Crossdressed and Unsexed: Exploring the Power of Shakespeare’s Women

Senior Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Undergraduate Program in Theater Arts
Susan Dibble, Advisor

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

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December 2017

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In Act I.V of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth delivers her famed soliloquy, best known for this section:

“Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty.” (1.5, 30-33)

Lady Macbeth is known as, perhaps, one of Shakespeare’s most ruthless and ambitious women, best remembered for her murderous drive to power and encouraging Macbeth’s violent actions. She spends much of the play questioning Macbeth’s manhood and berating him for weakness, and, as indicated by the phrase “unsex me here,” she is also a woman who willingly challenges gender norms to meet her dark ends. In a contemporary sense, Lady Macbeth can be considered a feminist character, equally investing herself in a quest for power alongside her husband that will also benefit her, and at the same time, challenging the definition of what it means to be a woman, or rather, what her gender is in the first place. Essentially, she becomes the poster woman for power in Shakespeare through her “unsexed” persona and the most popular and widely known example of female power in Shakespeare in contemporary conversation.

While this speech is still a prime example of Lady Macbeth’s strength based on her inclination towards cruelty alone, one still must ask: what does “unsexed” really mean beyond a transcendence of womanhood? Here, the idea of “unsexing” certainly refers to abandoning one expression of gender identity—femininity, in her case—for another, approaching what can be considered masculine. At the same time, however, it could also indicate transcending gender altogether. But this, too, yields a few more
questions. When we bring into question unsexing, we ask if it refers to aspiring to manhood, if it is just appropriating male qualities temporarily, or if it refers to neutralizing and removing gender. These questions invite us to consider what women are, and what their gender, or even lack thereof, affords them, takes away from them, or endows them with. As “unsexing” comes into play, we have to discuss how the concept of gender identity coincides with women, and furthermore, how a woman’s power is played if gender performance becomes a tool.

But at the same time, if Lady Macbeth’s unsexing is considered the center of female power in Shakespeare’s plays, one disregards the multitude of avenues by which power is tapped into or accessed beyond aspiring to a distinct lack of femininity. While women’s power in Shakespeare is evidently derived from the appropriation of masculine qualities, it is also accessed by embracing feminine attributes as well, and redefining them. And such is the focus of this study: embracing, and simultaneously expanding beyond, the idea of or ideas related to “unsexing,” as the center of power for Shakespeare’s women in order to create a fuller picture of female power in the plays, and furthermore, how that translates in performance.

First and foremost, this study is being done to challenge the idea of gender onstage and how we can use the all-women Shakespeare to make informed choices about how power is played by tracking who has the power, how they got it or aspired to it, and by what means. It goes without saying that Shakespeare is a male-dominated space in text and in performance, so one has to ask where the women fit into this structure. This study seeks to explore how gender power is used as a primary tool, and how it takes several forms across the different genres of plays.
This study at the same time, is also an exploration of “finding the feminine,” as Tina Packer, artistic director of Shakespeare & Company has put it. This is not women aspiring necessarily to entirely reject or conform to gender altogether, although they definitely can, but this is also an exploration of redefining feminine and playing within the idea of what feminine is and can be.

Furthermore, in doing this project, one must acknowledge that they are in an age of theatrical “man-spreading,” and that it is socially necessary for women to take up space onstage. This is both an Elizabethan historical concern as well as a contemporary one. By performing scenes and monologues centered on Shakespeare’s women, one inevitably partakes in the conversation about gender, and the anxiety surrounding its subversion, in a contemporary way, engaging in the discussion about what women are doing with the power they have, and how as performers and readers one can use this knowledge to make informed, empowered, and textually interesting choices in a scene.

Through the use of feminist criticism in relation to Shakespeare as embodied through an understanding of the conventions of dramatic genres—comedy, tragedy, romance, and history—as well as through the concepts of masculinity and femininity, gender presentation, and how it coincides with one’s interpretation as a reader and performer of Shakespeare, this study presents a critical and creative analysis of Shakespeare’s women that explores the various ways in which they can achieve power. In the plays *The Taming of the Shrew, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, Othello, Troilus and Cressida, The Winter’s Tale, and Henry VI Part III*, the power of Shakespeare’s women is achieved in a myriad of ways, including: using language and all-women casting to inspire a sense of mutuality between male and female characters in spite of an imbalanced patriarchal power.
dynamic; playing within and against patriarchal structures through cross-dressing; breaking encouraged patterns of silence and aspiring to vocal dominance in male-dominated spaces; using the language of prophecy to reach desired outcomes and influence events; and appropriating tenets of prescribed masculine and feminine behaviors to use as tools in political and social arenas.

This study will also try to reconcile how these critical studies of Shakespeare’s women in power contribute more broadly to the exploration of female power in the theatre, including how taking up space in a performance setting translates to taking up space more confidently in society at large. Furthermore, this study seeks to understand the effects of a majority-female, or less overtly masculine, rehearsal process in creating an environment conducive to creativity and risk, and one which allows women to explore what it means to access and play, through gender-bent casting, masculinity and men.

As outlined in the introduction of *The Woman’s Part*, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz says, “Feminist criticism of Shakespeare begins with an individual reader, usually, although not necessarily, a female reader—a student, teacher, actor—who brings to the plays her own experience, concerns, and questions.”¹ This book takes part in a conversation that pushes back against a critical tradition that places overwhelming emphasis on male characters and themes. It thus becomes the job of the feminist critical to “analyze the nature and effects of patriarchal structure” and explore women’s relations to one another.²

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² Lenz, *The Woman’s Part*, 2
This study uses this model to explore the woman’s role in Shakespeare, in specific regards to how they achieve, reach for, or grapple with power in several different plays. In doing so, it brings to the forefront how these women interact with one another through an exploration of the female friendship, how women achieve positions of political or militaristic prominence, and the tactics they use to persuade, diffuse, or challenge patriarchal strongholds of power. Furthermore, through this critical understanding of these women in terms of their power, they inevitably become more humanized for the actor or actress, and thus give way to a greater, deeper exploration of character.

In analyzing these women, then, it becomes of paramount importance to create or subscribe to a lens of analysis that not only services the goal of creating a feminist reading, or one that “[concentrates] on exposing the patriarchal assumptions and structures that govern his drama and marginalize or contain its female energies,” but also does not sacrifice the meaning of the text as a whole to service just one individual scene. While this study seeks to explore in performance the possibility of interpretation throughout the various scenes, ensuring that the texts not be divorced from their roles as “social documents” is equally important. That is, in performing these readings, various critiques are made, but an analysis of these plays must walk the tightrope between life, art, and social context.

As outlined in The Woman’s Part, this idea is part of a discussion on “New Criticism,” where the text is given a feminist analysis in isolation as “…the indispensible method is used in the service of a goal rather than, larger than, the discovery of unity in

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4 Lenz, The Woman’s Part, 8.
This to say, this ignores a text aside from specific isolated parts. In the case of this study, the larger context of the play is considered: the social conditions, the subjugation of women as inherent, and the prevalence of sexism. All of it must be recognized in staying truthful to the world of the play, because that is what is written. In performance, the task is figuring out how to approach these topics through acting choices, directorial decisions, and even casting. Even if the text is not “feminist” content-wise, a feminist reading still invites greater possibilities for interpretation and exploration of character, but not in isolation.

But while these plays are “social documents,” they are also literary texts. Historical ideas that sprout from these texts, while at times relevant in terms of understanding how particular social concerns or conventions permeate a conflict in the text, are not always as useful in preparing text for performance. Relying on the text as literature will inevitably be at the crux of this analysis. Critical research is used to help aid in understanding the text for a performer of Shakespeare, and thus, it becomes important to understand the context in which these plays manipulate gender. But at the same time, overreliance on theory must be avoided to ensure that scenes do not become cerebral or unplayable. Context must be provided to understand where certain ideas found in the text developed from and how they work in performance.

Thus, to access the heart of the plays and explore where power comes from fully, it becomes important to understand how genre—comedy, tragedy, and romance—serves as a blueprint for interpreting the text. In terms of the exploration of gender, the idea of comedy goes beyond “ending in a marriage” and tragedy beyond “significant deaths by

5 Ibid., 10.
6 Ibid., 8.
the plays’ ends.” With those interpretations alone, one can only garner information about women’s specific ends in a play in the sense of overall structure and plot, as opposed to understanding the nuances by which they seek power and find their voices. When we perform a closer analysis of the plays by genre, we can better understand, or even predict, how or in what way a woman is going to find her power within the bounds of the particular social world she finds herself in as well.

In the comedies, the relationship between men and women is based in equality, or allows for greater freedom for women. According to The Woman’s Part: “…as their values educate the men, mutuality between the sexes may be achieved.”7 One sees this in *As You Like It*, as Rosalind educates Orlando on how to woo women successful. In doing so, she attempts to bring him to her level of wit and intelligence that would not otherwise be possible without her intervention and instruction. This may also go beyond mutuality, as the balance of power in this particular scene may shift towards Rosalind entirely, creating not only a sense of equality, but also a relationship where she is clearly pulling the strings and guiding its direction.

Furthermore, in the comedies, “…the feminine either rebels against the restraining social order or (more commonly) resides in alliance with forces that challenge its hegemony: romantic love, physical nature, the love of pleasure in all its forms.”8 In another play explored in this study, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katharina’s central conflict stems from a patriarchal society that tries to silence her, restrain her, and force her adaptation into an idea of what a woman should be; her actions, then, as a typified

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7 Ibid., 6.
“shrew” character, fit into this comedic mold when she attempts to rail against the system that encourages her subjugation. Katharina, unlike comic heroines such as Rosalind and Viola, is by far the most deliberate in challenging that social order. Although comic heroines do briefly subvert the system by aligning themselves with virtues based in romantic love, and act or make choices based on its pursuit, shrews pursue patriarchy’s downfall more directly without the use of aforementioned forces. And it is this distinction in the comedic structure that helps to inform, in performance, how the women in these plays find their voices.

Shakespearean tragedies present an entirely different perspective on women altogether, where women serve as audience to men and “...are without the benefit of disguise...their roles are at once more varied, more constructed, and more precarious.”9 But while women may seem more disempowered—as they often are at the disadvantage of existing within a patriarchal structure—their societal disempowerment creates a scenario for women where they must find their power within a system that oppresses them. In performance, the scene becomes playable with inherent obstacles as provided by the text’s tragic structure, and we begin to consider how women must survive and relate to each other when they do not have comic conventions such as cross-dressing or the “wearing” of masculinity to aid them. From the performance perspective, the tragic lens forces one to consider how women can exist individually and together against patriarchal forces bent on their failure.

9 Lenz, The Woman’s Part, 6.
As written in *Gender and Gender Crossing*: “tragedies focus much more on the ideals of manhood.”\(^\text{10}\) Essentially, finding where women fit into plays which expound on masculine ideals creates a challenging structure where women characters are tasked with fitting into dramatic and societal structures that are not, presumably, as concerned with their development as characters or as people. This creates more of a reason to highlight them and uncover their seemingly minimized roles within the plays in this study.

Lastly, the tragedies “…are obsessed with the dark side of women’s sexuality.”\(^\text{11}\)

It is interesting to point out that this obsession stems from male anxiety, as we see in the context of Emilia’s relationship with Iago in *Othello* later on, but this anxiety also emerges in a romance like *The Winter’s Tale* as well, where a fear of women’s power—in speech, in wit, and argument—doubles as a fear of women’s sexuality as well. Certain conventions laid out in the tragedies—like the suspicion of woman’s sexuality—is not exclusive to just this genre, of course, but in the tragedies, the possibility of tragic consequences are far more likely. From there, as a reader and performer, one must delve into how this perception of women as a threat to masculinity paired with an inevitable tragic end, and how these together translate into a grappling with power.

Another main genre of Shakespeare’s plays is the romance, which centers on parenthood, but also how women—mothers, daughters, and their relations—redeem fathers for their mistakes. This perspective invites a co-mingling of the masculine and feminine into reconcile using the power of “the feminine,” or the attributes assigned to feminity, as a catalyst for men’s changes by the ends of the plays. According to


*Manhood in the Romances*, “In Shakespeare’s romances…the inadequacy of the traditional masculine stereotype is much more obvious. Men’s attacks on women are presented as both more obviously wrong-headed and more ineffectual.”\(^{12}\)

Critical literature surrounding men in the romances describes how men are “wrong-headed” in their choices, and while men are said to be more likely to appropriate aspects of what is considered “the feminine,” the use of feminist criticism to analyze the romances helps to focus how this wrong-headedness creates an arena for women to affect a change in men, where they capitalize on man’s ill-conceived perceptions of and anxieties in relation to them and their powers as women.\(^{13}\) The role of women in the romances thus becomes “infinitely valuable”\(^{14}\) where “feminist critics celebrate the power and fertility of…women—daughters, mothers, wives, friends”\(^{15}\) not just in terms of changing men, but in how they rhetorically, socially, and even physically challenge man’s misguidedness to begin with, as Paulina does, for example, in *The Winter’s Tale* when she opposes Leontes in court against his epithets of her as a “mankind witch.” (2.3.69)

With the definitions of these genres in mind, it is important to acknowledge that these definitions are not entirely rigid; for example, this is not to say that women in the comedies must change a system entirely, or that the women in tragedies are inherently trapped as victims of a tragic, or seemingly tragic, structure. But by examining the qualities of these genres, we garner a wider context for what power has the potential to be for Shakespeare’s women, and as a result, can engage with the plays on a deeper level

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 171.


that subscribes to, qualifies, or contradicts what a play or piece of criticism about a play might suggest about a character’s development or empowerment.

Building on the discussion of power within the genres comes a wider discussion of the ideas behind “masculinity” and “femininity,” which permeate Shakespeare’s texts in a variety of ways, but primarily as a suggestion of assumed power or disempowerment, strength or weakness, and courage or lack of gall, respectively. In order to understand how these concepts work in the plays, they must first be defined and their origins traced to their use in Early Modern England.

In relation to the masculine and feminine roles, the Renaissance valued what appeared to be a strict gender division between men and women in order to enforce a social order and “gendered division of labor.”16 But as a result of this division and need for societal hierarchy, women inevitably ended up on the bottom of the scale: “…if women were not invariably depicted as anatomically different from men in an essential way, they could still be seen as different merely by virtue of their lack of masculine perfection (softer, weaker, less hot), and their subordination could be justified on those grounds.”17

In reading the plays, we have to acknowledge that they were inherently written within this historical enforcement of a gender binary, where gender divisions permeated the plays because they permeated the society. That being said, when these rules were broken in Shakespeare’s text—through women speaking “out of turn,” by adopting man’s garments, or by assuming political power, to name a few—this societal construct was

17 Howard, “Crossdressing,” 422.
upset. As a result, woman became the “other” invariably, and any effort to de-marginalize themselves from that role, at least in the plays, was threatening.

This is the crux that this study partially rests on: how do women use masculinity and femininity, as we traditionally understand them, as tools in conjunction with their female gender role to meet their ends? And furthermore, how do women mitigate the meaning of “Other” as they experience what it means to be “Other” within and outside of confines of “femininity?” Of course, concepts of masculinity and femininity are constructed as being assigned to a particular gender. But that does not mean these attributes are exclusive to any single gender, and especially in the case of Shakespeare’s women, masculinity and femininity are more pliable resources of power than one would think.

According to Artistic Director of Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, Tina Packer: “If we divide human attributes into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ and strengthen only those attributes that ‘belong’ to that sex, we cut off half of ourselves as human beings, condemned forever to search for the other half…”  

While Packer rightly argues that human qualities are often narrowly divided between “masculine” and “feminine,” as opposed to remaining genderless, it is still necessary to see, for purposes of feminist analysis, how these qualities operate in terms of gender presentation in Shakespeare, since, textually, men’s and women’s roles are divided. Part of what makes Shakespeare’s women powerful is how they embody these defined characteristics dually, straddling both masculine and feminine qualities. What also makes them powerful, too, is how they take advantage of qualities assumed to “belong” to a

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feminine realm, as well as ones that are more masculine, and use them to get what they want out of a situation.

Tina Packer describes the feminine as, “Those qualities in a human being which have to do with feeling, valuing feeling more than logical sense. The feminine is associated with the body, holding relationship to be of primary importance, wiling to trust intuition and make decisions on intuition alone. Soft, tender, gentle voice. Tends toward associative thinking.”

The Masculine, on the other hand, refers to being: “Goal oriented, looking for abstract or logical reasons to go into action, challenging the body to obey the dictates of the mind, being careless of collateral damage when going for the top prize. Tough, independent, loving the idea of justice. Tends toward linear thinking.”

