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| Shakespeare, it is claimed by many modern critics, was a feminist. Shapiro for example goes so far as to claim that Shakespeare was 'the noblest feminist of them all'. Although I am inclined to agree with McLuskie that as Shakespeare 'wrote for a male entertainment', it is historically incorrect to regard him as a feminist. I believe that Shakespeare because of his extraordinary genius for portraying human behaviour, necessarily depicted the condition of women within a patriarchal system and created women characters which in their richness, transcend the limitations of his time.  In this essay I will explore chiefly Shakespeare's treatment of the three heroine's Ophelia, Desdemona and Cleopatra, of the tragedies *Hamlet, Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, beginning with an exploration of Shakespeare's representation of the effects of a patriarchal system upon the characters. |  |

Ophelia, it would seem, wholly at the mercy of the male figures within her life, is certainly a victim figure. Although it has been claimed by critics that Hamlet is unique amongst Shakespeare's tragic heroes for not being to blame for the tragedy of the play, if we are to consider the death of the heroine as part of this tragedy then surely we must question Hamlet's innocence. In his treatment of Ophelia, Hamlet oscillates between protests of undying love and cruelty such as his cold and accusing speech in the 'nunnery scene'. In short, Hamlet throughout the play uses Ophelia as a tool in his revenge plan.

To examine this culpability more deeply however, it could be suggested that it is Queen Gertrude's behaviour that has instigated Hamlet's unforgivable treatment of Ophelia: She transgresses the patriarchal bounds of femininity by marrying so soon after her husband's death and not remaining in passive grief and obedient devotion to his memory. This provides Hamlet with a model of women's inconstancy. His bitterness leads him to believe that all women are untrustworthy - 'Frailty thy name is woman' and as R. S. White puts it, Hamlet projects upon Ophelia the 'guilt and pollution' he believes exist in Gertrude's behaviour. However we view his culpability, Ophelia suffers as a result of Hamlet's patriarchal values of womanhood.

With regard to her father and brother, the two direct ruling male forces in her life, Ophelia is also very much a victim. Unquestioningly obeying their remonstrances against pursuing a relationship with Hamlet, she rejects his advances - which of course she believes to be genuine - and thus when he pretends to be mad she believes it to be her fault. Her speech reflects her deep and genuine sorrow:

And I of ladies, most deject and wretched  
That sucked honey of his music vows ...   
O woe is me.

Ophelia's feeling of guilt is reinforced by Polonius's insistence to King Claudius:

But Yet I do believe  
The origin and commencement of this grief  
Sprung from neglected love

Polonius's conviction, in which one can't help believing, stems from a mercenary desire to marry his daughter off to such an eligible husband as the prince of Denmark, rather than a genuine belief in his daughter's role in causing Hamlet's madness.

Thus when Hamlet murders her father, Ophelia enters a double realm of guilt, believing herself to be to blame for both Hamlet's madness and her father's death. As a result she becomes mad. Although at one level this decline into madness sets Ophelia up indisputably as a victim figure, on a deeper level perhaps her madness itself can be seen as Ophelia's active rejection of patriarchal restraint. Charney Maurice suggests that since within Renaissance drama madwomen were 'more strongly defined than madmen', and women's madness was 'interpreted as something specifically feminine', through depictions of madness dramatists were able to give women a chance to express their selfhood - 'make a forceful assertion of their being' - in a way which patriarchal conventions would otherwise have prevented.

In the later tragedy, *Othello*, it can also be argued that the tragedy occurs from adherence to patriarchal rules and stereotypes. Gayle Greene summarises this position in her claim that the tragedy of Othello stems from 'men's misunderstandings of women and women's inability to protect themselves from society's conception of them'. Certainly Desdemona's very much feminised qualities of passivity, softness and obedience are no match for Othello's masculine qualities of dominance, aggression and authority. After Othello in his jealousy has struck Desdemona and spoken harshly to her, she tells Iago, 'I am a child to chiding'. Protected by a system which makes women the weaker, dependent sex, Desdemona is unequipped to deal with such aggression; she is helpless against Othello. As Dreher puts it 'following conventional patterns of behaviour for wives and daughters, these women lose their autonomy and intimacy and do not achieve adulthood'. Desdemona thus retreats into childlike behaviour to escape from reality.

With regard to men's misunderstandings of women, Greene points out that Iago's manipulation of Othello - the cause of the tragedy - occurs only because of 'the views of women the moor already possessed'. This is certainly a convincing argument, for Othello all-too-easily accepts a stereotypical view of his wife based on the authority of a male voice. He loses sight of the real Desdemona, allowing every action of hers, once his suspicion is stimulated, to reaffirm this stereotypical conception of her.

