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LOVE'S VIOLENCE IN SHAKESPEARE

by

Martin Laub

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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VITA

The author, Martin Laub, is the son of John and Mildred Laub. He was born January 14, 1961 in Chicago, Illinois.

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CHAPTER I

"VIOLENT DELIGHTS"

At the end of Shakespeare's Ovidian narrative, Venus and Adonis, the goddess of love, lamenting the loss of her beloved, concludes the poem with this prophecy:

Since thou art dead, lo, here I prophesy:
Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend.
It shall be waited on with jealousy,
Find sweet beginning, but unsavory end,
Ne'er settled equally, but high or low,
That all love's pleasure shall not match its woe.
(1135-1140)

In this opening stanza and the others that follow, Venus anticipates the problems that lovers will face as a result of Adonis' death. However, in cataloguing love's sorrows, she is careful to note its paradoxical nature, its tendency to create both "pleasure" and "woe," to have "a sweet beginning" but an "unsavory end." This recognition of love's contraries is significant, for it underlies Shakespeare's treatment of love throughout the canon. In many of his works, Shakespeare exhibits a "syncretic" vision of eros: the ability to see love from opposite and irreconcilable points of view. In this study, I will examine Shakespeare's syncretic vision as it appears in three plays: Measure for Measure, Othello, and Antony and Cleopatra. In each of these works, Shakespeare portrays

love as glorious and inspiring, the source of great happiness, yet at the same time, he also presents love as irrational and destructive, the cause of much sorrow. During this investigation, I will focus on the tension that exists between these two views and show how each forms an integral part of Shakespeare's syncretic vision.¹

That Shakespeare was deeply interested in the experience of love is evidenced by the corpus of his work. In the Sonnets, love is the cause of either euphoria or despair; in the comedies, it leads to self-knowledge and reconciliation; and in the tragedies, it precipitates misery and bloodshed. In the plays that comprise this study, Shakespeare offers two opposing views of love: one which sees it as noble and elevating and another which sees it as impetuous and self-deluding. Because both views make equal demands on our sense of what is true and never cancel each other out, we are completely incapable of choosing one

¹The failure to recognize this syncretic vision is a crucial weakness in some previous studies of Shakespeare's treatment of love. For example, in Not Wisely But Too Well, Franklin M. Dickey reduces the love tragedies to cautionary tales warning against "the disharmony of excessive or misdirected love" (9), despite his acknowledgement that the Renaissance held conflicting views about the power of eros. In Shakespeare's Sexual Comedy, Hugh Richmond claims that Shakespeare advocates a change in our attitude toward ideal love by vividly showing its dangers (13), but he fails to note that Shakespeare also reinforces the ideal by consistently showing its virtues. In Passion Lends Them Power, Derick R. C. Marsh argues for a more varied approach to the love tragedies yet oddly concludes that what destroys the protagonists is not love but "the operation of time" (232-233).

view over the other; in fact, any attempt to do so proves reductive and damaging to the plays. In essence, what Shakespeare does in these works is establish a dialectic which is never allowed to work itself out. In the end, Shakespeare does not attempt to provide any answers but instead focuses on the tensions and paradoxes that constitute the experience of love.²

Although other Renaissance writers exhibit the ability to examine human nature from different and often opposite points of view, this tendency appears to be one of the most constant and distinguishing features of Shakespeare's work. In a letter written in 1817, John Keats identified this quality of Shakespeare's genius as "negative capability":

. . . [A]t once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously -- I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason . . .
(193)

Keats' remarks are suggestive for they point to Shakespeare's ability to look at the world in contrary ways

²As several scholars have shown, the ability to perceive human experience in terms of opposites appears to be a quality of the Renaissance mind. For example, in Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, Edgar Wind discusses the period's fascination with the Latin maxim festina lente or "hasten slowly" (98). In Paradoxia Epidemica, Rosalie Colie examines the various ways in which Renaissance authors have made deliberate use of the paradoxical tradition. In The Tudor Play of Mind, Joel B. Altman claims that Renaissance students trained to argue both sides of a question developed a "complexity of vision" that allowed them to "see all sides of an issue" (3-4).

without seeking either certainty or resolution. For Samuel Taylor Coleridge this ability was the function of the poetic imagination which he described in Biographia Literaria as a "synthetic and magical power" that "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities . . ." (16). Like Keats, Coleridge appears to believe that the true poet manifests himself in his ability to embrace life's antinomies.

Among modern commentators, the most prominent critic to discuss Shakespeare's ability to explore human problems from conflicting viewpoints is Norman Rabkin.³ In his book Shakespeare and the Common Understanding, Rabkin claims that Shakespeare possesses a "complementary vision" of reality and therefore "tends to structure his imitations in terms of a pair of polar opposites . . ." (12). In this influential study, Rabkin attempts to relate his views about Shakespeare's double vision to the theory of complementarity as it has been developed by the physicist, Neils Bohr. In Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning, Rabkin defines "complementarity" as an approach to experience in which "radically opposed and equally total commitments to the meaning of life coexist in a single

³Along with Rabkin, Marion Bodwell Smith has also written skillfully about Shakespeare's double vision. Although less influential, Smith's Dualities in Shakespeare shares some basic similarities with Rabkin's work in its attempt to analyze Shakespeare's "awareness of contradictions" and his "sensitivity to interdependent relationships" (v).

harmonious vision" (113). According to Rabkin, this "complementary vision" may be found throughout the entire canon and is the most characteristic feature of Shakespeare's work.⁴

In attempting a study of Shakespeare's syncretic vision, I am aligning myself with Rabkin and other critics whose main interest is to examine Shakespeare's tendency to look at human experience in contrary ways. However, my work differs from these critics in that it is a detailed examination of Shakespeare's complementary vision only as it applies to the experience of love.⁵ Furthermore, my investigation is not a broad study of Shakespeare's works but rather an in-depth discussion of three plays: Measure

⁴Rabkin's theory of complementarity has had a major impact on Shakespearean criticism and has influenced a number of important studies. For example, in Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies, Bernard McElroy argues that the "complementary viewpoint" operates in all four of the mature tragedies and constitutes "the common foundation of all four tragic worlds" (9). In Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety, Robert Grudin also discusses Shakespeare's "complementary vision," but unlike Rabkin, he attempts to place Shakespeare in his intellectual milieu by showing his relationship to other Renaissance writers such as Castiglione, Montaigne, and Bruno. Also worth noting is Michael McCanles' Dialectical Criticism and Renaissance Literature, a study that attempts to show how "dialectical criticism" can help illuminate certain Renaissance texts.

⁵In Shakespeare and the Common Understanding, Rabkin briefly discusses Shakespeare's treatment of love. In the chapter entitled "Eros and Death," he remarks that "Love must always be judged from contradictory points of view" (157), a claim that I take as the genesis for my own investigation. But while Rabkin argues that Shakespeare perceives eros as "the impulse to both life and death" (163), I contend that his vision of love is actually more varied and complex.

for Measure, Othello, and Antony and Cleopatra. But before discussing these plays, I wish to look first at Venus and Adonis and Romeo and Juliet, two works that share crucial similarities despite their generic differences. Because both of these works offer an early glimpse of Shakespeare's syncretic vision, they look forward to the plays that comprise this study and serve as prologues for Shakespeare's later treatment of love.

In Venus and Adonis, Shakespeare portrays the struggle between a goddess who is mature and sexually aggressive and a youth who is beautiful yet devoid of passion.⁶ But as is the case in Shakespeare's other works, the experience of love becomes inextricably linked to the power of discourse. Thus, in her attempt to win Adonis's love, Venus uses the same romantic language employed by other lovers in Shakespeare. For example, in the second stanza, she praises his beauty by calling him "The field's chief flower, sweet above compare, / Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man . . ." (8-9). But because Adonis is a

⁶My purpose here is not to offer a complete interpretation of Venus and Adonis but to note its significance for the other works in this investigation. For more detailed discussions of the poem, see Coppelia Kahn, "Self and Eros in Venus and Adonis," Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare, Berkeley: U of California P, 1981, 21-46, S. Clark Hulse, "Shakespeare's Myth of Venus and Adonis," PMLA 93 (1978): 95-105, William Keach, Elizabethan Erotic Narratives, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1977, and Norman Rabkin, "Eros and Death," Shakespeare and the Common Understanding, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1967, 150-191.

reluctant lover, she must shift her mode of speech from hyperbolic praise to the rhetoric of seduction. In her various attempts to make Adonis more responsive, she proves herself a skilled rhetorician, using a number of verbal ploys such as carpe diem, "Make use of time, let not advantage slip . . ." (129) and the procreation stratagem, "By law of nature thou art bound to breed . . ." (171). But as the poem unfolds, these different rhetorical maneuvers culminate in the work's most erotic passage as Venus tells the young hunter:

I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer.
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
 Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry,
 Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.
(231-234)

In this stanza, Venus uses sexual topography to tempt Adonis with the delights of the body as she offers him the uninhibited joy of sexual pleasure. But while the goddess is sometimes portrayed as playful and erotic, she is also presented as aggressive and threatening. For example, her pursuit of Adonis is often described as predatory as she plucks him from his horse, pins him to the ground, and smothers him with kisses. This image of Venus as hunter and Adonis as helpless prey is intensified when the narrator likens her kissing of the youth to the feasting of an eagle who "Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh, and bone, / . . . Till either gorge be stuff'd or prey be gone . . ." (56-58). Because of these conflicting portrayals,

Venus emerges as an ambivalent figure, promising pleasure and fulfillment on the one hand but death and destruction on the other -- the two perspectives that comprise Shakespeare's syncretic vision of eros.

For his own part, Adonis perceives Venus as a Circe-like figure, one whose love is insatiable and devouring; therefore, he constantly resists her kisses and embraces.⁷ But more importantly, Adonis guards himself against Venus' artful rhetoric which he describes as "Bewitching like the wanton mermaids' songs . . ." (777). In response to her seductive arguments, he denies that her passion for him is truly love; instead he insists that all earthly desire is mere lechery: "Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled, / Since sweating Lust on earth usurp'd his name . . ." (793-794). With this remark, Adonis reveals his yearning for a love that is purely spiritual and thus free of sexual desire.⁸ In refusing to allow passion the name of love, he indicates that, for him, there is no eros but only agape. Yet in denying the existence of earthly or sexual love, Adonis appears to be avoiding the conflict and suffering that it necessarily entails; as he explains to Venus: "My love to love is love

⁷For Coppelia Kahn, Venus represents an "engulfing maternal presence" that Adonis protects himself against through "narcissism" (23).

