

PASSIVENESS AND GRIEF AS FEMALE CONCEPTS IN  
SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

DIPLOMARBEIT

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## STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS OF SHAKESPEAREAN TITLES

(According to the *MLA Handbook*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition)

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* MND

*Antony and Cleopatra* Ant.

*Hamlet* Ham.

*Henry IV, part 1* 1H4

*Julius Caesar* JC

*Macbeth* Mac.

*Othello* Oth.

*Richard II* R2

*Romeo and Juliet* Rom.

*The Comedy of Errors* Err.

*The Merchant of Venice* MV

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* Wiv.

*The Taming of the Shrew* Shr.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>CONDEMNING WOMEN TO PASSIVITY</u>	<u>3</u>
HUSBANDS AND WIVES	5
FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS	14
MORE OR LESS INNOCENT VICTIMS	24
<u>THE CHANGING IMAGE OF FEMININITY</u>	<u>37</u>
MALE MELANCHOLY VS. FEMALE DEPRESSION	39
SHAKESPEARE'S EFFEMINATE MEN	46
WOMEN CROSSING GENDER BORDERS	49
THE POWER OF MALE DISGUISE	57
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>62</u>
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	<u>64</u>

# INTRODUCTION

For centuries there was a huge gap between men and women as far as the roles which are attributed to them by Western society are concerned. In more recent decades, women continuously managed to achieve greater equality: many of them would still be housewives and mothers; however, women were no longer limited to their households only. Contemporary women are as active as their male counterparts. They make their own choices in life; they are able to vote, work and decide whom to marry. In most Western societies, husbands and wives are seen as equal partners who carry out their plans together. Women are allowed to be in public on their own. They are not judged when intellectually challenging a member of the opposite sex; on the contrary, women are able to attend universities just like men and there are women in virtually any kind of job. Nowadays many companies are led by female managers and quite a few countries in the world are governed by women. In theory, women in the Western world have exactly the same possibilities as men.

All this might seem very natural to someone living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the fact that women and men have equal rights might be taken for granted by most people. However, only a few hundred years ago, women's situation was still very different. The Renaissance, for example, was a time of change and intellectual re-orientation with a variety of new ideas being introduced to European society. Yet, women were greatly limited as far as their possibilities were concerned. As during the Middle Ages, Renaissance women were rather restricted to their homes and the domestic sphere and were generally still considered as male property. Patriarchy, which was a dominating force in both medieval and Renaissance society, greatly focused on the idea that women are inferior to men and should therefore be bound to their homes rather than being allowed to enter the public sphere, which was reserved for men. Women had no other choice than being passive and were, above everything else, expected to be concerned with the men in their lives.

England, which had already been governed by two female monarchs by 1600, was arguably more liberal than other European nations at the time; however, the situation of English women was not much different than the one of French or

Spanish ones. Social hierarchy in Renaissance England greatly emphasized male superiority; women in powerful positions and the idea of equal rights for women were regarded as subversive and inappropriate. Of course, women were anything than satisfied with their disadvantageous situation; however, their options concerning social change were limited, to say the least. Renaissance women's struggle for more rights and their often hopeless position were also mirrored in the literature of the time.

The concept of patriarchy dominating women and women's bid to change their social position is a central topic in the works of William Shakespeare. Numerous of his works focus on the often destructive nature of male dominated patriarchal societies and the situation of women in them. Whether it is Shakespeare's tragedies, histories, comedies or Roman plays: the author depicts a wide range of characters who are probably an accurate reflection of Elizabethan and Jacobean society and their concepts of gender hierarchy. In this thesis, I will discuss the issue of how much and what kind of significance was given to women in Renaissance England by closely analysing a variety of Shakespeare's plays; I will closely examine a number of Shakespeare's female characters: wives and daughters who are dominated by their husbands and fathers according to patriarchal tradition and the concept of male superiority over women. In his plays, Shakespeare created a vivid image of Elizabethan and Jacobean society and the way men tried to control, dominate and even "tame" women. Many of these women are presented as unable to change their situation; they are forced to be passive and are often experiencing great tragedy and grief; moreover, not even women's sorrow is given much significance. On the other hand, some of the playwright's heroines are active and powerful, which must have been considered as rather unusual, considering the views of the society which Shakespeare was part of. I will discuss several examples of women who might be described as powerful, self-conscious and active, and how Elizabethan and Jacobean society might have reacted to them. Some of these 'unusual' women are condemned to tragedy and downfall as they might be interpreted as disruptive for patriarchy; however, some of Shakespeare's female characters are able to temporarily escape their state of forced passivity; I will discuss several examples of those as well in this thesis.

## CONDEMNING WOMEN TO PASSIVITY

Throughout their age the Elizabethans were confronted with a wide variety of social changes that affected them in literally every part of their lives. Among these novelties, the slow but steady transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance introduced new ways of handling gender differences and the various roles attributed to each sex. While medieval women were virtually regarded as property and were not even allowed to be in public by themselves, the liberties of women increased continuously during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Women were still attended by their male relatives in public; however, some of them were much better educated or even allowed to choose their own husbands. Furthermore, women became more and more interested in fashion and clothing, which was an expression of creative liberty and, on the other hand, probably even reinforced their “otherness” as against men (cf. Crump Wright 1993:7f.).

Despite the fact that their situation had greatly improved, Renaissance women were still far away from being independent from men and the comparably vast number of benefits experienced by modern women today. Male superiority and thus female subordination were part of everyday reality. Girls had to obey their fathers, and wives had to obey their spouses, who most probably had been chosen for them by their parents. According to Dwyer (1999:87), obedience, silence and chastity were the most important features men expected from women.

Certainly, women were not men’s slaves; however, the woman of the Renaissance was limited to the domestic sphere rather than being a part of public life. Men represented their households in public while women were expected to take care of their homes by carrying out all the duties that were traditionally attributed to housewives. Man was seen as the leader of his house. Even though England and Scotland were ruled by two female monarchs during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, authority was still a feature rarely attributed to women (cf. Rackin 2005:27ff.). Rackin (2005:32) points out that “most recent scholarship on Queen Elizabeth insists on the difficulties she encountered as a woman in a position of authority over men”.

The issue of gender inequality is a major topic also in Shakespeare's works. The author portrays passive women who are objects of male domination as well as self-conscious women who try to improve their situation and enlarge their independence. Leaving aside the question of Shakespeare's personal opinion of women, he certainly depicts the female struggle for change in a vivid way that is fairly unique among his contemporaries. Shakespeare introduced his audiences to characters like the wives of Windsor, who play tricks on men; the shrewish Katherine, who wants to be independent, and Portia, who holds great power over men when in disguise. In contrast to this, the poet also stages the downfall of the highly immoral Lady Macbeth, the suicide of the sensual, self-confident Cleopatra, who is hungry for power, or the tragic end of the youthful Juliet, who chooses her own husband. Furthermore, Shakespeare's work is full of passive victims like Gertrude, Ophelia and Desdemona, who are caught between several men and who are ultimately torn apart by their wish to be obedient to all of them at the same time.

It remains unclear to which extent Shakespeare meant to portray strong, emancipated women when he wrote plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew* or *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Shakespeare's plays are highly complex as far as their motifs and themes are concerned, and the depiction of powerful women must be seen on various levels: e.g. Katherine is clearly a powerful and seemingly independent woman; however, she is finally tamed by her husband Petruchio. Still, Crump Wright (1993:9f.) insists that Shakespeare must have permanently kept an extremely revolutionary and subversive image of female empowerment in mind when he wrote his plays.

The concept of female independence and disobedience was considered in negative, even hostile terms by most Elizabethans and Jacobeans, and thus the idea of a woman trying to outwit a man would have been impossible and most probably destructive to Shakespeare's career as a writer. This might explain why a wild character like Katherine can be "tamed" at all. Some of Shakespeare's writing proves how difficult it must have been for a writer to straddle the very delicate line between female subordination and empowerment (cf. Dusinberre 1975:86ff., Crump Wright 1993:9f, Dwyer 1999:87). Many of Shakespeare's plays depict both female power and the downfall of strong women. I will discuss several examples of this in this paper.

## HUSBANDS AND WIVES

The beasts, the fishes, and the winged fowls  
Are their males' subjects and at their controls.  
Man, more divine, the master of all these,  
Lord of the wide world and wild wat'ry seas,  
Indued with intellectual sense and fowls,  
Are masters to their females, and their lords.

(Err. II.i.18-24)

The above quoted answer Luciana provides to her sister in *The Comedy of Errors* after being asked why men should have more liberties than women affords important insights into how much relative importance Renaissance society attributed to each sex. The above passage not only shows that man is regarded “lord of the wide world” and nature itself, but woman is put on the same level as “beasts”. Indeed, Hillman (1992:26) points out that the act of taming Katherine, the shrew, also compares the female protagonist to an animal: in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherine is compared to a falcon, which establishes Petruchio as the ruler over her and nature, for he is able to “tame” her (cf. Shr. IV.i.174ff).

It is difficult to judge the extent to which Shakespeare meant to be political when he compared women to animals; however, it has been argued that many of Shakespeare’s female characters are ridiculed through farce and even objectified. Although Katherine tries to remain independent of men and is able to resist in the beginning, she is constantly made fun of and even compared to a wild bird, as we have seen. She is “tamed” and kept small by her husband; ultimately, she seems to give in to Petruchio (cf. Bean 1980:75, Hillman 1992:30).

The concept of “taming” a woman provides a rather extreme idea of how many Renaissance husbands must have dealt with their wives. In 16<sup>th</sup> century England, women as well men were constantly confronted with a whole variety of challenges and tasks. Both had to contribute to the household in ways that were conventionally attributed to their genders. The man, for instance, had to represent his estate in public, but he also had to provide for his family and serve as a protector. Women were to manage the household and function as assistants to their husbands,

which would sometimes include advising servants and selling home-made goods at local markets. However, actual authority constantly remained with the man (cf. Dwyer Amussen 1999:86ff). Many women in Shakespearean plays are condemned to be strictly limited as far as importance, action and personal development are concerned.

A number of Shakespeare's female characters, especially wives, seem to be concerned more with what affects their husbands than with themselves. A possible reason for this female tendency to forget about themselves certainly is the fact that men were much better educated than women. Wives wanted to please their husbands; this also meant that they tended to be preoccupied with the issue of how their husbands perceived them and which socially dictated qualities they should nurture most (cf. Dusinger 1975:92ff).

A lack of female importance can be observed on all levels of social hierarchy, which is also illustrated in Shakespeare's writings. *Richard II*, for example, shows that medieval and Renaissance ideas of gender hierarchy would not even make an exception for royalty. Richard's wife, the Queen of England, is an example of female passivity. She is unable to influence Richard in any way and is totally reduced to grief and sorrow after her husband has been deposed; all the scenes she is part of belong to a domestic setting and she is rarely given the opportunity to speak. Her grief is the only form of expression she is allowed. Concerned only with what will happen to her husband, Richard, she both predicts and mourns his dark future and is at the same time unable to change it. In the second act, Bushy, a courtier and one of the King's flatterers, advises the Queen "to lay aside life-harming heaviness" (R2 II.ii.3). Unaware of herself, she answers "[t]o please the King I did; to please myself / I cannot do it" (R2 II.ii.5-6).

The difference between how much importance is given to male and female characters in *Richard II* is underlined even more by the way Shakespeare stages a scene in which the Queen walks around the garden with her ladies. The women listen to a conversation between the gardeners, who have heard of Richard's deposition. Following the bad news, the Queen mourns her husband's fate, leaves the stage and is pitied by the gardeners. This scene creates a very strong contrast in terms of gender importance. Not only is it striking that the Queen is informed of her own husband's fate by 'common' workers in her palace, but the fact that even the gardeners talk about politics while all she does is grieve for her husband, offers an

unmistakable image of a passive, typically medieval woman (cf. Howard and Rackin 1997:140ff).

From a modern point of view it often does not seem quite understandable why women were kept so small. Egeon's description of childbirth as "pleasing punishment" in *The Comedy of Errors* (Err. I.i.46) certainly indicates that theories of female inferiority were based on and justified by a wide variety of theological and philosophical ideas. However, the Renaissance was a period of changing concepts and transition. Not every woman was lower in the hierarchy of power than any man. Often the nature of gender relationships was very ambiguous and Renaissance men were far from being untouchable if they behaved in the wrong way.

Society saw a slow change from total male domination over woman to a more constructive way of seeing relationships that naturally involved two equal parties. Shakespeare illustrates this evolution by introducing his audience to a couple like Iago and Emilia in his tragedy *Othello*. In terms of Renaissance conventions, Emilia is a good and loyal wife to her husband Iago; however, Iago is the antagonist of the play. He completely lacks virtue and tries to destroy Othello's life out of jealousy by hatching one intrigue after the other. Emilia proves her loyalty by stealing the handkerchief for Iago without even questioning his motive. His villainy is revealed to her not before the end of the play, and up to this point Emilia is a truthful spouse to her husband. The subplot of Emilia and Iago's marriage illustrates that whenever a husband acts in sinful ways, a wife is not bound to her vows of loyalty any longer. This thesis was also strongly supported by Puritan preachers during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (cf. Dusinger 1975:90, Dash 1981:129).

It might be argued that no other Shakespearean play highlights the ambiguous nature of Renaissance relationships as much as *The Taming of the Shrew*. A husband was definitely not able to act out of arbitrary villainy without being morally judged or even punished. However, to Shakespeare's contemporaries, an even bigger threat was the idea of unruly women and the possibility of women's empowerment. Dwyer Amussen (1999:88) states that English society in Shakespeare's time was very concerned about distinguishing between the two genders, and unruly or even independent women like Katherine (or the female protagonists in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, who I will discuss below) would have been seen as a great threat to social order.

McNeill (2007:1) points out that the comic theme of ordering the household was very common and highly popular in theatres at Shakespeare's time. Seemingly independent, self-confident women, who were often labelled as "shrews", would be confronted by male protagonists who tried to put an end to the female rebellion. Marriage was often to stand as a symbol of the end of a woman's revolt in Elizabethan or Jacobean drama. This is arguably also true for Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*. After a long struggle for independence, she and Petruchio are finally joined together in matrimony; as we have seen, the title of the play even suggests that she is "tamed" like a wild beast (cf. Jardine 1983:113).

Certainly one of the most intensively discussed Shakespearean speeches is found at the very end of the play, when Katherine addresses the audience to rationalize the importance of a wife's obedience to her husband (cf. Shr. V.ii.141-184). Katherine is a character that changes substantially during the play. First she behaves in a wild and rebellious way, refuses to obey her father and is portrayed as being cruel to her own sister. Some of the stage directions even suggest that she uses a lot of physical violence towards other characters, especially Petruchio (cf. Shr. II.i.218). In the end, however, she is presented as someone completely different. Petruchio has somehow managed to influence his bride in a way that seemed impossible even to Katherine's own father.