At the close of the play Othello attempts to vindicate himself from intentional murder by claiming that he did nothing 'in malice', but is simply a man 'that loved not wisely but too well'. This speech illustrates the precarious position of love in a society submerged in stereotypes. Othello's excessive, 'unwise' love for Desdemona is tied up with his perception of her as representing perfect womanhood, and his underlying fear of her - endorsed by society - as whore. Like Hamlet, who tells Ophelia 'get thee to a nunnery' in order to protect her chastity and remove his fear of woman's infidelity, Othello too wishes to erase Desdemona's sexuality and potential for infidelity. His decision to kill her, he claims, is to prevent her from a further transgression - 'Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men'. As Iago's insinuations build, the gulf between this perception of Desdemona as angel and the fear of her as whore grows, leaving Othello in a void of confusion and doubt:

. . . By the world,   
I think my wife be honest, and think she is not.   
I think thou [Iago] art just, and then think thou art not.

In Othello's refusal to hear Desdemona's own protestations of innocence, Othello is very much a tragedy in which the female is subordinated by the male.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare again explores the idea of the victim within a patriarchal society. However, in this play the gender roles are inverted and it is Antony who is the true victim. Stifled by the rules of the patriarchal society of Rome which expects him to retain a masculine side only, and not to adopt the feminine qualities of passion, emotion, and love, Antony's control over his life diminishes. Within such patriarchal confines the role of lover must be subordinate to the male's political role. After finding an extraordinary and powerful love with Cleopatra - which Shakespeare establishes to perfection - Antony is unable to accept the 'business first' principle of the patriarchal laws. Like the typical female heroine of a tragedy, Antony's plight escalates when he is rushed into an arranged marriage of convenience. He cannot remain away from Cleopatra and faithful to Octavia who symbolises Caesar and the power of Patriarchal Rome. He says 'though I make this marriage for my peace,/ I'th' East my pleasure lies'. Inevitably he returns to Egypt and Cleopatra, and causes a rift which can never again be cemented between himself and Caesar, which ultimately results in war.

The first words of the play, spoken by Philo, illustrate the growing condemnation of Antony's untraditional behaviour, which is not confined within the 'measure' of patriarchy: 'Nay but this dotage of our General's / O'erflows the measure'. The patriarchal males view Antony's devotion as shameful - 'His captain's heart ... become the bellows and the fan / To cool a gipsy's lust'. Surprisingly, in modern-day readings of the play, this attitude still exists: in W. Baker's view of the play - in my opinion a view grossly over simplified - 'throughout the play [Antony] is suffering from a disease, his passion for Cleopatra, which obsesses his mind and which causes him to desert his public responsibilities'. It is true that the play is ultimately concerned with the conflict between love and politics; Egypt and Rome; but to simply reject the former as wrong, is to miss the nuances of the play and succumb to a view of the polarities of masculine and feminine as separated and distinct, which the play itself undercuts.

Although Antony occasionally lapses into judging himself by the standards of the patriarchy - for example, towards the end of the play dejected and shamed by his diminished political power, he becomes jealous and irrational and claims that Cleopatra has emasculated him: 'O thy vile lady, / She has robbed me of my sword.' In the conflict between love and politics - love wins. Ultimately, Antony is not debased by his loss of power, but rather, through his love of Cleopatra envelops a manhood of stronger parameters - an 'alternative masculinity' as Woodbridge puts it. The end of the play can be seen as a tribute to love; a celebration rather than a downfall. Antony does not cease to be a valiant Roman by choosing Egypt over Rome; love over politics, but becomes vanquisher of himself in his suicide. By dying simultaneously in the Roman fashion, and with Cleopatra and for Cleopatra (he kills himself when he believes she is dead), Antony combines the two polarities which have been evident and separate throughout the play: the masculine Rome and the feminine Egypt.

Cleopatra's masculine qualities counterbalance the play, so Shakespeare provides us with a relationship of surprising equality. Neither Cleopatra nor the relationship can be stifled within the confines of the patriarchy of the seventeenth century. The distinctions between masculine and feminine are blurred - in a sense Antony and Cleopatra swap roles, continually embracing both their masculine and feminine selves and thus experiencing a full bonding of souls. As Woodbridge says, 'Antony and Cleopatra can cross gender boundaries without losing their sex roles as man or woman'. This swapping of gender roles is rather shockingly portrayed in the scene in which Cleopatra puts her 'tires and mantles on [Antony] whilst / [she] wore his sword Phillipan'. Shakespeare evidently recognises the existence of both masculine and feminine qualities within females and males.

