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To Put Her in Her Place

An Interrogation of Death and Gender in Shakespearean Tragedy

Isabella Zentner

There is space to frame Shakespeare as a feminist. After all, his plays are full of complicated, often independent women. He certainly critiqued and played with social expectations of the 1600s, leading to diverse interpretations of his work. However, as many critics have, I argue that he was still a product of his time and saw women as having set, particular roles that needed to be maintained. As one examines the role of the ideal woman and the societal view of suicide and death in Shakespeare's time, it becomes evident that the deaths of tragic heroines, as illustrated in *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Titus Andronicus*, are intrinsically gendered. These deaths reflect the way each character has betrayed traditional gender roles and act as a punishment for that betrayal, forcibly returning her to the feminine sphere.

Macbeth

At first glance, it seems that Lady Macbeth, the ambitious wife of Macbeth, fulfilled at least one of the main roles of a woman in the Elizabethan era. As Rachel Speght states in her work *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, one of the responsibilities of a married woman was to act as a counselor to her husband

and support his decisions. In Act I, Macbeth comes to Lady Macbeth with the witches' prophecy. She is supposedly acting for his benefit when she tells him that they must seize the crown (*Macbeth* 1.5.1–10, 1.5.58–70). However, she is not counseling her husband, she is ordering him to take action. She doesn't believe he can do what needs to be done. In assuming the responsibility of the head of the household's decisions, she places him in a weaker, effeminate role. At one point, she ponders Macbeth's qualities:

It is too full o'th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. (1.5.15–21)

Lady Macbeth describes her husband as pure and honest, qualities that, according to Speght, usually describe a good woman. To take it a step further, Macbeth is also described as being "too full o'th' milk of human kindness." In the same act, Lady Macbeth begs the spirits to "unsex" her and exclaims, "Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall" (1.5.45–46). Macbeth is the one with a mother's milk, not Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth's feminine qualities have been corrupted by her masculine ambitions and become "gall." She is rejecting her femininity in order to step up into the masculine role she feels her husband is too feminine to fulfill. She even describes their castle as "my battlements" (1.5.38), not "our" or "Macbeth's," implying that she, not he, is in control over it all.

Such contempt for gender roles and feminine attributes of the day led to a two-pronged method for Lady Macbeth's narrative punishment: hysteria and suicide. In the latter part of the play, Lady Macbeth spirals. She has visions of blood she can't scrub out, no matter how hard she tries. She loses her mind. While the blood is of course a reminder of the murder she helped commit, I believe it is also Shakespeare reminding the audience of the femininity she killed within herself. In her "unsex me" monologue, she says, "Make thick my blood" (1.5.41). As this is followed by her demand to exchange her breast milk for gall, this could be read as her asking that the spirits take away another feminine trait: her menstrual cycle. Lady Macbeth is forced to see the blood over and over again because it is a constant reminder both to herself and to the audience that she killed the feminine within herself

for power, and that there is no regaining it now that it is lost. In *Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health*, Cecilia Tasca examines how women have been diagnosed with hysteria and madness for centuries for a variety of causes, but especially when they strayed out of their traditional roles. Society saw it as a sign of madness that a woman would consider acting unnaturally. As Tasca puts it, “afflictions, diseases and depravity of women result from the breaking away from the normal natural functions.” Shakespeare falls in line with this tradition, reminding the reader what could happen if a woman breaks away from her natural roles.

Lady Macbeth dies offstage. That itself is telling. She is no longer a player. While she started off as the most powerful person in the plot, her ambition and rejection of her womanhood have left her without her mind and without power. We are told that she most likely killed herself (5.8.100–102), but her method and final words remain a mystery. All we know is that it is due to her hysteria. Hysteria was at times thought to be the work of demons (Levin 21). This is reinforced by the physician’s statement: “More needs she the *divine* than the physician” (5.1.67) (emphasis added). Her hysteria and subsequent suicide could be read then as divine punishment for the evil she invited into herself. This idea is reinforced by the Christian ideas of suicide at the time. While some saw some aspects of “self-murder” as noble, many others considered suicide to be just as heinous a sin as murder, and worthy of eternal damnation (Lord). If Shakespeare is in the latter camp, then he not only punishes Lady Macbeth for her betrayals of gender expectations in this life but also damns her for them in the next.

Antony and Cleopatra

The English had to reconcile their ideas of femininity and power when Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne. Thus, it is logical to draw from the British perception of Elizabeth I’s monarchy when evaluating Cleopatra’s role in *Antony and Cleopatra*, which was published relatively soon after Elizabeth I’s death.

There was a great deal of tension throughout Elizabeth’s reign between herself, political leaders, and the populace, as many people believed that her rule was, “if not an unnatural monstrosity, an unusual and in principle undesirable exception to the regular rule governing human affairs”

(Collinson). Many people believed that women belonged only in the private sphere. In response, Elizabeth positioned herself in such a way that the private sphere she *was* meant to rule over was her public sphere. She symbolically placed herself in marriage to England with the English people as her children. She also presented her maidenly chastity, not as a weakness or indicator of naivete, but as a noble sacrifice of personal interests (King 30).