Although “the feminine” and “the masculine” seems rigidly defined, the women in Shakespeare’s plays often use characteristics of each description within the same play, expanding upon what femininity is capable of in terms of accessing power, and how the concept of masculinity becomes a wearable or performative tool that can either sheath the feminine underneath or amplify it. Within this study, particularly in performance, I am also interested in accessing what “the feminine” and “the masculine” are, as embodied in male and female characters, and what it means to express the feminine through and in the body—particularly through movement—but also to physically and verbally understand how masculinity is played and worn successfully as a woman performer.

As these topics are explored throughout the plays, one sees how a character’s gender presentation oscillates between what it means to be a man or a woman, to be masculine or

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20 Ibid.
feminine, and how it may straddle both simultaneously. To paint a fuller picture of
gender subversion and pliability as a power tool, and how it works conventionally in
Shakespeare’s text, one must understand the concept of cross-dressing, a form of
costumed or disguised role-playing, and how it operates not only within the text and in
Renaissance society, but also in the context of the performer and gender-bent casting.

Renaissance England operated within a rigid social system, where dress was state-
regulated in an attempt to uphold the social hierarchy, and thus keep societal order intact
and undisturbed. According to Jean Howard: “cross-dressing, like other disruptions of the
Renaissance semiotics of dress, opened a gap between the supposed reality of one’s
station and sexual kind and the clothes that were to display that reality to the world.”

Essentially, cross-dressing signaled not only a disturbance of order, but it unleashed an
anxiety about certain members of society—women and boys, or non-men—either gaining
social mobility or challenging commonly relied upon social structures; furthermore,
cross-dressing made it difficult to discern a person’s sexual leanings and actual social
standing.

And as is widely known, boy actors were often dressed for female roles on the
Renaissance stage, which, according to David Cressy, “[aroused] deep-seated fears of
[the] feminized self.”

However, while cross-dressing on the stage, according to Jean Howard, “…cannot
simply be conflated with cross-dressing on the London streets…” one cannot dismiss
that Renaissance stage conventions—where young boys could access the “feminized self”

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22 David Cressy, “Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England.”
simply by cross-dressing—stirred a similar anxiety about men and women accessing femininity and masculinity in a way that united a large-scale societal fear with what was occurring in a theatrical setting. Thus, the fear of the feminine in Early Modern Europe can easily be translated to the stage, where cross-dressing within Shakespeare’s plays among women was not only subversive for audiences, but also a way within the comic plays for women characters to lay claim to masculine attributes, privileges, and securities built into the male identity.

But how does cross-dressing operate in a theatrical setting? As mentioned, the comedies were defined by social disruption, which, on the Renaissance stage, opened the possibility not only for the disturbance of conventional dress for reasons of class, but how dress was used to transcend and challenge gender roles which would allow a woman character to meet her chosen ends.

The idea of gender being disrupted through cross-dressing is empowering because women gain access to male attributes, reconciling it with the self for their individual needs. And from this, we garner that the masculine identity is not just played, but it can be played because it can be worn. According to Tina Packer: “We put trust in the uniform, the status, the outside. We all wear uniforms of one sort or another to advertise something to the world, trying to strengthen our perceptions of ourselves.”²⁴ For women in the comedies, becoming the man—aside from taking up space vocally as women or aspiring to political power—can be as straightforward as adopting a different appearance.

What is also interesting, too, is how women do not always necessarily become men; masculine dress can just further establish them as the ultimate other: it creates a

²⁴ Packer, Women of Will, 178.
liminal being, the androgyne, or one who straddles both the masculine and the feminine. For women, cross-dressing is a significant opportunity to claim space. And onstage, internally existing as a woman while ‘playing’ or performing the man, too, reminds us that cross-dressing a practice that is built for the theater—a place of possibility, transcendence and performative actions—and one that creates a sense of disruption given that women are “moving up” beyond what is expected of them at a societal level. And it is this disruption that creates a space for power to be played.

As will be seen in this study, comic heroines in two of Shakespeare’s plays, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, explore the implications that come with cross-dressing, respectively, looking closely at the freedom of movement and expression that is afforded by male costume, and, on the other side of the coin, the inherent social difficulty and discomfort that comes with being “other” in spite of playing within and against patriarchal structure. But beyond the text, it is necessary in contemporary conversation to question why the performance of Shakespeare’s women—and men—by women today is important to the task of illuminating how gender is a tool that serves to promote and expand a woman’s presence in a theatrical setting. In performing a study such as this one, we ask: why do we do this work in the first place? To answer this question, we look to the contemporary “single-sex,” or rather, single-gendered, theatre environment to understand how it cultivates and enriches a rehearsal process for women specifically.

*The Shakespeare Standard* wrote in 2012: “16% of the 981 characters [Shakespeare] wrote were female.”25 This confirms the fact that there is a distinct lack of women written by Shakespeare, and if the 981 characters are played according to

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assigned gender roles, the problem of women’s underrepresentation still persists. The solution to this issue, then, comes from an all-women setup, where, according to Terri Power, “The female single-sex theatre environment [becomes] an essential response to the male-dominated spaces that [make] up the majority of theatre and theatre history.”

A primary participant in this conversation is Phyllida Lloyd, a female British director known for her inventive staging of Shakespeare’s plays using an all-women setup, most significantly and recently known for the Donmar Trilogy, where she staged all-women productions of *Julius Caesar, The Tempest*, and *Henry IV*.

Lloyd describes her reasoning for an all-female *Julius Caesar* as a way to make “women in the audience feel included” while also “[creating] a project…with equal roles for all.” Another scholar, Terri Power elaborates on Lloyd’s work: “…her all-female concept was born in an effort not only to create more roles and role models for women in classical theatre but also to create theatre for all.”

This study seeks to do the same and take part in the same conversation, albeit within the microcosm of Brandeis theatre, to introduce these practices to an audience that might otherwise be unfamiliar. In the sense of creating “theatre for all,” this study aims to create theatre for and about a faction of women perceived as “other,” or those who do not perfectly fit into conventional standards of femininity, as to engage with a wider idea of what and who women are and how we define them. Through the conscious use of all-women casting as a way to frame this study, we explore: how we shed light on the women Shakespeare wrote, how the actress must embody them, and, in playing one of

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27 Ibid., 35.
28 Ibid.
Shakespeare’s men, how women can expand their influence and presence in the performance space.

According to the accounts in *Clamorous Voices*, “A rehearsal room dominated by men can be threatening in another way: it may endanger the integrity of the role, not by manipulating women into playing out clichéd male notions of the character but by provoking them to the opposite extreme.”

Juliet Stevenson, an actress profiled in *Clamorous Voices*, also adds: “If you are interested in how women are portrayed on stage and in reinvestigating Shakespeare’s women from scratch, you feel a responsibility to the women that does not necessarily go hand in hand with creativity, because you go into the rehearsal room feeling slightly defensive of them.”

Thus, in the rehearsal process envisioned for this study, a woman-dominated rehearsal room removes this additional pressure that comes from an intense justification of choices, which results in an isolated reading of a scene that inhibits creativity. I have deliberately chosen a director who is willing to collaborate and integrate my ideas about these women. But research is not the entire goal; I have purposely not intended to use research as a strict blueprint, but rather as another perspective to open up the text for the interpretation of women characters in an empowering way.

When these ideas are brought into rehearsal, a major topic becomes how women seek to play men, and claim space as men, in practice. Oftentimes, according to Rebecca Mead

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30 Rutter, *Clamorous Voices*, xviii.
in her interview with Harriet Walter, the concerns of playing men introduced, “a question of inhabiting a body that felt unapologetic about taking up space.”

In this sense, the all-female Shakespeare performance seeks to challenge women’s ability to lay their claim to the stage in the same way that men do through similar physical conventions. And while certain elements of the female voice and physicality can be a hindrance to playing men, it is still something that women have ability to approach and practice for themselves. Gender, at its core, is a performance, and through this rehearsal process, in theory, these impulses to become smaller are checked and minimized.

It is, after all, according to Harriet Walter, the challenge of “…not playing a man but playing a man with power.” And while Harriet Walter explains that today women do indeed have access to power, being apart of “public life,” the playing field is not always level for women performers.

By exploring these more modern practices using 400 year old text embedded in gender division, we inevitably unite the past with the present and enliven and enrich the possibilities by which Shakespeare’s women experience freedom in this way. While we can obviously acknowledge that a woman’s power contemporarily is far greater, these all-women practices still exist as an acknowledgement that the playing field is not, nor has been, level in theatre performance. And by using Shakespeare’s text, where women were not part of “public life,” we make a connection between then and now, text and life,

33 Ibid.
and must inevitably ask how women can take up space—vocally, physically, mentally—in a theatrical setting.

_The Taming of the Shrew_

_The Taming of the Shrew_, one of Shakespeare’s earliest comedies, centers on Katharina Baptista, a young woman notoriously known throughout Padua for her “shrewish” behavior that has prevented her, much to her father’s frustration, from finding a husband. Having repelled or scared away nearly every potential man, coming to “wive it wealthily in Padua” is her unlikely suitor, Petruchio, who through demeaning and cruel means chooses to “tame” Katharina and make her his wife. (1.2.75)

Perhaps the largest struggle with tackling any production or scene from _The Taming of the Shrew_ is addressing just how the taming itself is played; traditionally, says Terri Power, “The play has historically been such a problem for feminists and contemporary audiences that it is often ‘reimagined’ by companies, making it a key play for feminist critique…”

The goal in presenting three scenes from _The Taming of the Shrew_ in this study is to essentially “frame the taming” in a new light that mitigates the traditionally sexist elements using a feminist reading, while still crafting a truthful relationship between Katharina and Petruchio, going beyond, and simultaneously embracing, what Tina Packer describes as, “…a sexist play written by a young Shakespeare who was interested in jokes and verbal games.” Interestingly, it is clever verbal game playing as that aids in cleverly mitigating the taming. According to Marianne L. Novy in “Patriarchy and Play in _Taming of the Shrew_,” “the play begins to raise the question of how much…social order is a human construction whose validity is

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34 Power, _Shakespeare and Gender in Practice_, 12.
35 Packer, _Women of Will_, 15.
more like that of a game than that of divine or natural law,\textsuperscript{36} and one that “sets up a
protected space where...the dangers of violence, tyranny, and deadening
submissions...magically disappear.”\textsuperscript{37}

Additionally, when paired with an all-woman casting setup, Katharina and
Petruchio achieve a level of equality and mutuality in terms of status and power that
unites the two of them as outsiders and role-players in a game of verbal wit that they both
share in. Important to the discussion of \textit{The Taming of the Shrew}, however, first concerns
its title, and how it interacts with Katharina’s character. Katharina, as a “shrew,” which
Fiona Shaw describes as “noisy one,” begs the question: what makes Katharina so
shrewish?\textsuperscript{38}

According to \textit{Comic Women, Tragic Men}: “The shrew’s rebellion directly
challenges masculine authority, whereas the comic heroine merely presides over areas of
experience to which masculine authority is irrelevant...the shrew is essentially powerless
against the social system, whereas the comic heroine is in alliance with forces that can
never be finally overcome. The shrew is defeated by the superior strength, physical and
social, of a man, or by women who support the status quo.”\textsuperscript{39}

This being said, a typical reading of the play would engage with Katharina’s
disempowerment against a larger sexist force, here embodied through Petruchio, her
outrageous suitor. I will not argue that \textit{The Taming of the Shrew} is devoid of
powerlessness against the social system, as Katharina is certainly not a comic heroine in

\textsuperscript{36} Marianne Novy, “Patriarchy and Play in ‘Taming of the Shrew.’” \textit{English Literary Renaissance} 9, no. 2 (1979): 265.
\textsuperscript{37} Novy, “Patriarchy and Play,” 279.
\textsuperscript{38} Rutter, \textit{Clamorous Voices}, 1.
\textsuperscript{39} Bamber, \textit{Comic Women, Tragic Men}, 30.
the traditional sense like Rosalind or Viola is, given that she lacks the same privileges within a social structure she cannot easily escape, but to argue that she is defeated is severely limiting to the way this play has the potential to be read in a feminist context. For the purposes of this study, I am eager to explore how Katharina finds her way through a social system that she will not allow to defeat her, in spite of patriarchal structures that try to engulf her, devoice her, or stand in her way. To do this, we must understand her “taming” as becoming a matter of learning to play a social game, and, as the “noisy” shrew, how she uses her language—and even lack thereof—to find her way through.

In casting three scenes from *The Taming of the Shrew*—where Katharina and Petruchio first meet, the “Sun and Moon” scene, and Katharina’s final speech—using two women, it creates a meta-theatrical setup where we can separate ourselves from the world of the play with the knowledge that two women are embodying the roles, one of whom is playing a man. While this casting does not excuse Petruchio’s actions in the taming scheme entirely, he is better established as a person playing a constructed masculine role. After all, as he says in the wedding scene: “To me she’s married, not unto my clothes.” (3.2.117) Thus, a distinction can be created between who Petruchio is and what he plays. With this knowledge, too, that two women are embodying Katharina and Petruchio, we establish, more so, a sense of equality between the two of them as performers. Thus when one woman actress attempts to wear masculinity through Petruchio, this sense of power shifts to not only show how Petruchio’s sense of power and status is merely a performance, but also that both characters are acting within a society where they must “play pretend” to meet the demands of their designated social roles as men and women.
Katharina and Petruchio, however, have very little interest in conformity, and it is from here that their relationship stems.

The idea of role-playing is also embedded within the text, as set forth by the Induction scene at the beginning of the play. *The Taming of the Shrew* is the play-within-a-play performed for one Christopher Sly, a man who is tricked into believing a page attending the play with him is a woman: “Sirrah, go you to Barthol’mew my page, and see him dress’d in all suits like a lady…and call him ‘madam,’…he bear himself with honorouable action, such as he hath observed in noble ladies unto their lords, by them accomplished.”(Ind.1.105-112)

This meta-theatrical format creates a scenario where what we see as presented in *The Taming of the Shrew* as fictional, or as the Page says, “It is a kind of history,” which creates a scenario where the audience can remove itself from the less appealing events of the world, like the traditional taming, and understand it as farcical comedy. (Ind.1.141) Furthermore, as written in *Female Impersonation of ‘The Taming of the Shrew’*, “…such awareness of theatrical artifice would inevitably lead to an awareness that these…performers were offering versions” of gender construction.40 Understanding how this play works structurally allows the reader or viewer to accept women playing men’s roles as well, as this concept of role-playing becomes a part of the text’s dramatic DNA.

Beyond women, too, other characters play with false identity as well, where, “…within this meta-theatrical framework are enacted familiar Shakespearean comic

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selves as schoolmasters, passing pedants impersonate wealthy fathers, masters and 
servants exchange places…”

In this sense, *The Taming of the Shrew* is built on societal 
roles being turned on their heads, so it is fitting that Katharina and Petruchio attempt to 
redefine their social roles as well.

Another instance of textual support for role-playing occurs in the “tailor scene,” 
where Petruchio berates a tailor for the faults he finds in his work which, to Katharina, 
are not at all ill made. Petruchio says following the tailor scene: “For ‘tis the mind that 
makes the body rich;” and according to an actress’s account *Clamorous Voices*, “this is a 
way of saying that outsides don’t matter, names don’t matter.”

This scene works with the tension involving gender and performative appearances 
being addressed as well. If outsides do not matter, and names do not matter, Katharina 
and Petruchio can fashion their social status or personal presentations the ways they like. 
Identity is flexible, as is status, and therefore, changing fate and aspiring to power 
becomes even more possible. We should take the taming, at least for the purposes of this 
study, as an avenue to mock and jest at social mores and rituals. The taming is a lesson to 
do the opposite (as Petruchio so often demonstrates when negating everything Katharina 
says) of what society begs of both of them.

In the first scene between Petruchio and Katharina, we meet Petruchio plotting how 
he is going to “woo” Katharina, entering the arena sporting a male bravado, and also 
impromptu concocting a plan for how he is going to speak to her.

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41 Evelyn Gajowski, *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare* (New York: 
Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 150.
One must note how Petruchio is role-playing here: “He tells the audience that he intends his courtship to be a spirited one, based on role-playing; but the terms in which he describes his intentions show that he, too, has not yet worked out what his role will be.” In this scene where they first meet, Petruchio is putting on an act and is attempting to play a game with her. Not only does this set the scene for potential game-playing, but the sheer fact of Petruchio preparing for a game with this contrary persona addresses a key element in the scene: role-playing. Petruchio is confronting Katharina, as if in character, to go against social mores of their society and draw her out of her social world and into his absurd and unconventional one. This perception is aided by the casting of a woman as Petruchio where the audience is subtly reminded that Petruchio’s actor is, meta-theatrically, playing a role that is playing a role. And in turn, we understand that courtship rituals are constructed in the same way that Petruchio chooses to play this game with Katharina.

