella remains silent. Depending on the staging, this could be interpreted a number of ways. Perhaps she was stunned by the reveal of her brother being alive. Or maybe she was so upset by all of the actions unfolding around her that she could not come up with any more words. Perhaps she was crying, or maybe after having to bring Angelo away from justice, she shut down her mind altogether.

Maybe Isabella stopped speaking because she felt suddenly powerless. Angelo was finally exposed for his hypocrisy and sexual harassment, and was forgiven, at her word, immediately. Lucio was taken away for the same crime and she knew this time there was nothing she could do about it. She discovered the Duke had lied to her about not only his own identity but her brother's life. He had always acted like he wanted to help her, but manipulated her just as much as Angelo. And then to top it all off, he declared their marriage, and thus, the end of Isabella's original goal of chastity. Nothing she could say to this would make any impact, she knew. Upon freedom from one sordid, manipulative older man, Isabella was handed off to another.

Poor Isabella, who fought several battles throughout the play, only to be shown it wasn't worth it. She was a strong and hardworking character, and at the hands of Angelo and the Duke, never got to achieve her goals. *Measure for Measure* is considered a comedy, but for Isabella

who bravely worked to defend her morals and ended up further back than where she started, it was much more tragic. In this, she joins the rankings of Mariana and the women of *King Lear*. It appears that these women could not live freely because they were either controlled by or catering to a multitude of men— King Lear, Edmund, The Duke, and Angelo. But truthfully, there was just one man holding all of them back from success: William Shakespeare himself.

The triumph of Shakespeare's plays is that they represent so many different types of women speaking their minds. He should be applauded for depicting such resilient women, especially in his era. But the shortcomings of his plays are that none of the women get to achieve their goals, or even make any sort of empowering statement. Their initial strengths are either condemned, or cave and falter by the end. One woman in *King Lear* speaks out, and dies alongside the villains. The female villains ruled the horrific tragic story, and were killed because suddenly one man was more important to them than anything else. Meanwhile the women in *Measure for Measure* have to defend and marry the men who ruined their lives.

These women show so much strength in their backstories, and would have been inspiring to know in real life. But Shakespeare always fails them in the end, allowing once-independent women to fall, at the hands of his intended storyline for the male protagonists. Because of the limitations in their writing, each of these women is stiffened after a display of strength and courage, and none of them get to leave a lasting impression as the triumphant heroines they could have been. Shakespeare gave these characters so much potential, but sadly held them back from achieving it, and held the audience back from watching a woman succeed.