⁸As Norman Rabkin points out, the heavenly love that Adonis praises may only be found in death ("Eros and Death" 162).

but to disgrace it; / For I have heard it is a life in death, / That laughs and weeps, and all but with a breath" (412-414). In this retort, Adonis identifies precisely the paradox that informs the experience of love in Shakespeare and that is its ability to create both joy and sorrow, not alternately but simultaneously.

However, while Adonis claims immunity to sexual desire, he freely confesses his passion for hunting the boar. As he tells the melancholy Venus: "I know not love . . . nor will know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it . . ." (409-410). It is, of course, part of the poem's ironic humor that Venus's rival for Adonis' attention is not another woman but a hideous and dangerous animal; yet this comic rivalry achieves a deeper significance at the poem's end. When Venus discovers Adonis' lifeless body, she devises an explanation for his death that is both perverse and grotesque. Reasoning that the boar meant to kiss Adonis and not wound him, she argues that the killing of her beloved was accidental, that "nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine / Sheath'd unaware the tusk in his soft groin" (115-116). But in creating such a story, Venus projects her own desires on the boar, for as she declares in the next stanza: "Had I been tooth'd like him, I must confess, / With kissing him I should have kill'd him first . . ." (1117-1118). With these words, Venus reveals her wish to have been the boar, to have penetrated Adonis'

defenses and applied such an intimate kiss. However, this expression of passion, quite tellingly, becomes a fatal gesture, the cause of the beloved's demise. Furthermore, the harm that the boar inflicts, an injury to the groin, is a sexual wound, a form of symbolic emasculation. Consequently, the poem's most violent moment, the destruction of Adonis, becomes charged with sexual meaning as the experience of love is associated once again with suffering and death.

Significantly, this linking of eros with violence and bloodshed also appears in Romeo and Juliet, another work in which Shakespeare's syncretic vision begins to take shape.⁹ In this early tragedy, Shakespeare constantly promotes and undermines the couple's romantic love, forcing us to view it as both admirable and dangerous. One way of illustrating this point is to examine Romeo's "poetic" speech and his tendency to use hyperbolic language. Throughout the play, Romeo adopts the magniloquence of the

⁹As with Venus and Adonis, my analysis of Romeo and Juliet makes no attempt at being comprehensive; instead my purpose is still to indicate the significance of an early work for the later plays that form this study. For other discussions of the tragedy, see Marianne Novy, "Violence, Love, and Gender in Romeo and Juliet and Troilus and Cressida," Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare, Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984, 99-124, Coppelia Kahn, "Coming of Age: Marriage and Manhood in Romeo and Juliet and The Taming of the Shrew," Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare, Berkeley: U of California P, 1981, 82-119, Marilyn L. Williamson, "Romeo and Death," Shakespeare Studies 14 (1981): 129-137, and Norman Rabkin, "Eros and Death," Shakespeare and the Common Understanding, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1967, 150-191.

sonnet-lover in order to articulate his passion first for Rosaline and then for Juliet. In describing his ill fortune with Rosaline, Romeo portrays himself as a figure suffering unrequited love for a mistress who is beautiful yet unresponsive, and in doing so, he identifies himself with those lovers found in the sonnet-cycles of Sidney and Petrarch. When Romeo shifts his affections from Rosaline to Juliet, his love appears more genuine, but he continues to employ the same artificial language that he used with his former mistress. Upon seeing Juliet at the Capulet feast, Romeo compares her to "a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear" (I.v.47), and later in the orchard scene, he likens her visage to the sun and her eyes to the stars (II.ii.2-22). Although such language may appear "romantic," it is actually quite destructive, for it turns the beloved into an object of worship. This point is emphasized in the lovers' first meeting when they speak to each other in the form of a sonnet (I.v.94-107). During this exchange, Romeo addresses Juliet like a palmer meeting a saint at a shrine, and from this point on, the couple's love assumes the intensity of religious fervor. In this way, Romeo transforms his passion for Juliet into a form of idolatry that in effect establishes the conditions for their double suicide, for if love is a religion, then it ultimately becomes worth dying for.

The ominous nature of the couple's love is also

emphasized in the marriage scene which takes place at Friar Laurence's cell. While waiting for Juliet's arrival, the Friar prays that heaven may smile on the intended union, prompting Romeo to declare:

Amen, amen! But come what sorrow can,
 It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
 That one short minute gives me in her sight.
 Do thou but close our hands with holy words,
 Then love-devouring death do what he dare;
 It is enough I may but call her mine. (II.vi.3-8)

With this response, Romeo affirms the power of his love over death,¹⁰ an affirmation that has strong implications for the play's end, but at this point it provokes only a stern reply from the moral-minded Friar:

These violent delights have violent ends
 And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
 Which as they kiss consume. . .
 Therefore love moderately. Long love doth so . . .
 (II.vi.9-14)

The Friar's rebuke is significant because it successfully describes Romeo and Juliet's love as something that by its very nature cannot last long. Their love proves so violent and powerful that it can only destroy itself like an explosion of fire and powder, and while such an explosion is spectacular, it is always short-lived. Hence, the Friar admonishes Romeo to love moderately because permanent love does so. Yet such a love is clearly less passionate and exciting than the love Romeo and Juliet share. In fact,

¹⁰For Marilyn Williamson, Romeo exhibits a stronger commitment to death than "to any living woman -- Rosaline or Juliet" (129).

the phrase "love moderately," in light of Romeo and Juliet's commitment to one another, strikes us as a contradiction in terms, for love that is moderate cannot be love, at least not "true" love. Thus, while the Friar's advice makes good sense from one perspective, from another it remains glib and unsatisfying.

When the Friar warns that "violent delights have violent ends / And in their triumph die" (II.vi.9-10), he actually speaks truer than he knows, for Romeo and Juliet's love proves so powerful that it will find its fullest expression only in death. Often in Shakespeare, love, which is the ultimate embrace of life, becomes paradoxically linked to a desire for self-destruction.¹¹ As Norman Rabkin points out: ". . . Insofar as love is a yearning of the human spirit for stasis, completion, perfection, and freedom from the mortal flaws with which it is paradoxically implicated, it is a desire that can be fulfilled only by death" ("Eros and Death" 162-163). In Romeo and Juliet and several of Shakespeare's other works, there exists a tension between the yearning for an ideal love that is complete, perfect, and immutable and the realization that love in this world may only be partial, flawed, and temporary. When Romeo and

¹¹For a skillful discussion of love and the death-wish, see Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World, Tr. Montgomery Belgion, 1940, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983, 42-46.

Juliet realize that their love may not survive the violent world of Verona, they seek their vision of an ideal love in death. When faced with a forced marriage to Paris which threatens to separate her from Romeo forever, Juliet seeks the Friar's aid, comforted by the thought that "If all else fail, myself have power to die" (III.v.243). When Romeo learns of Juliet's apparent death, his decision to join her is immediate: "Is it e'en so? Then I defy you, stars! . . . Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight" (V.i.24-34). Significantly, Romeo speaks of his reunion with Juliet in sexual terms as if death will be the ultimate consummation of their love. At this point in the play, both Romeo and Juliet take conscious control of their destinies and appear intent on making their own way.

When Juliet awakens from her sleep and discovers that Romeo has taken his life, her decision to die is also swift: "I will kiss thy lips; / Happ'ly some poison yet doth hang on them, / To make me die with a restorative. . . . Yea, noise? Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger! / This is thy sheath; there rust and let me die" (V.iii.164-170). That Juliet speaks of her death as an act of restoring is of the utmost importance and reminds us of Romeo's reference to his poison as a cordial (V.i.85). For Romeo and Juliet, death is not a "parting" but a "joining"; it is the incorporating of "two in one" that the Friar speaks of in the marriage scene (II.vi.37). That this episode in the

Capulet tomb turns out to be the lovers' true wedding night is foreshadowed several times by Juliet: "My grave is like to be my wedding bed" (I.v.136), and "I'll to my wedding-bed, / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!" (III.ii.136-137). Thus, it is through death that Romeo and Juliet achieve the ideal love that they sought in life. In this way, the lovers' suicides may be viewed as a glorious triumph over a violent and hostile world. Yet as is the case throughout the play, Shakespeare never allows us to accept fully Romeo and Juliet's romantic love. While we admire the couple's commitment to a passion that for them is greater than death itself, in the end, we are left with nagging doubts and a great sense of waste. When we recall the immaturity and recklessness of the couple's actions throughout the play, we cannot help but wonder if their suicides are merely the culminating act of a young love that has gone seriously astray. However, by encouraging both of these views of the lovers' deaths, Shakespeare successfully engages and disillusion his audience at the same time. By making it impossible for us to choose one view over the other, Shakespeare makes the lovers' deaths equally attractive and disturbing.

But despite its achievements, Romeo and Juliet still remains part of Shakespeare's juvenilia, for it lacks many of the problems found in later plays. For example, one of the tragedy's most distinguishing features is its complete

lack of sexual conflict. Unlike characters in Shakespeare's other works, Romeo and Juliet never express any doubts or misgivings about their sexual relations. For instance, the issue of chastity, which figures so prominently in Measure for Measure, is never allowed to become a dilemma in this play. Curiously, it is Romeo and not Juliet who raises the question of chastity but only to dismiss it immediately. When Romeo first sees Juliet at her window, he likens her to the sun and cries:

Arise fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
 Who is already sick and pale with grief
 That thou her maid art far more fair than she.
 Be not her maid, since she is envious;
 Her vestal livery is but sick and green
 And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.
(II.ii.4-9)

In this speech, Romeo praises female beauty but criticizes the virtue that prevents its enjoyment.¹² Those who choose to wear Diana's colors, he argues, are fools, for her livery is but "sick and green." Such an attack, then, must include Rosaline, whom Romeo also describes as beautiful yet well armed in "strong proof of chastity" (I.i.210).

But if Romeo and Juliet appear to give little thought to their sexual relationship, the same may be said about their decision to marry. The young lovers agree to wed in

¹²Romeo's disdain for chastity resembles that of Astrophil in Sidney's sonnet-cycle. Addressing the moon in Sonnet 31, the lover asks: "Are Beauties there as proud as here they be? / Do they above love to be lov'd, and yet / Those Lovers scorne whom Love doth possesse? / Do they call Vertue there ungratefulnesse?" (11-14).

the orchard scene shortly after their first meeting at the Capulet feast. As Marianne Novy points out, it is Juliet who "takes the initiative in turning their love from shared fantasy and passion to social institution . . ." (104).