Critics of *The Taming of the Shrew* have always held divergent views of the "taming" process found in the play as ambiguous. Some argue that Katherine is only transferred because Petruchio shows her the true nature of her misbehaviour, and by realising that true love can conquer and eliminate any kind of shrewish behaviour. Other scholars insist that every single detail of Kate's transformation is happening completely against her will, and that Petruchio even forces her to give her final speech as if it were a moral testimony for other "shrews". Moreover, it has been argued that Kate functions as a comic device for the audience as she is constantly made fun of and played tricks on by her husband Petruchio. Thus, she fears to be turned into an object and Katherine is exploited for theatrical reasons (cf. Bean 1980, Dash 1981, Hillman 1992, Gay 1994).

Petruchio and Katherine are even more complex and ambiguous as a couple. Katherine physically attacks Petruchio, yet praises him for his marital virtues in her final speech. Petruchio woos Katherine and admires her wild beauty; however,

he ridicules and even starves her. While Kate actually hits Petruchio, his form of violence is psychological and rather “sophisticated”, as suggested by Hillman (1992:29). The themes of gender hierarchy and marriage in *The Taming of the Shrew* are far more difficult to interpret as might seem at first glance. Katherine is not completely disobedient and Petruchio is not completely dominant. Without doubt, the play illustrates the changing roles of Renaissance couples in contrast to medieval marriage.

In her final speech, Katherine mainly focuses on her duties as a married wife and marital hierarchy. She suddenly rejects any form of rebellion against her husband, whom she calls “lord”, “king”, “governor”, “life”, “keeper”, “head” and “sovereign” (cf. Shr. V.ii.143-152). Now Katherine points out what she perceives as the hideous nature of female revolt and further establishes the political metaphor of a husband being a leader by using the terms mentioned above. She describes any woman who refuses to be obedient as a “foul contending rebel” or even a “graceless traitor” (cf. Shr. V.ii.164-165). Renaissance audiences must have considered a woman revolting against a man as just as depraved in terms of social order as a rebellion against the country’s monarch (cf. Bean 1980:68f., Rackin 2005:28). Indeed, when Petruchio talks about how he finally managed to “tame” Kate, he utters: “[t]hus have I politicly begun my reign” (Shr. IV.i.174).

Katherine not only highlights her duties as a wife; she also lists a number of more or less substantial advantages which a woman gets out of being married to a man. She states that a husband is not only woman’s “sovereign” but “cares for thee, / [...] commits his body / to painful labour [...] / Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe” (cf. Shr. V.ii.152-156). Katherine ambitiously explains why her obedience to Petruchio is just a small price to pay for what she gets back from him.

As mentioned above, Renaissance men were expected to provide for their families in many different ways; and even though Katherine’s speech holds a notably high amount of female obedience and male superiority, her image of marriage as an institution is ultimately positive. In contrast to the still predominantly medieval idea of a woman being the possession of man, Renaissance philosophy began to introduce the concept that women and men can work together in harmony if certain rules are followed. Bean (1980:70) states that “loving kingship allows hierarchy without tyranny”. Women were still passive and subordinate to men; however, husbands had

to take good care of their wives. Katherine obeys but Petruchio has to be loving, supportive and virtuous in return (cf. Crump Wright 1993:138f., Bean 1980:69ff).

A number of Shakespeare's plays raise the question of what might happen if a man is not virtuous. A man who behaves improperly would have possibly provoked drastic female reactions as far as the traditional medieval gender hierarchy was concerned. We have already learned that Emilia's loyalty is abruptly ended when Iago's villainy is discovered to her. However, Iago's foul plotting is revealed to her and other characters only towards the very end of *Othello*. Petruchio's treatment of Katherine might be interpreted as harsh and cruel; however, their relationship might also be seen as ambiguous, to say the least, considering the fact that both partners use various forms of violence while dealing with each other. While Petruchio's character seems to develop towards a more positive notion of partnership, Iago's mean intentions are invisible to other characters.

But what if a (male) character is introduced to both the audience and the other characters as completely lacking any virtue from the very beginning? Probably one of the most grotesque and immoral characters found in Renaissance literature is the knight Falstaff, who arguably functions as a sort of comic relief in Shakespeare's second tetralogy. Falstaff is also the antagonist in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Even before *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the picture Shakespeare draws of the knight in *The First Part of Henry IV* is anything but chivalrous: Falstaff (in this play his name is still John Oldcastle) is repeatedly described in negative terms. Other characters call him "fat-kidneyed rascal" (1H4 II.ii.6), "fat-guts" (1H4 II.ii.31), "woolsack" (1H4 II.v.135), "whoreson round man" (1H4 II.v.140), "fat rogue" (1H4 II.v.548) or simply "gross, fat man" (1H4 II.v.517), to mention just a few examples. In one of his first appearances ever, Falstaff even refers to himself as a "villain" (1H4 I.ii.96). Therefore, the idea that Falstaff is an immoral, physically grotesque and possibly evil character must have definitely been established by the time Shakespeare first put *The Merry Wives of Windsor* on stage.

In this play, Falstaff represents a direct threat to his community and its social order: because he believes that Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, two highly respected and established Windsor wives, might fall for him, he propositions them. He sends them love letters and tries to arrange secret meetings with them. He is

convinced that his flattery will buy him the love of the wives (cf. White 1991:25). When they find out about Falstaff's intentions, the women fear that their good reputation might be harmed and therefore decide to take revenge on the lascivious knight.

Dwyer Amussen (1999:88) points out that any woman in Shakespeare's time would have been greatly and permanently concerned about her good reputation. Therefore, Falstaff's threat is an immediate and serious one as he aspires to break the sacred bond between wives and their husbands. The fact that he is introduced as the moral antagonist and threat is what ultimately justifies any harm done to him, even if it is done by a woman (cf. Crump Wright 1993:59). The nature of the wives' revenge on Falstaff is certainly open to discussion; Smith (2000:109), for example, insists that the women's rebellion is directed simply against the immoral knight and not against masculinity itself.

In response to the knight's immoral attacks, the wives of Windsor mock him and play tricks on him. In three hilarious episodes, Falstaff is thrown into the Thames, dressed up as an old woman, beaten up and burnt. The wives perform all this without being disloyal to their husbands even once. In the final episode, Falstaff is even ridiculed and mocked by the whole town. Regardless whether he is acting immorally or not, the fact that Falstaff, a (male) knight, is openly mocked and even physically attacked by women creates a strong image of chaos and social disorder. Scholars have repeatedly labelled *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as an example of carnivalesque subversion in regard to its humorous depiction of women dominating men.

Like actual carnival, the (temporal) subversion of social norms might have functioned as comic relief for Shakespeare's audience, who had already seen political intrigues, the deposition and death of kings in *Richard II*, *The First Part of Henry IV* and would again later, in *The Second Part of Henry IV*. Just like carnival was a welcome distraction from harsh reality, this play must have been a nice diversion from Shakespeare's serious histories. It might be argued that a play like *The Merry Wives of Windsor* must have been greatly appreciated by the Elizabethan upper classes as well, who were constantly interested in securing their authority (cf. Jardine 1983:109ff, Hall 1998:126f.).

Many scholars assume that Queen Elizabeth I herself commissioned *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, to be written by Shakespeare within a fortnight. Indeed, Elizabeth might be compared to the character of Mistress Page. She is a self-confidently acting woman who plots against the immoral knight. Mistress Page is confident about her standing while her friend Mistress Ford is subject to her husband's jealousy (cf. Crump Wright 1993:63). Moreover, in the final plot against Falstaff, when the knight is attacked by "fairies", another female citizen of Windsor, Mistress Quickly, who runs the local tavern, enters the stage disguised as the Fairy Queen. Elizabethan aristocracy was known for being passionate about the "masques", a popular form of entertainment at court involving members of the upper classes disguising as fairies and various mythological and allegorical figures (cf. Fletcher Bellinger 1927:202ff). All this suggests that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* actually was a comedy that was to Elizabeth's taste.

Crump Wright (1993:59) points out that the play is also the only Shakespearean comedy that focuses on middle class issues. All the other plays are set in royal or noble environments. This is probably another indication for the subversive nature of the play. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare clearly favours middle class and Englishness (by ridiculing foreign characters); however, the strong female, even feminist tone is probably the most striking feature of the play.

Mistress Ford and Mistress Page manage to take revenge on Falstaff; the old knight is subject to everyone's ridicule. In the end, however, he is pardoned by the husbands of Windsor. Hall (1998:144) argues that all the women do to Falstaff ultimately serves the higher purpose of protecting patriarchy; they act for their husbands. The purpose of finally restoring male superiority justifies anything they do, even physical attacks on a man.

After the men pardon the knight it is indeed implied by Page that "law and order" will be restored again when he pronounces "Thou [Falstaff] shalt eat a posset / tonight at my house, where I will desire thee to *laugh / at my wife that now laughs at thee*" (Wiv. V.v.168-170; emphasis added). Page invites Falstaff to his house and suggests that the situation is going to change; now it is his wife who is laughing at Falstaff, but soon it will be the other way round.

Even though the wives of Windsor are able to implement their revenge on Falstaff and even on Mistress Ford's jealous husband, it can be observed that the traditional power relations between the two genders are restored in the end of the play. There are even hints that the dominance of men over women has never completely vanished. Mistress Quickly, for instance, reports to Falstaff that Mistress Ford is "beaten black and blue, that you cannot / see a white spot about her" (Wiv. IV.v.105f.); because of the violent nature of Ford's jealousy, Mistress Quickly is most certainly reliable when she expresses her worries about Ford's wife (cf. White 1991:27f.).

For the Renaissance upper classes, probably the most important fact about traditional carnival was its temporariness. After carnival was over, everything was back to normal. This is true for every kind of social subversiveness found in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as well. Ford and Page are re-established as heads of their households; White (1991:31f.) even implies that the wives are "compelled [...] to fall back into stereotypical roles". Everything seems to be back to the traditional gender hierarchy which makes women subordinate to men.

Anne Page's wedding at the end of the play most probably functions as a symbol of the reestablishment of patriarchy. At Shakespeare's time, marriage was certainly more than a mere celebration of love in terms of patriarchal authority. The next chapter will therefore focus on the relationship between fathers and daughters in Shakespearean drama and on how marriage used to be a device to secure patriarchal structures during the Renaissance.

## FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS

To you your father should be as a god,  
One that composed your beauties, yea, and one  
To whom you are but as a form in wax,  
By him imprinted, and within his power  
To leave the figure or disfigure it.

(MND I.i.47-51)

When Theseus, the Duke of Athens, explains to Hermia why she cannot decide for herself whom she wants to marry, she realizes that she must obey her father Egeus. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare highlights the dilemma many young women found themselves in during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In general, women were better educated and had more possibilities than their ancestors; however, a daughter's complete obedience to her father was still crucial. But many Renaissance women already struggled greatly with the still predominant idea of female inferiority. As I have already mentioned above, Renaissance wives were far from being their husbands' equals in terms of power and authority.

Probably even greater than the authority a husband held over his wife was the power a father had over his children, especially his young daughters. Indeed, it is obvious that some fathers would still regard their daughters as possession rather than individual human beings with a growing sense of the self. Egeus wants his daughter to marry Demetrius, the husband he has chosen for her. Egeus argues "As *she is mine*, I may dispose of her, / Which shall be either to this gentleman / Or to her death" (MND I.i.42-44; my emphasis). Egeus basically states that he would rather have a dead daughter than a disobedient one. Only some lines later he claims again that "she is mine" (MND I.i.97). For a modern reader, the image of a father like Egeus will be highly unusual. It is important to understand, therefore, that social norms were very different in Shakespeare's time than they are today. Watts (1991:92) argues that parents who chose their children's spouses and arranged marriages for them were quite the standard; many of Shakespeare's contemporaries might have even regarded a parentally arranged wedding the only morally correct possibility.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides an instructive example of how different attitudes towards women were around 1600. When Hermia expresses her emotions, stating "I would my father looked but with my eyes" (MND I.i.56), Shakespeare definitely highlights her individuality and gives an insight into her feelings and thoughts. She is a human being; Hermia is aware of herself as an individual and she wants to choose her husband out of love, not obligation. This very powerful image of self-awareness is strongly contrasted by the way Egeus perceives his daughter. When they are in front of the Duke, Egeus not only accuses his daughter of being disobedient but moreover insists that her daughter's true love Lysander "turned her obedience which is due to me / To stubborn harshness" (MND I.i.37-38). Thus, Egeus objectifies his own daughter. He describes her as if she was an unruly "shrew"; he even implies that it is Lysander who is mostly responsible for her choice, which diminishes her individuality and self-awareness even more.

While Hermia seems more active and willing to risk a break with her father in order to pursue true love, her friend Helena is a more passive character (cf. Crump 1993: 91-93). The melancholy she has developed out of unfulfilled love arguably contributes greatly to the hilariousness of the play; this is also what her character is mostly reduced to. Furthermore, Helena appears quite accepting and even a bit stoic when she expresses women's helplessness in the game of love: "We cannot fight for love as men may do; / We should be wooed, and were not made to woo" (MND II.i.241-242). Regardless of how they react to it, both Hermia and Helena know exactly that patriarchy tells them whom to marry or not. In the end of the play, they do marry the men they love; however, the happy ending occurs as it complies the wish of a "higher power", i.e. Oberon, the Fairy King. Together with Puck, Oberon creates confusion among the young lovers. By doing so, Shakespeare shows how helpless humans are in the face of supernatural powers and so, after Oberon has re-established social order, neither Theseus nor Egeus dare to question Oberon's choice of who lies with whom.

Social hierarchy, gender hierarchy and the inability to change one's situation because of social norms are themes frequently found in Shakespeare's works; it might be argued that women, especially daughters, are much more disadvantaged in terms of power than other characters and are probably observed in much stricter ways by their environment. A notable example of paternal control is

Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. She proves herself to be an enthusiastic speaker; when disguised as a man, Portia defends Antonio in court and thus temporarily holds great power over all the male characters in the play. She is eloquent and expresses herself through the art of rhetoric (I will further discuss the power of Portia's male disguise later on). However, Portia is controlled by her father; the power he holds over his daughter is so great that he even influences her life from beyond the grave. Portia's father is long dead; his last will, however, dictates Portia to marry only the man who is able to solve the riddle of the caskets, a puzzle created by Portia's father in order to choose a husband for her even when he is already dead.

By creating Portia, Shakespeare depicted a strong-willed heroine who struggles with the way her father intends to shape and form her. She underscores her own helplessness by naming her father's scheme "the lott'ry of my destiny" (MV II.i.15). By comparing her dead father's match-making plans to a lottery, Portia highlights the arbitrariness of his image of a perfect husband: literally anybody could solve the riddle and whoever is able to do so receives his 'prize'. This strongly suggests that any man can be Portia's husband as long as it is the man of her father's choice. Since he created the rules for this unusual wedding game, he indirectly chooses Portia's husband. Portia's father actually developed a way to secure and even reinforce his patriarchal influence after his own death. This underlines both Portia's obedience and her father's dominance as Portia has to accept her father's wish and cannot even complain to him about it (cf. Shapiro 1994:101). All she can do for a relief is temporarily switch gender and thus experience power, and lament the fate that was chosen for her: "[...] I may neither choose who I would / nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living / daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (MV I.ii.22-24).