Cleopatra, unlike Othello and Ophelia, is the dominating force of the play in terms of theme and also her personal presence. Novy claims that Antony and Cleopatra is the only tragedy that 'glorifies woman as actor'. Through his treatment of Cleopatra, Shakespeare provides us with a 'real' woman rather than a stereotype. Velma Richmond claims further that in Cleopatra we can find Shakespeare's 'finest embracing of the feminine'. Cleopatra through the combination of sexual and political power is a force to be reckoned with.

Cleopatra's sexuality, despite condemnation by the patriarchal men - she is referred to as 'strumpet' and 'whore' on various occasions throughout the play - is unhidden and unrestricted. Her sexual power over men is conveyed boldly, for example, in her descriptions of her former conquests 'great Pompey' and 'Broad-fronted Caesar'. Cleopatra's sexuality is not a thing to be locked up, as in *Hamlet* and *Othello*, but is celebrated as a positive force. Surprisingly, even Enobarbus, despite his patriarchal views, does on occasions present her as positively sexual, as his unforgettable description of her indicates:

Age cannot wither her,   
Nor custom stale her infinite variety. Other women cloy   
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies. For vilest things   
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests  
Bless she is riggish.

Refusing to adhere to the stereotypes of patriarchal society, Cleopatra transforms her natural sexuality into part of her power, rather than as a diminishing of her goodness.

So too, Cleopatra insists on fulfilling a political role against the wishes of the patriarchal men: when Enobarbus attempts to prevent her from doing so she replies in enraged determination:

A charge we bear i'th'war,  
And as the president of my kingdom will  
Appear there for a man. Speak not against it.  
I will not stay behind.

Cleopatra thus forces her access into the male arena, where Ophelia and

emona do not - and cannot of course, in the same way, for in her status as a middle aged woman and Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra naturally has more freedom. She is not dependent upon anyone financially, as are Ophelia and Desdemona.

Ophelia, the dominated daughter, is completely dependent. Although a flash of her potential self-will shines through at the beginning of the play, when we learn that Ophelia has entertained Hamlet unchaperoned or without paternal consent, this is stifled very quickly by Polonius and Laertes - the double voice of the patriarchy - telling her that she is naive and that her behaviour is unsuitable. Ophelia, daunted by their claims that she has mistaken Hamlet's love, assumes that her father and brother necessarily know best and replies simply 'I will obey'. Shakespeare shows, however, that it is this obedience of Ophelia's that leads to her own destruction, and illustrates that when the guiding male is like the cynical Polonius or the unperceptive Laertes, the fate of the subordinate female is considerably threatened.

While Ophelia then, silently and obediently accepts the oppression of male power, turning her distress in upon herself in her madness, Desdemona does display some traces of a more Cleopatra-like self-assertion. In her choosing of Othello as her husband, she exercises her own desire, subverting the female role of passivity within the patriarch, and marries him without parental consent. This is a rather courageous act of will, which could have resulted in much strife. However, she handles the situation with a cleverness and a manipulation which outwits the male judges who listen to her. When her father questions her about her marriage she answers forcefully, first pacifying him and then justifying her disobedience on the very grounds of patriarchal obedience and duty:

. . . My noble father,   
I do perceive here a divided duty.  
To you I am bound, for life and education . . .   
You are the lord of my duty,  
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord.

Desdemona by her cleverness thus appears obedient in her disobedience.

Shakespeare shows Desdemona's behaviour in her relationship with Othello before the marriage to be slightly manipulative also. For Desdemona tells Othello in a very suggestive way after she has fallen in love with him, as Othello himself relates - 'if I had a friend that loved [me]/ I should but teach him how to tell [your] story,/ And that would woo [me]'. However, when she is married she slips into the role of the submissive wife. Obedient to Othello's every command, she says to Emilia - after Othello tells her peremptorily 'Get you to bed on th'instant' - 'we must not now displease him'. At this point Desdemona becomes more of a stereotype, her identity disappearing as Othello's jealousy becomes more defined. Her identity diminishes until she fits into the stereotype of the silent woman. Othello denies her right to a voice when he soliloquises 'Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,/ Made to write 'whore' upon?'