But how does Petruchio create the game that Katharina will play? Most significantly, the game lies within the language. This scene is notable for its use of anaphora, which Tina Packer defines: “Shakespeare understood this repeating and mirroring—it’s a figure of speech called anaphora in the art of rhetoric. Repeating the words of someone you want to align yourself with…” For instance, Petruchio says, “Alas! good Kate, I will not burden thee; for, knowing thee to be but young and light—“ while Katharina picks up his language, retorting, “Too light for such a swain as you to catch; and yet as heavy as my weight should be.” Petruchio replies: Should be! should—buzz!” (2.1.206)

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43 Gajowksi, Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare, 152.
44 Packer, Women of Will, 36.
Interestingly, anaphora is used when one wants to “align” himself or herself with someone. Although Petruchio seemingly does this in jest, a closer look at the text suggests that there is a mutuality that grows between the two of them in language that would suggest their unity. But then the question becomes, “What is uniting them?” And in the playing of this scene, one is tasked with deciding what keeps Katharina playing Petruchio’s game. While it could be initial attraction, it is also highly probable that they see themselves in each other, as two outsiders.

It is also no secret that Petruchio is outlandish, either; he “laughs at the conventions of society that give him power” as seen when he arrives to his wedding dressed ostentatiously and inappropriately.⁴⁵ According to Novy in “Patriarchy and Play”: “Petruchio…is not interested in using clothes as signs of a playful or serious rise in the social hierarchy…his choice of clothes for the roles he plays dramatizes his independence of the status concerns usually coded by Elizabethan coding.”⁴⁶ And in his first meeting with Katharina, his continual mockery of societal convention is further played out. For her, he is the first person to challenge her in this way. Katharina keeps playing the game because she has found an alliance in a social world where neither of them feels as though they belong. For Katharina, she is confined to a rigid social structure where, if she does not marry, her sister cannot, and she is shamed for it. The first words said to her in the play, in fact, are about changing her behavior and manner to be more socially appealing to men, where Hortensio says, “Mates, maid! how mean you that? No mates for you, unless you were of gentler, milder mould.” (I.1.58-60)

⁴⁵ Novy, “Patriarchy and Play,” 268.
⁴⁶ Ibid., 270.
But in playing this game, the interaction “[creates] a private language” between the two of them to begin with; also, when paired with two-women casting, we see a kind of equality emerge, where one woman is pushing back and engaging in verbal games with a woman clothed in man’s attire, and that is empowering for each of them. According to Fiona Shaw, too, in *Clamorous Voices*, “The Shrew is also about upstarts and outsiders, an unruly woman and a subversive suitor.”

This outsider perspective is important; Katharina is a woman who feels caught within conformity and forced to forgo her sense of selfhood. Thus, Katharina and Petruchio share language in a way that seems symbiotic. There is an unspoken alliance here, or equality between the two of them. This rhetorical matching they use helps to justify women playing both Katharina and Petruchio, allowing the scene to be read as play rather than straight subjugation.

Another scene where Katharina and Petruchio use game-playing is the “sun and moon scene,” where Petruchio tries to convince Katharina that the sun is the moon and vice-versa; if she does not comply to his definitions, they must turn back on their way home and begin again. How the game is played here affects what Katharina discovers about herself in relationship to Petruchio. Does it entirely mitigate the sexist elements that come before? Not entirely. But what it does do is show that Katharina has agency in her own taming. According to the late actor Raul Julia, who played Petruchio in A Shakespeare in the Park production of *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1980 opposite Meryl Streep: “I love

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her and all I’m going to do is give her the opportunity to find out for herself that she has a choice.”

Critics argue that Katharina’s decision to be “tamed” is essentially in her own hands; that is to say, while Petruchio engages in these acts of cruelty, including starvation, the taming is mitigated by the fact that Katharina has to choose to play into the game that he is presenting her with. And once she does—once she unbridles her imagination—she can not only play the game, but also take control of it.

One source insists: “Reluctant at first, eventually Kate comes to understand that when power and dominance are played as games rather than inherited as societal and ideological necessities, a kind of freedom is achieved.” One cannot deliberately avoid the sexism question through this lens of game-playing, but it does generate the most activity in the scene as well and gives the actress playing Katharina a stake in her own activity and not as someone who will remain silent and helpless. It also provides an arc for her, one where she learns how marriage—and her role in it—is a presentational societal construct. If she and Petruchio as outsiders, this is not a game either of them will want to play, necessarily, but they understand its social necessity.

But how does Katharina find her voice and agency? According to John C. Bean: “…Kate is tamed not by Petruchio’s whip but by the discovery of her own imagination, for when she learns to recognize the sun for the moon and the moon for the dazzling sun she is discovering the liberating power of laughter and play.” And this in itself makes the play playable; as opposed to playing stagnant opposition as an action, Katharina here

50 Gajowski, *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare*, 152.
is discovering her imagination and how it frees her. She is not “tamed,” per se, but joins in on an even level. And that changes what we typically understand as “taming” into an active participation by two people in a scene where they reimagine, “a new world and a new society between the two of them.”

There is some validity in this; if connected to what, in Clamorous Voices, says is Katharina learning the “freeing possibilities of conceding anything,” then the sun and moon scene becomes a reflection of Kate learning to challenge the social realm she lives in by denying the world’s validity through its most basic symbols: sun and moon. Playing the game with Petruchio isn’t necessarily a form of his subjugation, but a way he’s encouraging her to see the world, challenge what it presents, and reinvent it together as two outsiders. She even goes as far as to take ownership of what she discovers, making it not a one-sided game, but one that she can eventually control her stake in when she says, “I know it is the moon.” (4.5.17) Thus, the game is hers to win as well.

An important question to ask as a reader and performer is, “How does this Katharina’s final speech come about when Katharina is silent for the most of the play?”

The word “shrew,” says Fiona Shaw, means “noisy one.” Yet Katharina is silent for the play’s majority. The final monologue, however, in conjunction with the previous two scenes, helps to answer where Katharina’s voice went and where her sudden verbosity emerges from.

All Kate has to retaliate in the first scenes of the play is language. And when that is taken away from her by Petruchio, seeing as in the sun and moon scene she has to

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53 Rutter, Clamorous Voices, 19.
54 Rutter, Clamorous Voices, 1.
essentially reclaim the text for herself until that point she has to make herself heard with physicality. Even *Clamorous Voice* states: “[In] the conventional taming version, ‘noisy’ Kate, silenced throughout, is invited at the end to speak; this ‘tamed’ shrew talks and talks and talks.” There is something to be said for her silence throughout the play and her verbosity now, as she is providing an outpouring of language.

What is interesting in this scene, when Katharina gives her final speech, is how her own language has seemed to change from the first scene with Petruchio, and how, then, this final speech might be an expression of her “taming.” Comparatively, her words are seemingly submissive, asking women to place their hands under their husband’s foot and generally subscribe to roles as wives. But given how her taming has been framed based on the previous two scenes, her intention has to go far beyond that in order to fit in with the thru-line of the piece. One must question where this outpouring of language originates from, why she is saying it, and in conjunction with that, how has Katharina changed over the course of the play as embodied here. In the sun-and-moon scene Katharina unbridles her imagination, and that is where the shift in her “taming” narrative first occurs, but the ending speech must clarify how she has developed specifically.

*Shakespeare and the Shrew* recalls the multiple ways this scene is typically played: That she is sincere and that this is a happy ending. Sinead Cusack in *Clamorous Voices* remarks: “I think the play is about Kate being liberated. At the end that so-called ‘submission speech is really about how her spirit has been allowed to soar free.” This presents one possibility. Next, she is sincere, but this is a tragic ending where, “Petruchio is to make sure he publicly humiliates his wife...[as] a man who considers her better than

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56 Rutter, *Clamorous Voices*, 1.
the other women, but not one who considers her too good to abase herself in front of the other men.”

Another ending might be that she does not mean it what she says, but allows Petruchio to think he does. Or perhaps she does not mean it, but is secretly allied with Petruchio so she can win him points against the other men. Alternatively, she is stating the Renaissance position on marriage where the content of the speech becomes irrelevant and she is expressing the unselfishness of true love by doing what her partner wants. Or, perhaps, “the speech serves as a reassurance to [the men] that Kate will speak to them in their traditional language…a common code reinforcing its society’s beliefs…”

The approach of this study will be to explore how to synthesize: using this language purposefully, what it means to be on the same page as Petruchio in the use of the language, and using it in a way that goes beyond simply winking to the audience that this is a social farce, but a more serious call to action on the audience’s behalf. Because it will also be performed at the end of this study, it should be a reflection which juxtaposes the previous scenes: how does this scene’s meaning change in the context of this study, placed alongside other interpretations of power among Shakespeare’s women?

For now, the ending might be played as a challenge to the audience. Fiona Shaw says that the play belongs to Kate by the end: “She speaks, and says everything she wants to say, more beautifully than anybody else has said it…Kate makes the men take themselves on. She is saying, ‘I acknowledge the system. I don’t think we can change this; -- which

57 Ibid., 24.
is a terrible indictment of a system of patriarchy that is so strong it is unchangeable even for its own good.\(^6\)

In this study, the final speech can be seen as a challenge to the audience, as if to say, “If this is what I’m being taught, this is what you should do, too,” in order to present an example of what patriarchy demands of women. If Katharina and Petruchio are framed as being on the same page, too, Katharina is realizing that she has the power to make the world what she wants it to be. In this sense, the ending is the appearance of a taming but is really a manifestation of Kate’s full knowledge that what she is reciting is commonly held doctrine of woman’s behavior. If she can make her own world, and if she knows she can, then why not challenge the audience to do the same by handing them the complete opposite of what they have garnered from this study in the first place.

In crafting *The Taming of the Shrew* for performance, balancing the inherent sexism of this play with the concept of role-playing becomes the crux of the way into the world. We cannot ignore Petruchio’s acts, given their presence in the text, but instead find a way to play it that embraces the inherent playfulness of the piece.

The text becomes personalized when framed as a game between outsiders, especially when it is two women. While this does not entirely remove the threat of the cruelty that is the traditional taming, it does not mean that Katharina does not change or develop in the process. Rather, it affects audience perception of violence and sexism in the crafting of her empowerment. If we know a woman is playing the part of Petruchio, too, we understand that what is being presented is highly presentational, as masculinity is a putting-on, or a societal role that a woman, as a man, is performing. This role-playing

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tactic allows for the construction of a world-within-a-world set forth by the way the play is structured. Having this knowledge minimizes the traditional taming threat, and simultaneously informs a kind of equality that Kate and Petruchio can share in terms of language and game playing. We explore a woman and man with equality. And at the same time, we can play the circumstances written to make a statement about masculinity as a wearable tool for the actor because we have the safety net of this kind of casting; we can do the play as written knowing that the entire play is being “put on” or “worn.” The stakes that create play are not removed, but Katharina and Petruchio’s way of relating to each other in the text is emphasized.

*As You Like It*

*As You Like It* follows a young woman, Rosalind, as she is banished from court life and enters the Forest of Arden—a pastoral world that presents newfound opportunities for her to pursue and woo Orlando, who, too, escapes to the forest, but to avoid threats of death from his elder brother. In the process of wooing Orlando, Rosalind employs the use of a cross-dressed disguise as Ganymede to meet these ends, and not only that, but also to establish a sense of safety and financial security for herself while also exploring the newfound freedom and agency that her disguise brings. When questioning where Rosalind’s power comes from, then, one can best attribute it to the positive results of her cross-dressed state, and more specifically: how it is informed by: her typified role as a “comic heroine” in the text; the way her language becomes amplified using the Ganymede persona as a platform; and how the disguise gives her the opportunity to play at patriarchy, challenging masculine and feminine definitions.
What also separates Rosalind from other women in Shakespeare’s plays is not just the act of her cross-dressing and how she uses it to amplify her voice and share her language, but also how she finds linguistic mutuality, and therefore trust, with her cousin, Celia, who she loves practically as a sister. So while *As You Like It* explores how freeing the pastoral world of Arden is for Rosalind, it also emphasizes the simultaneous strength and test of the female friendship, and even the power of the female disguise, through Celia.

Rosalind is best described as the “comic heroine” not just for her wittiness and good humor, but how she interacts and toys with the social mores set forth by her society by turning them on their heads. Whereas the ‘shrew’ archetype as embodied in Katharina “provokes a battle of he sexes,” the comic heroine “does not actively resist the social and political hegemony of the men, but as an irresistible version of the Other she successfully competes for our favor with the masculine representatives of the social Self.”

In this sense, the power of women is built into the play, where the comic heroine can subvert gender restrictions and thereby challenge masculine authority because she is in a space where she is unchecked and free to do so. So if she is not directly, as it would seem, fighting a patriarchal system, she is still taking part in the privileges of this masculine Self that she can use to her advantage as a tool for power.

As observed throughout *As You Like It*, Rosalind best accomplishes this through her Ganymede persona, a male disguise that, by merely donning it, invites the idea that masculinity is a wearable and constructed set of traits that women can use to achieve their goals. Therefore, this disguise works for Rosalind on multiple levels: first and foremost, to inspire a heightened self-confidence. That is, Rosalind immediately recognizes her

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ability to play the man in a self-assured way once she dons the Ganymede disguise early on in the text: She says, “We’ll have a swashing and a martial outside, as many other mannish cowards have/that do outface it with their semblances.” (1.3.120-122)

Here Rosalind creates a distinction between inside and outside by acknowledging that masculinity is worn. But what is more interesting is how “mannish” becomes the operative word here, meaning like or similar to a man. That is, a type of man, a presentation of man, but not one that is an inherent part of identity necessarily: it is a putting-on. In that sense, it means Rosalind can play the man just as any coward can, because regardless of how one feels or exists internally, it is their outer persona that everyone sees. Thus, the disguise is an expression of male bravado that allows her to adopt a semblance of bravery, and therefore become empowered. From here, Rosalind feels fully comfortable and even entitled to adopting a male identity to assure her safety and act on her ambitions.

Once Rosalind begins, Ganymede, the disguise itself, according to Elizabethan conventions of dress, releases her as well. According to Clamorous Voices: “Literally and figuratively the disguise releases her: you have to imagine her going into doublet and hose from Elizabethan petticoat and farthingale and a rib-cracking corset.” Thus, through dress alone, Rosalind can capably release herself from courtly restriction, physically releasing her body to the possibilities of freedom in a pastoral world.

Clamorous Voices elaborates on how courtly restriction operates in the text itself: “The Court is structured around traditionally male values, it’s a patriarchy established on

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62 Rutter, Clamorous Voices, 104.
masculine priorities. It’s all suggested in Orlando’s story.”63 So while the play begins
with Orlando’s grievances against his elder brother and subsequent victory in a wrestling
match, in Arden we find the opportunity to integrate ourselves into the text from
Rosalind’s perspective. The world becomes fresh and exciting, and all of it is experienced
primarily through her.

Understanding female freedom in As You Like It, therefore, heavily tied to
conventions of the pastoral: a lilting, scenic landscape of sheep and shepherds that seems
removed from time, but also a universe that welcomes social disruption. In the context of
this play, it is where those in court who have not found belonging, or who have been
banished—particularly in the case of Rosalind and her father, Duke Senior—find greater
opportunities for freedom of existence, especially in speech, dress, and manner.

For Rosalind specifically, her speech practically explodes from her mouth when she
enters Arden, as she becomes incredibly verbose with long-winding speeches and
witticisms. According to Tina Packer, Rosalind becomes capable of finding herself
through her disguise, now having the power of self-expression and ability to act on what
she wants outside of a courtly setting. So while she says very little at the beginning of the
play, in the guise of a man, she interacts with everyone freely.64 This is especially true
when she, a woman alone in the forest with her cousin Celia, purchases a sheep cote from
a shepherd, Corin: “I pray thee, if it stand with honesty, Buy thou the cottage, pasture and
the flock, And thou shalt have to pay for it of us.” (2.4.91-93)

Not only does Rosalind have the ability to convincingly present herself as a man—as
it provides a vehicle for her confidence—but she finds that at the beginning of the play,

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63 Rutter, Clamorous Voices, 98.
64 Packer, Women of Will, 184.
she can use it to win herself security in the form of a living space and make monetary transactions with men, some of whom would probably otherwise disregard her or discriminate against her for her gender.

But Rosalind is not braving this move from one world to the next alone: with her is her cousin, Celia. Through an exploration of the female friendship in *As You Like It*, one further understands how Rosalind’s verbal power evolves in this move to the pastoral world and how her disguise empowers her.

The female friendship in Shakespeare in the comedies is rarely depicted in Shakespeare beyond Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello*. But what is remarkable about the Celia and Rosalind relationship is how it rests on a sense of evenness between the two of them; while Helena and Hermia’s relationship is put to the test in a quarrel between them and two other men, and Desdemona and Emilia are separated by class distinctions of mistress and lady-in-waiting, Celia and Rosalind share a mutual bond that remains largely unbroken or subject to serious betrayal throughout the play. This is established primarily in how the both of them interact together in speech, but also in how their cross-dressed disguises complement one another’s in such a way that allows them to survive in the forest.