From her window, Juliet declares:

Three words, dear Romeo, and good night indeed.
 If thy bent of love be honorable,
 Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow,
 By one that I'll procure to come to thee,
 Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite . . .
 (II.ii.142-146)

In this passage, Juliet asks Romeo to prove that his intentions are honorable by committing himself to marriage, a ritual that she believes will sanctify and complete their love. While Juliet's speech raises some important questions about the nature of matrimony, her words are followed by neither discussion nor debate. Instead Romeo readily assents to Juliet's proposal for marriage, although as Coppelia Kahn notes, such a marriage "subverts patriarchal loyalty" (83). That Romeo fails to understand the value and significance of marriage is made clear in the next scene at Friar Laurence's cell. In an attempt to explain his present happiness, Romeo tells his friend:

Then plainly know my heart's dear love is set
 On the fair daughter of the rich Capulet.
 As mine on hers, so hers is set on mine,
 And all combin'd, save what thou must combine
 By holy marriage. (II.iii.57-61)

In this passage, Romeo repeats Juliet's notion that marriage will complete their love for one another. Despite their mutual affections, something still needs to be

"combined" by marriage, but Romeo seems terribly unsure about what that something is. While Romeo's speech appears innocuous, it really indicates his failure to comprehend either the spiritual or emotional value of matrimony. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that his former wooing of Rosaline included many pledges of love but no talk of marriage.

Although Friar Laurence has grave reservations about the marriage he is asked to perform, he sees an opportunity to end the feud and thus is willing to do his office with haste: "Come, come with me, and we will make short work; / For, by your leaves, you shall not stay alone / Till holy church incorporate two in one" (II.vi.35-37). Through these words, the Friar points to the mystery of marriage, the incorporating of "two in one" that Romeo in his youth does not yet understand. But while the couple's marriage is not opposed by the Friar nor threatened by internal conflicts within the lovers themselves, it will still meet its obstruction in the figure of Paris, who also desires Juliet's hand. Although the rival suitor is usually the source of jealousy and unrest in both comedy and tragedy, such is not the case in this play. While jealousy becomes an overriding force in Othello, it is completely absent from Romeo and Juliet, although Romeo is made aware of Paris' existence on two separate occasions. The first occurs when the Nurse informs him of Paris' earlier suit

(II.iv.196-202), but Romeo never reacts to this bit of information, apparently secure in his love for Juliet. The second occurs at the end of the play when Romeo is forced to fight Paris in the Capulet vault, but even after slaying him, Romeo graciously consents to his rival's wish to be placed in Juliet's tomb (V.iii.83-87). The only time that Romeo speaks of jealousy is when he mockingly accuses Death of being Juliet's paramour (V.iii.102-105), a situation that he is prepared to remedy through suicide.

Because jealousy is never allowed to infect the love that Romeo and Juliet share, there is never any fear of betrayal or even criticism of the beloved. The only time that the lovers speak any harsh words about each other is in the aftermath of Mercutio's and Tybalt's deaths. For example, after Mercutio is fatally wounded, Romeo declares:

This gentleman, the Prince's near ally,
 My very friend, has got this mortal hurt
 In my behalf; my reputation stain'd
 With Tybalt's slander -- Tybalt that an hour
 Hath been my cousin! O sweet Juliet,
 Thy beauty has made me effeminate,
 And in my temper soft'ned valor's steel!
(III.i.108-114)

As Coppelia Kahn points out, Romeo believes that his new identity as Juliet's husband is responsible for Mercutio's death, and therefore, he reverts to his former identity as a son of the house of Montague in order to slay Tybalt (89-90). But this change is extremely short-lived, for that very night he will reconcile with Juliet and consummate his marriage before beginning his exile in

Mantua. Similarly, when Juliet hears of Tybalt's murder, she immediately denounces her new husband:

O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face!
 Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?
 Beautiful tyrant! Fiend angelical!
 Dove-feather'd raven! Wolvish-ravening lamb!
 (III.ii.73-76)

In this passage, Juliet attacks what she sees as Romeo's duplicity, but the artificiality of her language prevents any real expression of emotion; in the end, there is more verbosity than true feeling. That Juliet cannot remain estranged from Romeo for long is illustrated several lines later when she is forced to defend him before the Nurse: "Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband? / Ah, poor my lord, what tongue shall smooth thy name / When I, thy three-hours wife, have mangled it?" (III.ii.97-99). With these words, Juliet reaffirms her marital obligation to Romeo and places it above patriarchal loyalty, making it clear that her love for her husband transcends all other bonds.

But despite the couple's commitment to one another, their love remains single-minded and unreflective, for it never confronts the difficulties of more mature relationships such as anxiety, suspicion, or disillusionment. For an examination of these problems, we must now turn to Measure for Measure, Othello, and Antony and Cleopatra. In these later plays, Shakespeare presents love as both glorious and destructive, opposing views that

enhance rather than displace one another. In each of these works, love is a noble emotion, promising intimacy and joy, but in each case, the protagonists encounter problems that reveal love's violent nature and its potential for bringing about suffering and death. Although these problems operate differently in each of the plays, they tend to center on conflicts involving sexuality, marriage, romantic discourse, and fear of betrayal. This does not mean that all of these conflicts appear in every play but that these types of problems, by virtue of their presence or absence, greatly shape the experience of love in each of the works under consideration.¹³

For example, while sexual conflict is absent from Romeo and Juliet, it dominates most of the action in Measure for Measure. In this dark comedy, the problem of sexual desire animates what may be called the play's three worlds: the world of romantic love, in which Claudio and Juliet bitterly lament the sexual act that has produced an unwanted pregnancy; the world of the brothel, in which sexual activity is constantly associated with corruption and

¹³Recent feminist and psychoanalytic studies of Shakespeare have also focused on conflicts involving sexuality and marriage. Most notable among these are Carol Thomas Neely, Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays, New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, Marianne Novy, Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare's Plays, Chapel Hill: U of Carolina P, 1984, and Arthur Kirsch, Shakespeare and the Experience of Love, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981. But while my work shares some basic concerns with these previous studies, our methods and interpretations tend to differ widely.

disease; and the world of politics, in which Angelo attempts to use his power to rape Isabella, an act that vividly reveals the danger of suppressing the sexual impulse. In Othello, disillusionment and sexual jealousy combine to bring about the lovers' misery and destruction. In this mature tragedy, Cassio's treatment of women serves as a paradigm for Othello's own sexual conflicts. While Cassio idealizes Desdemona and praises her virtues, his only sexual relationship is with the prostitute Bianca whom he treats with contempt and derision. Cassio's splitting of the female sex into the parts of goddess and whore reflects precisely Othello's problems with Desdemona, for it is Othello's inability to see his wife as both sexual and innocent that leads to his great suffering in the play. In Antony and Cleopatra, sexual activity becomes shameful dotage, a descent into idleness and depravity. In addition, desire, as embodied by Cleopatra, becomes a potent threat to order, reason, and political duty. But more importantly, sexuality is problematic because of the anxiety it engenders. Near the end of the play, Antony equates Octavius' military triumph with a sexual one and fears that like Pompey and Caesar before him, he too will be supplanted by a younger man in Cleopatra's bed.

Although Romeo and Juliet never harbor any doubts about their secret wedding, conflicts surrounding marriage are rigorously explored in Measure for Measure. In this

play, Claudio's relationship with Juliet and Angelo's betrothal to Mariana raise serious questions about the nature of matrimony and its power to legitimize sexual behavior. More importantly, the artificial and hastily-arranged marriages of the final scene call into question the whole idea of marriage as a "container" of passion, for almost all the matches are devoid of love and lack even the consent of the couples involved. In the final analysis, the play's "comic" nuptials remain a false and inadequate response to the problem of sexual desire. In Othello, marital fidelity is the issue on which the entire play turns. Although the couple's marriage triumphs early over threats of bigotry and malice, its happiness is undermined by serious weaknesses in the relationship itself. For example, Othello admits that he knows little about the experience of love and claims to be immune to the fiery passions of youth; in contrast, Desdemona takes an active part in the couple's courtship and possesses a vital sexuality that reveals itself in her plea to accompany Othello to Cyprus. When the Moor first suspects Desdemona's honesty, he questions his decision to marry, fearing his wife may possess an appetite beyond his control. Unable to see Desdemona as both a sexual creature and a virtuous woman, he becomes fatally convinced of her infidelity even though he lacks the true evidence he so desperately seeks. In Antony and Cleopatra, marriage would

not seem to be an issue, but Antony's marital ties first to Fulvia and then to Octavia greatly affect his relationship with Cleopatra. For example, these marriages become inevitable points of contention between the two lovers causing Cleopatra to question Antony's constancy on more than one occasion. But Cleopatra's fears are unwarranted, for at the play's beginning, Antony has clearly abandoned Fulvia for a life in Egypt, and the news of her death causes him only momentary sorrow. Similarly, Antony's later marriage to Octavia is one of convenience only, a shaky political alliance broken by Antony at the first provocation from Caesar. In the end, Antony's only true commitment is to Cleopatra, and despite the illicit nature of their affair, the couple's love and companionship approximate the conditions of marriage more closely than any relationship in the play. This point is illustrated most effectively in Acts IV. and V. when both lovers portray their deaths as the consummation of a marriage that transcends all others.

The most significant feature that Romeo and Juliet shares with these later plays is an emphasis on romantic discourse. In almost all the works under consideration, the male protagonists use hyperbolic language to idealize both their love and beloveds. But as I have already suggested, such language is problematic because it is essentially self-deluding, a twisting of reality that leads

inevitably to disaster. The only play in this investigation that avoids romantic speech is Measure for Measure. Unlike Romeo, Claudio does not idealize his love but instead condemns the sexual act which has led to his arrest for fornication. Ironically, the most rhetorical speeches in the play are not about love but death, yet even this is significant, for in Measure for Measure, it is sexual desire that leads to a loss of self and the threat of execution. In Othello, romantic discourse helps to shape and define the Moor's image of Desdemona. Like Romeo, he uses hyperbole to praise his wife's beauty and virtues. For him, she is the embodiment of innocence and purity, and his faith in her love becomes the basis of his existence. But once Othello's mind becomes infected with doubt, his ideal of love collapses, and he begins to acquire Iago's view that all love is lust and all women are devious whores. Thus, as the play unfolds, Othello moves from idolatry to misogyny, from idealization to degradation. In Antony and Cleopatra, the relationship between love and discourse reaches its most sophisticated level. Faced with the problem of articulating a passion that exceeds human measure, Antony uses language to create an elaborate fiction in which he and Cleopatra reign as the world's greatest lovers. But like all artful constructs, this amorous fiction remains open to interpretation and revision. Consequently, other characters and even the

play's audience are forced to interpret the couple's love according to their respective viewpoints. But despite opposition, Antony remains committed to his vision of love and pursues it even to the point of defeat and humiliation.