The concept of a lottery of the caskets and all the scenes dealing with this issue in *The Merchant of Venice* are not only a symbol of Portia's enforced passiveness as far as her choices are concerned but moreover an extreme example of a father objectifying his daughter. At the end of the play, Portia marries the young Venetian Bassanio, a man she loves; however, there is a risk with every lottery, and it could be argued that Portia was just lucky. Her father's scheme does not include either her feelings or any kind of choice that Portia might want to make for herself.

The complete disregard of a daughter's individual wishes, her resulting objectification and her relative passiveness and helplessness are also found in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Baptista introduces the plans he has for his two daughters, Katherine and Bianca, at the beginning of the first act; his younger daughter Bianca will only be allowed to marry one of her suitors if her older sister Katherine, who is introduced as a "shrew" to the audience, marries first. The extraordinariness of this plan results from the fact that Katherine is regarded as impossible to be married off due to her rebellious character. Furthermore, Baptista forbids Bianca to have any contact with men except for some "schoolmasters" that he will pay and who are "[f]it to instruct her youth" (cf. Shr. I.i.48-101).

Hortensio and Lucentio, who both want to marry Bianca, later disguise themselves as tutors in order to be able to see Bianca behind her father's back. Parker (2007:195ff) raises the question if Bianca is actually able to influence her situation at all. She is portrayed as a passive object in various situations; her father dictates the conditions for her own wedding and pays "masters" to control her when he is not around. It is further suggested that those supposed teachers, Hortensio and Lucentio, treat Bianca as if she was the submissive object of the competition between them (cf. Parker 2007:200).

When introduced to the audience, both Bianca and Katherine are limited to their marital qualities. As already mentioned, Katherine is even compared to the animal world through farcical and figurative elements in the play. While Bianca is presented as a virtuous young girl, her father insists that he needs to find a husband for Katherine first as she is thought to be far less likely to find a husband soon. Bianca has numerous suitors, while men seem to be afraid of Katherine's temper. The father's strategy therefore increases the pressure on Bianca's suitors, and Baptista seems like a businessman who wants to get rid of goods (cf. Dash 1981:35ff, Parker 2007:199). Indeed, when Hortensio and his servant decide that in order to gain access to Bianca they need to find a suitor for Katherine first, Hortensio uses the language of the market when he expresses that a husband for Katherine might be hard to find: "there's small choice in rotten / apples" (Shr. I.i.133-134).

While her suitors still fight about Bianca, Katherine is already auctioned and sold by her father, not just figuratively speaking. At the beginning of the second act, Petruchio is introduced to Baptista, and he intends to marry Katherine. However,

before Petruchio can start 'wooing' and 'taming' Katherine in the way described above, he needs to discuss the details of the 'deal' with her father. Petruchio indeed labels the content of their conversation as "business" (cf. Shr. II.i.114). He wants to know about the financial benefits if he should really marry Katherine. Here, Shakespeare is truly creating a masterpiece of farce as Petruchio not only compares marriage to business and Katherine has to endure everything personally as she is present in the scene and is hopelessly trying to prevent Petruchio from wooing her; in addition, her father plays along with Petruchio and literally 'signs the deal' by giving Petruchio the permission to marry Katherine: "'Tis a match" (Shr. II.i.315). Katherine is given away to a stranger by her father and she is unable to influence the decision even though she is next to them and listening to their negotiations.

Daughters like Hermia, Portia and Katherine find their own individual ways to temporarily relieve the tensions that are created by patriarchy. In the end, however, they all get married and their fathers seem content with transferring their paternal power from themselves to their daughters' new husbands; Portia obeys her father even when he is dead. The situation is much different in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. An important topic of the play is the relationship between Juliet and her parents, especially her father, old Capulet. We know from the text that Juliet is only fourteen years old. According to Dash (1981:69), Juliet's age is strongly emphasised in the play. She is about to grow up and wants to be a woman; Juliet is presented as very mature for her age when she expresses her feelings; however, part of her is still a child. The dilemma she faces is probably not only caused by patriarchal views on women but moreover due to the fact that she is the child of a dominant father; she does not want to marry the man of her father's choice and disobeys him actively and wilfully (cf. Dash 1981).

At the beginning of the play, we are introduced to Paris who wants to marry Juliet. However, her father still thinks her too young to marry. Juliet later falls in love with Romeo and keeps their love a secret as there is a bloody feud between their families. After Romeo kills Juliet's cousin Tybalt the situation changes dramatically. Capulet suddenly seems to think that his daughter is ready to be married off and decides without losing any time that she must marry his friend Paris (cf. Rom. III.iv.1-35). Shortly afterwards, Capulet tells his daughter Juliet about the agreement he has made with Paris. When Juliet insists that she does not want to

marry the man of her father's choice the situation gets completely out of control. Furiously, Capulet exclaims:

An you be mine, I'll give you to my friend.  
An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets,  
For, by my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee,  
Nor what is mine shall never do thee good.

(Rom. III.v.191-194)

He makes it quite clear to his daughter that he will not hesitate to disown her if she refuses to do what he wants. As we have already discovered in the speech of Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the child is seen as a sort of possession and therefore it seems to be the father's right to do whatever he wants with his daughter. Capulet would rather see his own daughter as a starving beggar on the street than allowing her to choose her own husband and disobey him. In contrast to e.g. Baptista in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Capulet seems much more dominant, harsh and even violent when he instructs his daughter.

From a modern point of view, Juliet's destiny appears extremely pitiful and there is probably not a lot of sympathy for her father. However, a Shakespearean audience might have interpreted the relationship between Capulet and his daughter in *Romeo and Juliet* quite differently. Hopkins (1998: 134) suggests that an Elizabethan or Jacobean spectator would have probably welcomed Capulet's reaction after facing his daughter's disobedience.

Patriarchal values and securing them was an important priority for Renaissance authorities; patriarchy is also a central topic in *Romeo and Juliet*. Coppélia Kahn (1980:171ff) argues that the feud between the families Capulet and Montague in the play primarily functions as a symbol of the predominant power of patriarchal values and the masculine world. Male members of both families fight each other on the streets and thus try to defend the honour of their families, especially the honour of Lord Capulet and Lord Montague. There is a strong contrast between the violent feud and the two young lovers. Romeo and Juliet try to separate themselves from the bloodshed and thus refuse to be part of their fathers' world of violence. They

separate themselves from patriarchy and by doing so try to escape their fathers' influence (cf. Kahn 1980: 172f.).

The young couple's efforts to divorce themselves from parental control raise the issue whether Romeo and Juliet consciously mean to threaten patriarchy or not. Also considering her age, Juliet is certainly one of Shakespeare's more self-confident female characters. Although she is still half a child, Juliet is full of ideals and wants to plan her own future, away from her father's house. However, as she is a fourteen year old girl, her disobedience might threaten the society she lives in and her self-confidence might as well be seen as rebellion (cf. Dash 1981, Addison 2002). Indeed, Kahn (1980: 178f.) underlines that Juliet questions an important symbol of patriarchy when she says to Romeo: "[d]eny thy father and refuse thy name" (Rom. II.i.76).

It is moreover certainly important to question old Capulet's behaviour in light of Renaissance customs in order to understand why he literally explodes when Juliet refuses to accept the spouse he has chosen for her. While contemporary audiences might condemn the idea of a father who wants to marry off his fourteen year old daughter to one of his friends, during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries it was not uncommon at all for parents to arrange marital agreements for their young children. It is even documented that upper class parents would contractually agree that their children were prepared to marry when they were very young. The reasons for upper class families to marry off their daughters when they were only in their adolescent phase were often financial ones; a marriage would often secure the family's estate and fortune. This was especially important since life expectancy was much lower around 1600 (cf. Watts 1991:90).

Financial issues might also be the reason why Capulet suddenly changes his mind about Juliet's readiness to marry after his nephew Tybalt is killed. Dash (1981:73f.) argues that Capulet is confronted with a completely changed situation when his possible heir is dead and that he tries to secure his family's fortune by declaring Juliet set for marriage. It is suggested that his motives are strictly financial and this could be the reason why he reacts in such a negative way when Juliet threatens to thwart her father's plans for financial security (cf. Dash 1981). In terms of romance, Juliet's end definitely makes her a victim of patriarchy; however, in

medieval and Renaissance times, a forced marriage might have been regarded as the only option by the majority of people.

The portrait Shakespeare drew of Juliet is certainly an extreme example of how the downfall of a disobedient daughter might be justified. However, as I have already indicated, the author not only depicted women who seem to rebel against the rules and norms of their social environment and are disciplined or even worse. There is also a number of daughters within the Shakespearean canon who will fully consciously disobey their fathers and who are not punished for it. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example, is not only a subversive play in regard to wives outsmarting their husbands; the subplot of Anne Page, the young daughter of one of the wives of Windsor, provides a hint that Shakespeare himself might have been a critic of forced marriage.

The character and traits of Anne Page are introduced to the spectatorship by Slender, a citizen of Windsor: “[s]he has brown hair, and / *speaks small like a woman*” (Wiv. I.i.43-44; emphasis added). Anne’s character is reduced to physical beauty and the readiness to be married off. Similar to Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Anne is objectified; like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, her suitors identify Anne as an object that can be won in the game of wooing (cf. White 1991:18ff). Like other paternal figures in Shakespeare, Page insists on choosing his daughter’s future husband himself; he strongly objects to Anne being in love with the young Fenton: “he [Fenton] shall not knit a knot in his fortunes with / the finger of my substance. If he take her, let him take / her simply: the wealth I have waits on my consent, / and my consent goes not that way” (Wiv. III.ii.68-71). Furthermore, it can be observed in this passage that Page’s interest in choosing a husband for Anne is certainly of a financial nature as well. However, in the end, Anne marries her lover Fenton.

Surprisingly, Shakespeare does not place the wedding during the play or towards the end of it; after the wives’ plotting against the immoral knight Falstaff, who is ultimately pardoned by the mocked husbands, Fenton reveals that he has already secretly married Anne. This leaves Anne’s parents completely speechless. Fenton and Anne are joined in holy matrimony; Page does not have any chance to change what has already happened. Fenton however, justifies their secret marriage through sophisticated rhetoric: “this deceit loses the name of craft, / Of disobedience, or unduteous title, / Since therein she [Anne] doth evitate and shun / A thousand

irreligious cursèd hours / Which forcèd marriage would have brought upon her” (Wiv. V.v.218-222). The contents of Fenton’s speech might propose that disobeying a father is the lesser of two evils if the state of holy matrimony is preserved in return. Indeed, Fenton indicates that through their marriage Anne might have prevented “a thousand irreligious cursèd hours”; this strongly suggest that if Anne had married her father’s choice instead of Fenton, they would have started an affair. Certainly, this passage is one of the rare examples of what Shakespeare might have privately thought about “forcèd marriage”. Following the other examples of social subversiveness in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Page, the disregarded father, is reduced to acceptance at the very end: “[w]hat cannot be eschewed must be embraced” (Wiv. V.v.229).

In Renaissance times, securing Christian values by all means necessary most certainly served as a valuable justification for many kinds of behaviour that would be frowned upon under normal circumstances. The fact that Anne disobeys her father and marries Fenton is justified by the assumption that a marriage organized by her father would have certainly ended in unchristian behaviour, i.e. adultery. In another example we have already discovered that Emilia feels no longer bound to her husband Iago when his unchristian villainy is revealed. Besides Portia’s dead father in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare depicts another dominant patriarch who seeks to control his daughter: Shylock the Jew.

Shylock has a daughter, Jessica, who wants to break free from her father’s house. Jessica is disobedient in many ways; she runs away from Shylock, steals his gold and marries her lover Lorenzo, a Christian man from Venice. Jessica’s disobedience against her father is not judged at all; she is rather supported morally by other characters. In order to understand why most other characters seem to accept Jessica’s rebellion against her father as correct, it is important to look at how Shylock is portrayed by Shakespeare.

Because of his revenge scheme against Antonio, Shylock can already be recognized as the play’s antagonist and villain. Moreover, the relationship with his daughter seems to be all but warm-hearted. When Shylock discovers that Jessica has run away with his money he exclaims: “I would my daughter were dead at my / Foot and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed / At my foot and the ducats in her coffin!” (MV III.i.82-84). Later in the scene, Tubal tells Shylock that Jessica is

spending most of her father's ducats on leisure activities. Shylock responds: "[t]hou stick'st a dagger in me. I shall never see / My gold again" (MV III.i.102-103). Shylock seems to be more interested in his money than in his missing daughter.

It can certainly be argued that Shakespeare put a great amount of negative stereotyping and racism in his play by creating Shylock's character. Hence Shylock's religious otherness and the nature of his relationship with his daughter completely justifies Jessica's wish to get away from her father. There are various passages in *The Merchant of Venice* in which Jessica's disobedience is supported through the language of Christianity. In the second act, Jessica establishes her father as the adversary in a religious sense when she bemoans that "[o]ur house is hell" (MV II.iii.2). Some lines later she describes both the dilemma she is in and how to solve it: "[...] what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child! / But though I am a daughter to his blood, / I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo, / If thou keep promise I shall end this strife, / Become a Christian and thy loving wife" (MV II.iii.16-21). Jessica realizes that it is wrong not to obey her father. However, she feels the need to distance herself from Shylock's villainy and immorality. Therefore she wants to marry a Christian and thus become a Christian herself in order to end her problems with her father once and for all.

Lancelot, Shylock's Christian servant once more highlights the necessity for Jessica to escape from her father's influence by referring to biblical law: "[...] the sins of the father / are to be laid upon the children" (MV III.v.1-2). Shortly afterwards, Jessica indicates that she finally managed to break with her father: "I shall be saved by my husband. He hath made / me a Christian" (MV III.v.17-18). Jessica has married Lorenzo and watches her father's downfall in a seemingly apathetic way from a distance. As we can see, Shakespeare did stage a great amount of female disobedience; daughters like Jessica highlight to which extent social norms were already exposed to change during Shakespeare's lifetime. Daughters and women in general might have been regarded as male property during the Middle Ages; however, with the beginning of the Renaissance it became more and more clear that not every woman necessarily has to be obedient to every man.

## MORE OR LESS INNOCENT VICTIMS

When Shakespeare created his various heroines, he most certainly had to consider a huge variety of influencing issues such as the social order of the society he lived in, its gender hierarchy, its religion and its diverse value systems. Considering Shakespeare's portrayal of many of his female characters' fates, it might be argued that Renaissance England was a place where disobedience and a lack of (Christian) values would often be heavily punished while subordination, virtue and obedience were expected by the establishment; this system of social rules was arguably even stricter for the female sex.