Unlike Elizabeth, the Egyptian queen Cleopatra is unable to smoothly combine her private and public spheres. Jyotsna Singh notes that Cleopatra seems to leapfrog between personal and public, masculine and feminine, blurring the lines as she goes. If her relationship with Roman leader Antony was simply a political ploy, that might be excused, as she is protecting her nation. It certainly is political at the beginning of their relationship: she goes out on the Nile in an ostentatious barge, arrayed in gorgeous clothes and surrounded by servants, and puts both her sexuality and power on display to awe him and gain political advantage (*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.2). However, this political relationship quickly devolves into love and obsession. Cleopatra is determined to keep her country and maintain her romantic relationship with Antony, even when it becomes adultery twice over and puts the security of her nation at risk. She allows her love for him to cloud her judgment in political decisions again and again. Elizabeth was careful to keep her personal sphere separate from her public image (Collinson). She presented a unified front as queen and ruler. In the play, Cleopatra, however, mixes the political and personal spheres freely—to the downfall of both protagonists.

Cleopatra betrays the role of wife to her nation when her desire for a romantic relationship with Antony overcomes her responsibility to lead. If Cleopatra were to pursue a romantic relationship solely for herself, she would have to conform to the submissive mores of the time. As a queen and ruler in her own right, naturally, she does not do this. This has lasting consequences. Willis and Singh separately note that Rome in many ways represents masculinity. At the very beginning of the play when Antony goes to see Cleopatra, Roman soldiers say, “Take but good note, and you shall see in him / The triple pillar of the world transformed / Into a strumpet’s fool” (1.1.11–13). When he visits her, he is corrupting that masculine ideal and is “not Antony” (1.1.57; Singh 99). He has become “the strumpet’s fool.” Because Cleopatra and Antony’s relationship is personal as well as political, it is unbalanced. The man in a personal romantic relationship must be seen as superior, especially one meant to embody the masculine Roman ideal.

Singh puts it this way: “if Antony is to remain the Roman hero, Cleopatra must be marginalized as the temptress, witch, adulteress” (100). Because of her tendencies towards “feminine passions” such as pride and self-love (Wright), Cleopatra becomes a devious stereotype that corrupts Anthony, who was previously an example of the masculine ideal. She is the one that initiates their relationship. Her failure to remain solely in the role of queen, her female-coded weaknesses, and her decision to make the private sphere public leads to the loss of not only her power and her life but also the life of Antony and many soldiers. By shifting Cleopatra into the role of temptress, Shakespeare shifts the responsibility off of Antony and onto Cleopatra.

Despite her other roles, Cleopatra does act as a mother to the Egyptians. It is frequently shown in the play how much the people love her. Again, however, because of her feelings for Antony, her priorities shift. In her Tilbury speech, Elizabeth said she had come “to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and my people, my honour and my blood.” In contrast, Cleopatra’s priorities rapidly shift away from her kingdom’s (and if we follow the metaphor of mother of the people, her children’s) well-being. Everything in this play is tied to the overlap between political and personal. Once her relationship with Antony is no longer a political move but a deeply personal relationship, her political ploy turns into a personal weapon that she has turned against herself. Falling in love with Antony (and then acting on those feelings in the public sphere) was, in a way, political suicide, and it follows that it led to her actual, personal suicide later on.

As discussed, Cleopatra is the one that initiated the adultery. She is presented as the temptress and Antony as the one that succumbed to temptation (Singh 101). At the same time, she uses her personal power over Antony to influence political decisions (3.7.50), again crossing the lines between personal and political. Shakespeare uses all of this evidence to reinforce the prevalent idea of the time that women should not be involved in politics or war unless, like Elizabeth, they have “the heart and stomach of a king.” At this point, Cleopatra’s heart is blurred between her personal love for Antony and her role as a queen.

To show her the effect of her influence, Shakespeare makes sure Cleopatra sees Antony die powerless and without his countrymen. As punishment for neglecting her country, she loses power over it. She sees in horror what she has done in making Antony a “strumpets’ fool,” echoed in her contemplation of what will happen if she is captured: the Romans will mock her and parade

her around as a trophy (5.2.213–20). Rather than have that happen to her, she decides to kill herself. In contrast to Lady Macbeth, she sees suicide as a noble way to go:

... and then, what's brave, what's noble
 Let's do it after the high Roman fashion
 And make death proud to take us. (5.15.101–3)

Because the masculine Roman ideal endorses noble suicide, and because she is not Christian, it seems her suicide will not damn her. However, because she has put all of her personal life in the public sphere, Shakespeare places her death in an undoubtedly private environment. She has lost all power, except over her personal life. The Romans offer to save her children if she will give up her freedom and pride to go with them to Rome. She refuses, enacting her agency, but again prioritizing herself over the traditional role of mother (5.2.155–60). The loss of her kingdom became inevitable the moment she prioritized herself over her traditionally feminine role as queen, wife, and mother. No one but her servants see her die. She is alone, she is powerless, and by her actions, she has killed herself, her children, and her lover.