Finally, while fear of betrayal is never allowed to develop in Romeo and Juliet, it becomes a malignant force in almost all the other plays that form this study. Once again, the only exception is Measure for Measure. In this work, fear of betrayal does not exist, although Angelo's desertion of Mariana may be considered within this context. Engaged to wed Mariana, Angelo breaks his pledge when the dowry is lost, and while this event occurs before the time of the play, it makes the scheme of the bedtrick possible. Through this deception, the Duke is able to reconcile the estranged couple and save Isabella's honor at the same time. It is, of course, in Othello that fear of betrayal manifests itself so powerfully. In this play, sexual jealousy is associated with the pain of physical torment -- the stretching of the rack or the gnawing of a poisonous mineral. Yet the suffering that Othello endures stems not only from his doubts concerning Desdemona's chastity but from his fears that beauty may somehow mask corruption. For Othello, the idea that Desdemona's virtuous appearance may actually conceal an evil nature is simply intolerable. Thus, once he becomes convinced of his

wife's guilt, he sees murder as the only alternative, for only death may end the duplicity. In Antony and Cleopatra, fear of betrayal also disrupts the lovers' happiness, but the form it takes is more subtle and complex. For example, when Antony suspects Cleopatra of conspiring with Caesar's messenger, he condemns her inconstancy, but his words reveal that he fears not only a political betrayal but a sexual one. After the Egyptian fleet defects to the other side, this association between political and sexual betrayal becomes more explicit as Antony denounces Cleopatra as a faithless whore who has forsaken him for the younger Caesar. Enraged by Cleopatra's deceit, he repeatedly threatens to take her life although her actual guilt is never really established.

In reviewing these particular problems and their significance in each of the plays, I do not wish to suggest that these are the only difficulties that the lovers face, nor do I mean to imply that these problems are somehow unique to these specific works. Instead it is my intention to illustrate the different ways in which these conflicts tend to undermine the joy and intimacy that the experience of love usually promises. Underlying this intention and the argument it involves is the following assumption -- that love in Shakespeare is always potentially "tragic," even in the comedies. As we are warned in A Midsummer Night's Dream, even the most committed love may end in

disaster, for "So quick bright things come to confusion" (I.i.149). What ultimately determines the experience of love is whether or not certain obstacles may be avoided or overcome. In the comedies, all conflicts are happily resolved; in the tragedies and problem plays, they are painfully acted out. It is through this painful acting out of conflicts that love in Shakespeare begins to fulfill Venus' curse of sorrow on love with its threat of "sweet beginning" but "unsavory end." In this way, Venus' prophecy may be seen as a table of contents for the plays that comprise this study, but as such it only points to what lies within; for a discussion of love's violence in these works, we must now turn to the chapters themselves.

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CHAPTER II

"THEIR PROPER BANE":

SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE IN MEASURE FOR MEASURE

In Measure for Measure, Shakespeare's vision of love becomes darker and more complex than in previous works. Unlike the other comedies, Measure for Measure exhibits a preoccupation with sexual desire and its consequences for both the individual and society. Basically, the play centers around two acts of passion: Claudio's alleged fornication with Juliet and Angelo's attempted rape of Isabella. Through his handling of these events, Shakespeare examines with great insight competing attitudes toward love, sexuality, and marriage. But once the Duke introduces the device of the bed-trick, this examination is disrupted and modified. With the opening of Act V., there is a shift in the play's focus from a concern with sexuality to an emphasis on mercy and forgiveness. After this change occurs, the play culminates with a series of hastily arranged marriages intended to remedy the offenses committed by Angelo, Claudio, and Lucio. But by concluding the play with marriages that are inadequate and perfunctory, Shakespeare creates a false romantic ending that underlines the problem of sexual desire instead of

resolving it.

Measure for Measure, like Shakespeare's other works, has elicited a diverse critical response.¹ For example, some critics are disturbed by the play's dark tone and complex treatment of moral problems. Coleridge, for instance, finds it "the most painful" of Shakespeare's works (102), and L. C. Knights calls it that play of Shakespeare's which causes "the greatest sense of strain and mental discomfort" (141). For some, the work's cynicism and disillusionment are the direct results of a dark period in Shakespeare's own life. Consequently, John Dover Wilson asserts that Shakespeare wrote the play in a state of "self-laceration, weariness, discord, cynicism, and disgust" (117). Yet for those uncomfortable with such speculation, the play's dark tone is not reflective of a phase in Shakespeare's life but is instead a product of the time in which he lived. Thus, Una Ellis-Fermor claims that in Measure for Measure the "lowest depths of Jacobean negation are touched. Cynicism has taken on a kind of diabolic vigilance . . ." (260).

While these critics view the play as an exercise in cynicism and disillusionment, others see it as an affirmation of the Christian virtues of charity and

¹For useful surveys of criticism, see the new variorum edition of Measure for Measure, Ed. Mark Eccles, New York: The Modern Language Association, 1980 and Michael Jamieson, "The Problem Plays, 1920-1970: A Retrospect," Shakespeare Survey 25 (1972): 4-7.

forgiveness. G. Wilson Knight, for example, offers a detailed analysis of the play's relationship to the teachings of the New Testament. In his well-known essay, he contends that the very thought of Measure for Measure is rooted in the "ethical standards of the Gospels" (73). Influenced by Knight's study, others have built and expanded upon his argument, stressing what they see as the play's allegorical significance.² According to these religious interpretations, the Duke is an instrument of divine providence or even God himself, Angelo is an example of hubris or overweening pride, and Isabella is a symbol of mercy or the Christian Church.

But while different critics seize upon either the play's cynicism or Christianity as an impetus for discussion, others see the work's intermingling of tragic and comic qualities as posing a serious problem for the study of genre. For these critics, the play's examination of moral issues creates an expectation of tragedy that is continually frustrated by the play's comic design, particularly its quick romantic ending. Because the work does not adequately fit either the genre of comedy or

²See G. Wilson Knight, "Measure for Measure and the Gospels," The Wheel of Fire, 1930, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965, 73-96. For studies influenced by Knight's essay, see Roy Battenhouse, "Measure for Measure and Christian Doctrine of the Atonement," PMLA 61 (1946): 1029-59 and Nevil Coghill, "Comic Form in Measure for Measure," Shakespeare Survey 8 (1955): 14-27.

tragedy, a new category must be created -- that of the problem play. The first critic to use the term "problem play" in relation to Measure for Measure was Frederick Boas. In his early study of the work, Boas claims that "we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome..." (345). Such a play, Boas concludes, cannot be called strictly a comedy or a tragedy, and therefore, it should be classed as one Shakespeare's problem plays (345). In time, Boas' study proved seminal, spawning a number of major books on Shakespeare's problem plays, all of which include Measure for Measure as a prime example.³

However, while these approaches to Measure for Measure have contributed greatly to our understanding of the play, most studies fail to pay sufficient attention to the drama's

³See Frederick Boas, Shakespeare and His Predecessors, 1896, London: Butler, 1947. For works influenced by Boas' study, see W. W. Lawrence, Shakespeare's Problem Comedies, New York: Macmillan, 1931, E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's Problem Plays, Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1950, and Ernest Schanzer, The Problem Plays of Shakespeare, London: Routledge, 1963.

preoccupation with sexuality.⁴ This is, of course, not to say that no critic has recognized the importance of sexuality in the play, but oddly enough, most commentators downplay its significance by focusing on one of the work's other features whether it be legal, generic, political, or religious. Consequently, Ernest Schanzer declares that the "main intellectual concern of Measure for Measure is clearly with the nature of Justice and Good Rule, a concern which is expressed at once in the opening lines . . ." (117). Continuing in this vein, J. W. Lever explains in the Arden edition that "the play is profoundly concerned with major intellectual issues . . . the treatment of the themes of Justice and Mercy, Grace and Nature, Creation and Death . . ." (lxiii). Because many critics, regardless of their approach, tend to center the play around these same themes, they often find themselves raising similar questions: Is Angelo a villain from the start or a good man who becomes corrupted? Is it right for the Duke to escape his responsibilities and assume the disguise of a

⁴Some recent exceptions are Carol Thomas Neely, Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays, New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, 58-104, Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality in the Reading of Shakespeare: Hamlet and Measure for Measure," Alternative Shakespeares, Ed. John Drakakis, London: Methuen, 1985, 95-118, Richard Wheeler, Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter-Turn, Berkeley: U of California P, 1981, 92-153, and Arthur Kirsch, Shakespeare and the Experience of Love, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981, 71-107. Each of these studies employs either feminist or psychoanalytic theory and views sexuality as a crucial feature of the play.

friar? Is the Duke's plan involving the bed-trick morally acceptable? How can Isabella plead for the life of a man who has apparently killed her brother and attempted to rape her? Why does Shakespeare end his play with a series of marriages that are completely unprepared for? Needless to say, these questions and the themes that provoke them are extremely important and demand explication, but I contend that they are really symptomatic of a deeper and more profound cause: the problem of sexual desire. Without sexual desire, Claudio would not have been sentenced for fornication and Angelo would not have attempted to rape Isabella, two events which allow for the plot's development and give rise to the complexities that have attracted critics to the play. Erotic longing lies at the very core of Measure for Measure, and one of the work's central questions is how are we to negotiate such passion on both an individual and social basis.

The play's concern with the problem of sexual desire has its most powerful expression in one of Claudio's first speeches. When Lucio asks his friend the cause of his arrest, Claudio responds:

From too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty.
 As surfeit is the father of much fast,
 So every scope by the immoderate use
 Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,
 Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,
 A thirsty evil, and when we drink we die.

(I.ii.126-131)

In this speech, Claudio bitterly condemns the sexual

impulse as he explains how sexual license leads first to restraint and then to destruction. In this passage, he laments his sexual nature, for it creates within him an appetite or thirst whose quenching proves fatal. Like rats that devour greedily their own poison, human beings pursue the satisfaction of their sexual desire, but such a fulfillment precipitates death not relief. The word "die" has a particular resonance within this context. Taken literally, it may mean the physical death that Claudio faces for the act of fornication; taken figuratively, it may mean sexual climax as it does so often in Elizabethan poetry. But perhaps more importantly, the word may signify a spiritual death brought about by uncontrollable passion. Human beings in pursuit of sexual gratification become like the basest of animals whose intemperance leads to their own destruction.