While Katherine is mocked due to her shrewish nature, Portia finds true love, as she is obedient to her father even though he is long dead; and in another example, the wicked Lady Macbeth experiences the ultimate downfall, as I will discuss in more detail later on. However, it is not always quite clear whether a female character's downfall can be justified morally or not; a number of women in Shakespeare's plays experience great suffering even though they are not evil at all. They might be to some extent ambiguous as far as their characters and motivations are concerned; however, some of them are most likely just innocent victims. In this chapter, I will discuss the downfall of three of Shakespeare's probably most prominent victims, i.e. Desdemona in *Othello*, as well as Ophelia and Gertrude in *Hamlet*.

After presenting the more or less comedic story of Shylock and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare returns to the mighty island nation one more time in *Othello*; the tragedy introduces the newlyweds Othello, an honourable black general in the Venetian army, and the fair Desdemona, whose father is a politician. Due to the evil plotting of Iago, who tries to convince the general that his wife has an affair with another man, Othello kills his innocent wife out of jealousy. However, it might be argued that a large part of the couple's tragedy is due to the circumstances which surround their marriage, as it was held in secret and without Desdemona's father's consent. Furthermore, questions about Desdemona's character prove to be the main motivation behind many other characters' acting in the play.

The true nature of Desdemona's characteristics and motivations has been the subject of scholarly research for a very long time. Indeed, critics seem to disagree on how to evaluate Othello's wife. While many scholars have labelled Desdemona "passive" or even "shrewish" and "disobedient", others keep insisting that she is self-confident, active and, most of all, innocent and virtuous (cf. White 1982:87, Hopkins 1998:155, Dash 1981:108). Thomas (1980:212) suggests that the appropriate analysis of Desdemona's true nature is quite problematic; and whether she is passive or active, in the end she experiences tragedy and death.

As a matter of fact, not only scholars disagree about Desdemona's personality; before she is even able to speak for herself, she is already introduced by three very different male characters in the first act, i.e. her father Brabantio, her husband Othello, and Iago, the man who tries to destroy her relationship out of his hatred towards Othello (cf. Dash 1981:104f.). Interestingly, the first and probably most striking description we receive of Desdemona focuses on the presumably foul and disruptive nature of her secret liaison with Othello when Iago informs Brabantio about what has happened in the middle of the night. Iago wants to destroy Othello by all means necessary. In his rage he does not even hesitate to victimize Desdemona.

Iago (together with his confederate Roderigo) tells the unknowing Venetian senator that his daughter Desdemona has secretly run away to be together with the black general Othello. In doing so, Iago not only uses some highly suggestive language; he also creates a horrible image of animal-like bonding when he tells Brabantio that "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (Oth. I.i.88-89). Desdemona's father seems confused about the nightly visitor who tells him strange things and therefore Iago goes on: "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter / And the Moor are now making the beast with two / Backs" (Oth. I.i.117-119). Iago's associate Roderigo further highlights the presumably disruptive and subversive nature of Desdemona's secret love: "your daughter [...] / [...] hath made a gross *revolt*" (Oth. I.i.135-136; emphasis added). Out of his hate for Othello, Iago creates this very negative image of Desdemona, which Palfrey (2005:254f.) even describes as "pornographic". Brabantio's reaction to Iago's shocking news seems strangely ambiguous; although Othello is a valiant and honourable soldier in the Venetian army, Brabantio immediately accuses him of witchcraft and of influencing his poor daughter with drugs. In the next scene, Brabantio confronts Othello with his suspicion: "[...]

thou hast enchanted her [...] / [...] thou hast practised on her with foul charms” (Oth. I.ii.64-74). However, at the same time, Brabantio does not seem to be completely convinced of his daughter’s innocence. When Iago informs him about his daughter’s disappearance in the first scene, Brabantio immediately exclaims “O heaven, how got she out? O, *treason of the blood!*” (Oth. I.i.171; my emphasis). This instantly raises the question why Desdemona might be guilty of “treason” if Othello really influenced her with drugs. In the third scene Brabantio and Othello meet in front of the Venetian court to settle once and for all what has happened. When the other senators ask the outraged Brabantio, who keeps complaining “[m]y daughter, O, my daughter!”, if she is dead, he oddly replies “Ay, to me” (Oth. I.iii.57-59). Brabantio’s attitude towards his own daughter seems strangely ambiguous. However, he still believes that Othello is the one who is to blame. What follows is Brabantio’s attempt to set things right by expressing his concerns about Othello in front of the Venetian court, and at the same time he creates his own image of his daughter. In contrast to Iago’s horrible and lustful description of Desdemona, Brabantio describes her as the stereotypically innocent, protected and good daughter who is influenced by the much older Othello:

A maiden never bold,  
Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion  
Blushed at herself – and she in spite of nature,  
Of years, of country, credit, everything,  
To fall in love with what she feared to look on!  
It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect  
That will confess perfection so could err  
Against all rules of nature, and must be driven  
To find out practices of cunning hell  
Why this should be.

(Oth. I.iii.94-103)

Brabantio insists that he thinks it completely impossible that a fair woman like his daughter, who is well educated, wealthy and innocent, and who comes from a decent house, could fall in love with a soldier who is much older than herself and who is of a different race. Brabantio is still quite sure that his daughter is chaste and obedient (features encouraged in daughters by Renaissance society). The only explanation he has for his daughter’s apparent disobedience and her unusual choice of a lover is that Othello must have drugged or even cast a spell on her. Following Brabantio’s speech is yet another description of Desdemona’s character; this time,

Othello tells the story of how he and Desdemona fell in love. First, however, Othello confirms what Brabantio had already feared when he tells the court: “[...] I have ta’en away this old man’s daughter, / It is most true, true I have married her” (Oth. I.iii.78-79). Then, he focuses on Desdemona’s good qualities, such as her pity and generosity. Othello explains that due to Desdemona’s benevolent nature and the fact that she was much impressed with Othello’s difficult past as a stranger in the Venetian army, she ultimately fell in love with him: “She loved me for the dangers I had passed” (Oth. I.iii.166).

Finally, after having been introduced and described by various male characters, Desdemona is allowed to enter the scene and to speak for herself for the first time since the play’s beginning. She appears in front of the court in order to present her version of the story. Brabantio seems absolutely positive about his daughter’s unquestionable loyalty towards him when he asks her, “[d]o you perceive in all this noble company / Where most you owe obedience?” (Oth. I.iii.177-178). Desdemona’s answer, however, which is at the same time her stage debut, is surprising:

My noble father,  
I do perceive here a divided duty.  
To you I am bound for life and education.  
[...] 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.

(Oth. I.iii.179-188; emphasis added)

Desdemona’s answer to her father’s question about her obedience is quite a surprise after she had been described as innocent and quiet. Indeed, Desdemona challenges her father and fights his fatherly expectations with her strong words (cf. Dash 1981:105f.). Desdemona introduces herself as a self-confident woman who seems to know what she wants. Like Juliet, she has made her choice and vows to be loyal to her husband even though it might mean a break with her father. She seems eloquent and diplomatic like Portia when she talks about “divided duty”; thus she both respects her father and supports her husband. Desdemona highlights that she has acted out of free will and that she has chosen to control her own life instead of being directed

by her father. Consequently, Brabantio feels helpless and rejected; for him, Desdemona's choice probably represents an attack on his patriarchal values. Dash (1981:106) argues that after Desdemona shows that she does not want to obey her father anymore, Brabantio consciously stains his daughter's good reputation in front of everybody, especially her husband Othello. Indeed, the last thing Brabantio utters before his death (which is revealed in the fifth act), is a warning for Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (Oth. I.iii.292-293; cf. Hopkins 1998:152). Desdemona's disobedience to her father has long been considered one of the major aspects that justify her ultimate downfall. Shakespeare not only depicts a daughter who chooses to disobey her father; when Graziano, Desdemona's uncle, mentions his brother Brabantio's death at the very end of the play (he is addressing Desdemona, who is already dead herself), the message of his speech is quite strong: "[...] I am glad thy father's dead. / Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief / Shore his old thread in twain. Did he live now / This sight would make him do a desperate turn" (Oth. V.ii.211-214). Graziano indicates that Desdemona's father has died only because of her disobedience against him (cf. Crump Wright 1993:112). Othello kills his wife out of jealousy; he thinks that she betrays him with another soldier. There is no single clue in the text that Desdemona actually commits adultery; she dies innocent. However, it might be argued that Shakespeare's original audience would have doubted Desdemona's innocence to some extent, considering the importance given to patriarchy during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and the fact that Shakespeare presents Desdemona as, to say the least, indirectly responsible for her own father's death through her disobedience.

It is questionable to which extent Desdemona's disobedience against her father justifies her death. Certainly another contributing factor to her downfall is the medieval and Renaissance attitude towards otherness. As is true for Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Othello is confronted with a great amount of racism; in the very beginning of the play, for example, Othello is already referred to as "the thick-lips" by Roderigo (Oth. I.i.66). It has been suggested that the connection between Desdemona, a white Venetian, and Othello, a black foreigner, would have been quite unusual and even shocking in Shakespeare's time (cf. Dash 1981:119ff, White 1982:80). David Holbrook (1989:237ff) suggests that after upsetting her father, Desdemona adds to her guilt of disobeying the establishment (patriarchy) by not

choosing a white Venetian for a husband, but a black foreigner. Thus, she separates herself even more from her society and becomes a stranger herself.

Desdemona's love for Othello is very strong and therefore neither her father's disapproval nor the way how other characters perceive Othello's otherness or even Iago's plotting can influence the couple in the beginning. However, there is a turning point in the relationship of the newlyweds which is represented by a small handkerchief. The handkerchief Othello gives to Desdemona as a present symbolizes not only their love but moreover Desdemona's loyalty to her husband (cf. Dash 1981: 120). Iago tells the unsuspecting Emilia to steal the handkerchief, and Iago later gives it to Cassio without him knowing. Iago tells Othello that Desdemona has an affair with Cassio and the missing handkerchief is all the proof Othello seems to need. Othello confronts Desdemona and asks her to show him the handkerchief. Desdemona tells him that she cannot show it to him and upon Othello's question whether she has lost it, Desdemona repeatedly lies to her husband: "I say it is not lost" (Oth. III.iv.84). It is argued that Desdemona's little white lie about the handkerchief is her biggest mistake. Othello is furious because his wife does not seem to give any sufficient significance to the handkerchief, which was his first present to his wife and which means very much to him. Desdemona tries to protect her husband's feelings by lying to him; she knows very well what the handkerchief means to him. However, in the end, her strategy proves to be completely wrong (cf. Thomas 1980:230, White 1982:88f.). Now Desdemona is not the self-confident young woman she used to be. She gets more and more insecure and uncertain; she does not know what to think about her true love anymore, as she is unaware of Iago's plotting. Her own husband thinks that she betrays him (cf. Dash 1981:121ff). White (1982:88f.) argues that the fact that she completely ignores what other characters seem to think about her, including the rumours of her supposed adulterous behaviour, makes her even more vulnerable to tragedy. In the end, Desdemona seems broken and confused; there is nothing left of her eloquence and strength. Just before she dies, Emilia asks her who committed this horrible act that has sealed her fate. Already dying, Desdemona weakly answers: "Nobody, I myself. Farewell" (Oth. V.ii.134). Desdemona dies an innocent victim's death; however, now even she herself doubts her own innocence. Through her disobedience and choice of marriage Desdemona earned her father's anger; she was used as a passive instrument by Iago in order to destroy Othello; and now her apparent ignorance makes her lose her

own husband's trust. Whether Desdemona's ultimate downfall is partly self-inflicted or not, it is certainly tragic.

Shakespeare depicts a whole variety of condemned female characters; often, the nature of their tragic downfall is highly ambiguous. In *Hamlet*, the author creates yet two other female victims, i.e. Queen Gertrude and her potential daughter-in-law Ophelia. Both women die a tragic death and the issue whether their gruesome destiny is deserved or not has been much discussed. I will first discuss Hamlet's mother. Gertrude, the Queen of Denmark, is introduced as being recently wed to Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and the new King of Denmark. Their wedding followed only two months after the death of the old king, Hamlet's beloved father. The fact that the wedding of Gertrude and Claudius was held only very shortly after the old king's passing inspires and motivates much of the play's tragic plot and greatly contributes to justifying Gertrude's ultimate downfall; especially Hamlet is concerned about his mother's quick remarriage and expresses his strong disgust: "[...] frailty, thy name is woman / [...] a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer" (*Ham.* I.ii.146-151). Hamlet puts his mother on a level with the animals; for him, his mother's marriage is highly unnatural and of a treasonable nature, especially because his father is "[b]ut two months dead" (*Ham.* I.ii.138). Hamlet condemns his mother because he thinks that she did not mourn her dead husband properly and definitely not long enough.

Hamlet is certainly not the only one who thinks that his mother should have waited much longer before she decided to marry again. It has been suggested that Gertrude's marriage with Claudius would have been condemned by a majority of Shakespeare's contemporaries as well. The assumption that Gertrude did not mourn long enough for Hamlet's father would have resulted in a shocked society, which would have probably thought that Gertrude's second marriage is completely improper. Considering Elizabethan and Jacobean traditions, many people must have even thought that Gertrude did not really love Hamlet's father (cf. Crump Wright 1993:42f., Hopkins 1998:136f.). Schiesari (1992:240f.) takes this idea even further and implies that Gertrude violates her duty as a wife when she interrupts her period of mourning too early; thus she is severely punished at the end of the play when she sees no other possibility but to take her own life.

It is questionable whether the fact that Gertrude did not mourn her dead husband longer than two months is enough to justify her tragic death. She is much concerned about her son who, as suggested by Claudius, fulfils his “mourning duties” (Ham. I.ii.88) while Gertrude allegedly violates her conventional duties as a wife. She seems to some extent aware of the fact that some people, including her own child, think that her decision to remarry rather quickly was unusual and impetuous (cf. Dusinberre 1975:131, Dash 1997:116ff). However, it might be argued that Gertrude feels upset about how other people, and especially her son Hamlet, think about her relationship to Claudius. When Claudius tells Gertrude that Polonius has found the reason for Hamlet’s depression and madness, the Queen of Denmark expresses great guilt about how her relationship might have influenced her only child negatively: “I doubt it is no other but the main - / His father’s death and our *o’er-hasty* marriage” (Ham. II.ii.56-57; my emphasis). Thus, it is Gertrude herself who labels her marriage to Claudius “overhasty”.

Maybe Gertrude did not mourn her dead husband properly; however, she certainly assumes the role of the stereotypical grieving woman when she decently mourns Ophelia: “Sweets to the sweet. Farewell. / I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife. / I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid, / And not t’have strewed thy grave” (Ham. V.i.238-241). In contrast to Hamlet’s comparison of his mother’s sense of duty as a mourning wife to an animal, it has been suggested that Gertrude is well aware of the duties which society traditionally attributes to her, stereotypical passive mourning being one of these duties. Heilbrunn (1990:14) points out that Gertrude is the only character in the play who actually mourns Ophelia properly when she gives her speech at the open grave. Indeed, Hamlet and Laertes only quarrel about whose character is nobler.