Titus Andronicus

Lavinia's situation is different from the other two. In many ways, she is an ideal daughter to Titus Andronicus and does nothing that goes against gender expectations. Therefore, her death cannot be a punishment for straying from the feminine sphere. Her death is painful and tragic. Despite this, her death is still defined by her identity as a woman. Her virtue, hands, and tongue are taken from her by force. One would imagine that she would not be blamed or punished for something so violating. However, the loss still renders her unable to fulfill feminine roles. Because she is no longer transactionally useful to the men around her, they see no reason for her to live.

Reading these horrible events through the lens of gender, the tragedy is not the trauma of the events or how they will impact Lavinia's quality of life but rather the loss of her essential female qualities and use to men and God. The play itself is titled *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*. It is not *The Tragedy of Lavinia*, or even *The Tragedy of Quintus and Martius* (Titus' sons). His children's losses are tragic based on their value to Titus, our main character.

It is important to recognize that, in contrast to Lavinia's mutilation, Titus' sons die. Their relationship with Titus was such that in order for him to lose their value in his life entirely, they *had* to die. Titus' enemies didn't have to kill Lavinia in order for Titus to "lose" her. They had to take away the parts of her that made her valuable to him: in this case, her tongue, her hands, and her virginity.

The loss of Lavinia's voice renders her unable to fill two other feminine tasks: praising God and counseling her husband. Women were known at the time for being more pious than men (Wright), and "Christian woman" was frequently (and often still is) a synonym for "good woman." In addition, women were meant to talk with their husbands and counsel them. While women weren't supposed to make decisions like their husbands were, they were supposed to be good and pure in order to provide a gentle, holy perspective for the men around them (like Eve's role as "an help meet" for Adam in the Christian tradition (Speght). Without her tongue, Lavinia cannot fulfill this role.

Lavinia also loses her hands so that she cannot write about her violation and reveal her attackers. Katherine A. Rowe argues that hands inhabit both a physical and metaphorical space. They are both a tool for action and a "metonym for those tools" (282). In other words, hands represent both action and agency. By cutting off Lavinia's hands, they are not only taking away the hand as a tool. They are metaphorically taking away her agency. Rendered both mute and handless, Lavinia's ability to express her choices is voided.

As William Hergest said, in Elizabethan times, "For ye chief, and almost only vertue, that above all things is required in a woman, is Virginitie and Chastitie, which being once lost, her credit is cracked, especially amonge the wise and godly." This sentiment is repeated by several of his contemporaries, and indeed throughout Christian canon (Speght). While it is tragic for the people around Lavinia to know that the loss of her virginity wasn't her fault, in the eyes of potential suitors, she is still "cracked." Someone of good standing might marry a mute, handless woman, but they will not marry someone who is not a virgin. Her worth to her father lies in the transactional value she would have brought through marriage, be it political or monetary. Her value, and therefore her right to live, is tied to the feminine roles of daughter, wife, and mother she is meant to fill for the men in her life. Because of this, Lavinia could have retained her value to others, and therefore lived, if her virginity had been preserved.

Her father, as a beneficiary of her potential marriage, is the one that is ashamed to have a daughter who has been corrupted. When Titus asks Saturninus if it is right for a father to kill their daughter after she has been raped, Saturninus responds yes, because “the girl should not survive her shame / And by her presence still renew his sorrows” (*Titus Andronicus* 5.3.40–41). Lavinia’s presence reminds Titus of his sorrow and her shame. Rather than try and help her heal and continue on with life, it is easier for Titus to forget the sorrow of Lavinia’s mutilation if he kills her. It should also be noted that he only asks if a woman who is raped, not mutilated, should live with the shame. It doesn’t matter if she doesn’t have hands to work or a tongue to speak, what really matters is her virginity, and by extension, her marriageability.

In the end, Titus does kill Lavinia. In a way, it’s almost an inverse marriage scene. In a less tragic version of events, he would give her to another man in a marital transaction. In this case, with marriage no longer on the table, he cancels the possibility of transaction entirely by killing her. He saves her from both his own pain as well as hers but, at the same time, assumes her agency and robs her of her future.

Conclusion

Shakespeare’s heroines may have power during the plot, but by the conclusion of the play, they must be returned to the feminine sphere. In comedies, this is most frequently done through marriage. In tragedies, it is almost invariably accomplished through narrative punishment and ultimately the death of the character. The method of these deaths is gendered regardless of whether the death acts as punishment for the character, as with Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, or is simply a tragedy, as with Lavinia. By condemning any masculine actions, utilizing feminine imagery, and giving them largely ignominious deaths, Shakespeare reminds his audience that in his eyes, women are only valuable in their set roles. When they stray or are “cracked,” tragedy will inevitably follow.

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