The disgust expressed towards sexual activity in this passage recalls some of Shakespeare's late sonnets concerning the dark woman. For example, both L. C. Knights (145) and Richard Wheeler (106) note similarities between Claudio's speech and Sonnet 129 ("The expense of spirit in a waste of shame"). Like the speaker of this poem, Claudio views the sexual act as a false bliss producing only shame and dissatisfaction -- "A bliss in proof, and prov'd, a very woe" (11). As Wheeler points out, both Claudio and the speaker see themselves as "having taken sexual bait

and been contaminated by it" (106). But while Claudio's speech and Sonnet 129 share the theme of post coitum triste, the poem does not adequately express Claudio's assertion that passion leads to self-destruction. This notion may instead be found in Sonnet 147 ("My love is as a fever, longing still"). In this poem, sexual love is characterized variously as an illness, an appetite, and a disease which consumes reason, creates unrest, and distorts the truth. But more importantly, this poem, unlike Sonnet 129, contains in one line the essence of Claudio's speech -- the idea that "Desire is death" (8). This belief is critical for understanding Claudio's extreme reaction to his arrest, but it also proves important for Angelo's involvement with Isabella. When Angelo, who professes immunity to passion, discovers his own sexual nature, he faces the destruction of an ideal that has been the basis of his existence.

However, while Claudio's denunciation of passion recalls the sexual nausea of some later sonnets, there appears to be something false and inappropriate about his speech. Although his negative commentary on sexual license may apply to the play's brothel world, it does not accurately describe his relationship with Juliet. On the contrary, Claudio's sexual relations with Juliet appear monogamous and loving. The inappropriateness of his words is further emphasized when, in the very same scene, he

reverses his position and attempts to defend his behavior. After calling his conduct with Juliet lechery, Claudio insists that he has done nothing wrong:

Thus stands it with me: upon a true contract
 I got possession of Julietta's bed.
 You know the lady; she is fast my wife,
 Save that we do the denunciation lack
 Of outward order. (I.ii.145-149)

In sharp contrast to his earlier speech, Claudio no longer portrays the sexual act as the result of base desire but now sees it as a conjugal right made innocent by the bond of marriage. That Claudio speaks with such ambivalence about his relations with Juliet has caught the attention of several critics. L. C. Knights, for example, claims that Claudio appears "to spring from feelings at war with themselves" (143) and that the uncertainty surrounding his offense develops because "he is not consistently created" (146). Ernest Schanzer also sees Claudio as a divided figure but argues that Claudio's ambivalence is a result of the confusion surrounding marriage contracts during Shakespeare's time. Schanzer explains that in an effort to encourage matrimony, the Church decreed that any couple could become lawfully wedded if they declared themselves husband and wife. This contract was called per verba de praesenti, and it constituted a legal and binding marriage. But in order to avoid the inevitable problems that would arise from such a law, the Church also declared that this clandestine marriage, though valid, was still sinful, and

if it was consummated before being solemnized, the act was considered fornication. Thus, Schanzer concludes that Claudio's ambiguous behavior stems from the contradictions inherent in the marriage laws themselves (75-76).⁵ While Schanzer's and Knights' remarks help illuminate this crux, both critics assume that it is essential either to explain or resolve Claudio's ambivalence. But such action is really unnecessary, for in this scene, Shakespeare offers, once again, opposite views of a human problem, in this case the problem of sexual desire. On the one hand, sexual desire is presented as an appetite that corrupts and destroys, yet on the other hand, it is portrayed as an expression of love between two people who are committed to one another. Consequently, any attempt to reconcile these opposing views fails to accommodate Shakespeare's syncretic vision of eros.

This syncretic vision becomes even clearer when Claudio's condemnation of sexual desire is contrasted not with his defense of his behavior but with Lucio's description of his offense to Isabella. Sent to the convent to enlist Isabella's aid, Lucio describes Claudio's

⁵Schanzer's major sources are William Harrington's Commendacions of Matrimony (1528) and Henry Swinburne's A Treatise on Spousals (1686). For further comment on the play's marriage contracts, see S. Nagarajan, "Measure for Measure and Elizabethan Betrothals," Shakespeare Quarterly 14 (1963): 115-119 and Margaret Scott, "'Our City's Institutions': Some Further Reflections on the Marriage Contracts in Measure for Measure," English Literary History 49 (1982): 790-804.

crime in the following manner:

Your brother and his lover have embrac'd.
 As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time
 That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
 To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb
 Expresseth his full tilth and husbandry. (I.iv.40-44)

In this passage, sexuality is presented as natural and fertile, and while Lucio may be an unlikely source for such a speech, the beauty and passion of his words cannot be denied. Like Claudio's lament, this passage contains a feeding metaphor, but instead of the ingesting of poison, it speaks of a natural appetite that produces life not death, fruition not destruction. Like Shakespeare's early sonnets, Lucio's speech sings the praises of procreation and is particularly reminiscent of Sonnet 3 in which the speaker asks the young man what woman would deny the opportunity to bear his child: "For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb / Dains the tillage of thy husbandry?" (5-6). Like Sonnet 3, Lucio's words emphasize the fecundity of sexual activity by using the images of cultivation and harvest. In this way, Lucio's description offers a complementary view of sexuality that balances Claudio's earlier condemnation. It is this view of sexuality as life-giving that allows other characters to argue that Claudio's "crime" deserves reprieve not execution. Thus, Lucio tells Isabella that her brother "should receive his punishment in thanks" (I.iv.28), and the Provost informs the Friar that Claudio is "More fit to

do another such offense / Than die for this" (II.iii.14-15).

Complementary views of the sexual act are not only found in the speeches of Claudio and his advocates but are also present, though in muted form, in Juliet's confession to the Duke. Upon meeting Juliet in prison, the Duke, disguised as a friar, begins to cross-examine her:

DUKE

Repent you, fair one, of the sin you carry?

JULIET

I do; and bear the shame most patiently.

DUKE

I'll teach you how you shall arraign your conscience,
And try your penitence, if it be sound,
Or hollowly put on.

JULIET

I'll gladly learn.

DUKE

Love you the man that wrong'd you?

JULIET

Yes, as I love the woman that wrong'd him.

DUKE

So then it seems your most offensive act
Was mutually committed?

JULIET

Mutually.

DUKE

Then was your sin of heavier kind than his.

JULIET

I do confess it, and repent it, father.

DUKE

'Tis meet so, daughter. But lest you do repent
As that the sin hath brought you to this shame,
Which sorrow is always toward ourselves, not heaven
Showing we would not spare heaven as we love it,
But as we stand in fear --

JULIET

I do repent me as it is an evil,
And take the shame with joy.

(II.iii.19-36)

In this brief interview, Juliet displays complete repentance and accepts responsibility for the child she carries. Throughout the exchange, she exhibits not only

contrition but a certain poise and self-confidence.⁶ Yet because of her name, Juliet recalls Shakespeare's more famous heroine of Romeo and Juliet and recourse to this play may prove illuminating. Unlike Claudio and Juliet, Romeo and Juliet never express any doubt or regret concerning their actions; instead they perceive their clandestine marriage and sexual relations as vital and transcendent. In some ways, Measure for Measure may be viewed as Shakespeare's darker version of the love affair found in Romeo and Juliet, the play that would have resulted had the couple's marriage ended in pregnancy and exposure. But while Juliet's repentant nature in Measure for Measure distinguishes her from her more popular counterpart, it also allows her to accept the Duke's charge that her guilt is greater than Claudio's. This claim that Juliet's sin is more serious than her lover's springs from the unfortunate double-standard that often surrounds the actions of men and women. Although a man may be excused for sexual indiscretions, a woman is expected to preserve her

⁶For Anne Richter, Juliet demonstrates a "perfect awareness of both the nature of her fault and its consequences . . ." (179), while Stephen Greenblatt finds Juliet's "tranquillity" remarkable because it thwarts the Duke's efforts to arouse "an instructive anxiety" (140).

chastity at all cost.⁷ But while the Duke's charge and Juliet's remorse appear to stress the importance of chastity, the real emphasis of the interview is on sexuality, especially female sexuality, although it is expressed in a subtle and indirect way. In the course of accepting the Duke's censure, Juliet makes it clear that she loves Claudio and that their sexual deeds were "mutually committed" (II.iii.27). By denying the notion that Claudio "wrong'd" her and by admitting her participation in the act of love-making, Juliet affirms her sexual nature as a woman and implies that intercourse is a natural expression of two people in love. This is not to say, of course, that her repentance is insincere, but it is important to note that unlike Claudio, Juliet does not condemn the sexual impulse; instead her compunction appears to stem from the conditions under which the urge was gratified. In other words, she does not repent the sexual act itself but the fact that it was committed outside of marriage or at least the type of marriage sanctified by the Church and approved by the State. Thus, the idea that marriage somehow "legitimizes" the sexual act begins to take

⁷During the Renaissance, female chastity was not only a religious concern but a social one, for as the bearer of children, a wife was expected to insure the integrity of the family line. As Juliet Dusinberre notes, "Fear of a bastard's intruding on the succession of property dictated virginity in brides and faithfulness in wives . . ." (52).

prominence in this scene and will help to inform our understanding of the hasty marriages that occur at the play's end.

While sexuality is tacitly affirmed in Juliet's interview with the Duke, it is stressed more overtly in other parts of the play. For example, while chastity is often described as unnatural or even pathological, sexual activity is presented as the result of an instinct that cannot be denied. Although several examples may be cited to illustrate this point, the following are representative:

ESCALUS

But the law will not allow [prostitution], Pompey;
nor it shall not be allow'd in Vienna.

POMPEY

Does your worship mean to geld and splay all the
youth of the city?

ESCALUS

No, Pompey.

POMPEY

Truly, sir, in my poor opinion, they will 't then.
(II.i.228-233)

PROVOST

[Claudio] hath but as offended in a dream!
All sects, all ages smack of this vice -- and he
To die for't! (II.ii.4-6)

DUKE

[Lechery] is too general a vice, and severity must
cure it.

LUCIO

Yes, in good sooth, the vice is of a great kindred;
it is will allied. But it is impossible to extirp
it quite, friar, till eating and drinking be put
down. (III.ii.98-101)

In each of these passages, sexuality may be viewed as a natural drive -- an inevitable part of the human condition. In his comic exchange with Escalus, Pompey makes it clear

that the sexual urge will govern the conduct of young men more than any law, and this condition may only be altered through castration or violence to the body. In his soliloquy at Angelo's house, the Provost once again laments Claudio's fate and argues that all classes and ranks throughout the ages have committed the error of sexual indulgence. Continuing in this vein, Lucio informs the Duke that sexual license possesses a great legacy and then proceeds to equate sexual desire with other natural appetites such as hunger and thirst. But while these characters treat sexuality as a natural instinct, their remarks pertain to its abuse or perversion not its healthful expression. In each of these passages, the characters speak of sexual activity in the context of either lechery or prostitution. But once again, we are allowed to distinguish between the morality of sexual desire itself and the circumstances under which it is satisfied. This is not to say that these characters are making such a distinction but that after Juliet's confession, this type of discrimination becomes possible and perhaps even necessary. In this way, Shakespeare asks how we are to deal with the problem of sexual desire on both a personal and social level. If human beings by their natures are sexual creatures, how may they gratify their desire in a way that is consistent with their humanity and self-respect? Furthermore, if the Church and State are to

regulate sexual behavior, how can they achieve such an end?