Leaving the issue of mourning duties aside, it is clear that there is another major point of interest concerning Gertrude’s character, i.e. her chastity and sexual behaviour. As is true for Desdemona in *Othello*, Shakespeare draws a great deal of attention to the question whether Gertrude has cheated on her husband or not. Smith (1980:202) points out that Gertrude did not have to do anything with the murder of Hamlet’s father; however, her sexual behaviour is regarded as highly ambiguous. When the ghost of his father appears to Hamlet, it is allegedly revealed that Claudius has murdered the former King of Denmark. The ghost calls Claudius “incestuous, [...]”

adulterate beast” (Ham. I.v.42). This is not only an expression of disgust over the foul crime that was committed by Claudius; furthermore, by using the words “incestuous” and “adulterate” in order to describe the nature of Claudius’ marriage to Gertrude, the ghost of Hamlet’s father strongly damages the way Hamlet’s perceives his own mother (cf. Dash 1997:116). Probably, the ghost primarily means to stain Claudius; however, he also highlights the fact that Gertrude is part of this “adulterate” relationship. This, however, remains ambiguous.

Immediately after the ghost’s revelations, Hamlet angrily exclaims: “O most pernicious woman! / O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain!” (Ham. I.v.105-106). Hamlet is raging; he vows to avenge his father’s death. At the same time, it seems incomprehensible to Hamlet that his mother chose the villainous Claudius as her husband. Hamlet condemns the entire relationship of his mother with Claudius and thus creates the image that they are both immoral and evil. There is no actual evidence that Gertrude has ever cheated on Hamlet’s father with Claudius; however, the mere fact that she is married to Claudius blackens her reputation and the way her son perceives her (cf. Smith 1980:202f.). When confronting his mother in the closet scene, Hamlet makes it quite clear what he thinks of his mother’s relationship to Claudius:

Such an act  
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,  
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose  
From the fair forehead of an innocent love  
And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows  
As false as dicers’ oaths – O, such a deed  
As from the body of contraction plucks  
The very soul, and sweet religion makes  
A rhapsody of words. Heaven’s face doth glow,  
Yea, this solidity and compound mass  
‘With trustful visage, as against the doom,  
Is thought-sick at the act.

(Ham. III.iv.40-49)

Hamlet describes his mother’s decision of marrying Claudius (calling it “the act”) as destructive, immoral, unnatural and as completely opposed to religion, virtue and true love. He creates an even more horrible, animal-like image of lust when he claims that Gertrude’s guilt lies “[i]n the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed, / Stewed in corruption,

honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty" (Ham. III.iv.81-83). Hamlet has become obsessed with his mother's sexuality; she is exposed to Hamlet's accusations. Gertrude was most probably completely uninvolved in the murder of Hamlet's father; she is arguably innocent of ever committing adultery and she is possibly even presented as remorseful concerning her lack of proper mourning. However, she is much stained by her dead husband's ghost and even her own son.

Gertrude's character has long been the subject of scholarly discussions. Just like Desdemona, critics have described Gertrude in both positive and negative terms. She is seemingly innocent; yet she is condemned. A major dilemma which the character of Gertrude has to face is the fact that she is caught between two men who both ask for her unquestioned loyalty, i.e. her son Hamlet and her husband Claudius. It has been argued that Claudius has manipulated not only all of Denmark but especially his wife Gertrude. She is a stereotypical wife and functions as Claudius' passive instrument; she represents her husband's interests and gets objectified by him since she is easily influenced (cf. Smith 1980:194ff, Dash 1997:115ff).

Gertrude wants to obey her husband and be loyal to her son at the same time. Smith (1980:200ff) argues that Gertrude's only interest is to care for other characters and to please the men in her life. Her dilemma intensifies more and more and Gertrude is only able to resolve it in the very end of the play. When Hamlet fights Laertes in front of the entire court, Claudius and Gertrude sit next to each other. Claudius wants to make sure that Hamlet dies and prepares a poisoned drink for him. Gertrude, who is perhaps aware of the danger, takes the poisoned drink and toasts her beloved son. Claudius tells her: "Gertrude, do not drink"; she, however, disobeys him and answers, "I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me" (Ham. V.ii.243-244). Gertrude drinks the poison, which was actually meant for Hamlet, and dies. Dash (1997:126ff) points out that when Gertrude disobeys her husband and drinks the poisoned wine, she acts for the first time independently and is not her husband's passive wife anymore. Rather, she proves herself a strong individual and is finally able to resolve the problem of her divided loyalties by choosing her son Hamlet before her villainous husband Claudius. Unfortunately, Gertrude's act of self-realisation is her last one as her disobedience also means her death (cf. Smith 1980:206, Dash 1997:126ff).

Gertrude is not the only female character in *Hamlet* whose dependence on various male characters tears her apart and finally leads to her downfall. Hamlet's alleged lover Ophelia finds herself in a probably even more complicated dilemma. She is supposed to be loyal to her father Polonius, to her brother Laertes, and her beloved Hamlet. Ophelia's love for Hamlet seems real; however, her father and her brother strongly disapprove of her relationship with the young prince right from the beginning of the play. In one of Ophelia's first appearances at her father's house, both Laertes and Polonius advise the young girl. Laertes, who is about to leave Denmark for his studies, tries to convince his sister that Hamlet is not the right one for her: "[...] Perhaps he loves you now, / And now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch / The virtue of his will; but you must fear, / *His greatness* weighed, his will is not his own, / For he himself is subject to his birth" (Ham. I.iii.14-18; emphasis added). Laertes wants to persuade his sister not to get too much involved with Hamlet as the young prince of Denmark is of a much higher social rank than Ophelia and therefore their relationship might not be accepted. Moreover, Laertes tells Ophelia to be careful about Hamlet's intentions. Ophelia's brother seems to be a bit obsessed about his sister's chastity when he tells her not to leave her "chaste treasure open / To [Hamlet's] unmastered importunity" and that "best safety lies in fear" (Ham. I.iii.31-43). However, it might as well be argued that Laertes simply behaves like a big brother who wants to protect his little sister.

Polonius' advice on his daughter's (love) life is much harder. He wants to know every single detail about the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet ("What is between you? Give me up the truth"; Ham. I.iii.98). When Ophelia starts to talk about Hamlet's tender display of affection, her father immediately interrupts her and exclaims: "Affection, pooh! You speak like a green girl / [...] Do you believe his 'tenders' as you call them?" (Ham. I.iii.101-103). Polonius does not attribute any significance or even truth to his daughter's love to Hamlet. Moreover, he strongly influences his daughter not to trust her own feelings as Polonius thinks her naïve and inexperienced. Ophelia still tries to convince her father of the true nature of Hamlet's love ("[Hamlet] hath given countenance to his speech, my lord, / With all the vows of heaven."; Ham. I.iii.113-114). Polonius, however, tells her: "Do not believe his vows" (Ham. I.iii.127). Ophelia's innocent bid to fight for her love has failed and she is limited to acceptance and obedience: "I shall obey, my lord" (Ham. I.iii.136). From this scene onwards, Ophelia is presented as passive and obedient; she tries to do

exactly what her family dictates to her. She becomes insecure about her own feelings and blindly follows her father, functioning like his passive instrument. Ophelia does not perceive herself as an individual anymore and distrusts her own feelings; she even questions Hamlet's love (cf. Dusing 1975:94, White 1982: 65ff, Crump Wright 1993: 41, Dash 1997: 128ff).

While Polonius manipulates his daughter, Hamlet discovers that his beloved father was killed by Claudius, and therefore he wants to take revenge and pretends to be mad. Polonius thinks that the reason for Hamlet's madness is his recent break-up with Ophelia. Claudius and Polonius attempt to find out about the true nature of Hamlet's strange behaviour and decide to spy on him. The poor Ophelia becomes the instrument in this cruel plot. Polonius shows Claudius a love letter which Hamlet had written to Ophelia and which Ophelia had given to her father "in her duty and obedience" (Ham. II.ii.108). Ophelia only watches in silence as her father humiliates her by reading out loud the love letter, which was written by the man she truly loved and who she was forced to break up with by her father. Ophelia's ordeal continues when her own father suggests using his daughter to spy on Hamlet. Polonius remembers that Hamlet uses to walk around the castle at a certain time and proposes: "At such a time I'll loose my daughter to him" (Ham. II.ii.164). Shortly before Hamlet arrives, Polonius tells Ophelia exactly how to act ("Ophelia, walk you here. [...] / [...] Read on this book"; Ham. III.i.45-46). Indeed, Dash (1997:138) suggests that Ophelia is like a passive tool in this bizarre play which is staged by her own father and Claudius; she is even told how to move and which stage properties to use. As suggested by her father, she wants to give back presents and love letters to Hamlet. The young prince Hamlet (who is still enraged with Gertrude's quick remarrying and thus probably projects his mother's supposedly immoral behaviour on the poor Ophelia; cf. Smith 1980:198) harshly confronts Ophelia, tells her that he has never really loved her and that he doubts her virtues ("Are you honest?" / [...] Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a / Breeder of sinners?"; Ham. III.i.105-124).

It must be extremely painful for Ophelia, who probably still loves Hamlet, to endure all of this. However, she knows that Polonius demands complete obedience. Dash (1997: 136ff) argues that Ophelia is willing to sacrifice her relationship with Hamlet in order to prove her loyalty to her father, as it is even greater than the loyalty she has for herself. When Hamlet asks Ophelia "[w]here's your father?" (Ham.

III.i.132), Ophelia chooses not to tell the truth about her father and Claudius hiding and spying on them, but to lie to her lover and stay loyal to Polonius. She quickly answers “[a]t home, my lord” (Ham. III.i.133). Polonius and Claudius are now convinced that Hamlet’s madness derives from Ophelia breaking up with him. Moreover, what results from their strange plotting is the inevitable end of the young people’s love. Ophelia has to accept the fact that she has to be loyal to her father and the male-dominated society she lives in.

After Hamlet’s cruel words for her, Ophelia seems even more passive and accepting and she resigns. She does not contradict Hamlet’s words anymore when he mocks her even more later on: “I think nothing, my lord” (Ham. III.ii.112; cf. Dash 1997:143). Ultimately, when her father Polonius, the only man in her life who she believes is reliable, is killed by Hamlet, Ophelia is driven into madness. As suggested by Claudius, she is now “[d]ivided from herself and her fair judgement” (Ham. IV.v.83). The fact that she is influenced negatively by Polonius and that she is torn between her family and her lover finally results in Ophelia becoming completely confused, unsure about her own feelings and even insane (cf. Dash 1997:111). After being abused by her family and mocked by her lover, Ophelia commits suicide, or so it seems. White (1982:63f.) argues that she is indeed the biggest victim in the play as even her death is condemned by the gravediggers and also the priest (“[...] pebbles should be thrown on her, / Yet here she is allowed her virgin rites”; Ham. V.i.225-226). Ophelia dies innocent and highly incomplete as far as her character and her mental development are concerned. She is passive and obedient throughout the play; however, she is never really herself.

# THE CHANGING IMAGE OF FEMININITY

Due to the values of patriarchal society, women's significance had constantly been kept low in medieval times and also later during the Renaissance; the functions which daughters, sisters, wives and all women in general had been expected to perform often underlined their dependence and passiveness: daughters had to obey their fathers, widows had to mourn their deceased husbands properly, and wives had to prepare their spouses a cosy home while caring for their children.

We have already discovered that a wide variety of Shakespeare's female characters function as examples of the power of Elizabethan and Jacobean patriarchy. Daughters like Ophelia and Portia had to obey their fathers; obedience did not even end with a father's death, as we can see in Portia's case. Gertrude, who is both mother and wife, is also torn apart by the complexity of the various roles that a male-dominated society attributes to her. Many of Shakespeare's female characters illustrate the destructiveness that was often associated with patriarchal structures.

The Renaissance had brought about great changes for European society as a whole. Naturally, there were changes in women's lives as well; depending on their social status and class these changes could be quite considerable. Some women, however, were granted far less freedom than others. There was an ambiguous attitude towards women who enjoyed more rights than other, e.g. women of the upper class; even more scepticism was brought to bear on powerful women (cf. Crump Wright 1993: 7-11).

It is quite probable, for example, that Queen Elizabeth I had at least as many enemies as she had friends when she ascended the throne. Due to political and religious tumults throughout her reign, attitudes might have changed fast. Women's place in society was, to say the least, all but stable. Even the young Queen was exposed to a patriarchal society which tried to direct her. However, she succeeded in not being married to a foreign king as long as she lived.

The Elizabethan Age clearly marked a new era for women; however, women's situation, as far as their rights and self-determination are concerned, cannot be compared to contemporary conditions at all. This highly varied range of attitudes towards the female sex can also be identified in literature; indeed, Shakespeare's plays are an important source for understanding the ambiguous nature of Elizabethan society's picture of gender hierarchies.

While the author creates dependent characters such as Ophelia or Katherine, he also introduces his audiences to Lady Macbeth, who aspires to male power, and the passive Richard II on the other hand; these and other characters might be interpreted as examples of the ambivalence of the power of the genders. The classic concept of physically strong men and weak women began to become more and more indistinct around Shakespeare's time while the question of what exactly constitutes "manliness" and "femininity" became even more significant. The following chapter will therefore focus on Shakespeare's "atypical" gender roles: passive men and strong women.

## MALE MELANCHOLY VS. FEMALE DEPRESSION

A variety of Shakespeare's plays illustrate how women have been reduced to submissiveness and lamenting throughout the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. Indeed, numerous interpretations of Shakespearean characters such as Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* or Ophelia in *Hamlet* might suggest that the inability and/or unwillingness to act as well as the expression of sorrow and grief are exclusively female features in literature. We have already seen that the Queen's character in *Richard II* is limited to her lamentation and she is thus even inferior to her gardeners as far as her dramatic power on stage is concerned.

A closer look of Shakespeare's plays, however, provides us with characters like Jacques in *As You Like It* who, according to Gellert Lyons, is consciously negating society and who is living a life as an outcast among outcasts (cf. 1971: 22ff.). Jacques is a grieving character who separates himself from all the other characters and who seems limited to lament. Two more obvious examples of men who are unable to act and who strongly detest their state of mental paralysis are Macbeth and Hamlet. And what about Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, who suffers from depression without knowing the reason for it? As a matter of fact, various passive men expressing sorrow can be found everywhere in the Shakespearean canon. Jacques, Antonio and even Hamlet are depressed and they do not always know the reasons for their mental state. Macbeth and Richard seem unable to change their situation; and still, all these male characters differ strongly from the women even though they, essentially, behave just like their male counterparts.