Obedience and silence were very much part of the patriarchal conception of femininity. A conception to which Cleopatra refuses to adhere. When Charmian traditionally suggests that the way to gain and retain Antony's love is to 'In each thing give him way; Cross him in nothing'. Cleopatra replies, 'Thou teachest like a fool, the way to lose him'. Far from being the silent woman, Cleopatra makes her voice heard whenever she wishes, challenging and meeting challenges. She mocks Antony and quarrels with him. Challenging him with a masculine aggression when they argue - 'I would I had thine inches. Thou shouldst know/ There were a heart in Egypt'. Spirited and passionate, such displays of assertion as her physical attack on the messenger informing her of Antony's marriage to Octavia, are a far cry from the passive silent role of the feminine in patriarchal society. In passionate disbelief and anger, she draws a knife on the messenger and strikes him with her bare hands. Charmian tries to pacify her by telling her 'Good madam keep yourself within yourself', but Cleopatra escapes the bounds of self-composure and the repression of self-hood. Her reaction when she feels herself wronged is in very stark contrast to the reactions of Ophelia and Desdemona.

Linda Baber explains that the relative weakness of the characters of Desdemona and Ophelia is due to artistic device, as opposed to Shakespeare's misrepresentation of womanhood. Baber claims that they are 'psychologically neutral characters who take on the coloration of the plays' moods'. Thus, their personalities are not fully developed. James Hill similarly says of the heroines of the tragedies that we are not shown 'their inner lives' or their 'inner conflicts'. However, in the case of Desdemona, I think it is a mistake not to recognise her as an active force within the play. As Brian Shaffer suggests Othello's punishment of Desdemona becomes the crime itself, subverting the domestic tragedy of the Elizabethan stage. These tragedies traditionally involve the process of marriage; 'disintegration' and then punishment and death. The conception of woman's inferiority to man in these tragedies is undercut by Shakespeare for he shows Desdemona to be the virtuous character who is finally vindicated.

Desdemona's goodness furthermore is not simply passive or weak but an act of will. Her refusal to blame Othello for his terrible treatment of her, when he suspects her of betrayal, must not be viewed as simple subservience but as a self-willed refusal to accept a bad opinion of the husband she has chosen. When he is behaving deplorably towards her she refuses to acknowledge his identity - 'My lord is not my lord,' she says 'nor should I know him / Were he in favour as in humour altered'. She stands by her acceptance of her love for him as something sacred, with a martyr-like determination: she tells Emilia 'his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love.' She thus obeys her own heart rather than patriarchal rules, extending this determination through to death, so that with her last breath - when Emilia asks 'who hath done this deed?' she can reply 'Nobody, I myself'. Othello's conviction that even upon dying she lies by claiming this self-death bears witness to the whole tragedy of the play, Othello's inability to see beneath the surface of stereotypical conceptions of femininity. By claiming this death for herself she re-affirms her self-hood. Metaphorically then she dies for her love which cannot be tainted, not from Othello's hands. In Hamlet too, Ophelia's death can perhaps be seen as an act of assertion and escape from the confining patriarchal world.

Unsurprisingly though, it is through the character of Cleopatra that Shakespeare really depicts death as an assertion of self-hood and an act of defiance to the patriarchal laws. Cleopatra's death becomes an act of triumph over Caesar - the representative of patriarchal Rome. On finding her dead, one of his guards says, 'Caesar's beguiled'. Through death Cleopatra not only transcends the world of oppression and fate, but embraces her death as a positive act rather than as an act of negation:

My desolation does begin to make a better life  
. . . And it is great   
To do that thing that ends all other deeds,  
Which shackles accidents and bolts up change

Cleopatra combines feminine and masculine qualities through her death. With her resolution to take on the masculine quality of rationality and firmness and courage she wills, 'I have nothing of woman in me. Now from head to foot/ I am marble constant'. She rejects her feminine qualities of water and the changeability of the moon and transforms herself into 'air and fire'. So too she embraces Antony's masculinity and the world of Rome by dying in 'the true Roman Fashion'. Yet through her death, Shakespeare depicts her as enacting the strength of womanhood by converting death into an image of both sensuality and motherhood. The pain of death is bitter-sweet and sensual 'as a lover's pinch,/which hurts and is desired' and the asp, the vehicle of death is a 'baby at [her] breast,/That sucks the nurse asleep'. Through death she is reborn and even the stern patriarchal Caesar is forced to admit to her bravery, and to the undeniable nobility and royalty of the woman who 'Took her own way'. Through his representation of womanhood, especially in the character of Cleopatra, Shakespeare indeed does transcend the stereotypes of his own time.