But if Shakespeare portrays sexual desire as a complex problem whose value is determined by the conditions under which it is fulfilled, there is definitely one context in which sexual activity is presented as evil and corrupting and that is the world of the brothel.⁸ It is from this unsavory underworld that Lucio springs, a character best described by Escalus when he declares: "That fellow is a fellow of much license" (III.ii.199). While the word "license" may refer not only to Lucio's promiscuity but also his slanderous tongue, it is his attitude toward human sexuality that proves most disturbing. As David Stevenson points out, Lucio tends to reduce the sexual act to a mechanical activity (53). Consequently, throughout the play, Lucio refers to Claudio's intercourse with Juliet as "a game of tick-tack" (I.ii.191-192), "the rebellion of a cod-piece" (III.ii.111-112), and "filling a bottle with a tun-dish" (III.ii.166). Through such remarks, Lucio attempts to downplay the seriousness of Claudio's "offense" (an offense that he is also guilty of with a prostitute), but these comments betray his failure to understand the

⁸For Leonard Tennenhouse, the major inhabitants of this world, Lucio and Mistress Overdone, represent an "unregulated desire" that must be "banished" (149). In contrast, Jonathan Dollimore argues that such characters represent only a "spectre of unregulated desire," for their "subversive identity" is really a fiction created by the authority that wants to control them (73,84).

sexual act as an expression of love or affection; instead he fixates on the physical mechanics that allow for gratification of the sexual urge. By dehumanizing the characters involved and equating them with inanimate objects, Lucio strips sexual activity of its emotional and psychological dimensions. In doing so, he debases sexuality and allows for the spiritual death hinted at in Claudio's earlier speech, for under such circumstances, humans become like the basest of animals who pursue the satisfaction of their appetites to the point of self-destruction. This view of sexual desire as evil and destructive permeates the entire brothel world as images of disease and corruption abound. From the very start of the play, Lucio and his cohorts speak of baldness brought on by venereal disease, bones made hollow by syphilis, and hips suffering from sciatica. This gross and unsettling imagery is only intensified near the play's end when Pompey reveals that Mistress Overdone has gone through all her prostitutes and has ended up in the sweating-tub herself: "Troth, sir, she hath eaten up all her beef, and she is herself in the tub" (III.ii.56-57).

In his disguise as a friar, the Duke experiences intimate contact with this nether-world of pimps, prostitutes, and their dissolute customers, and his indignation reaches its peak in the last act when he declares: "I have seen corruption boil and bubble / Till

it o'er-run the stew" (V.i.323-324). But the corruption has not only overrun the stew or brothel; it has touched the highest seat in Vienna as Angelo becomes infected with a consuming passion for Isabella. As can be expected, the critical response to Angelo's character has been harsh. G. Wilson Knight affirms that while some of Angelo's faults may be excused, he may not be acquitted of "Pharisaical pride" (85). Ernest Schanzer argues that Angelo is a "compendium" of human qualities that Shakespeare disliked most -- "Cruelty, ingratitude, perfidy, judicial tyranny, calculated cunning, Pharisaism, humourlessness . . ." (92-93). But most of Angelo's faults stem from a single flaw: his attempt to live up to an ideal that denies the importance of the body. While Angelo may exhibit the hubris of Greek tragedy in his role as deputy of Vienna, his real pride lies in his ability to live a life void of emotion and desire: ". . . yea, my gravity, / wherein -- let no man hear me -- I take pride . . ." (II.iv.9-10). That Angelo has succeeded in leading a life of extreme sobriety at the expense of his humanity is evidenced by the testimonies provided by different characters. The Duke, for example, tells Friar Thomas that

. . . Lord Angelo is precise;
 Stands at a guard with envy; scarce confesses
 That his blood flows, or that his appetite
 Is more to bread than stone. (I.iii.50-53)

This view of Angelo as someone cold and inhuman is reinforced in the very next scene when Lucio explains to

Isabella that in the Duke's place

Governs Lord Angelo, a man whose blood
 Is very snow-broth; who never feels
 The wanton stings and motions of the sense,
 But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge
 With profits of the mind, study, and fast.
 (I.iv.57-61)

In both these passages, Angelo emerges as a man without passion or desire, as one who wishes to remain insensitive to the promptings of the body, but it is the wisdom of such a life that is severely tested as the play unfolds.

In the face of Isabella's beauty and innocence, Angelo's ideal of severity and self-denial slowly begins to crumble. Unlike other women, Isabella awakens in Angelo the sexual urge that he has long kept buried within himself: "She speaks, and 'tis such sense / That my sense breeds with it" (II.ii.146-147).⁹ In his meeting with Isabella, Angelo's conversion from man of stone to man of blood vividly illustrates the Platonic idea that love is desire aroused by beauty: "What do I love her, / That I desire to hear her speak again, / And feast upon her eyes?" (II.ii.82-84). But it is not Isabella's beauty alone that stirs Angelo's passion, for oddly enough her purity and innocence also have a crucial effect upon him. Immediately after Isabella departs, Angelo cross-examines himself:

⁹For a skillful discussion of Shakespeare's use of the word "sense" in the play, see William Empson, "Sense in Measure for Measure," The Structure of Complex Words, London: Chatto and Windus, 1951, 270-288.

Can it be
 That modesty may more betray our sense
 Than woman's lightness? Having waste ground enough,
 Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary
 And pitch our evils there? O, fie, fie, fie!
 What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?
 Dost thou desire her foully for those things
 That make her good? (II.ii.173-180)

As this passage reveals, Angelo is tempted by innocence and that which is forbidden. In an ironic and perverted way, Isabella's chastity inflames the very passions that it means to restrain. Consequently, Isabella, a young virgin in nun's garb, penetrates Angelo's guarded virtue in a way that "the strumpet, / With all her double vigor, art, and nature" (II.ii.188-189) never could. But it is significant that Angelo compares his desire to possess Isabella sexually to the building of a privy on sacred ground. By couching his desire in such language, Angelo characterizes sexuality as something foul and unclean, an attitude that may stem from the conflict surrounding the genitals themselves as the means for both sexual pleasure and the passing of bodily waste. But once Angelo releases the sexual energy that has been pent-up within him, all remnants of guilt and remorse are swept aside. As he declares to a stunned Isabella in their second interview:

I have begun,
 And now I give my sensual race the rein.
 Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite,
 Lay by all nicety and prolixious blushes
 That banish what they sue for. (II.iv.159-163)

As this speech indicates, sexual desire in Angelo has been whetted, not blunted, by restraint until it becomes so

intense that it is uncontrollable. Anticipating Freud, Shakespeare reveals that although the sexual impulse may be suppressed temporarily, it will inevitably resurface in a stronger and more perverted form; in Angelo's case the eruption of suppressed desire has a particularly monstrous consequence: the attempt to rape a nun.

While critics are almost unanimous in their assessment of Angelo, they are far from united in their reactions to Isabella. Except for Cleopatra, Isabella has probably stimulated more diverse and radically opposed responses than any other female character in Shakespeare.

Interestingly enough, some of Isabella's strongest supporters attempt to defend her character by arguing that she embodies certain qualities that Shakespeare himself admired. Thus, C. J. Sisson declares, "Let there be no mistake about this; Shakespeare sets up Isabella as a heroine, who represents something in womanhood which Shakespeare, no less than Lucio in this play, reveres with all his heart" (58). Similarly, R. W. Chambers claims that "Never does Shakespeare seem more passionately to identify himself with any of his characters than he does with Isabel, as she pleads for mercy against strict justice . . ." (286). These critics and others tend to praise Isabella for both her chastity and her goodness, but oddly enough these are the very "virtues" that Isabella's detractors call into question. For example, Arthur

Quiller-Couch argues that Isabella "is something rancid in her chastity; and, on top of this, not by any means such a saint as she looks" (xxx). Continuing in this vein, Una Ellis-Fermor accuses Isabella of being as "Hard as an icicle" and characterizes her virtue as "pitiless, unimaginitive, self-absorbed . . ." (262).¹⁰ This criticism represents a vehement response to Isabella's cold and severe nature, for like Angelo, she attempts to live up to a frigid ideal that strips her of her humanity. That Isabella, like Angelo, seeks a life of self-denial, is made clear in the very first act when she expresses her wish for "a more strict restraint" upon the sisterhood of St. Clare (I.iv.4). In Act II, Isabella's austerity is further emphasized when she petitions for Claudio's life before Angelo. Unable to name her brother's offense and too willing to accept Angelo's judgment, Isabella is repeatedly warned by Lucio that she is "too cold" (II.ii.49,60).

However, while Isabella may appear "cold" and passionless, her words actually betray a vital sexuality that she remains unaware of. As Arthur Kirsch points out, there is a "strong erotic undercurrent" in Isabella's character that helps trigger Angelo's overwhelming desire (87). But while Isabella is unconscious of this sexual

¹⁰For Marcia Riefer, the debate over Isabella's character "obscures a more important point, namely that through her one can explore the negative effects of patriarchal attitudes on female characters and on the resolution of comedy itself . . ." (157).

undercurrent, Claudio appears to recognize the powerful effect that his sister has on members of the opposite sex. Before being led away to prison, Claudio instructs Lucio to have Isabella petition Angelo in his behalf:

Implore her, in my voice, that she make friends
 To the strict deputy; bid herself assay him.
 I have great hope in that, for in her youth
 There is a prone and speechless dialect,
 Such as move men . . . (II.ii.181-185)

As this passage indicates, Claudio understands that there is something about Isabella's presence that allows her to exert a subliminal influence upon the male sex. As Marvin Rosenberg explains, men need only look at Isabella, and they "get an unmistakable subverbal message from her face and body . . ." (52). This unspoken language is, in Claudio's description, "prone," meaning "ready" or "eager," but as Rosenberg points out, this word carries "a complex chord of reverberations" and one of them is inevitably "sexual" (52). Thus, it is her sexual speech that enables Isabella to "move men," that is, excite their passions. This effect is illustrated vividly when Isabella, with her youthful beauty and virgin discourse, prompts the distracted Angelo to exclaim: "She speaks, and 'tis such sense / That my sense breeds with it" (II.ii.146-147). Consequently, Claudio's plea that Isabella "assay" Angelo must be examined within this context of sexual meaning. At the beginning of the play, Angelo attempts to evade his new authority by telling the Duke: "Let there be some more

test made of my mettle" (I.i.49). Although the Duke dismisses this remark, Isabella will "assay" or make a trail of Angelo, yet it is not his fitness as a ruler that she will test but rather his rigid self-ideal. In their meetings together, Isabella penetrates Angelo's guarded virtue not through the force of her rhetoric, which is often specious, but through the power of her subverbal language or sexual presence. Thus, when Lucio enjoins Isabella to "Assay the pow'r you have" (I.iv.76), it becomes clear that this power is a sexual one.