Indeed, it has been suggested that expressions of male and female suffering, both in reality and in fiction, vary from each other fundamentally. In *The Gendering of Melancholy* Juliana Schiesari describes that Renaissance philosophers and humanists not only reinforced the idea that the mental suffering of the sexes varies but even created an image of inferiority as far as female grief is concerned. She states that while female sorrow attracted little or no attention at all, male suffering was emphasized in terms of significance (cf. 1992: 2ff.). As Schiesari stresses, this was true even in linguistic terms: "[...] men are called 'melancholic,' women who fall into the depths of sorrow are all too easily dismissed with the *banal*

and *unprestigious* term ‘depression’” (1992: 3f.; my emphasis). Male melancholy seemed to be considered much more important than female grief by Shakespeare’s contemporaries.

In ancient Greece it was believed that melancholy is an illness which can be found particularly in the minds of powerful men. Melancholy was then considered as a disease and not as something worth attaining. However, Marsilio Ficino, the Renaissance humanist, suggested that men affected by melancholy were the ones with the most talent. Through their suffering they expressed their grand genius. Thus, Ficino introduced the notion of melancholy as a major quality in all men of letters to the rest of Europe. In fact, melancholy in men is still associated with creativity and with the stereotypical image of the great thinker (cf. Schiesari 1992: 6ff.).

Hamlet is most certainly the best-known male melancholic in Shakespeare’s works. His sorrow over his father’s death and his mother’s abrupt remarrying leaves him unable to act. His grief provides him with an almost inexhaustible store of thoughts that he tries to follow in his mind, which is reflected in the numerous soliloquies and monologues that can be found in the play. Plainly speaking, Hamlet thinks too much. Hamlet is a man who seems to reduce himself to grief and passiveness. He is led by his thoughts of agony and the ghost of his father, who directs his son as if he were unable to act for himself. But Hamlet is by far not the only character in the play that suffers and grieves. Indeed, while he keeps reflecting about suicide, it is Ophelia who actually acts and takes her own life.

At Ophelia’s funeral, as Heilbrun suggests, Hamlet’s mother Gertrude is “the only one present *decently* mourning [...] and not heated in the fire of some personal passion” (1990: 14; my emphasis). Ophelia is driven into suicide by her mental confusion caused by Hamlet, Claudius and Polonius, who used her like a passive instrument. And Gertrude acts just the way the patriarchal society she is part of directs her to do. She does what she feels is her duty as a woman. Gertrude mourns “decently” for Ophelia at the funeral while Hamlet and Laertes quarrel about which of them is more upset about the death of fair Ophelia. Gertrude and Ophelia experience an immense amount of suffering and pressure throughout the play, and yet, Hamlet’s melancholy is the clear centre of attention. These examples raise the question why women’s grief seems to lack significance in the play as it is not only Hamlet who experiences the loss of loved ones.

Schiesari argues that “[...] Hamlet falls squarely within this Ficinian tradition with its ethos of suffering, an ethos that points to the (male) subject’s difficult – and extraordinary – encounter with the ‘martyrdom’ associated with ‘true greatness’” (1992: 8f.). As suggested above, Shakespeare expresses the greatness and complexity of Hamlet’s character through his suffering. The fight between Hamlet and Laertes at Ophelia’s grave pictures not only the laments expressed by a former lover and a brother but moreover it shows two men who are quarrelling about which of them owns the greater spirit, and each of them refuses to become less of a man by giving in (cf. Schiesari 1992: 242). Hamlet compares his love for Ophelia to her brother’s love for her: “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not, with all their quantity of love, / Make up my sum. – What wilt thou do for her?” (Ham. V.i.266-268). Hamlet craftily describes the nature of his lamentation over Ophelia’s unexpected death and tries to diminish the importance of Laertes’ grief over his sister’s abrupt demise. He expresses that not even “[f]orty thousand brothers” could match the intensity and importance of his feelings and he even directly challenges Laertes by uttering the question “[w]hat wilt thou do for her?”. Furthermore, Hamlet’s way of expressing his grief might be regarded as artful and sophisticated assuming that the intensity of his laments mirrors his genius.

Claudius does not appreciate Hamlet’s “greatness”. When Claudius tries to convince Hamlet of his grief’s inappropriate nature in the first act, he describes Hamlet’s “mourning duties” to his father as “unmanly grief” and “common as any the most vulgar thing to sense”; even “a fault to nature” (Ham. I.ii.88; I.ii.94; I.ii.98-99). Claudius compares Hamlet’s grief to a woman’s “common” grief. Indeed, Schiesari states that often “a woman’s lament, grievance, or suffering is seen as the ‘everyday’ plight of the common (wo)man, a quotidian event whose collective force does not seem to bear the same weight of ‘seriousness’ as a man’s grief” (1992: 13).

Assuming that Shakespeare intended Hamlet’s grief to be an expression of his importance in the play, or just an expression of his mental greatness in general, how can Claudius’ behaviour be justified? Dash suggests that it is Claudius’ negative view of Hamlet’s grief in the first act which identifies the new King of Elsinore as the antagonist of the play. By trying to diminish the significance of Hamlet’s sorrow, Claudius identifies himself as both an aggressive manipulator *and* the play’s main villain (1997: 114).

Thus, Hamlet's intensive grief may be justified through his brilliance and not "unmanly" at all. Claudius identifies himself as Hamlet's enemy; however, at the same time he is fully aware of his melancholic state, which must certainly be a result of his genius, when Claudius expresses that "madness in great ones must not unwatched go" (Ham. III.iii.185). In Elizabethan and Jacobean times the glorification of male melancholy as an expression of genius was, obviously, only one way of treating this issue. The way grieving men were displayed in Shakespeare's plays depended on their functions on stage. Hamlet, for instance, is the main character, and most of the audience's sympathy is directed to him; however, various critics would have rather described him as an anti-hero: Hamlet is often unable to act and seems restricted to his obsession with grief, death and suicide. He plots against the establishment by staging his grotesque play-within-the-play. Some spectators might not think of Hamlet as a sympathetic character. However, by illustrating the sophisticated nature of Hamlet's melancholy, Shakespeare created a highly ambiguous character. The audience experiences an intelligent character whose sophisticated display of suffering makes him the centre of attention and a majority of people might feel for Hamlet. Even his enemy Claudius admits that the young prince is full of greatness.

As a matter of fact, there is a large variety of possibilities to display male melancholy in drama. In *Voices of Melancholy* Gellert Lyons hints at the broad range of melancholic types of characters in Renaissance drama and supports the theory that male melancholy is a part of the lives of the powerful and privileged: "The court, as the centre of patronage and success, was also the focus of melancholy or malcontentedness among those who were unable or unwilling to achieve the success it offered" (1971: 19). It is furthermore suggested that a number of different types of melancholy were used in Elizabethan drama in order to endow stock characters with, e.g. the love-melancholic who could only cure his illness by receiving love. Many of these stock characters were used in comedy and satire to ridicule the Elizabethan or Jacobean image of melancholy.

Another type of melancholic was the traveller: "a young man who had done a kind of educational grand tour on the Continent [...] and [...] was dissatisfied with everything that he saw in his own country" (1971: 23). Jacques in *As You Like It* is described as being a traveller, a melancholic who distances himself from his

environment and sees himself as an opponent to the current (political) system. Some of Shakespeare's comedies depend on the humorous effect of male melancholics such as Jacques. Jacques is ridiculed for his melancholy; he is, however, only a minor character.

It is striking that Hamlet's character apparently spans a wide range of melancholic types; it is highly interesting to try to identify different types of melancholy in Hamlet's personality. Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg and at his return he finds Denmark in a "rotten" state; after a long absence he finds himself alienated from his home environment and he strongly disagrees with the new establishment at his home court Elsinore. Does this make him a stereotypical "traveller"? In another example, in the second act, Polonius tries to convince Gertrude and Claudius that Hamlet is a "love-melancholic". Polonius seems completely convinced that Hamlet's strange behaviour and depression result from his troubled romance with Polonius's own daughter Ophelia, which of course might warp his perception. And then only some lines later, Shakespeare's stage directions introduce Hamlet as "*madly attired, reading on a book*"; Gertrude further introduces him as follows: "But look where *sadly the poor wretch comes reading*" (Ham. II.ii.170; emphasis added). Hamlet now seems to have taken up the role of the "scholar" to illustrate his madness and melancholy.

Gellert Lyons points out that "melancholy men were thought to be naturally inclined to solitary study" (1971: 26). The fact that Hamlet reads a book certainly helps to create the image of Hamlet being yet another stereotypical image of melancholy. By having Hamlet act like a "scholar", Shakespeare shows great skill not only in switching between stock characteristics but, moreover, in parodying them. Assuming that an Elizabethan audience was aware of the existence of melancholic stock characters such as the "scholar" or the "traveller", Shakespeare's introducing them in his tragedy must have had a great comic effect.

In *Hamlet*, the nature of male melancholy becomes quite ambivalent due to Hamlet and Claudius and their lack of (Christian) virtues. Shakespeare's sophisticated display of various melancholic stereotypes in his eponymous character certainly underlines Hamlet's stature and to some extent his intellectual superiority. However, some Renaissance spectators might have seen Hamlet as immoral in

terms of Christian values and social norms. Claudius certainly is the villain; however, Hamlet is ambivalent, to say the least.

Hamlet is obsessed with the idea of taking revenge on Claudius, the murderer of his beloved father, and Hamlet does not even seem to mind sacrificing anyone who is in his way. He kills Polonius, even if inadvertently, he drives Ophelia mad, he challenges Laertes and he even has his childhood friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed. Bearing all this in mind, one might argue that Hamlet is a villain himself. However, Claudius' murder of Hamlet's father is the driving power behind Hamlet's intentions of revenge. Claudius is clearly established as the true villain of the play. Moreover, Hamlet's intense and artful grief would probably ensure him the sympathy of any Elizabethan or Jacobean audience. Hamlet is to some extent immoral, but Claudius is even worse; and even though Hamlet is passive, the audience even empathises with him because of his artful use of language, his great soliloquies and the sophisticated nature of his grief.

However, what if there is a weak, passive male character who suffers grief from being confronted by a strong, active male character? This situation underlies Shakespeare's historical tragedy *Richard II*. This play focuses mainly on the issue whether there is any rational reason to kill a king who, naturally, is anointed by God. What ultimately leads to Richard's doom is his unsurmountable grief and the passiveness connected to it. However, his sort of melancholy seems to differ from Hamlet's, at least as far as the reactions of the audience/reader are concerned. Hamlet's melancholy is of a sophisticated, intellectual nature while Richard's passiveness and the strong melancholy resulting from it are rather manifestations of his inability to govern his kingdom.

Shakespeare's audience must have felt that Richard's incompetence not only enables Bolingbroke to have his weak opponent deposed and murdered but justified moreover the murder of an English King who was thought to be God's representative on Earth. Forker states that according to most medieval chroniclers "Richard was a weak, incompetent and despotic king, extravagantly self-indulgent, deaf to wise counsel, dominated by corrupt and selfish favourites and altogether ruinous to his country" (2002: 24).

Whether their male grief was seen in positive terms as artful or as pathetic and negative, there is an essential aspect that both Hamlet and Richard share in their inability to act: they completely diminish the importance of female suffering and grief. Their intense suffering makes them appear noble and heroic. The few female characters in *Richard II* are limited to private scenes. This is not uncommon in Elizabethan theatre. However, their grief is once again overshadowed by Richard's suffering and thus is belittled.

The Queen in *Richard II*, the only English queen appearing in Shakespeare's plays, is outdone by her own husband who orders her, shortly before his execution, to tell the story of his "lamentable fall" "in winter's tedious nights" (R2 V.i.40-50). It is the Queen's duty as a wife and woman to mourn her husband's and king's death. Moreover, Richard wants her to keep his image as a martyr. He even compares his fate to the suffering of Jesus Christ: "[...] you Pilates / Have here delivered me to my sour cross" (R2, Deposition Scene, IV.i.230-31).

The idea of noble suffering and self-sacrifice even goes as far as accepting death in the end. Richard dies fighting with his keepers and Hamlet dies fighting against Laertes. However, both of them know that they have to die and they are willing to face death. Even Antonio, the merchant of Venice, is willing to accept his fate in court when pronouncing "let me have judgement and the Jew his will" (MV IV.i.82). And similar to Richard he wishes his story of martyrdom to be remembered: "You cannot better be employed, Bassanio, / Than to live still and write mine epitaph" (MV IV.i.116-17). Towards the end of some of Shakespeare's plays it might seem as if the protagonists have lost all their power; however, this is definitely not true for their theatrical power.

In summary, the difference between "male melancholy" and "female depression" was quite substantial in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Schiesari states that "not only is the male form empowering and the female one disempowering, but melancholy is romantically garbed in the past while depression is given only the banality of the present" (1992: 16). While female grief is often labelled as being "common" or even "hysterical", male grief often carries a notion of "noble suffering" in Elizabethan drama, as e.g. Richard's self-comparison with the Passion of Jesus Christ exemplifies.

## SHAKESPEARE'S EFFEMINATE MEN

It is difficult to distinguish between male and female grief in terms of significance; as mentioned above, female grief was often regarded as inferior compared to male melancholy. However, some of Shakespeare's male characters, even some of his protagonists, display features of melancholy and passivity, which would probably remind Shakespeare's original audiences of the less prestigious characteristics that used to be attributed to the female sex. Characters such as Macbeth, Richard II and Hamlet are repeatedly described as lacking stereotypical male virtues. They are labelled "unmanned" (Mac. III.iv.73), "weeping" (R2 II.iv.21) or "unmanly" (Ham. I.ii.94) by their sworn enemies and even by their own wife, as in Macbeth's case. What all these characters have in common is that they belong to royal houses; they are princes and even kings. Nevertheless, they are mocked for their melancholy. This unquestionably provides us with a considerable contrast to the concept of male melancholy as noble suffering and martyrdom. This raises the issue in which ways the negative display of male suffering, and thus their degradation, can be justified.

The feminization of male characters in Shakespearean drama is closely connected to the passing on of values. Smith states in *Shakespeare and Masculinity*:

In addition to proverbs and conduct books, a man trying to shape himself to the expectations of his peers might turn also to the theatre. [...] the fundamental purpose of all kinds of fiction is to teach ethics by offering positive examples to be emulated and negative examples to be rejected.

(2000: 40)

Some of Shakespeare's male protagonists are openly ridiculed for lacking traditional masculine features. This is even true for royal characters like Richard II and Macbeth who are both the regents of their countries. Most likely it is their lack of virtues that exposes them to other characters' unsympathetic critique. It is therefore important to understand which values were expected in a man by the Elizabethans and Jacobean. Shakespeare might be illustrating the qualities that form a true man in his Roman play *Julius Caesar*. Smith (2000:42) suggests that characteristics such as

“nobility, honesty, gentleness, honour, virtue [...] are qualities that make a man a man”.