Celia and Rosalind, from the beginning of the play, are described in the following way: “never two ladies loved as they do.” (1.1.112) This is further established not only in their addresses to one another, where they refer to one another as “Dear Celia” and “sweet Rose, my dear Rose,” but more specifically how they a form a kind of linguistic mutuality. (1.2.23) It is both in what they are saying and how much they say to one another that create this sense of equality.
Rosalind, first and foremost, says she “will forget the condition of my estate, to rejoice in yours,” which establishes an emotional connection of sharing in one another’s happiness and grief. (1.2.15-16) Celia returns with, “for what he hath taken away from thy father perforce, I will render thee again in affection;” saying she will make up for Duke Frederick’s tyrannical rule and banishment of Rosalind’s father through her love for Rosalind; she will give a piece of herself to her as recompense. (1.2.19-21) On both sides, love for one another is mutual. But this sense of equality as women is not limited to this sense of give and take in affection: it is also important to acknowledge here how Rosalind and Celia speak an even amount in this scene, and encourage one another’s thoughts to be shared.

Rosalind, throughout this first scene between the two of them, prompts Celia with questions that invite her participation in conversation: “what think you of falling in love?” and “what shall be our sport then?” (1.2.25-30) In return, Celia proposes they “mock the good housewife Fortune…that her gifts may henceforth by bestowed equally” upon women. (1.2.31-33) Celia and Rosalind, in the following lines, participate equally in this sport Celia has devised, uniting themselves together through a mutual understanding of womanhood and sharing almost an even number of lines between the two of them. This sense of mutuality exists early on in the play. However, once Celia and Rosalind are in Arden, and Rosalind is in full pursuit of Orlando, this balance in language changes, and Rosalind cannot stop talking.

In the scene right before Rosalind teaches Orlando to woo women, Celia and Rosalind have their first moment alone together in the forest—as women—where Rosalind can break from her disguise and express her lovesickness. Throughout this
scene, Celia and Rosalind engage in similar banter as earlier in the play which suggests mutuality between them, as Rosalind plays Celia’s guessing game to find out who has been writing her love poetry, hanging on Celia’s every word. However, a shift occurs once Rosalind finds out the verses belonged to Orlando. From there, she can barely contain herself, and Celia, in attempting to tell Rosalind of Orlando, continually finds herself interrupted by her chattering friend. After multiple attempts to silence Rosalind, she at last says, “I would sing my song without a burden: thou bringst me out of tune.” (3.2.247-248)

In this scene, it is important to observe who is talking and how much. Rosalind’s comparative silence earlier in the text emphasizes the influence of courtly restriction on her speech, so her verbosity in Arden, then, signifies two key notions: first, that in a pastoral setting, Rosalind is more apt to express herself in a way that takes up space more than she would have in court; and second, while her newfound verbosity may be granted by her disguise in some ways, it is limited in others, in the sense that she feels continually compelled to betray it. She claims that because she is a woman, when she thinks, she “must speak.” (3.2.249-250) Rosalind’s disguise, therefore, does not afford her the personal feminine expression of feeling that she would like; her outside, at least until she encounters Orlando in Arden, limits the expression of her inner self. Hence, this scene becomes incredibly important for Rosalind and Celia’s relationship, serving as the one time neither of them has to exist cross-dressed or disguised and can freely open up to each other.

However, since Rosalind continually brings Celia “out of tune,” there exists a simultaneous threat to their mutuality. Although Rosalind’s disguise has greatly
empowered her to take up space verbally, her infatuation with Orlando has caused her to abandon the equality in expression as seen in her first scene with Celia in the text, where each woman spoke roughly an even amount. While this would seem that their friendship is put to the test, their sense of equality in the play is not entirely abandoned. Celia, here the quieter of the two, is still afforded commentary to ground Rosalind and attempt to level her lovesickness with sense and reason, asking her to “Cry ‘holla’ to thy tongue…” as it “curvets unseasonably.” (3.2.244-245) Though this scene is an example of Rosalind’s growth towards simultaneous empowerment and lovesickness, Celia still remains to provide her cousin with every detail she craves, a sign of their unbreakable bond.

Celia and Rosalind, beyond use of language, also take advantage of their disguises in a way that serves as an advantage to them both. While Rosalind disguises herself as Ganymede, which, as mentioned, provides her with a sense of security by playing the man, Celia’s disguise as Aliena, a shepherdess, helps win them security as well. Because both of them are disguised, one sees how both representations of masculinity and femininity work in tandem to achieve a common goal. Rosalind says to the shepherd Corin when attempting to purchase his cote, “Here’s a young maid with travel much oppressed and faints for succor,” referring to an exhausted and fainting Celia. (2.4.73-74)

Rosalind cross-dresses as Ganymede for safety, given that the masculine disguise likely makes both her and Celia less vulnerable while unarmed in the forest, but with Celia dressed as Aliena, the women can take advantage of “both sides” of the gender binary to work with and manipulate. Rosalind can gain economic freedom for both of them via male disguise, while Celia can use a presentation of stereotypical femininity to
suggest a kind of external fragility, and one that allows her to manipulate others for accommodations. In this way, Rosalind draws a physical distinction between men and women to achieve an end; it is not because she believes women are weak, but she and Celia understand both presentations as constructions that the public will find convincing.

Interestingly, too, both women disguised as two separate genders has made them more successful than their male counterparts, Orlando and his servant Adam, who, too, are wandering through Arden nearly fainting for want of food and shelter. While Rosalind and Celia successfully acquire a cote and financial security, Orlando resorts to violence and intimidation to win food in the forest, and it is these differences that paint Rosalind and Celia as the more resourceful pair.

While Celia and Rosalind share a more equal bond in shared language, the same cannot necessarily be said between that of Rosalind and Orlando, where, especially in the wooing scene, she clearly is the one endowed with greater power. And not just here, but from the outset of the play, Rosalind consistently has greater capability in speech and self-expression. Her disguise merely allows her to amplify her speech and give way to self-expression, becoming a vehicle through which she can speak her mind to the one she loves and actively pursues.

According to Clamorous Voices, “Ganymede affords her the control that might otherwise be beyond her. That is not to say that the ‘man’ Rosalind can control things, the ‘woman’ can’t. Because it’s always only Rosalind.”

Rosalind is always herself, but through her disguise, she as the comic heroine is able to appropriate masculine qualities that she can use to play within patriarchy and influence

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65 Rutter, Clamorous Voices, 109.
Orlando to love her. In the role of Ganymede, she becomes a male figure and self-proclaimed love expert who can sway him to woo Rosalind.

What is also interesting is how Orlando and Rosalind each respectively embody the feminine and masculine. While Rosalind has her disguise, Orlando has a feminine characteristic as well, especially in the way his character plays within the structure of the text. According to *Clamorous Voices*: “Orlando plays the conventional woman’s part in the play. He doesn’t initiate any of the action in *As You Like It*. He spends most of his time asking questions—which she answers—and what happens to him is classically what happens to women in Shakespeare.” Rosalind, conversely, “[holds] her own in conversation and [is] far from being chiefly [spectator] or [assistant] to the men.” Thus, their typical gender roles are reversed and serve as complements to one another, endowing Rosalind with an authority she could not normally enjoy in a conventional social structure.

However, what distinctly separates Rosalind and Orlando comes through primarily in speech: while Rosalind becomes increasingly verbose, Orlando struggles to express himself or write decent verse for Rosalind throughout the play.

Upon meeting Rosalind for the first time after the wrestling match, Orlando finds himself at a loss for words: “What passion hangs these weights upon my tongue…or Charles or something weaker masters thee…” (1.2.257-260) Here he is seriously inarticulate; whereas Rosalind can pinpoint the source of her passion and express herself in as many words as possible, Orlando is rendered silent or unable to speak properly. He is also incredibly incapable of writing poetry, some of which Rosalind describes as

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66 Ibid., 105.
67 Ibid.
having feet that “were lame and could not bear themselves without the verse and therefore stood lamely in the verse.” (3.2.169-171) Needless to say, Orlando has comparatively little control of language.

And it is this lack of language that allows Rosalind to use hers, not in a sparring match like Katharina and Petruchio, but in a game she is playing by herself, and one she continually keeps winning. While Orlando continually asks Rosalind questions or encourages her to speak more and explain her methodology for curing lovesickness, Rosalind improvises on-the-spot mouthfuls of text to corner Orlando into a position where he must come to her cote and woo her as Rosalind, but in the guise of Ganymede.

In the scene immediately before with Celia, Rosalind expressed a limitation of the Ganymede disguise, as she betrayed her male garb in order to speak freely with Celia when she said, “dost thou think, though I am caparisoned like a man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition?” (3.2.194-196) citing a discrepancy between her womanly qualities and male exterior. In this scene with Orlando, however, Rosalind becomes a woman of many words, and in this way, the disguise becomes the vehicle by which she expresses her love through Ganymede, contributing to an overall externalization of self.

Critically speaking, Rosalind using her disguise is a tool to get what she wants, and thus she fits properly within her role as the comic heroine. In line with the definition of the comic heroine, she is not directly out to change the social system she is operating in; she is using tactics here that derive directly from a patriarchal system to reach her goal of wooing Orlando successfully. One has to acknowledge, however, in spite of this goal, that her power is not compromised because she does not actively choose to rebel against the system directly.
According to Jean Howard in *Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England*, Rosalind is still victim to the patriarchal system: “…in playing Rosalind for Orlando, she acts out the parts scripted for women by her culture. Doing so does not release Rosalind from patriarchy but reveals the constructed nature of patriarchy’s representations of the feminine and shows a woman manipulating those representations in her own interest…”

Furthermore, Howard argues that cross-dressing on the Renaissance stage emphasizes what disguised women cannot do. Howard’s arguments are valid, but it is important to remember that the use of patriarchy does not eliminate Rosalind’s ability to find power for herself in Arden. The question of Rosalind’s power as the comic heroine stems from not what she does to change patriarchy, but how she makes patriarchy comply with her needs. If this social system cannot be easily overturned, even in a pastoral world, Rosalind’s resolve comes from finding pathways through it that amplify her voice, meet her needs, and get her what she wants. She does not need to be “released” from patriarchy because it does not control her; she appropriates the structure for herself. It is important to focus on what makes her an individual, and therefore powerful, woman, rather than highlighting her inability to overturn a social system.

So, while Rosalind as the comic heroine does use patriarchy to her advantage and use its conceptions of womanhood by playing Ganymede playing Rosalind as a tool, she is not emphasizing what women cannot do, but what they are capable of doing. The disguise she wears gives her the social mobility to express her personal version of the feminine through actions taken in the guise of the masculine. One can argue that, through

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68 Howard, “Gender Struggle,” 435.
69 Ibid., 439.
the use of her disguise, she is presenting a type of feminine on her own terms, using a masculine presentation to give leverage to an individual feminine self, which is embodied in this scene by her emotional expression and the clarity and length of her speech. Language itself is not exclusive to Rosalind, but the way in which she uses it, the way in which it escapes from her, is.

Rosalind’s presentation of scripted femininity then—“full of tears, full of smiles” certainly does reveal the constructed nature of patriarchy’s representations of stereotypical femininity, but it is separate from her individual expression of the feminine. (3.3.412) One has to remember that while cross-dressed she is still Other in that she blends feminine and masculine qualities as she takes up space, forms verbal bonds with women like Celia, makes a man her audience, and uses words in such a particular way that Orlando cannot compete. She is ultimately empowered by her ability to qualify masculinity and femininity, coalescing them together to express herself at her fullest potential.

Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night, the third of the comedies explored in this study, centers on another cross-dressed comic heroine, Viola. Having lost her brother at sea, and now shipwrecked on the coast of Illyria, she sets out to become a page to Illyria’s governor, the duke Orsino, and act as a messenger on his behalf. In both a comic and tragic turn of events, Viola entraps herself in an unfortunate love triangle with Duke Orsino and the countess Olivia, where Orsino uses Viola to pursue Olivia, Olivia has only eyes for Viola in her cross-dressed state as Cesario, and Viola, in turn, loves Orsino, who, only regarding her as her cross-dressed persona Cesario, does not return her affection.
Like Rosalind, Viola cross-dresses, but not for the initial aim of pursuing or wooing a man like Orlando; conversely, Viola’s male persona Cesario in conjured from a need for security and safety in a foreign place. In accordance with Viola’s given circumstances—primarily a lost, possibly deceased, brother and being in a foreign terrain—cross-dressing for Viola is less of a choice, and more of a practical and emotional necessity. In order to fully explore Viola’s power in *Twelfth Night*, it is important to focus on how Viola’s role as both comic heroine and “androgyne” coincide with her tragic given circumstances, and, with that in mind, how she takes these circumstances in stride with incredible resolve and empathy to rectify her situation when all of the odds are against her.

Viola’s role as the comic heroine is defined, similarly to Rosalind, as a woman who uses conventions of patriarchy to advance herself. Like Rosalind, Viola does not directly challenge patriarchy, but finds herself using a cross-dressed persona to adopt the privileges of the masculine self, and thereby play within patriarchy to get what she desires. However, while Viola cross-dresses, the act in itself considered an act of social subversion, she is still not free of the societal restrictions that are inherently part of Illyria.

While *Twelfth Night* does exist in somewhat of a separate terrain that exists apart from Viola’s typical reality, Illyria, unlike the pastoral Arden, is still within the world of the court. Without pastoral convention as part of the play’s structure, Viola lacks the freedom in her cross-dressed disguise that Rosalind has in hers. More specifically, Viola, now in Illyria, as opposed to adopting male attire to gain social privileges, gains male status as Cesario, but cannot act on her convictions directly as Rosalind can within the
disguise. She becomes a page in service of a duke, and cannot seduce him directly in
spite of her love for him, and furthermore, she is grappling with the loss of a vessel that
would allow her to escape elsewhere. Rosalind heads to Arden by choice, bringing with
her jewels and wealth to subsist, whereas Viola must become part of a social structure out
of survival, economically and otherwise.

According to Lisa Wolpe, Artistic Director of the Los Angeles Women’s
Shakespeare Company, “When I think about Twelfth Night, it’s about the vulnerability of
a girl’s experience at that time, meaning that if you were Viola, discovered as an
unattached single woman, alone in a strange place like Illyria, you could be raped or
killed.”

This is not to say that Illyria as a courtly world is entirely limiting however;
Casey Charles in Gender Trouble in Twelfth Night describes it as “properly named Ill-
lyria in order to demonstrate how the phenomenon of love itself operates as a mechanism
that destabilizes gender binarism…” Based on Viola’s presence in this world, gender is
able, as in Arden, be turned on its head, but how Viola personally experiences her social
disruptiveness is quite different than Rosalind’s.

In this sense, the circumstances by which Viola cross-dresses are not about
freedom; in fact, they create a sense of limitation. Rosalind, as mentioned previously, is
never free from patriarchy, but that does not mean she cannot take advantage of it. Viola
uses patriarchal standards in a similar fashion, but for her, this subversion does not allow

70 Elaine Avila, “Lisa Wolpe Uses Shakespeare to Bend Gender Roles,” American
Theatre, August 2014, 6.
124.
her to relish in language quite as freely as Rosalind does, or in a similar way, as Viola grapples with the danger of sacrificing her security.

According to Jean Howard in *The Theatre, Gender Struggle in Early Modern England*, “Viola adopts male dress as a practical means of survival in an alien environment, and, perhaps, as a magical means of keeping alive a brother believed drowned.” In this way, argues Howard, cross-dressing becomes a “psychological haven” or a method by which Viola can find comfort and solace, or attempt to find resolve, in spite of danger and personal tragedy. Perhaps, given that she and her brother Sebastian are twins who look so startlingly alike that their identities are often mistaken for one another’s, the disguise allows her to recall his memory and presence. It is an act of self-assurance and belief in his life, even though he may be dead. Thus, the disguise serves both the purpose of a safe haven as well as an emotional comfort.

Furthermore, she is balancing her love for Orsino while being simultaneously employed by him as a page, and therefore must perform the man for the sake of duty towards him and consequently suppress her affection. The disguise inhibits her more than it releases her, and with these circumstances it creates for Viola, at least compared to Rosalind, Viola speaks far fewer words. However, it is the frustration of being caught in a love triangle, unable to express herself, and managing her melancholic state that gives way to perhaps the most significant soliloquy in the text: the “Ring Speech.”

As Viola speaks the Ring Speech, she talks about how the countess Olivia has fallen in love with her, and that she, the messenger, is caught in the middle as a one who is not only loved, but also a lover whose affections are not returned or able to be requited

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72 Howard, “Gender Struggle,” 431.
73 Ibid.
on account of her disguise. The speech highlights a few key concerns for Viola on account of the disguise, drawing distinctions “woman” and “man” respectively, and how the male disguise has inhibited her rather than empowered her. She says, “…my master loves her dearly; and I (poor monster) fond as much on him;” (2.1.34) and, “As I am man, my state is desperate for my master’s love.” (2.1.36-37) In her male disguise, being “man,” she is unable to express her feelings, as Rosalind would to woo Orlando in her garb as Ganymede. Cesario, for Viola, is a “poor monster,” a reference to her having both male and female qualities, being androgynous and indistinctly neither man nor woman entirely. She is caught in an in-between state, in terms of where her gender identity lies.