The most powerful expression of Isabella's sexuality appears in her second meeting with Angelo. When the deputy asks Isabella what she would do if her only means of saving Claudio were to yield up her body, Isabella responds with surprising violence:

As much for my poor brother as myself:
 That is, were I under the terms of death,
 Th' impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
 And strip myself to death, as to a bed
 That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
 My body up to shame. (II.iv.99-104)

It is revealing that Isabella should assert her chastity in language that is so highly erotic.¹¹ Ironically, her use of such sexually-charged words as "whips," "strip," and "bed" only undermines her claim. Even more importantly, Shakespeare once again has a character express death in sexual terms, something he does quite prominently in Romeo

¹¹Both Kirsch (87) and Rosenberg (58) make similar remarks.

and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra. But unlike the lovers of these plays, Isabella does not deliberately associate sexuality with death; instead the unconscious eroticism of her speech may be viewed as an indication of sexual conflict.

Faced with the dilemma of either sacrificing her virginity or losing her brother, Isabella goes to Claudio, firm in her belief that "More than our brother is our chastity" (II.iv.185). But because she appears to have already resolved the matter, it is unclear why Isabella tells Claudio of Angelo's treachery, especially since she obviously fears her brother's inconstancy. When Claudio, in a moment of weakness, pleads for his life, Isabella turns on him with a fury so violent it proves disturbing:

O you beast!
 O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch!
 Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice? . . .
 Heaven shield my mother play'd my father fair!
 For such a warped slip of wilderness
 Ne'er issu'd from his blood. Take my defiance!
 Die, perish! . . .
 I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
 No word to save thee. (III.i.135-146)

The ferociousness that Isabella displays in this speech has become a critical issue among commentators of the play. In his edition of Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson argues that "In Isabella's declamation there is something harsh, and something forced and far-fetched. But her indignation cannot be thought violent when we consider her not only as a virgin but as a nun" (197). Yet many critics since

Johnson have not been as understanding. For David Stevenson, Isabella's attack on Claudio demonstrates "a capacity for sick and self-righteous anger" (51). Echoing this sentiment, Rosenberg points out that Shakespeare invests Isabella with "a vicious anger unique among his comedy heroines" (59). In defense of Isabella, R. W. Chambers, her most ardent supporter, expresses amazement at "the dislike which critics feel for the tortured Isabel" (289), and argues that the "fierceness of Isabel's words is the measure of the agony of her soul" (292). But none of these comments, in the final analysis, sufficiently explicates the passage. To condemn Isabella's anger without tracing its source or to excuse her attack because she is a nun or a soul in agony does not adequately address the issue. In this scene, it is not Claudio's inconstancy that terrifies Isabella but her own sexual longings. Isabella is afraid that, like Angelo, she will succumb to the sexual impulse that she has long suppressed.¹² Thus, it is not Claudio's cowardice that prompts Isabella's hysterical outburst but the fear and revulsion she feels over her own sexual desire.

While some critics are disturbed by the anger and hostility that Isabella expresses toward Claudio, many fail to acknowledge that her outburst includes an unwarranted

¹²Arthur Kirsch makes a similar point when he remarks that Isabella "is afraid not only of Angelo's desires, but of her own" (87).

attack upon her mother's chastity.¹³ In the process of stressing Claudio's dishonor, Isabella calls into question her own mother's honesty. Such an attack appears odd in the context in which it occurs, but it is actually part of a greater mistrust that Isabella feels towards her entire gender. When Angelo comments on the frailty of women, Isabella too readily concurs, declaring:

Women? Help Heaven! Men their creation mar
 In profiting by them. Nay, call us ten times frail,
 For we are soft as our complexions are,
 And credulous to false prints. (II.iv.127-130)

In this demeaning appraisal of her own sex, Isabella emphasizes once again the weakness of women, but it becomes clear that she does not include herself among this group. After hearing Isabella speak of the vulnerability of women, Angelo attempts to use her speech against her in order to complete his seduction: "I do arrest your words. Be that you are, / That is a woman; if you be more, you're none. (II.iv.134-135). But Isabella demonstrates that she wants to be more, for she pursues a life of self-denial that is incompatible with her description of women as weak and inconstant. Consequently, Isabella's desire for a life of "strict restraint" has serious implications, for it forces her to denigrate her own sex and deny her

¹³A notable exception is Carol Thomas Neely who comments that Isabella is willing "to project the shame of unfaithfulness onto her mother in order to protect her father's 'blood' from the humiliation of a degenerate son" (230 n.40).

femininity.

At this point, it is important to recognize that the complexity of Isabella's character is inevitably caught up with the virtue of chastity which is portrayed ambiguously throughout the play.¹⁴ On the one hand, chastity appears in its traditional moral context as the supreme female virtue that must be preserved at all costs. From this perspective, Isabella's decision to defy Angelo at the expense of Claudio's life may be seen as painful but necessary. As Isabella's explains to Angelo, "Better it were a brother died at once / Than a sister, by redeeming him, / Should die for ever" (II.iv.106-108), and the logic of this religious argument appears irrefutable. But on the other hand, Shakespeare treats the issue of chastity with great ambivalence, often undermining its moral context in order to present it in a different light. While chastity appears admirable from a strictly ethical point of view, its positive qualities tend to be cancelled by the fact that it is associated only with Isabella and Angelo, characters who are constantly described as cold and unfeeling. Furthermore, Isabella's and Angelo's chastity appears less a moral choice than an attempt to escape their sexual natures. Consequently, while sexual desire is treated as natural and life-giving, sexual abstinence often emerges as

¹⁴For a discussion of Renaissance attitudes toward chastity, see Juliet Dusinberre, Shakespeare and the Nature of Women, London: Macmillan, 1975, 20-76.

callous, selfish, and even pathological. At the center of the problem is the play's portrayal of chastity as a negative or withdrawn virtue. This point may be illustrated by looking at the scene in which the Duke confers his powers onto Angelo. In an attempt to convince Angelo of his worth, the Duke praises him in the following manner:

Thyself and thy belongings
 Are not thine own so proper as to waste
 Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee.
 Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
 Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
 Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
 As if we had them not. (I.i.30-36)

In this passage, the Duke makes clear that God has invested his creation with certain qualities that should be used in the service of humanity, and while this speech appears early in the play, it may prove illuminating to ask what its relationship is to the virtue of chastity. Unlike the qualities of which the Duke speaks, chastity in Measure for Measure is not a virtue that goes "forth" like light from a torch, for it remains static and tightly guarded. In fact, one could argue that sexual activity and not abstinence may be "used" in the manner that the Duke describes, and such an argument figures prominently in Shakespeare's procreation sonnets. For instance, in Sonnet 4, the speaker chastises the young man for not marrying and producing children:

Unthrifty loveliness, dost thou spend
 Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?

Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend,
 And being frank she lends to those are free. (1-4)

In this quatrain, the speaker faults the young man for not reproducing his beauty through the bearing of children, for instead wasting his loveliness upon himself. When chastity is viewed according to this idea of "using" as it appears here or in the Duke's speech, certain problems arise, for in the play, it is a virtue that is withdrawn not active, defensive not giving.¹⁵

It is certainly ironic that the Duke should counsel Angelo on his obligation to the State while at the same time he plans his own retreat from power. The incongruity of his speech about using one's virtues and his decision to assume the guise of a friar is problematic, and the explanations he offers for his behavior only confuse the issue. In his interview with Friar Thomas, the Duke provides several conflicting reasons for his departure from power. Initially, he explains that Angelo is needed to enforce the biting laws that have grown dormant, but near the end of the interview, he suggests that his real reasons for leaving power are to test Angelo and learn more about

¹⁵The idea that chastity is a negative virtue appears often in Elizabethan love poetry, especially as an argument for seduction. Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis and Marlowe's Hero and Leander are two famous examples. In Marlowe's poem, for instance, Leander declares that "Men foolishly do call [chastity] virtuous: / What virtue is it that is born with us? / Much less can honour be ascrib'd thereto, / Honour is purchas'd by the deeds we do" (277-280).

his subjects. As he confides to Friar Thomas, donning the habit of a monk will allow him to observe freely "both prince and people" (I.iii.45). But as the play unfolds, the Duke becomes more than an observer of human nature; instead he begins to manipulate and control crucial events. Because the Duke is capable of directing the action of the play, some critics see his character as possessing a supernatural dimension. For example, G. Wilson Knight argues that like Prospero, the Duke "tends to assume proportions evidently divine" (79). More directly, Roy Battenhouse contends that the Duke exercises his power "like a mighty God" (1054). But despite these claims, the Duke's behavior is hardly above censure, for his deception of Isabella concerning Claudio's death appears completely unnecessary. Disturbed by such trickery, William Empson concludes that the Duke is not God but a man "playing at being God" (283).¹⁶

Although the Duke's ability to orchestrate events appears to place him above the play's sexual turmoil, he is, in fact, very much like Angelo and Isabella in his denial of passion. When Friar Thomas suggests that love is the cause of his retreat from power, the Duke responds:

No, holy father, throw away that thought;

¹⁶For Stephen Greenblatt, the Duke inflicts anxiety upon his subjects for "ideological purposes," that is, he wishes to instill within them a sense of loyalty and obedience. But Greenblatt also notes that Shakespeare calls this activity into question (138).

Believe not that the dribbling dart of love
 Can pierce a complete bosom. Why I desire thee
 To give me secret harbor hath a purpose
 More grave and wrinkled than the aims and ends
 Of burning youth. (I.iii.1-6)

In his reply, the Duke professes a bosom impervious to the effects of love and claims that the seriousness of his purpose has nothing to do with the passion of burning youth. But while the Duke delivers this speech with complete confidence, his words betray an ignorance of love's power, for like Angelo, he too will succumb to Isabella's beauty and goodness. Furthermore, like Angelo and Isabella, the Duke's rejection of passion includes a desire to withdraw from the world: "My holy sir, none better knows than you / How I have ever lov'd the life removed" (I.iii.7-8). Thus, all three characters may be seen as trying to live a life free from both passion and conflict.