As suggested above, the theatre exhibits both positive and negative examples of male behaviour to the audience. In order to define male behaviour, however, it is important not only to create characters full of virtues such as honour, but rather to introduce characters who exemplify the contrast. Therefore, it is often argued that female behaviour is used in male characters to create an effect of “otherness”. In other words, what is considered to be typically female can be applied to a man to make him inferior to stronger male characters in a play. Indeed, the idea of feminization, in literature and in reality, was well established in Elizabethan society and men were considered to be exposed to the likelihood of acquiring female features at all times (cf. Smith 2000: 101-110).

In Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, the aggressively straight forward acting of Bolingbroke, the later King Henry IV, confronts the passiveness of King Richard II. Bolingbroke is a man who acts while Richard prefers talking. Gurr points out that “Richard’s two main actions, stopping the duel and seizing Gaunt’s estate, both are reactions to an outside stimulus, not actions he initiates” (1990: 23). Richard seems unable or even unwilling to rule his country and spends his kingdom’s gold on luxury. Quite possibly, Shakespeare creates a good deal of ambiguity about Richard’s attitude towards ruling his country when Richard articulates the punishments for the contestants in the duel: “Norfolk, for thee remains a heavier doom, / *Which I with some unwillingness pronounce*” (R2 I.iii.143-44; emphasis added). Richard seems uninterested and unmotivated to handle his royal chores.

Moreover, Richard is not interested in foreign wars; rather, he enjoys the company of his royal flatterers, Bushy, Baggot and Green. When Bolingbroke judges Richard’s flatterers, he even accuses them indirectly of preventing Richard from fulfilling his manly duties towards his wife, i.e. sharing his bed with her: “[...] You have, in manner, with your sinful hours / Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him, / Broke the possession of a royal bed, / And stained the beauty of a fair queen’s cheeks” (R2 III.i.11-14). Basically, Richard’s part in the play is limited to words rather than actions.

*Richard II* is entirely written in verse, contains numerous extensive metaphors, such as the comparison of England to a garden, as well as Richard's eloquently performed speeches. Without doubt, Richard's power is of a rather theatrical nature. After all, it is his lamenting nature and his inability to act properly which offers Richard's enemies a reason to depose him. Furthermore, his grief and the mournful state of mind that he experiences especially towards the end of the play create a strong image of a feminized king. In *Engendering a Nation*, Howard and Rackin imply that "the gendering of excessive emotion as feminine has unsettling effects on the gender position – and the authority – of Richard II, perhaps the most emotive of all Shakespeare's kings" (1997: 141). Interestingly, Richard himself is aware of his feminine acting: "My brain I'll prove the female to my soul" (R2 V.v.6).

The few women in the play are limited to private scenes that function to provide relief between the "seriousness" of public scenes (e.g. the Duchess of York in her comedic account of having her son Aumerle pardoned). Leaving the traditional division of characters aside, it could be argued that Richard functions as the most strikingly female character of the play. Indeed, Richard has been labelled the play's female point of view, while Bolingbroke is the strong male counterpart (cf. Howard and Rackin 1997: 137-143). The strong and active Bolingbroke is ultimately responsible for the death of King Richard II, who is "God's substitute, / His deputy anointed in his sight" (R2 I.ii.37-38). Whether Richard's effeminacy and his passivity were regarded to be the reason for his ultimate downfall by the Elizabethan audience or not is a matter of ongoing discussion. Certainly, however, the original spectators of Shakespeare's play must have drawn such conclusions from Richard's obvious effeminacy and the values associated with it.

## WOMEN CROSSING GENDER BORDERS

The creation of effeminate male characters is not the only possibility to demonstrate how easily gender boundaries can get blurred. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Richard II* illustrate that both male and female features may be present in men. This suggests that passivity and grief are not solely attributed to women; however, these concepts are nevertheless mostly associated with what is considered as female behaviour, found both in women *and* in men. Female features attributed to men often generate negative connotations, as we have learned. This chapter examines male features found in female characters. Powerful women in Shakespeare's plays occur quite frequently. Characters such as Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth are presented as highly ambitious and arguably powerful and dominant. However, Shakespeare pictures many of his vigorously acting women all but positively or as virtuous.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* introduces the audience to medieval Scotland; much of the play's plot deals with issues of war and the honourable defence of the state, which Long describes as a "concentration on the masculine world" (1989: 54). In a world like this, women are traditionally bound to their homes while men dominate the public scenery, i.e. politics and battle. The King traditionally functions as the centre in the medieval world, with his chivalrous knights surrounding and protecting him (cf. Long 1989: 54-59). However, the protagonist and new King of Scotland, Macbeth, does not act like an honourable and virtuous knight at all. He gets involved with black magic and, moreover, slaughters the Scottish King out of his foul ambitions to become the new monarch. Clearly, Macbeth is a villain; the three witches even predict the entrance of "something wicked" shortly before he arrives (cf. Mac. IV.i.62); however, the new Queen, Lady Macbeth, plays an important role in this tragedy as well and she is clearly at least as villainous as her husband.

Michael Long argues that in *Macbeth* the "imagery of pollution is very largely female, its counter-imagery of cleansing and recovery very largely male" (1989: 54). The idea of comparing female influence to "pollution" might at first glance seem a bit exaggerated. A close look at Lady Macbeth's ambitions, however, might to some extent justify this conclusion. While Macbeth has become a thane, Lady

Macbeth gets obsessed by the idea of achieving even more. When she learns that King Duncan is going to spend the night in their house, his fate is already virtually sealed when Lady Macbeth utters her evil plan: “He [Duncan] that’s coming / Must be provided for; and you shall put / This night’s great business into my dispatch, / Which shall to all our nights and days to come / Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom” (Mac. I.v.65-69). Lady Macbeth decides that King Duncan has to die in order for them to achieve total power and to make her husband the new King of Scotland.

Lady Macbeth pushes her husband into finally committing the crime and it is her who insists of being responsible for it. Throughout the play, she emphasizes her husband’s inability to act and repeatedly questions his manhood (“Are you a man?” Mac. III.iv.58). She does not command him; rather, she drives him into the act of murdering the King by questioning Macbeth and his point of view and thus makes a largely passive instrument out of her own husband in order to satisfy her ambitions: “Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valour / As thou art in desire? [...] Wouldst thou [...] live a coward (cf. Mac. I.vii.39-44). After murdering Duncan, Macbeth reports the crime to his wife: “I have done the deed” (Mac. II.ii.14). He indicates that he has finally been able to act.

It first seems that murdering Duncan makes Macbeth an active villain; however, he receives his stimulus for committing the crime from the three witches and Lady Macbeth. Thus Macbeth becomes the largely passive object of his wives’ plot. The royal couple has committed their crimes together, Macbeth acting as an instrument of murder and Lady Macbeth being the driving force behind their cruel plots.

As mentioned above, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* depicts female influence on men and gender ambiguity in a highly negative way. Asp (1991:379ff) suggests that the concept of women acting like men would be seen as unnatural and wrong by Elizabethan or Jacobean audiences. Passiveness and grief were rather attributed to women; e.g. after his whole family is killed, Macduff is told to “dispute it like a man” and he tries to repress his own tears as they would only make him “play the woman” (cf. Mac. IV.iii.17-142). This highlights Shakespeare’s negative depiction of femininity in *Macbeth*: many male characters in the play fear that the display of stereotypical female qualities might lead to them becoming effeminate (cf. Hopkins 1998:146). However, women aspiring to male power, who try to adopt male qualities, are

probably even more dangerous for the characters in the play. As already mentioned, violence was theoretically limited to men, and the image of violent women would have been regarded as most disturbing. Since Macbeth has taken Scotland's throne through his horrible crime, the country is in an unnatural situation that would even "make [...] women fight", according to Ross in the fifth act (cf. Mac. V.i.187). The idea of sexually ambiguous women (the three witches being a further example in the play) was therefore regarded as a threat to social order and, according to Long, even as a polluting element (cf. Long 1989: 55f., Asp 1991:382). Lady Macbeth is certainly the most ambiguous character in *Macbeth* as far as gender identity is concerned. She is a powerful woman; already when she first appears in the play, she is portrayed as ambitious, and by influencing her husband she achieves her aim to have him murder the king. Her new title of Queen then empowers her even more. However, her ultimate downfall is tragic.

The image of femininity in *Macbeth* is extremely negative as the wicked Lady Macbeth is the predominant woman in the play. While the partly evil protagonist Macbeth is corrupted by his equally evil wife's intentions, there is a strong counterweight in the form of uncorrupted male virtue in *Macbeth*. Long proposes that "the task of cleansing the world of their [i.e. of aggressive females'] polluting influence requires not only males but peculiarly *uncontaminated* males" (1989: 56; my emphasis). Malcolm for instance is "unknown to woman" (Mac. IV.iii.127) while Macduff is not "of woman born" as he was delivered by Caesarean section (cf. Mac. V.x.12-15). The fact that these men have not been exposed to women as other men enables them to save Scotland from the tyrant Macbeth. They are portrayed as completely uncorrupted by female influence and thus are able to clean their society from Macbeth and his wife's evil plots (cf. Long 1989: 54-57).

The motivation behind Lady Macbeth's schemes most certainly is her wish to achieve great power. Macbeth is already greatly influenced by his wife when he is not the King of Scotland. To Lady Macbeth the idea of potentially holding power over a king must therefore be even more appealing. She definitely wants her husband to rule the country so she can become the Queen. However, an important issue concerning Lady Macbeth's character is how she perceives gender differences and the stereotypical separation of the sexes. She wants Macbeth to be the king but at the same time she thinks him unable to perform royal duties. The dilemma she thinks

to be in is that her femininity prevents her from holding even more power. As a woman, traditionally, she does not actively influence what happens in political and public scenes; she realises that her society thinks her less important than a man (cf. Asp 1991:377f.). It is herself who claims that her female qualities might interfere with her intentions concerning power and total control. Thus, Lady Macbeth declares even to be willing to kill a child in order achieve her goals:

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn  
As you have done to this.

(Mac. I.vii.54-59)

A mother killing her own child is an image that illustrates both extreme violence and utter rejection of femininity, a mother providing milk to her child being one of the most common symbols of womanhood and innocence. It seems as if Lady Macbeth wishes to become a man in order to reach her goals. She is willing to give up exclusively female qualities like giving birth to a child in order to be able to attain total power, which she thinks is limited to men only. For Lady Macbeth, manliness is associated with violence and boldness as opposed to virtue and honour (cf. Long 1989:61f., Sramkova 1996: 2f.; Smith 2000: 42).

Driven by her ambitions, Lady Macbeth tries to make her husband more masculine in the stereotypical sense and to get rid of feminine qualities that she is sure society associates with weakness. Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband in many ways and it might be argued that in reality she is the one who “unmans” Macbeth. Smith states that “the most destructive [...] women are those who aspire to male power” (2000: 113). As a matter of fact, the ambiguity of gender becomes more and more relevant throughout the play. While Macbeth constantly seems to lose his male virtues and the power that remains, his wife more and more tries to cast off her femininity. The royal couple approach each other in terms of gender identity. Macbeth is presented as passive and insecure, while Lady Macbeth actively seeks to lose her gender identity as a woman. She wants to be “unsexed”, filled with the cruelty that

she believes to be a male quality and thus be liberated from what she considers the disadvantages of her physical sex (cf. Mac. I.v.40-42). Carolyn Asp supports this theory: "Lady Macbeth *consciously* attempts to reject her feminine sensibility and adopt a male mentality because she perceives that her society equates feminine qualities with weakness" (1991: 377-78; my emphasis).

Despite the fact that Lady Macbeth tries hard to exchange her seemingly weak female qualities for strength and violence, which she believes to be exclusively male virtues, it has been argued that she never really manages to separate herself from her femininity. Larsen Klein (1980:246) suggests that throughout the play, Lady Macbeth can always be clearly identified as a woman, even though she tries to attain male qualities.

Similar to the Queen in *Richard II*, Lady Macbeth's stage appearance is largely limited to domestic scenes; she never seems to leave her home. She is fully aware of her duties as a wife and housewife. It might even be argued that when she plans Duncan's murder, Shakespeare parodies a woman fulfilling her domestic duties: she prepares the murder instrument for her husband and thinks about how to clean up the murder afterwards (cf. Larsen Klein 1980:245ff, Hopkins 1998:148ff). In the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth is presented as strong-minded and ambitious; towards her tragic ending, however, she more and more loses control and power. Asp (1991:385) suggests that while her husband is preoccupied with the idea of becoming more masculine, Lady Macbeth spends her time alone and isolated at home.

Indeed, power seems to slip away from her: at the banquet scene it is her husband who takes care of his guests and she cannot even function as the host of her home anymore. It seems as if there is no more use for Lady Macbeth, and when she reveals her crimes while sleep-walking, she underlines that there is no more purpose for her when she is awake (cf. Larsen Klein 1980:248ff). Her guilt ultimately drives Lady Macbeth mad and a major reason why she takes her own life might be the fact that she has lost her struggle to "unsex" herself and to achieve true power, which she has always associated with masculinity.

Both Lady Macbeth and her husband experience most unpleasant and tragic deaths due to their villainous behaviour and plotting. It might be argued that

Macbeth is punished because of his horrible crimes and also for his inability to govern his state. Lady Macbeth, however, who never actually committed these crimes but rather functioned as a creator of plots, is mainly punished for her conspiracy against the king, her complete lack of virtues and probably for trying to aspire to male power and authority. Lady Macbeth arguably represents a threat to her society, to say the least. However, what if the female protagonist, a woman who enjoys great power is appreciated by her people, has to defend the wealth of her nation by all available means? This issue is raised in Shakespeare's tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*, which reveals the story of yet another powerful couple facing their mutual doom.

The Queen of Egypt is a powerful woman; unlike Lady Macbeth, she was born into her royal role, and yet, Cleopatra lives in a world dominated by men. Dash argues that she is seen ambivalently by her people, both as the ruler of a mighty nation and as a woman. Shakespeare introduces sceptical characters such as Enobarbus who, through his speech, limits his Queen to her sexual identity as a woman. His point of view represents the opinion of the Egyptian people (cf. 1981: 209-218).

After Antony receives note that his wife in Rome has died, Enobarbus tells him to "give the gods a thankful sacrifice" (Ant. I.ii.153) and further compares women to pieces of clothing, thus highlighting Cleopatra's female, and probably sexual, benefits. He states that when wives die "it shows to man the tailors of the earth" and that "when old robes are worn out / there are members to make new"; Enobarbus further stresses the advantage of having a younger wife when he utters that Antony's "old smock brings forth a new petticoat" (cf. Ant. I.ii.155-160). Essentially, Enobarbus tells Antony that mourning for the death of his wife, Fulvia, is unnecessary as there are other women; Cleopatra just happens to be there and, as far as her female qualities are concerned, she is as good as any other woman. Even though Enobarbus belongs to Cleopatra's court, he shows his disrespect towards his queen in expressing this point of view. He describes her as an object and creates a superficial image of her by comparing her to something that might be useful to men; thus, he clearly undermines and underestimates her authority.