To give better context to the idea of androgyny in the text, one has to know how it was received in the society in which she lived, which informs her feelings of frustration, fear, and discomfort. Essentially, Viola is seen in her disguise as a threat to her society, where, according to David Cressy in *Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England*, there was a strict fear of “disorderly costuming, off-stage as well as on,” and cross-dressing in general was considered in the Elizabethan era as “abomination unto the lord.” In a Christian society, it was adulterous against the word of God.74 This knowledge creates an additional layer in the text, where not only does the audience to which Viola speaks—perhaps Time, or simply those in the theater—have an awareness of cross-dressing as a social taboo, but she has a high level of personal anxiety from using cross-dressing as a tool, knowing it to be a sin.

Even outside of the Ring Speech, Viola’s androgynous state is addressed throughout the play, and it is not so much a blessing as it is an emotional hindrance.

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74 Cressy, “Gender Trouble,” 442-443.
Feste, Olivia’s fool, says, “Now Jove, in his next commodity of hair, send thee a beard!” as an indication of her boyishness and subtle femininity as Cesario. (3.1.44-45) Her response of “By my troth, I’ll tell thee, I am almost sick for one; though I would not have it grow on my chin.” (3.1.46-48) This expresses most clearly the nature of her predicament: she pines for a man, particularly Orsino; but also she wishes her disguise were more convincing, though she would not personally wish for a beard outside of her cross-dressed state. These lines express not only her androgynous appearance, but also her conflict surrounding it. She longs for the ability to share her truest self without need of disguise and still play the man convincingly, or better, be herself and ensure her safety.

In other cases, Malvolio, the steward of Olivia’s household, describes Viola as Cesario as, “in standing water, between boy and man.” (1.5.159) She herself even admits that she does not have the aptitude to play the man’s part in swordplay when she says, “Pray God defend me! A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man,” when confronted with the possibility of dueling Sir Andrew Aguecheek. (3.4.302-303) Viola’s disguise, then, exists somewhere between boy and man as a youth, given Malvolio’s notice of what seems to be her feminine qualities, or even Orsino’s comment about her “rubious” lips and her “small pipe…as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,” it is made clear that Viola falls somewhere between woman and man, having the qualities of both through disguise and physicality, but she never succeeds in presenting entirely believably male or female. (1.4.32-33) Her androgyny makes it doubly difficult for her to be taken seriously in her male persona, and by that same token her womanhood is constantly at risk of being exposed. This creates not only a safety concern, but also expresses, perhaps, an internal motivation to express her feelings and not be in disguise.
Betraying the disguise is not necessarily intentional, but an action she wishes she could take deeply. And this is where her conflict lies. The Ring Speech, then, springs from an inability to act, and here she details her frustration to find a solution. For the purposes of this study, the Ring Speech will use the context of Viola’s aforementioned circumstances and attempt to exemplify how Shakespeare’s comic women can be both cross-dressed and opposed to the disguise.

But, if the disguise does not free or release Viola, where does her power come from? Again, similarly to Rosalind, Jean Howard argues in *The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England* that, “Viola’s is a properly feminine subjectivity; and this fact countervails the threat posed by her clothes and removes any possibility that she might permanently aspire to masculine privilege and prerogatives.”

Viola is playing within patriarchy to find her power, though, certainly, she is not directly aspiring to it permanently. And as mentioned earlier, she would rather betray her disguise if she could still be secure. But her power, unlike Rosalind’s, does not come from using the disguise of Cesario as a vehicle for language; rather, it is how she uses the disguise, one that limits her more than expands her freedom, that truly testifies to her resolve and strength as a character. It exists to keep her alive, allowing her to safely search for her brother Sebastian, and subtly grow closer to Orsino and gain his trust as a page, and hopefully, ideally, as Viola.

But one should not think of this as conforming to a patriarchal ideal, or that she is cross-dressing simply for a marriage by the play’s end alone. She is using the cards she is given in a situation she is practically forced into, grappling with loss and trying to protect

75 Howard, “Gender Struggle,” 432.
herself. The power comes from embracing her situation; her disguise may be a “wickedness wherein the pregnant enemy does much,” one that invokes sexual frustration and an inability to act, but she makes the best of it. (2.2.27-28) In spite of her state, she, additionally, acknowledges the effect it has on another woman, too, considering Olivia’s personal plight in loving a cross-dressed woman, or one who will not return her love.

And although Viola asks for time to affect change for her, as an expression of frustration, the speech would not be active if Viola simply resigned to letting events play themselves out. Being “desperate for [her] master’s love,” she has cause to act. (2.2.37) And furthermore, she feels bound, as a woman, to rectify Olivia’s situation as well, fully acknowledging—“now alas the day!”—that she is directly center in a love triangle that she has to find her way out of. (2.2.38)

According to Tina Packer in *Women of Will, Twelfth Night* is about “willing love into existence after a twin is lost, [and] changing the will of others.” In this way, Viola—as woman whose musical name Tina refers to as trying to find joy in the face of death—has the ability in her disguise, in spite of the limitations it provides, to influence how events will play out, particularly in the realm of sexual desire (especially because “will,” in this double-entendre, also refers to sexuality). Viola’s power comes from being an orchestrator who can amend the situation in whatever way she can, injecting joy into darkness. While she may feel entrapped by her disguise, and struggle to use it to its fullest capability as Rosalind does, it is her willingness to use it as a response to personal tragedy, and still amend her situation with empathy and resolve while in the disguise, that makes her powerful.

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77 Ibid.
In the sense of Viola being a comic heroine, and *Twelfth Night* operating within the structure of a comedy, its use of cross-dressing and subsequent androgyny reiterates a notion about gender that reoccurs throughout this study: that it is playable. And while Viola plays her disguise in a way that longs to betray it, she never does. And while she does not, based on the comic heroine definition, outwardly defy patriarchy, she is still using the structure it provides to meet her goal by the sheer fact of being disguised. Ultimately, it is a tool at her disposal, but even more so, it is her response to her disguise and the way she responds to her circumstances within it that confirms her power. As Paula S. Berggren says in *The Woman’s Part*: “…it would be foolish to see the male disguise merely as an indication of the female’s infirmity…the assumption of masculine garb creates no lady knights in Shakespeare’s scheme of things, but rather celebrates a flexibility and responsiveness that few men, in comedy or tragedy, can match.”  

*Othello*

Shakespeare’s tragedy *Othello* recounts the conflict between Othello, the “Moor of Venice” and his ensign in the Venetian army, Iago, who, after being passed up for promotion, plots to drive Othello into a jealous rage that ends in Desdemona’s death. Serving as attendant or lady in waiting to Desdemona throughout the play is Emilia, Iago’s wife, who acts as protector, confidante, informal advisor, and friend to Desdemona. In terms of understanding how women critically function in *Othello* in terms of structure and character in a feminist reading, it becomes imperative to analyze the role of Emilia and how she aspires towards power in a world that discourages her participation and speech. While the performance piece connected to this study will only

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feature the “willow scene” between Emilia and Desdemona, the knowledge of the play’s structure, and Emilia’s relationships with both her husband and lady, heavily influence the way in which the willow scene is played and contextualized in terms of understanding female power.

A major question surrounding Emilia as a character is related to her friendship with Desdemona, and how as a character she seems to betray that trust in order to service her husband Iago’s ambitions. According to Harry Berger in Impertinent Trifling: Desdemona’s Handkerchief, “Emilia’s behavior…straddles two different trajectories, one dominated by Desdemona and the other by Iago. In the first she is a faithful attendant, in the second a closemouthed watcher.” While a first impression would suggest a duplicitous reading of Emilia’s character, specifically one that exists to serve Iago’s malicious prerogatives, a closer analysis reveals the way in which Emilia relates to Iago as a wife is a product of the play’s structure as a domestic tragedy. Critically, she can be perceived as disloyal, a servant or audience to male ideas and prerogatives, and a traitor to Desdemona. However, while Emilia’s presumed duplicity is a subject of speculation, merely condemning her actions would be simplistic; her decisions, though they do seem to support Iago’s ambitions, are born from a patriarchal setup that encourages silence and complicity to man’s rules and desires.

Thus, we cannot entirely judge Emilia’s actions as an example of unwavering loyalty to Iago, although we must acknowledge that her actions are a product of the relationship she has with him. If one looks closely at how Emilia’s role in the tragedy

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plays out, she is a woman grappling with social expectations and prescribed wifely duties. But within that structure, particularly in the willow scene between her and Desdemona, she not only tries to redeem herself, but also redefines her relationship with Desdemona beyond being an attendant. She takes a private space—Desdemona’s chamber—and uses it not only as a feminine sanctuary against societal pressures and violent masculine ambitions, but does so by adopting the space as an arena to: speak freely and outwardly against her husband; express her want for sexual freedom; preach for men and women’s equality; and at the same time, impart this wisdom to Desdemona as doctrine, reminding her that women have more power than they believe they do. The space she creates becomes intimate, educational, and empowering.

Where Emilia’s power derives from, then, is how she exists within the tragic structure that tries to suppress and subjugate her, and how what she imparts to Desdemona in the willow scene is meant to encourage defiance against women’s assumed social positions. Emilia functions in the willow scene, a more tragic example of the female friendship in Shakespeare, to defy patriarchy outwardly. Emilia’s power, then, must not be judged entirely on not how she functions as an accessory to Iago’s plot—although it is necessary to understand her motivations and speech in the willow scene—but on what she does to condemn patriarchy through her relationship with Desdemona, and ultimately, how this relationship as embodied in the willow scene manifests itself by the play’s end when Emilia dies for her lady as a martyr. While Tina Packer says that “Women in Othello are unable to escape the institutional structures they live under,” Emilia in the willow scene and at the end of the play makes an effort to try.80

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80 Packer, Women of Will, 196.
The tragic structure of Othello informs the way women are treated or viewed by a patriarchal society. Whereas in the comedies women found protection in male disguise or had the verbal ability to outwardly oppose patriarchal structures, the domestic tragedy structure of Othello functions to suppress women’s voices and toy with the possibility of their deaths, which, in the text of the play, are shown to be preventable. What makes this tragedy specifically domestic is that it, “[springs] from a familial relationship, unlike tragedies which involve political murders and take place in the public sphere.”81 Furthermore, this type of tragedy exists in a structure where “…an intervention to save [Desdemona and Emilia’s] lives is dramatically presented as viable and possible.”82

However, it is important to note that within this structure, the only possible people who could prevent the deaths of Emilia and Desdemona are the men in the play; what makes the text a domestic tragedy is that no one personally intervenes to rescue either of them, and more than that, to listen to, trust, and respect them. Rather, men conform to tragic dramatic structure that places women in a position as audience to men; women who step outside of those boundaries and attempt to assume a more central role must pay for it in death.

Structurally, too, women become “audience” to male prerogatives and ambitions, where “the women are ultimately like the tragic audience in their sense of powerlessness and separateness.”83 In this sense, and unlike the comedies, women do not achieve mutuality with male counterparts; rather, they become an audience to their actions and

83 Lenz, The Woman’s Part, 84.
words, an accessory to their plots—sometimes unwillingly or unwittingly—and even silent in the face of male abuse.

For example: Desdemona, this source explains, establishes this role of audience member at the beginning of the play, especially when Othello says that Desdemona listens to his stories: “with a greedy ear/devour up my discourse.” (1.3.149-150)

But beyond being a listening ear to men, women’s inability to speak out against patriarchal behaviors also places them in audience roles. In the case of Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, a lack of trust in women discourages female participation in their own affairs and lives, and thus, she is not only audience to Othello, but discouraged from making decisions autonomously. Brabantio laments in her absence: “O heaven! How got she out? O treason of the blood! Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds by what you see them act…” (1.1.169-171) While Desdemona has the opportunity to act on her love for Othello by being with him, her father attempts to limit her through denouncing their union, here a form of patriarchal control.

And largely, while women in this play may attempt to act, they are encouraged to be audience members or even silent. Specifically in the case of Emilia, her husband, Iago, who speaks hatefully of women, encourages her silence throughout the play. Through verbal intimidation and disrespect, as well as by having a dominant masculine status in the public eye, he moves her to silence.

In Act II. I, for instance, Iago in conversation with Desdemona and Emilia, complains broadly about the general behavior of women. When Desdemona exclaims, “Alas, she has no speech!” when Cassio speaks to her, Iago laments, “In faith, too much. I find it,
still, when I have to sleep. Marry, before your ladyship, I grant, she puts her tongue a little in her heart and chides with thinking.” (2.1.103-107)

Iago explains that while Emilia is silent in public view, she likely scolds him privately to herself. This draws a distinction between Emilia’s public performance of their marriage versus how she would address it in a personal, private space; their relationship, Iago well knows, is merely a putting-on for public display. And he, too, knows Emilia has to follow the societal rules of wifely duty, which means not speaking out against Iago in a public place, or at all. She speaks most freely with Iago privately, but when the public is involved, she must be audience to his words. She must listen to his broad, hateful generalizations about womankind, which he describes as: “…pictures out of door, bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens…” referring to them as noisy, reckless, and difficult in a private, domestic sphere. (2.1.108-110) The only way Emilia can reply to these invectives against women is by saying, “You shall not write my praise,” declaring that Iago has nothing positive to say about her. (2.1.116) And he concurs. But she can do little more than that, for her verbal power is publicly unavailable to her.

Hence, the public relationship between Emilia and Iago paints Emilia as passive in the relationship through silence, which critically brings into question her motivations for doing so: does she fear Iago? Is she complicit? Societal restriction of women, and having to publicly perform in this society makes it seem so, but given the dramatic structure of the play, a domestic tragedy, her silence is not purposely passive, for it is not by choice. She is restricted as an audience member to Iago’s deeds, and makes this point when she says, “They are all but stomachs, and we all but food.” (3.4.104) She acknowledges to
Desdemona that women, at least publicly, seem to exist to be used by their male counterparts, and it is from here that Emilia’s initial drive to power extends.

But if Emilia’s silence is interpreted as being victim to patriarchy, and specifically the “wifely duties” it asks of her, her involvement, then, in the tragic “centerpiece” of the play regarding Desdemona’s handkerchief, has to be defended. That is, she does not serve Iago’s needs directly; rather, she becomes an accessory to his jealousy plot against Cassio and Othello. Emilia, unfortunately, is made a catalyst in his plot, and unwillingly complicit.

It becomes important then to acknowledge, in understanding why Emilia is silent, how she becomes involved in the handkerchief plot. Contrary to popular opinion, her complicity in the plot was not, as Tina Packer says, “an attempt to bribe her way into her husband’s favor” so directly. In Emilia’s defense, the napkin is snatched from her when Iago says, in response to her question of what he will do with it, “Why what’s that to you?” (3.3.315)

Not only does he exclude her from his intentions and make them unclear to her, he forcibly takes the handkerchief from her grip without her consent. Emilia’s first intention is to retrieve it from him out of loyalty to Desdemona; she is not servicing his plot, for she knows not what it is, other than the fact that he desires the handkerchief, and she, out of prescribed social duty, is obligated to “please his fantasy.” (3.3.299)

While the two of them are certainly not in a public space, the rules of the domestic tragedy structure still apply: Emilia conforms as audience to his deeds, and her tragic mistake, ultimately, comes from being silent about it to Desdemona.

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What is interesting to discover, however, is that in spite of Iago’s aforementioned hateful description of women, or how in this scene he refers to Emilia as a “foolish wife,” Emilia is not intimidated into silence in the private sphere. (3.3.303) Rather, she finds an opportunity to spar with him, dangling the handkerchief in front of him as a covetous object. This is genuinely the one instance in this text, at least until the play’s end, where Emilia can briefly relish in short-lived power she has over Iago. While she is subject to his authority when she exits the scene when told to, she still jumps at the opportunity to subordinate Iago using the handkerchief as a power symbol. And this, as seen in the willow scene between her and Desdemona later, hints at her drive towards power in spite of her circumstances.

But, at least from a critical standpoint, one begins to question if Emilia was entirely powerless to Iago’s desires, or rather, if there was anything she could do about its loss. Thus, the critical concern surrounding Emilia, having inadvertently allowed Iago to get ahold of the handkerchief, is why she remains silent regarding the whereabouts of the handkerchief, especially when she tries to be loyal to Desdemona. Her silence inevitably leads to Othello’s destructive jealousy, and ultimately, to Desdemona and Emilia’s deaths. The concern of the play, and of Emilia, becomes answering why she never admits to the napkin’s disappearance to Desdemona, even when she may have the opportunity to do so.

This can be attributed to the text being a domestic tragedy, where stepping outside the boundaries of the audience role and becoming an actor, instigator, or speaker, is deadly. If Emilia were to provide knowledge as to the whereabouts of the handkerchief, she would be subverting wifely duty to Iago, and subsequently killed. Additionally, as
Thomas D. Bowman suggests in his *In Defense of Emilia*, perhaps Emilia also reasons that her involvement would put Desdemona at a disadvantage with Othello, as Othello’s jealousy may not be related to the handkerchief at all, but is a “convenient device on which hang deeper grievances still unexpressed.” For these reasons—underestimating the centrality of the handkerchief in Othello’s jealousy and avoiding the risk of death by stepping too far out of societal bounds—Emilia remains silent.

But given that her silence is primarily out of necessity, and that she has an inability to act because of it, she feels the need to redeem herself and confirm her loyalty to Desdemona. She does this in the willow scene, alone with Desdemona in her chamber, as she helps her prepare for bed and the arrival of Othello after, in their last encounter, Othello called Desdemona a “cunning whore of Venice” and suggested she belonged in Hell. (4.2.88) Emilia, entering at the end of the conflict, must silently acknowledge her guilt for catalyzing Othello’s reaction, and in recompense, she comforts her.

Uniquely, this is the one time where Desdemona and Emilia are alone in a completely feminine space, one that can be compared to a sanctuary. Not only can Emilia “cheer the frightened and confused Desdemona with the advice that men should hear, but women only dare tell one another but she can also admit to her guilt indirectly, and at the same time, deflect blame from herself given her circumstances as wife to Iago and victim of patriarchy. More important, the chamber operates as a safe haven for Desdemona and Emilia in that the two of them only inhabit it—at least for the time being—and this gives them the freedom to speak privately and intimately apart from a patriarchal setting. And

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furthermore, it also gives Emilia the platform to speak out against a society that has silenced her for the majority of the play. In this sense, the willow scene is an expression of Emilia’s frustration over an inability to act, and genuinely the first time she can take verbal action. She empowers herself, but also Desdemona, as she voices her frustration and also instructs Desdemona on the world of men as an unjust place.

Taking advantage of the setting, in Emilia’s speech near the end of the scene, she attributes women’s lack of morality as stemming from husbands’ actions, as she says, “Their ills instruct us so.” (4.3.102) Not only do Emilia’s words reflect the woman-as-audience component of the play’s structure, as she follows Iago’s example or at least becomes inadvertently complicit in his actions, but she also hints that, regardless of what she has done, she is not to blame. At the same time, the speech is an acknowledgment of the double standard that women are held to in a patriarchal world, where violence and infidelity is not acceptable for women as it is for men.

She claims, “Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace, yet we have some revenge.” (4.3.92-93) Emilia’s empowerment in this scene is driven by an acknowledgment of the double standard, but more than that, by her newfound ability to call for action in this space. Men and women, she argues, “have their palates both for sweet and sour,” and as such, they share an inherent level of equality that defies gender divisions. (4.3.95) She further argues, too, that if women cannot act on this equality, or are chastised for a presumed lack of morality, this behavior originated with men. Emilia’s speech is not only a cry for gender equality and an attack on the double standard, but it is important in that it is a call to action. In this sense, Emilia is attempting to defy the tragic structure of the play itself by refusing to be an audience member to Iago. And
subsequently, she hopes to indoctrinate, and comfort, a frightened Desdemona by encouraging her to follow suit.

In educating Desdemona, Emilia is also tasked with empowering her to recognize her own humanity and the unfairness of being caught in what is now a threatening relationship to Othello. Desdemona says, “Women do abuse their husbands” by cheating and cuckolding them, perhaps as an expression of wrongful guilt. (4.3.62) Emilia, conversely, replies that she would cheat on her husband if the world were promised to her. Emilia here introduces to Desdemona the radical idea of marital infidelity, and furthermore, if it will earn her something substantial—more than a “join-ring,” “measures of lawn,” or “gowns” and “petticoats,” then it is worth pursuing. (4.3.73-74) Only in this separate space they share can Emilia threaten to challenge a social institution, marriage; and not only is she challenging a social institution, but she is advocating to violate it for the sake of power. She would do it to make her husband king and reap the benefits of owning the entire world, which she could fashion any way she likes. In this way, Emilia becomes an advocate for women’s sexual freedom and promiscuity, while trying to comfort and inspire Desdemona at the same time.

Emilia’s text in the willow scene is inherently cry for gender equality. But its significance also extends to the end of the play, when Emilia, in response to Desdemona’s death, reveals Iago’s role in stealing the handkerchief. Thus the events of the willow scene serve as an important catalyst for Emilia to empower herself and practice using her voice, which ultimately serves to motivate her social transgression in the final scene. In the final scene of the play Emilia transgresses her social position out of moral rightness, releasing herself from the patriarchal imposition of wifely duties that she
has been publicly and privately subscribing to throughout the play, and all in a public arena before men. Unfortunately, as a result, Emilia dies because she opposes the structure that the play demands. The structure is restored because the society of men, embodied by Iago, will not allow her to get away with public invectives of male authority.

Nonetheless, Emilia’s power cannot be discounted: her call to action in the willow scene against a sexist double standard, her advocacy for sexual freedom and marital infidelity, and promotion of gender equality is here embodied in martyring herself for Desdemona. Her use of language shows an evolution from silence, to outspokenness in a private sphere, to full redemptive action, even at the cost of her own life. According to Shakespeare and the Shrew, “Emilia’s decision to prioritize speech over silence is framed by a self-awareness that she is transgressing.” But it is not only this transgression that empowers her, but her motivation right before her death: justice for Desdemona. Emilia’s actions in the willow scene serve to instruct and comfort Desdemona against an uncompromising world of men that does not value her, but also teach her that she is entitled to equality that she currently lacks. The willow scene lays the groundwork for the strength of the female friendship, and how one woman’s reach or desire for power and equality can and should be shared by all women. So while Iago does murder Emilia, she dies having made a major social transgression by refusing silence. She dies in power, having attempted to empower another woman at the same time.

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87 Callaghan, Shakespeare and the Shrew, 147.
Troilus and Cressida

Troilus and Cressida, one of the “problem plays” in Shakespeare’s canon, explores a war-torn environment set during the Trojan War, where man’s thirst for power, militaristic success, and victory overshadows their ability to end or withdraw from the conflict. Overpowered by their obsession with the war state, the men in this play—warriors, lovers, and strategists alike—lose sight of their role in the conflict, as they are incapable of finding another way to, as Tina Packer says, “identify who they are” without the military machine.88 Within this male-dominated structure are the few women in the play: Cressida, Helen, Andromache, and at the center of this study, Cassandra, the prophetess sister of Hector and Troilus and daughter of Priam. Having the ability to see into the future, Cassandra predicts the downfall of Troy and her brother Hector in this fruitless conflict, but in spite of her prophetic protestations that he and the other men of Troy refrain from battle, she is written off by her brothers as their “mad sister,” and “brain-sick,” and is unable to persuade them otherwise. (2.2.98-122)

While Troilus and Cressida as a problem play straddles comedy and tragedy, even satire, the way in which the war state prevents love from flourishing, resolves in men’s deaths, and silences women for speaking against social authority is closer to that of a tragedy, a structure which, as in Othello, creates a significant challenge for women to find their voices and be heard in a patriarchal power structure.

And Tina Packer agrees: “The women lack the ability to break out from their assigned roles. They can’t create an alternative world. Their circumstances are so inculcated into their psyches and the social system that there’s no breaking out.” She

88 Packer, Women of Will, 119.
describes the women as following the “hierarchical pattern,” which prevents them from gaining a sense of equality among men, and being free to act on their convictions freely.\footnote{Packer, \textit{Women of Will}, 120-121.} For instance, Cressida is exchanged as a hostage in a Greek camp and is accused of being “false” for trying to defend herself in an alien environment, and women like Helen are idealized, as the text suggests, as prizes to stroke men’s pride and egos. According to Cressida, “Men prize the thing ungain’d more than it is,” and in this war state, either objectifying women or ignoring them when they aspire to any sort of power or autonomy is the name of the game. (1.2.289)

The challenge of defining women’s power in the text, then, specifically for Cassandra and Hector’s wife, Andromache, is directly tied to how women rise through the cracks of masculine authority when they are not being listened to or heard. While Cassandra is a relatively small character who appears only in two scenes, her power extends far beyond her physical presence in the play. Her use of language as a prophet permeates the text of the play in such a way that her predictions, unconsciously and unknown to the men who ignore her, are textually present throughout. While they do not listen to her directly, her words are still psychically embedded in the pulse of the play. In this sense, she \textit{is} the play.

Furthermore, women’s power through prediction—and knowing that the war state will collapse Greek and Trojan society—is embodied in the way men and women in the text approach rhetoric and action, where men’s vows are subsequently not followed or adhered because of the contradictory actions they take, and vows made by women are consistently followed, save for instances, as in the case of Cressida, where safety against
violence becomes a concern. Women’s vows not only prove prophetic power, but largely, they suggest that this prophetic power is based in truth, and that men opposing this power suffer if they ignore women’s visions. Their subsequent downfall becomes proof of women’s, particularly Cassandra’s, ability to identify the destructive consequences of violent actions in a society at large. While these prerogatives of Cassandra and her sister-in-law Andromache do not come to fruition, as no one listens to their warnings, it is important to focus on the lengths Cassandra goes to achieve her ends, and how the language of the text—subtly throughout the play and from Cassandra personally—becomes her vehicle to try and secure a stable outcome for Troy, or at least bring its male members to reason.

While women lack the powers of comic heroines or shrews in the comedies, where patriarchy can be successfully opposed or used as a tool, patriarchy in Troilus and Cressida is an opposing force that they have to transcend or attempt to escape. If they cannot, like Cassandra, she can at least infect the male members of her society with the knowledge of oncoming tragedy. And this is where Cassandra’s language becomes a tool.

Language in Troilus and Cressida operates through Cassandra as the “linguistic fabric of the play,” and as a form of power, her words prophesizing danger, while they may not be listened to if spoken directly by her, find a way to be expressed in other characters’ dialogue.90

Cassandra has two major appearances in Troilus and Cressida, where her speeches employ important words of prophetic doom. In her first speech she exclaims a number of phrases, including: “cry,” “tears,” “nothing canst but cry,” “moan,” and “Troy

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must not be.” (2.2.102-109) While the language coming from Cassandra is certainly bleak, it manifests itself in other ways within the text that have fewer demonic undertones.

Alexander says to Cressida about Hector, for example: “Before the sun rose he was harness'd light, and to the field goes he; where every flower did, as a prophet, weep what it foresaw in Hector's wrath.” (1.2.8-11) The language used by Alexander here recalls Troy’s fall, where flowers “weep” in connection to Hector’s anger. But contextually in this scene, the connotation of Hector’s wrath leading to his demise is countered by positive connotation that glorifies militaristic ventures: leaving before the “sun,” an image of warmth and strength. He goes to the field in such a way that we believe Hector to be ambitious, and therefore infallible. Additionally, even though the flowers weep, it is for an unknown tragedy; that is, what they “foresaw in Hector’s wrath” may not refer to Hector’s hubris, but Ajax’s defeat at Hector’s hands. The language in this passage ambiguously foreshadows the result of Hector’s wrath—his own death—but in such a way that promotes his strength and potential victory.

But at the same time, between these descriptions of Hector’s anger, Cressida repeatedly asks Alexander, “What was his cause of anger?” (1.2.12) and “…how should this man, that makes me smile, make Hector angry?” (1.2.31-32) Here Cressida calls attention to the needlessness of the conflict, and by extension, how this needlessness of Hector’s anger leads to his downfall. This, in conjunction, with the doomsday language of prophetic weeping flowers, helps to form a tragic prophecy that is recalled in Cassandra’s first speech. The words used here hint at Hector’s demise, and in this way the characters can “catch glimpses of their tragic destinies,” even if they may not fully
realize it yet. Textually, this connects back to Cassandra and feeds into her prophetic power.

Tragic prophecies have deceptively positive undertones elsewhere as well. Ulysses says, “To see these Grecian lords!—why, even already they clap the lubber Ajax on the shoulder, as if his foot were on brave Hector's breast and great Troy shrieking.” (3.3.138-141) Ulysses prophesizes Troy’s end, with “shrieking” as a more horrific reference to Cassandra’s words of “cry,” and a shrieking Troy recalling its ruin, becoming a city that Cassandra insists “must not be.” Without Cressida, a woman with the voice of reason, here qualify the language as she did with Alexander in the aforementioned scene, this leaves the men to indulge in their own misguidedness, foreseeing victory and praising the military machine’s infallibility. It is an example of male hubris, investing in a future with the possibility that nothing can or will go wrong.

Cassandra’s omnipotence in the text through language, based on both of these examples, must be nearly godlike, supernaturally infecting other characters’ phrases and lines, as if they were only able to say these words because of Cassandra’s prophetic abilities. While in her physical body as a woman she is disregarded, her powers to affect language in others nearly deify her; she is, albeit subtly, somewhat of an oracle. Using the language from her first vision, one notices that men are unable to identify their own city’s doom in a way that she can; while she, and even Cressida, try to help them see reason to end the conflict, she is not wholly successful in convincing them, especially Hector. But because her language permeates even men’s speeches, and their downfall is ensured, the

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text clarifies that she is in control of allowing others to realize their fates and hopefully change their course.

Another facet of Cassandra’s power comes from how the way women keep vows versus how men break theirs. A major theme in *Troilus and Cressida* surrounds the discrepancy between rhetoric and action, and how those who break their vows are the ones who pay the price. Women, like Cassandra and Andromache, who are consistent in how their actions follow their words, are the voices of reason. Men like Troilus, for example, take actions that oppose what he earlier promised; he says, “Why should I war without the walls of Troy, that find such cruel battle here within? Each Trojan that is master of his heart, let him to field; Troilus, alas! hath none.” (1.1.2-5) While here at the beginning of the play he vows to disarm, claiming to be “weaker than a woman’s tear,” by the end of the play he has entered battle against the Greeks. (1.2.9) Ulysses, too, in his speech where he speaks about order and degree, transgresses his original vow to have the Greeks refrain from battle when, according to Vernon P. Loggins in *Rhetoric and Action in ‘Troilus and Cressida’*: “Hector’s desire to meet in single combat with a ‘Grecian that is true in Love’ makes [him] realize that his opportunity for power is at hand.”92 Men break their vows as they aspire to violence, whether it is a heartbroken Troilus resorting to kill Diomedes on the battlefield after witnessing Cressida agrees to sleep with him, or Ulysses perpetuating the war for his selfish needs for power. And, ultimately, it is these aspirations that Loggins attributes to “self-interest” that destroys them.93

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Women like Cassandra and Andromache, however, hold steadfastly to their rhetoric when it comes to taking action. For Cassandra, rhetoric and vows are embodied through prophecy, where what she insists will happen, does happen. And she never strays from her story; she is consistent in sharing them to a group of men, even if they are unwilling to listen to her. When she shares her visions, she is inserting herself into a society that cares not for her voice, but also one that is ignoring a truth that, if listened to, would have prevented their demise. Such is one tragedy of *Troilus and Cressida*, but also another form of power for Cassandra: she knows what she sees—her rhetoric—is true, and she will escalate to any means, or take action, along with Andromache, to share these visions for the common good. As a woman prophet, her intentions paint her as both courageous and an altruist.

In the scene where Cassandra and Andromache confront Hector in a final plea for him not to go to battle, Cassandra tells Hector in his response to his insistence that he must leave: “The gods are deaf to hot and peevish vows.” (5.3.16) Cassandra is referencing Hector’s inconsistency in deciding whether or not to fight the Greeks. While at first he questions the merits or even purpose of holding Helen and staying in the conflict, Cassandra in this scene has to sway him to stick to this course, as he insists, “the gods have heard me swear,” and chooses to reverse his initial course by continuing to fight. (5.3.15) Cassandra acknowledges here that his vows are “hot and peevish,” or inconsistent and spur-of-the-moment, and that “It is the purpose that makes strong the vow.” (5.3.23) If Hector’s actions, or his purpose, are ever changing, his vows mean nothing. And if his vows mean nothing, his swear to the Gods to fight is a fruitless enterprise that will gain him nothing but an early death.
Cassandra’s actions in this scene service to convince him to align his intentions with his actions, but also to strongly dissuade him from going to battle. The struggle is, she will not be easily heard by Hector, who is hell bent on heading to battle. And she will do it herself, without male assistance, as evidenced when Andromache asks her call Priam “to persuade” and Cassandra instead bursts forth in a frenzied prophecy.