Antony, in contrast, is much attracted by Cleopatra. It is not only her beauty that fascinates him, but rather her exotic world as a whole. Cleopatra's Egypt

is much different from Antony's pragmatic Rome. Antony's affection is real; undoubtedly, just as Cleopatra's love is real as well. The couple creates an image of gender equality. They appear together in public scenes and even go to war together. Cleopatra holds great power, both in sexual and in political terms. She is the Queen of Egypt and wants to stay independent. She insists on performing her royal duties.

The Queen of Egypt seems obsessed with her beloved Antony. She cannot let go of him: "See where he is, who's with him, what he does" (Ant. I.iii.2). Cleopatra wants to own Antony; she wants to control him. Antony is just as obsessed with Cleopatra. He loves her, yet he claims "would I had never seen her" (Ant. I.ii.144). Dash suggests that Shakespeare's play pictures a loving relationship between two powerful rulers who constantly try to achieve dominance over each other (cf. 1981: 247). Still, they love each other until their deaths; Cleopatra is the one to survive until the final act, which might even suggest that she ultimately achieves total dominance in her relationship. Such a romantic view, however, is not shared by everyone.

Enobarbus' depiction of Cleopatra's stereotyped values was mentioned above. Moreover, as Stanton suggests, Antony's fellow countrymen back in Rome "regard Antony as effeminized" (2002: 95). They think that Antony's falling for Cleopatra must be the result of her struggle for power. The story of the historical Queen Cleopatra of Egypt, a woman who felt obliged to seduce powerful men in order to save her kingdom from Roman conquest, is well-known, certainly also to many in the Renaissance audience. This story can be evaluated in different ways.

Shakespeare chose to depict Cleopatra's efforts to secure her power in negative terms by having Caesar observe that "he [Antony] hath given his empire / Up to a whore" (Ant. III.vi.66-67). Caesar is a character that people would look up to; he is known for his male, Roman virtues. His statement certainly functions to create a moral justification for Cleopatra's downfall. Antony wants to achieve complete control of the Roman Empire, he betrays the rest of the triumvirate, which consists of honourable men, and, moreover, he allows a woman to control his feelings.

David Holbrook (1989: 221-223) suggests that the image Shakespeare creates of Cleopatra's influence on Antony is one of charm and corruption. By having him call her "my serpent of old Nile" (cf. Ant. I.v.19-33), Cleopatra is compared to

snakes crawling on the muddy banks of Nile. Holbrook explains that this comparison pictures Cleopatra as a snake who tempts virtuous men (similar to the snake that is responsible for committing the original sin in the Bible) and the mud this snake lives in functions as a fruitful breeding ground not only for Egypt's essential crops but moreover for the corruption that is attributed to Cleopatra's court (cf. 1989: 222-224).

Whether Cleopatra is corrupt or not is not directly influencing her relationship to Antony, as their love is strong. Holbrook, however, hints at a basic fear expressed by male characters of the play, i.e. the feminization of men (cf. 1989: 229). Camidius, one of Antony's loyal followers, expresses this fear by uttering that "we are women's men" (Ant. III.vii.69). Even Antony might indicate having been "unmanned" by mighty Cleopatra: "O thy vile lady, / She has robbed me of my sword!" (Ant. IV.xv.22-23). Antony's sword could possibly as well be interpreted as a symbol of male sexuality (cf. Holbrook 1989: 228-29). Antony's character is criticized for lacking male virtues while Cleopatra is said to disempower members of the male sex. Shakespeare's spectators might even suspect that she has cast a spell upon Antony to take away his power and absorb it. She is punished by being forced to witness her lover's death, by her own suicide, and ultimately by Egypt's integration into the Roman Empire.

If Shakespeare really intended to reveal the consequences of female reign and ambition by illustrating the tragic downfall of Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra is a question of interpretation. However, these two examples certainly must have functioned as hortative in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. Moreover, England had already seen female monarchs; therefore it must be doubted whether Shakespeare really expressed strong critique towards the female gender as ruler or not. As I have already mentioned above, the Renaissance image of women was much more liberal than the medieval one. Definitely, Shakespeare demonstrates that great power can corrupt anybody; this is true for Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth and also for Richard II. Kings and queens are expected to display a range of leadership qualities and virtues, regardless of which gender they belong to. And it was Queen Elizabeth herself who, facing the attack of the Spanish Armada, told her men: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king" (cf. Tilbury Speech 1588).

## THE POWER OF MALE DISGUISE

Shakespeare's histories and Roman plays illustrate the moral ambiguity of powerful characters; moreover, we have learned that while incompetent male protagonists are often considered as effeminate and passive, powerful women seem to be more likely to be labelled as being corrupted by power than their male counterparts. Some of Shakespeare's heroines, however, acquire their power in a completely different way which is, nevertheless, connected to the idea of male dominance. Male disguise has been a key issue in studies on the poet's work for a long time; it is arguable, however, whether male disguise in Shakespeare's plays functions as a symbol of female power or of the ridicule of female passiveness, as every single role on the Elizabethan stage was impersonated by male actors. Most likely the best example to investigate this problem is *The Merchant of Venice*, a comedy that introduces the character of Portia. Her transformation into Balthasar, a young lawyer, provides her with enough power to fool the entire male cast of the play and to contribute greatly to the solution of the play's issues.

The power of disguise is a central motif in *The Merchant of Venice*. While Portia's disguise as a lawyer empowers her in front of the Venetian Duke, Jessica's disguise as a male torchbearer functions in a protective way, i.e. to help her escape from her father Shylock's house without being recognized by anyone. Michael Shapiro highlights the immense contrast between Portia's and Jessica's disguise (cf. 1994: 97-100). Jessica's masquerade underlines her female passivity; she needs to be protected by the mask of manhood. The need for protection is her main motivation for disguising herself as a member of the opposite sex; thus Jessica gets in line with female characters like Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*.

Many of Shakespeare's female characters seek to find protection through male disguise. This, however, reinforces the concept of passiveness as a female attribute even more: women were not able to move freely outside of their homes without male protection. Indeed, Crump Wright states that in medieval times "they [women] were escorted to the market area by a male member of the family; women

never would have thought of venturing forth unprotected from the eyes and attentions of rude men” (1993: 7). Women were dependent on male protection.

Portia, on the other hand, along with Cleopatra, is one of Shakespeare’s female characters who definitely do not fit the medieval scheme of female passivity and subordination. Moreover, Portia distinguishes herself substantially from other cross-dressing women in Shakespearean drama. In *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage*, Michael Shapiro describes Portia’s peculiarity as follows:

Whereas most other disguised heroines serve men as youthful companions, *Portia invents a role* that will give her authority over the men in the play. [...] Portia is also the only one of Shakespeare’s heroines to adopt and relinquish male disguise ‘not under pressure of events from outside [...] but *by her own choice* of time and circumstance.’

(1994: 100; emphasis added)

While Jessica sees no alternative but to protect herself with male disguise in order to flee from her father’s house, Portia takes action when she borrows male authority and is fully aware of which kind of power her disguise will bring along. As a woman she is bound to her dead father’s marriage plans. In male disguise, however, Portia experiences great power. And, as a matter of fact, while she acts the role of the young lawyer Balthasar, her power over other male characters is immense. Shylock, who is presented as intellectual and precise, “honours” her for her wisdom and praises her, exclaiming “much more elder art thou than thy looks” (cf. MV IV.i.220-301). Portia’s power grows to the extent that she is actually able to save Antonio and to denounce Shylock as a criminal; thus she holds power over the lives and death of the men in court. When Shylock takes the place of the accused, Antonio, Bassanio and Graziano praise Portia in the same ways as Shylock has done before. Even the Doge of Venice is impressed by the young “man” and he spares Shylock’s life. Her disguise as Balthasar enables Portia to show her rhetorical genius in front of the Venetian court. Rackin states that “male disguise allowed female characters to perform heroic actions that were generally reserved for men. [...] she demonstrates the legal skill that saves Antonio’s life after the male characters have been unable to do so” (2005: 74-75). In the cloak of manhood Portia finally merges her skills.

Investigating the male protagonists in *The Merchant of Venice* might explain why Portia is actually able to achieve great power: all the male main characters show a great lack of (Christian) virtues. Shylock's business is to lend money, which is despised by Christians, and Antonio actually takes advantage of these services although he publicly mocks Shylock. Bassanio and his servant Graziano mockingly talk about sacrificing their wives in order to rescue Antonio. It might therefore be argued that Portia is the only main character in the play who acts virtuously, as she supports her husband in saving his friend without embarrassing him by showing her real identity in court.

Portia is full of virtues while Bassanio, Antonio and Shylock are not. Shapiro even goes one step further in demonstrating how the men of the play empower Portia with their behaviour. He states that "Shakespeare makes Portia flex her power more explicitly when she hears of Antonio's plight [...], she recognizes Antonio as her rival for Bassanio" (1994: 102). We have already learned that Bassanio's love for Antonio is very great ("life itself, my wife, and all the world / Are not with me esteemed above thy life. / I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all"; cf. MV IV.i.279-284).

The question is whether Bassanio's love for his friend, a love that might be interpreted as romantic, but also as platonic, is reason enough for Portia to call Antonio her opponent. Indeed, it is suggested that Portia finds it necessary both to finalize her relationship to Bassanio and support him as a virtuous wife in his attempts to save his friend. Before Bassanio departs for Venice, she insists on their immediate marriage ("First go with me to church and call me wife, / And then away to Venice to your friend"; MV III.ii.301-2; cf. Shapiro 1994: 102-4).

If we keep in mind the above chapter on male melancholy, we might discover that Antonio, the merchant of Venice, is a self-made martyr. He is passive and celebrates his suffering to the extent that with his self-pity he indirectly tries to outdo the significance of the grief that the play's women experience, particularly Portia's frustration about being controlled by a dead father. Like Richard II, Antonio accepts his final doom and wants his downfall to be remembered by his friends. In doing so, he actually devaluates Portia as a wife, even though he calls her "honourable":

Commend me to your honourable wife.  
Tell her the process of Antonio's end.  
Say how I loved you. Speak me fair in death,  
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge  
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

(MV IV.i.270-74)

Whether Antonio and Bassanio have been sexually involved or not, the merchant openly denies the significance of Bassanio's and Portia's marriage. In court, it is the young Balthasar who holds all the power that is necessary to bring justice. Of course, the audience knows that Balthasar is Portia. However, for the male protagonists, Portia's achievements are disguised along with her female physique. Nevertheless, she is probably the most powerful person in the play. She manages to maintain her power achieved through male disguise even until the end of the play when she is herself again.

Portia holds power over all the male protagonists, especially after she confronts them with the truth about Balthasar: Shylock is punished, Bassanio is more than ever bound to his virtuous wife, and Antonio even owes Portia his life. As Shapiro states, Portia is "reducing Antonio to a three-word statement of speechless wonder, 'I am dumb' [...] Portia 'removes the last vestige of Antonio's role as martyr'" (cf. 1994: 112; MV V.i.279). If, indeed, Antonio was Portia's rival for the love of Bassanio, she certainly defeated him.

The issue of male disguise and what is associated with it has been variously treated. In Elizabethan drama, men portraying women who dress up like men have been repeatedly accused of arousing so-called "unnatural" (i.e. homosexual) desire among the male spectators. Female characters in male disguise were often thought to mock manhood and praise femininity. As every character was acted by men or boys in Shakespeare's time, this might, according to some of Shakespeare's contemporary critics, create the impression that the feminization of men is desirable (cf. Jardine 1983: 9-33; Dusinger 1975: 231-271).

A further point of criticism in Shakespeare's time was that women were acting as if they were men in several plays (not regarding the fact that all the actors were men). Women who tried to acquire male qualities were considered as immoral,

probably even dangerous: "Trousers on a woman, whether on the stage or off it, spelled insubordination" (cf. Dusinger 1975: 321). Dusinger further states that "the masculine woman was as potentially subversive as the player. [...] by taking a man's clothes she threatened not only to usurp his authority but to annex his nature" (1975: 239). Portia has shown us that women in men's clothes are well able to achieve great power. Once she is in disguise, it is Portia's responsibility how to perform with the newly acquired strength. She does not, however, take advantage of her power. Portia saves Antonio's life and teaches her husband a lesson in morality.

Although Portia is powerful, at the end of the play everything is back to normal. The subversion of social orders has often been considered as dangerous and therefore it was important in drama to show that normal order is restored afterwards. This is also true, for instance, for Shakespeare's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as we have already seen above. After all, *The Merchant of Venice* is ultimately a comedy, too; as a matter of fact, there are no women in male disguise in any of Shakespeare's tragedies. Considering that numerous Elizabethan comedies are not only meant to entertain their audience with slapstick but also to teach important moral values might justify powerful women in male disguise. Shakespeare's heroines may have been acted by young boys in former times; nevertheless, their strong voices have always been female.

## CONCLUSION

In his works, William Shakespeare represents the way Elizabethan and Jacobean society treated women for their supposed otherness. Having a close look at the author's various plays, the works discussed in this paper being just some examples, it becomes quite clear to which extent the hierarchy of men over women, which is often regarded as a central feature of medieval society, was still predominant in Renaissance England.

We have seen that wives had to obey their husbands, and daughters had to do what their fathers told them to do. Shakespeare created numerous female characters that provide insights into the social norms of Elizabethan and Jacobean times; some of them behave according to patriarchal rules while others attempt to revolt against them. We have learned that a woman's attempt to disobey would usually be seen as highly negative. For some women, disobedience leads to public ridicule, e.g. Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*; for others, the result would be even worse (cf. *Romeo and Juliet*).

For Shakespeare's contemporaries, the idea of female revolt was an actual and serious threat. Furthermore, the idea that men might acquire female features was considered as disruptive, subversive and morally wrong. In general, the significance given to the female sex was ambiguous, to say the least. Women were condemned to passivity and subordination by men; any attempt of a woman to become man's equal was met with patriarchy's negative attitudes (cf. *Antony and Cleopatra*).

On the other hand, Shakespeare's plays demonstrate that Elizabethan and Jacobean England was undergoing a change in attitude as far as society's views of women are concerned. Not every woman was necessarily "inferior" to every man; husbands who lacked virtues would be condemned by society as well; their wives would no longer be bound to them in terms of loyalty; this is true for fathers and daughters likewise (cf. Emilia in *Othello*, Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*). Moreover, Shakespeare created various strong women who, at least temporarily, managed to become equal to men in terms of significance, power and influence

(Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* being just two examples).

Renaissance women definitely enjoyed more rights than their medieval counterparts; however, they were still expected to obey the rules of patriarchy. Shakespeare's work is therefore a valuable document in order to understand the slow transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance as far as gender hierarchy in Elizabethan and Jacobean society is concerned.

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