While Troilus says in the text, “for th’love of all the gods let’s leave the hermit pity with our mothers,” associating the feminine strictly with the maternal, inaction, and cowardice, Cassandra’s direct and dramatic action here, to push against man’s wrongful and misguided actions, would suggest otherwise. (5.3.45) As embodied through Cassandra’s visions, the feminine is tied with the supernatural, and in this final prophecy she speaks to convince Hector to change his course, she delivers her most desperate plea yet. The speech itself repeats the word “Hector” five times, indicative of increasing tension and desperation, and always makes use of an incredible number of vowel sounds, mainly “O” sounds in the repeated words: “look,” “how,” the cry of “O!” “behold” and “poor,” creating a highly emotional appeal, but also a prophecy that she hopes is unable to be ignored. (5.3.80-87)

When action follows vows, demise can be prevented, and Cassandra is pleading for Hector to follow suit. As her visions become stronger, she is shown here to openly defy the social structure that writes her off and considers her “an embarrassment to her brothers.”94 In spite of Hector’s opposition, she manages to convince her father, Priam, to stand by her to dissuade Hector from his course when he says, “…and I myself am like a prophet suddenly enrapt…” (5.3.64-65)

So while she is still being excluded by a masculine environment that favors the success of the war state for selfish male prerogatives, she is at least able to convince another man—her father, who, by prescribed social standards, is an authority she must subscribe to—to stand behind her as she refuses silence and attempts to change her brother’s mind. While Tina Packer rightly says in *Women of Will* that women in this world cannot break out of the social system, Cassandra boldly challenges it. Using the language of prophecy as a tool for power and influence in this militaristic society that excludes her participation, she asks it to be accountable for and aware of the vows it makes, if these vows are rational, and to take action that aligns with their rhetoric in order to ensure the most desirable outcome. As a prophet with the answers to what the future holds, she proves that she is most certainly worth listening to.

*The Winter’s Tale*

*The Winter’s Tale* tells the story of Leontes, King of Sicily, who out of jealousy imprisons his wife, the good Queen Hermione, over his belief that she is having an affair with his childhood friend Polixenes, the King of Bohemia. While imprisoned, Hermione gives birth to a daughter, Perdita, who Leontes insists to have sent away to a remote location and left for dead. In spite of the king’s advisor, Paulina’s, passionate protestations in court, Perdita is taken away and Hermione subsequently dies of heartbreak. However, Perdita survives, and over fifteen years, grows to fall in love with the prince Florizel, daughter to Polixenes. By the play’s end, not only is Perdita reunited with her father and able to pursue a marriage with Florizel, but also Paulina, having also restored Leontes to good sense through the aid of magic, brings Hermione back to life.
At its core, the play is about rescue, restoration, and rebirth, where women, according to Tina Packer, “use time, nature, and art as the means of redemption.”\textsuperscript{95} When time, nature, and art come together in this play, women are able to affect change in men, bringing them to their senses and unearthing their actions as insecure, misguided attempts to subordinate women.

Of the three women in The Winter’s Tale who Packer describes as the triumvirate of mother (Hermione), witch (Paulina), and virgin (Perdita), Paulina is most direct in how she confronts the patriarchal structure that seeks to control, kill, silence, and restrain the women of this play, as she is the one who challenges a jealous, unthinking Leontes in his court following his condemnation and imprisonment of Hermione. One, then, must ask how Paulina’s power is made possible, and furthermore, how her power expressed in The Winter’s Tale. While the three women of this play work together in various ways to dismantle patriarchal power and reinvent patriarchy in a way they see fit, this study will primarily focus on defining Paulina’s role as a “witch,” and then explore what she does to directly control patriarchy’s transformation. But first, one must define why patriarchy feels threatened in the first place, and from there, explore how The Winter’s Tale structurally seeks to prove how patriarchy’s fragility and fallibility as inherent in the text, painting these patriarchal anxieties as needless and foolish.

This fragility of patriarchy extends to Early Modern England, where it was believed that, “…anxiety about female sexuality might [have been] considered a

\textsuperscript{95} Packer, Women of Will, 287.
displaced version of anxiety about female authority.”96 Leontes’s fear of Hermione’s possible affair with Polixenes, then, is not without some cause. Although his jealousy in the text is highly irrational, and seems to spring exclusively from witnessing a harmless conversation between Polixenes and Hermione, it is important to understand that it extends from anxiety over losing power. He believes Hermione is being, perhaps, too friendly with his friend Polixenes, and this raises suspicions of Hermione’s fidelity to him. If Hermione is unfaithful or even promiscuous, then this creates the possibility that “the wife’s children might not be her husband’s,” and consequently, “his property might be transmitted to another man’s son.”97 Furthermore, it confirms Hermione as a woman with sexual freedom. While it is virtually impossible that Hermione’s baby would belong to Polixenes, having been pregnant before his arrival, Leontes’s jealousy practically blinds him to reason. The fact that Hermione gets along well another man is not just an expression of sexual jealousy, but also a deep fear of his wife having autonomy as well as losing power to another man. From the outset of the play, male characters like Leontes are painted as needlessly paranoid, and thus the entire structure on which male power rests—domination over women—begins to show its fragility.

However, it is also important to establish how the romance genre establishes an environment for patriarchy to be challenged, as it will provide dramatic momentum when it comes to understanding of Leontes’s rage and Paulina’s capable defense of Hermione’s innocence. One can attribute Paulina’s source of power to the tenets of the romance genre. As previously stated, women’s fertility and connection to the natural world in the

96 Lindsay Kaplan and Katherine Eggert, “‘Good Queen, My Lord, Good Queen’: Sexual Slander and the Trials of Female Authority in ‘The Winter’s Tale,’” Renaissance Drama 25 (1994): 90.
romances are emphasized, but in their relationships with men not only do they now have the vocal presence to overpower them, but their qualities typified as “feminine”—maternity or parenthood, in particular—are shared with the men as well, or rather, men can now “express emotions about their children directly.” With this sense of equality in mind, the play is structurally interested in exploring female power, allowing it to flourish in venues such as the court or where it ordinarily would not exist in the tragedies. As *Shakespeare and the Shrew* argues, the play “[revisits] the female voice as a positive force, a source of truth, justice and healing, and creates a scenario in which the idea of silence as something desirable for women is very specifically rejected.” So although Leontes may attempt to suppress the female voice, he is continually met with opposition.

Thus, the presence and actions of women destroy, remold, and transform patriarchy to make it into a structure that they can inhabit and survive in. Peter B. Erickson suggests in *Patriarchal Structures in The Winter’s Tale* that “the dramatic action [of the play] consists in the fashioning of a benign patriarchy….one capable of including and valuing women.” But in doing so, women ultimately threaten a male structure that fears their dominance. Women of *The Winter’s Tale* are especially a threat to patriarchy at the play’s beginning, where by merely existing or speaking out against its structures, fuel Leontes’s wrongheadedness and bring about patriarchy’s collapse. In that sense, men threatened by women sabotage the patriarchy themselves out of fear and anxiety.

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One of the ways in which the fragility of patriarchy is embodied initially is through the theme of parenthood and children, where destruction of the father-son relationship through death of Leontes’s son, Mamillius, as well as the birth of Perdita become examples of patriarchal ruin. Leontes’s relationship to his son Mamillius becomes a microcosm of the conflict in the play surrounding men feeling threatened by women. The relationship they share, and more significantly, Mamillius’s death, speaks to the fallibility of patriarchy, and by that token, the need for women’s presence in the lives of children and how that extends to the society at large. Leontes spends an exorbitant amount of time describing how he and Mamillius are alike at the beginning of the play when he says, “Yet they say we are almost as like as eggs,” and says that Mamillius’s nose is “a copy out of” his own. (1.2.129-130) Mamillius later echoes these sentiments to Leontes: “I am like you, they say.” (1.2.207) This defines a relationship where trust exists between the two of them because they are men; based on Leontes’s obsession with his son’s likeness to him, and because of his already brewing jealousy of Polixenes, there is no room for women in this relationship.

Distrust of women is also embodied by Mamillius when among women attendants: the First Lady asks him, “Shall I be your playfellow?” to which Mamillius responds, “No, I’ll none of you.” He instead tells the Second Lady, “I love you better.” (2.1.2-6) Oddly for a child, Mamillius becomes a player in patriarchy by choosing which women he prefers, as if they are objects for him to choose between and discard. He also demands more respect from the women above what he likely deserves as a young boy—they call him “a baby still,” and in spite of age, he seems to ask to be given more respect
in spite of his years. Essentially, Mamillius has already learned how to place women beneath him, or at least attempt to rise above them.

However, once Hermione is imprisoned, Mamillius’s health begins to fail, and he finally dies in an offstage death from the grief and heartbreak of being separated from his mother. This goes to show that without woman’s influence and presence, ultimately, men cannot survive, and the social structure they have created falls into ruin. At the same time, based on his close connection and likeness to his jealous father, as well as his comments to the ladies, the death of Mamillius reconfirms that patriarchal attitudes are not sustainable, nor are to be encouraged.

But what does Perdita do to upset the patriarchy? Quite simply, she is born. Being a daughter when a son is needed to “[provide] the basis for the transmission of property, values, and the self,” she is ultimately threatening to the standard order of primogeniture.\(^\text{101}\) Without a male heir, Leontes’s property cannot be passed on and nor can is kingdom survive. And Perdita, being a girl as well as Hermione’s direct offspring, thus thwarts the system and Leontes’s plans for primogeniture. *The Winter’s Tale*, as shown, thus inherently discourages patriarchy from thriving and rests on the belief of women’s ability to dismantle male strongholds of power. With this in mind, we can better understand how Paulina’s role as a “witch” is enabled by the social circumstances provided in the text.

As Tina Packer says, Paulina is a witch “partly because Leontes calls her one,” but also because she “is willing to take actions that she knows an change the

\(^{101}\) Erickson, “Patriarchal Structures in the Winter’s Tale,” 821.
narrative.” In this sense, Paulina’s witchcraft is appropriated form of what men believe her to be: an enchantress, or having evil connotations about her character. To provide the text with a feminist reading, and one that is empowering to Paulina, the definition of “witch” must be appropriated when defining her role. That is, Paulina’s role as a witch is an example of using patriarchal terms against the system, where instead of having malicious intentions, she becomes a catalyst for change, and one that tries to ensure Hermione’s freedom, Perdita’s safety, and Leontes’ change of heart and transition to rationality by the play’s end. Her “witchcraft,” then, translates into an ability to control outcomes and create change, and all for the better. But that being said, Paulina as a character is threatening to Leontes because of the power she has in the system he has created. That is, she should not be able to address a king in the way she does by confronting him in a courtroom, but this is precisely where Hermione’s role as a witch and patriarchal threat emerges most strongly.

In the court scene, “Paulina’s illegitimate assertion of power upsets the system” that Leontes has tried to preserve through Hermione’s imprisonment. Paulina, in order to bring justice to Hermione, and by extension, all women, acts as a conduit for women’s voices when she enters the arena against Leontes, a man who would defy the prophecies of an all-knowing oracle as if he were a god. What makes Paulina particularly strong in this scene is her motivation for being there; while she is defending Hermione’s honor, she is also a representative for all women. Specifically, Paulina has three daughters with her husband, Antigonus, and he says that if Hermione is “honor-flaw’d” it means his daughters will “pay for’t” also. (2.1.143-146) In this sense, one woman’s actions or

103 Erickson, “Patriarchal Structures in The Winter’s Tale,” 822.
public perception has an effect on all women and the entire gender becomes disgraced. If Paulina cannot recover Hermione’s honor, womankind falls, and “every dram of woman’s flesh is false if she be.” (2.1.138-139) At its most drastic, according to David Schalkwyk in A Lady’s ‘Verily’ is as Potent as a Lord’s: Women, Word, and Witchcraft in The Winter’s Tale: “If she is unfaithful, then all women are whores, and if all women are whores, they must be made to pay for their transgressive nature.”

This inevitably invents stakes that drive Paulina’s motivation for being in the room, and in order to bring Leontes to reason, she devises specific tactics to invoke change—which are, in her own way, a form of witchcraft—such as threatening Leontes with maternal values and images, as well as using her voice and language to its fullest capacity.

Having imprisoned Hermione, and based on earlier evidence, maternal imagery is threatening to Leontes. When Mamillius was alive, Leontes’s approach to parenthood was based in allying himself as a father against his son’s mother, letting his rage against the queen affect how he spoke to his son: “Go, play, boy, play: thy mother plays.” (1.2.187) His role as a father to his son is overshadowed, even infected, by his need to punish his wife. Paulina enters to rectify Leontes’s behavior, and hopefully bring him closer to reconciling his hatred of women with the maternal spirit, by “[becoming] a foster mother, a surrogate for the imprisoned Hermione.”

Paulina confronts Leontes with what he fears the most: an image of maternity in the form of Perdita, who she has taken from Hermione in the jail and brings directly into the courtroom.

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105 Erickson, “Patriarchal Structures,” 823.
Her initial tactic, she says in the jail with Hermione, is to use her words: “If I prove honey-mouth’d let my tongue blister and never to my red look’d anger be the trumpet any more.” (2.1.31-33) But realizing that “the silence often of pure innocence persuades when speaking fails,” she brings Perdita to the court as an attempt to soften Leontes. (2.1.38-39) While bringing Perdita to court is a gesture that could easily threaten Leontes, she entertains the possibility that, perhaps, seeing his own child—one who bears resemblance to him, too—would allow him to recognize himself in such a way that he can find unity with the powerful feminine qualities in himself. After all, as is typical in the structure of Shakespeare’s romances, men gradually find their way to “[applying] to themselves imagery of women’s close…relationship with children.”

When she presents the baby to him, she references every part of Leontes that is physically present in Perdita: “the whole matter and copy of the father, eye, nose, lip, the trick of’s frown, his forehead, nay the valley, the pretty dimples of his chin and cheeks, his smiles…” (2.3.99-102) While he is unmoved for the time being, Paulina still leaves Perdita in the court, forcing him to confront what he is so afraid of.

Through action and imagery, Paulina has the opportunity to push back against Leontes, but her greatest strength comes as she fires her words straight at him in the court in the most confrontational way possible. With baby in hand, Paulina enters a room of men that try to bar her entry to unselfconsciously speak her truth. Interestingly, while Paulina is received by Leontes as a “mankind witch” and is nearly forcibly removed, her verbal tactic is actually to ally herself with Leontes as a trusted friend, or “loyal servant…physician…[and] most obedient counselor.” (2.3.54-55) She comes to “bring

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106 Lenz, The Woman’s Part, 171.
him sleep,” understanding that, if he is left to his own masculine prerogatives which exclude her participation and counsel, then he is all the worse for it. (2.3.33) She will endure his rage if it means she can bring him to light and see how misguided he has become. And with every epithet and threat thrown at her by Leontes, from “mankind witch” to “a callat of boundless tongue,” to the final blow of “I’ll ha’ thee burnt,” as if she were a witch burning at the stake, Paulina’s speeches in response only grow longer, as she in intent on changing his mind. (2.3.67-113) Leontes cannot stop her tongue, and with every attempt, it brings the opposite response; for every insult, she immediately denies it: “No so;” “I am none, by this good light;” and “I care not.” (2.3.69-114) She is practically a wall to his words.

The court scene depicts a confrontation between the two most seemingly opposed sides, but Paulina ultimately tries to reconcile them by bringing both herself as a trusted advisor and Perdita as his child into his masculine domain. In this way, the patriarchal structure can transform and allow women’s participation, if only she can be heard. This is what in the end will allow Leontes to change; if she can save Leontes by showing him the error of his ways, she can rescue Hermione. She insists that her words are as “medicinal as true;” that is, the truth of her words must remedy him. She does not come purely to attack him, but to help him. (2.3.37)

Paulina’s personal dedication to both Leontes and Hermione follow when she becomes a feign source of comfort for Leontes after Hermione’s death is announced. She does not let him escape from his crime—the death of his wife and son—and essentially reminds him through a fake apology what trouble he has caused as a result of his jealousy: “Now, good my liege sir, royal sir, forgive a foolish woman: the love I bore
Following Hermione’s death, Paulina ensures that Leontes lives guilty by pretending to chastise herself as a “foolish woman” for speaking out against him earlier, but in doing so, she elicits change in him: “Once a day I'll visit the chapel where they lie, and tears shed there shall be my recreation.” (3.2.238-240) For the next fifteen years, the witch Paulina will help Leontes to reform himself and allow him time to rectify his wrongs. Through Paulina’s evocation of the “feminine spirit,” as Tina Packer would say, she capably takes control of a once masculine setting and, through language and persistence over time, creates a world where women are allowed to flourish.

*Henry VI Part III*

*Henry VI Part III* focuses primarily on the destruction stemming from the War of the Roses conflict, following both the loss of England’s French territories and the fall of the House of Lancaster as embodied through Henry VI and Queen Margaret. As both England and France sink into battle, tensions between the Yorkists and Lancastrians rise, ultimately leading to the rise of Richard III by the play’s end.

Standing out amidst the conflict is Margaret, transitioning in the *Henry VI* trilogy from the Princess of Anjou to a full-fledged Queen of England, but not just from a ceremonial place; capably and confidently, she leads armies, decapitates her enemies, and strategizes against her foes, and at the same time, serves as a lover to the Earl of Suffolk and mother to Edward, Prince of Wales. Margaret is notable in the history plays, along with Joan of Arc and Elizabeth Woodville, for her great strength. According to Tina Packer: “The women in these plays not only break up the repetition and (after a while)
the tedium of the battle action…each woman shifts the balance of power—and breaks up the monotony of the way men fight.”

Compared to the other women covered in this study, Margaret is perhaps the most “masculine” of them all: the most violent, interested in political power, and willing to stop at nothing, even torture, to get what she wants. When this is reconciled with her role as a woman ruler, a role that demands subservient or controlled social behaviors, we can understand Margaret as a woman who straddles both the masculine and feminine, or perhaps, in the spirit of Lady Macbeth, “unsexes” herself and defies gender altogether. She is perhaps one of Shakespeare’s most simultaneously empathetic and ruthless political machines, understanding masculinity and femininity as performative tools to acquire political power. But Margaret is far more nuanced, as she combines her political ambitions with her role as a parent to Edward the Prince of Wales, and not only to ensure her own political safety, but to ensure her son’s guarantee of future rule.

In order to understand Margaret’s power in the history genre, we have to look to the actual social circumstances of Elizabethan England. According to David Cressy:

“From the 1570’s to the 1620’s, during the reigns of a manly queen and a queenish king, England is said to have been challenged by disorderly people presenting themselves in public in a gender-confusing manner.”

As a history play, this play is a dramatic reflection of that same societal disorder and embraces it through Margaret, who steps beyond the bounds of what political society expects her to do. At the same time, she is certainly “gender confusing” by not subscribing perfectly to her assigned gender role as a woman.

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In *Part III* as well, Margaret here is shown in her most, “androgy nous role, and without her lover Suffolk encouraging her as femme fatale, motivated by lust and/or dependent on the Queen’s role as leader and politician…” Suffolk’s presence in the previous two plays can be understood as an initial source of Margaret’s power. That is, he is a male figure who is not only her lover, but he also plots with her and is partially responsible for orchestrating her marriage to Henry VI; together, they create a codependent political-romantic relationship. He says in *Henry VI Part I*, “Margaret shall now be Queen, and rule the King, but I will rule both her, the King, and realm.” (5.5.107-108) However, without Suffolk to pull the strings in *Part III*, Margaret is left married to a weak and declining Henry VI, so her drive to political power must be purely self-motivated. Because of this, “Margaret in [*Part II and Part III*]…completely lacks any dams el-in-distress appeal.”

But in this drive to power, Margaret takes on masculine qualities, which, not surprisingly, make her the societal “other.” According to Shakespeare and the Shrew: “The masculinity of the female warrior is linked with the sexual promiscuity of the harlot…[the women] can either be womanly or warlike. They can be either virtuous or powerful. But never both.” Margaret as a strategist and leader embodies masculine qualities that contradict what is “womanly,” allowing her to command a military and seize control from her weak husband Henry VI. And at the same time, threateningly, she combines her sexuality and role as a mother with political matters. These characteristics,

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which straddle both masculine and feminine qualities, are also apparent in how she responds to conflict.

As shown in her dealings with Edward Plantagenet, Margaret provides the most combative or militaristic answers. For instance, King Louis XI of France and Lady Bona declare to take action against Edward, who has forgone his interest in Lady Bona for Elizabeth Woodville, creating a rift between the Plantagenet family and French as a result. Lady Bona provides perhaps what sounds like a more “feminine” answer when it comes to seeking revenge on Edward: “Tell him, in hope he’ll prove a widower shortly, I’ll wear the willow garland for his sake,” wishing for failure of his marriage. (3.3.227-228) Margaret, on the other hand, declares: “Tell him, my mourning weeds are laid aside, and I am ready to put armor on,” presenting a clear intention to fight and resort to violent measures to seek revenge on Edward for his infidelity and promise breaking. (3.3.229-230) Margaret transcends what is deemed gender appropriate behavior, vowing to take violent action as opposed to Lady Bona’s passive wish for his failure.

However, at the same time, Margaret is known—even in the same setting—to adopt feminine behaviors when she knows it can manipulate a situation to meet her needs. As Henry VI says to the First Keeper about Margaret and the Prince of Wales seeking aid in France: “Her sighs will make a battery in his breast; her tears will pierce into a marble heart; the tiger will be mild whiles she doth mourn…” (3.1.37-39) While this sounds uncharacteristic of Margaret, a woman unafraid to decapitate her enemies on the battlefield, she still uses stereotypical feminine actions and qualities—sighing, crying, mildness—as a tool in a political arena. Even in the presence of Louis XI, at the beginning of her emotional appeal to him after having lost Henry VI’s kingdom the
Yorkists, she refuses to sit down, saying, “…now Margaret must strike her sail and learn awhile to serve where kings command,” informing the king that she is now in a position of power. (3.3.4-6) But when asked where her despair comes from, she responds: “From such a cause as fills mine eyes with tears and stops my tongue, while heart is drown’d in cares.” (3.3.12-14) Here, Margaret establishes a monarch’s dominance while still eliciting sympathy through emotional language, insisting that the state of political affairs, ushered in by Henry VI’s actions—have made her heart heavy and she herself unable to speak. And successfully, from her manipulation, Louis XI insists that Margaret sits right next to him so she may continue to share her grief. She gets closer to getting what she wants: audience from Louis, and even more, political aid.

As queen, Margaret also takes matters into her own hands once she realizes that her husband is a weak ruler. But while Margaret is a queen in action, Henry VI believes he is a king “in mind; and that’s enough.” (3.1.60) Thus, oftentimes Margaret’s actions are a result of Henry VI’s inability to act or make sound decisions that would benefit the Lancastrians, and ultimately, his weakness stands in contrast to her strength, and sometimes even bolsters it.

King Henry VI establishes himself as an incapable ruler at the beginning of the play, when he foolishly relinquishes his kingdom to the Yorkists, disinheriting young Prince Edward. He says, “The Earl of Warwick and the duke enforced me,” clearly incapable of making sound decisions alone as he is easily swayed and manipulated. (1.1229) In fact, he is such a hindrance to Margaret and Clifford’s political aims, that Margaret encourages him to go elsewhere: “For Margaret my queen, and Clifford too, have chid me from the battle; swearing both they prosper best of all when I am thence.”
(2.5.16-18) Essentially, Margaret over the course of the play seeks to reduce her husband’s power, and not only does so by discouraging his participation—which, interestingly, as seen prior, is a male prerogative when Shakespeare’s women attempt to find power—but by “divorcing” herself from him at a familial, sexual level.

After Henry VI disinherits their son, Margaret replies: “I here divorce myself both from thy table, Henry, and thy bed, until that act of parliament be repeal’d whereby my son is disinherited.” (1.1.247-250) She recognizes that her status is compromised by Henry VI sacrificing the throne, so this is of obvious concern to her, but more than that, she fears for her son’s future; this is the only way Henry VI’s bloodline may continue to be in control of England, and he has sabotaged it. But what Margaret does here is not only separate herself from him politically, but sexually as well. Part of Margaret’s manipulative power is how she is able to provoke emotional concerns in her dealings with men beneath a political veil. Here, she threatens not only her political alliance to him as a queen, but her presumed duty to him as a wife. In terms of marital conventions of the period, this is unheard of; and further more, it is a greater threat to Henry VI than it is to Margaret. While her power as queen is contingent on his role as king, her anger practically controls him, and without her favor and presence, Henry VI is reduced to a puppet; simply put, he needs her more than she needs him. And this is a situation she can surely use to her advantage, as she can rule as a pseudo-king and steer England’s political ship.

But not only does Margaret use emotional or sexual tactics to put men in their place, but she also frequently ties in her role as a parent to create emotional appeals for power and ensure that her son’s future is secure. Besides being a political strategist,
Margaret is first and foremost a mother. While Edward losing his inheritance would disenfranchise her to an extent, putting her title into question, ultimately Edward is the one who has lost the prospect of kingship, and she is willing to fight mercilessly for her son’s right to power throughout *Part III*. And she does so very capably. But her role as a mother also provides her with an incredible maternal strength and empathy that allows her to love fiercely and boldly, challenging men directly on the battlefield when her son’s life is endangered or when he is dead.

Margaret, when facing men on a battlefield, is continually belittled. As said in *Shakespeare and the Shrew*, Margaret “is made to suffer from the English courtiers, before she has even done anything to give them a chance to make a valid judgment on her personally...”112 To the men, Margaret is naturally seen as “other,” as and such, she is frequently subject to epithets from her Yorkist opposition throughout the trilogy that try to demonize her womanhood and disempower her through words. In *Part III*, before his death, the Duke of York refers to Margaret as “she-wolf of France,” alienating her from her right to the English crown by referencing her origins as the Princess of Anjou while simultaneously disparaging her as a woman in power. (1.4.110) Consistently, Margaret is judged by her ruthless actions; while it is definitely ruthless to kill, the frequency at which her male opposition highlights her violence is perhaps more frequent than if a man were in power instead: when the Plantagenet family mourns the death of York, they refer to York’s other murderer, Clifford, as “stern Lord Clifford” who has “done to death” York, while Margaret is “warlike queen, that robb’d my soldiers of their heated spleen.” (2.1.103-124) The men are more interested in demonizing Margaret, and given that she is

usually the only woman on the battlefield, she alone is forced, in spite of her strength, to
confront enormous misogyny and her own otherness.

However, in her role as a mother, Margaret can also access incredible
vulnerability, and as she does so on the battlefield before men who wish to see her fall,
she establishes herself as one who commands both the political and the parental. There is
power for Margaret in empathy, and she uses it as a tool when violence is no longer an
available tactic. On the battlefield when her son is killed before her eyes, Margaret cries
out: “You have no children, butchers! If you had, the thought of them would have stirr’d
up remorse: but if you ever chance to have a child, look in his youth to have him so cut
off as, deathmen, you have rid this sweet young prince!” (5.5.63-67) Margaret’s maternal
power is what separates her from the rest of the men, defining her power as one that is
based in “masculine” propensity for violence, but countered by “feminine” desire to
protect children. Of course, neither one of these qualities is rigidly tethered to one’s
gender, but the way in which Margaret uses them brings the stability of her gender
identity into question. By straddling the gender binary in this way, she qualifies the use of
violence by drawing the line at children—she personally will not harm them. In spite of
her cruel tactics, this sets her morally above the rest and contextualizes her use of
violence in the play as purposeful. Though she may seem ruthless, she is far from
senseless. And given that she is willing to speak before the men so her heart “may burst,”
she gives voice to feeling in an unbridled way and will not be drawn into silence.

All of Margaret’s powers—her willingness to resort to violence, minimize male
power, and role as a mother—culminate in perhaps her most famous scene, where she
delivers a speech upon a molehill and executes the Duke of York. Tina Packer, having
played Margaret, described her process: “I want to see his agony about the slaughter of his youngest. I want him to die more slowly that Suffolk had done. I want to pour every piece of my misery into the act of killing him.”

Suffolk, Margaret’s lover, is a prime motivator in Margaret’s act of killing York; while murdering York would prevent his rise to the English crown, which ensures Margaret’s power, his slow and torturous death by Margaret is an opportunity for her to emotionally release herself following Suffolk’s death. After Suffolk was banished in *Henry VI Part II* for his role in the Duke of Gloucester’s assassination, pirates murdered him and his head was sent back to Margaret. York’s death ultimately becomes an opportunity for Margaret to channel her heartbreak over this loss by ensuring that her enemy understands just what loss feels like. The dramatic tension in the molehill speech stems from York’s inability to leave and Margaret’s prolonging of his death. In a way, it becomes a game for her to see how much she can do to break him before allowing him to speak.

To do so, Margaret uses every tactic she has available. Primarily, she taps into the Duke of York’s role as a parent; in this way, Margaret and York are matched in the sense of having the same sympathies: they are both parents to children who they hope to see succeed. Margaret toys with York’s role as a father when she asks: “Where are your mess of sons to back you now?” naming them one by one, verbally lining them up in front of him so she can shoot them down. (1.4.73) She hits her target when she gets to his son Rutland, who Clifford murdered in *Part II* to avenge his own father’s death. Margaret, while she does, in fact, draw a personal line at murdering children, still recognizes the

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power a child’s death has on a parent, so she waves a napkin dipped in Rutland’s blood about York’s face in taunt. And not only that, but she also asks York why he is unable to cry: “What, hath thy fiery heart so parch’d thine entrails that not a tear can fall for Rutland’s death?” (1.4.87-88) Margaret knowingly exploits York’s love for his son in such a way that calls into question his masculinity. That is, it is not in a man’s character to cry, but if York does not, Margaret insists that he would not be mourning him, but even more than that, he would not love him. And this is perhaps her most emotionally manipulative tactic of all.

Next, Margaret seeks to emasculate York. As this is a game for her, and because she and York are both vying for the right to the English crown, she flaunts her current winning streak by placing a paper crown on York’s head: “Ay, marry, sir now looks he like a king!” (1.4.96) Unable to move, York is made a puppet of Margaret, a clown, for the purpose of her entertainment, in a way that will completely humiliate him: to be crowned by a woman in a coronation ceremony of all acts, is a patriarchal threat, as it suggests that his power is granted to him through Margaret, a queen who does not just seek Henry VI’s kingship, but her own.

Margaret is said to be “avenging no one’s death (except perhaps that of her paramour Suffolk). And yet, as the orchestrator of this savage scene, she proves herself to be the most…imaginatively vengeful, of all the participants.”114 It would be simple to suggest that Margaret kills York merely out of sheer ruthlessness. Suffolk, as a motivator, would make textual sense, seeing as she carries out York’s death in a way that mirrors Suffolk’s: decapitation. Margaret declares, “Off with the crown, and with the crown, his head…”

(1.4. 207) She wants York to experience Suffolk’s pain, and if he does so, Margaret will have fully avenged a death she could not control or prevent. This scene is her way of regaining that control.

After Margaret gives the molehill speech, she gives York time to share his rebuttal. He lists attributes that the typical woman would have in order to prove that she lacks them: “‘Tis beauty that doth oft make women proud; but, God he knows, thy share thereof is small.” (1.4.128-129) Furthermore, her lack of virtue makes her “wond’red at,” and her ambitions to the crown, political power, and government, are ”abominable.” (1.4.131-133) He also informs Margaret of what women are: “soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible.” (1.4.141) Margaret uses this as fuel to inform her final actions. While York, trapped in place, has only the ability to speak, Margaret can both speak and use her hands and body. While York and Northumberland continue to speak, Margaret watches silently as York rails. Finally, after telling Northumberland that York wronged them all, her first action is to stab York to the words: “And here’s to right out gentle-hearted king.” (1.4.176.) Allowing York to speak not only gives Margaret the potential energy to drive a knife into him, but at the same time, her stabbing negates everything he has said.

Through physical violence, Margaret reaffirms her womanhood as a definition all her own, one that is not “mild,” but hungry for success and power; she is not “soft,” but unflinching and courageous in the face of men who speak out against her. So while she may stab York on Henry VI’s behalf formally, her intentions suggest that she kills him for her own validation of self, for her love of Suffolk, and for her son: if succession is handed over to York, it is Prince Edward’s “death sentence” and Henry VI’s line is no
more. In this scene, which can be thought of as the microcosm of Margaret’s incredible strength throughout the Henry VI trilogy, Margaret unfailingly juggles these motivations and gets closer to political security. She succeeds, for the time being, as York is beheaded so he “may overlook the town of York.” She is able to rest, satisfied, at least for now. (1.4.180)

Through the exploration of gender power as it concerns Shakespeare’s women, the text is opened to reveal the various avenues by which women in Shakespeare’s text find power, extending not only to defying gender expectations and “unsexing” in the traditional sense of the term, but using and even amplifying the power of gender. As seen in seven plays, gender can be: a performative tool to adopt masculine qualities, a way to increase vocal power and dominance, an opportunity to create private spaces and find feminine sanctuary, seize political power, change the will of men, and simultaneously use the structure of and contradict the expectations a patriarchal society to achieve a desired end goal. And while women in these plays may lack power on account of the societal restrictions they are subject to, that does not hinder their ability to grapple with and aspire to it.

The research done here is only the first half of this study and will be applied to inform a thoughtful rehearsal process and final performance of Shakespeare’s women. Ultimately, through the coalescence of research and performance, one will better understand the way in which gender performance in Shakespeare is understood textually as well as onstage. And furthermore, how as theatre practitioners we can use the all-

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[115] Callaghan, Shakespeare and the Shrew, 56.
women Shakespeare format as an opportunity to take these ideas as written in the text and bring them into a space that encourages women’s empowerment in an artistic setting.
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