However, while the Duke, Angelo, and Isabella all seek the "life removed," Mariana is the only character who actually lives it, and her solitude is far from voluntary. Deserted by Angelo, Mariana endures her suffering alone on the moated grange, still loving the man who has wronged her. When she first appears in Act IV., she is seen feeding her melancholy with music much like Orsino in Twelfth Night, but unlike the Duke of Illyria, Mariana is not content to languish in her sorrow. Given the chance to regain her lost love, Mariana acts without hesitation, for

as the Duke reveals, Angelo's cruelty has only increased her passion:

[Mariana] hath yet in her the continuance of her first affection; [Angelo's] unjust kindness that in all reason should have quenched her love, hath, like an impediment in the current, made it more violent and unruly. (III.i.237-241)

Thus, Mariana continues to love despite injury and betrayal, and the strength of her love for Angelo will be tested once again at the play's end. But when Mariana appears in Act IV., she does more than expedite the Duke's plans; she allows an important contrast to be drawn between herself and Isabella. Noting this opportunity for contrast, Juliet Dusinberre points out that the virtues Mariana exhibits, such as generosity, compassion, and tolerance, are simply not present in Isabella's "rigorous chastity" (54). But more importantly, Mariana, unlike Isabella, accepts her sexuality and acts upon it. Assured by the Duke that her act is free from sin, Mariana willingly takes Isabella's place in Angelo's bed.

The Duke's stratagem for saving Isabella's honor is, of course, the bed-trick, a device that has a long literary tradition.¹⁷ But while the bed-trick is an accepted convention in some plays, its appearance in Measure for

¹⁷Shakespeare uses the device of the bed-trick in a similar fashion in All's Well That Ends Well, and Thomas Middleton uses it, not as a comic device, but as a desperate ploy in The Changeling. Perhaps the strangest twist on the bed-trick convention appears in William Wycherley's The Plain Dealer, a play in which a man takes the place of a woman disguised as a man.

Measure is problematic, and critics have reacted to it in a variety of ways. For instance, Arthur Quiller-Couch finds the whole affair scandalous and fiercely criticizes Isabella's part in it. "To put it nakedly," he says, "[Isabella] is all for saving her own soul, and she saves it by turning, of a sudden, into a bare procuress . . ." (xxx). Although this accusation is extreme, it is also suggestive, for after the Duke counsels Isabella about the bed-trick, he encounters Pompey whom he denounces as "a bawd, a wicked bawd!" (III.ii.20). By juxtaposing these two incidents back to back, Shakespeare implies a subtle comic parallel between the Duke's plans with Isabella and Pompey's activity with Mistress Overdone. Although it would be inappropriate to call either the Duke or Isabella a bawd, the incongruity of a bogus friar and a would-be nun plotting to find a substitute for Angelo's bed can hardly be ignored.

But while the bed-trick may afford some brief ironic humor, its real function is more complex because it has serious implications for the two women involved. By conspiring with Mariana, Isabella is forced to confront the sexuality she sought to escape. As Arthur Kirsch points out, "Nothing is clearer in a stage production than that Mariana wants her man, and far from being a scandal, it is an education for Isabella to help her get him" (88). In addition, Mariana also benefits from the scheme as she is

converted from melancholic lover to devoted wife.

Commenting on this change, Nancy Leonard remarks that by participating in the bed-trick, Mariana plays "the role of rejected bride transformed, gaining her true identity by substitution" (295). Along with Kirsch and Leonard, Ernest Schanzer also sees the bed-trick as a positive act but for very different reasons. Schanzer argues that the marriage-contract between Angelo and Mariana appears to be one of per verba de futuro, meaning that the couple had sworn to become husband and wife at some future date. According to Schanzer, this contract became law once the pair consummated their relationship. Thus, through the bed-trick, the Duke not only saves Isabella's honor but reconciles the betrothed couple (109-110).

Although each of these responses helps illuminate Shakespeare's use of the bed-trick, none of them examines its relationship to the problem of sexual desire in the play. In order to do this, the bed-trick must be viewed from Angelo's perspective, for critics tend to limit their remarks to either the Duke, Isabella, or Mariana. What critics of the play fail to understand is that the ploy of the bed-trick is really dehumanizing, for it vividly demonstrates that in the heat of passion the sexual partner does not matter. In effect, the act becomes bestial, for human beings become like animals (or rats in Claudio's estimation) who merely seek an available partner to gratify

their sexual urge. Under these circumstances, intercourse is not an expression of love or affection but an act of narcissism and self-indulgence. In the end, there is a complete loss of identity, for the sexual partner is no longer "somebody" but a "body" -- a human being is reduced to a set of genitalia.

Although the bed-trick may be viewed as having these disturbing effects, it is, nonetheless, that feature of the plot which allows for the play's "happy ending." In the final act, Angelo is exposed, Claudio is restored, and several marriages are arranged with breath-taking speed. But this comic resolution is totally incongruent with the play's earlier treatment of sexual conflicts. The play's "felicitous" ending may allow for dramatic unity, but as Richard Fly points out, "The price of such unity is a willingness to diminish the turbulent vitality and dramatic immediacy of the play's first half" (56). Similarly, Harriet Hawkins argues that "The first half of the play shows us what is in fact the case; the second half is escapist fiction" (76). But for other critics, the play's artificial ending is deliberate and part of Shakespeare's intention to parody the form of the romantic comedy.¹⁸ According to this viewpoint, Shakespeare uses the

¹⁸Significantly, the characters in Measure for Measure, unlike their counterparts in romantic comedies, are thwarted in their attempt to achieve love and happiness not by parental obstruction but by their own internal conflicts.

perfunctory marriages of the play's end to express his dissatisfaction with a comic formula that he has grown tired of. Stressing this point, Anne Barton explains that "The Duke refuses to accept failure, but Shakespeare seems perversely to stress the hollowness, in a sense the falsehood, of the happy ending of this comedy" (547).¹⁹

But the Duke's control of the action and the hasty marriages of the final scene do not totally account for the inadequacy and frustration of the play's ending. Another crucial factor is the play's abrupt shift in Act V. from a concern with sexuality to an emphasis on spiritual love. If the greater part of Measure for Measure expresses a dark fascination with the tragic implications of sexual desire, the play's denouement emphasizes the human capacity for a heavenly love marked by both forgiveness and understanding. This heavenly love begins to emerge when the Duke condemns Angelo to the block. Shocked and incredulous, Mariana protests the Duke's sentence but to no avail. The Duke explains that with Angelo's possessions, she may "buy" herself a better husband, but Mariana responds: "O my dear lord, / I crave no other, nor no better man" (V.i.430-431). In this simple and direct response, Mariana once again reveals her total devotion to

¹⁹For a discussion of the play as a parody of romantic comedy, see Anne Barton, Introduction to Measure for Measure, The Riverside Shakespeare, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1974, 545-549.

Angelo despite his cruel betrayal. Her steadfast loyalty to the man who callously deserted her appears even more admirable in light of Angelo's claim that their engagement was broken off because Mariana's reputation "was disvalued / In levity" (V.i.226-227). But more importantly, Mariana's reply to the Duke demonstrates that for her no substitute is possible. While her body successfully replaces Isabella's in Angelo's bed, no man can take Angelo's place as her husband, for as she makes clear, she "craves" no other. This point is worth stressing for it highlights the crucial difference between the types of love that both characters claim to experience. The love that Angelo professes for Isabella is based solely on sexual desire, and thus it is easily deceived by a surrogate partner, but the love that Mariana feels for Angelo is both sexual and spiritual, and thus she attaches her desire to one man alone. This higher form of love not only allows Mariana to remain committed to Angelo but helps her to see that Angelo's faults may also serve as the means for his redemption. As she explains to Isabella:

They say best men are molded out of faults,
 And, for the most, become much more the better
 For being a little bad; so may my husband.
(V.i.444-446)

Thus, while Angelo seeks a life free from error and doubt, Mariana realizes that the best of men are imperfectly formed and may improve by accepting their flawed natures.

Moved by Mariana's words, Isabella joins her in

pleading for Angelo's life, an act that has caused great consternation among some critics of the play. Ernest Schanzer, for instance, finds Isabella's defense of Angelo reprehensible in light of her feeble attempt to save Claudio's life:

One's spirit recoils at hearing this girl, who had not a word to say in excuse of her brother but rather admitted the justice of his doom, now plead, with all the finesse of a seasoned attorney, on the most purely legalistic grounds for her would-be ravisher and the judicial murderer of her brother. (101)

But critics like Schanzer fail to understand that Isabella's response, far from being perverse, is actually quite admirable. When Angelo judges Claudio's case, he is endowed, in the Duke's words, with "Mortality and mercy in Vienna" (I.i.45), and yet he chooses to take Claudio's life despite Isabella's pleas for leniency. With the roles reversed and Angelo now in Claudio's place, Isabella makes the same argument for mercy over mortality and in doing so teaches a lesson of forgiveness made more powerful by the circumstances under which it is delivered. By opposing the Duke's Old Testament ethic of "'An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!'" (V.i.414), Isabella demonstrates her understanding of Christ's words to the Pharisees: "I require mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:14). Consequently, Isabella's plea for Angelo may be better understood as a poignant expression of Christian love whose chief characteristics are mercy and compassion.

But while it is a spiritual love based on forgiveness

that allows Isabella to plead for Angelo's life, this love paradoxically includes a recognition of her own sexuality and its effects upon others. Imploring the Duke, Isabella says:

Most bounteous sir,
 Look, if it please you, on this man condemn'd
 As if my brother liv'd. I partly think
 A due sincerity govern'd his deeds,
 Till he did look on me. Since it is so,
 Let him not die. (V.i.448-453)

In this speech, Isabella acknowledges her role in Angelo's downfall and in doing so admits to her sexual nature as a woman. Because of this admission, Isabella is able to forgive Angelo, for true forgiveness may only be achieved through understanding.²⁰ In this way, Isabella's speech demonstrates a subtle and paradoxical relationship between sexuality and heavenly love in the play, revealing how the acceptance of one is a precondition for achieving the other.

After Isabella's and Mariana's remarkable display of mercy and compassion, the play ends with what Anne Barton cleverly describes as "an outbreak of that pairing-off disease so prevalent in the fifth acts of Elizabethan comedy . . ." (548). It is, of course, the incongruity of these marriages that constitutes the greatest crux in a play already filled with problems and inconsistencies.

²⁰Kirsch makes a similar point when he remarks that Isabella's "recognition of her femininity has taught her the human need for mercy" (89).

Following his dramatic discovery of Claudio, the Duke unexpectedly proposes to Isabella. His offer of marriage is not only startling but highly ironic in that he no longer rejects love but now actively pursues it. Because this proposal immediately follows Claudio's unmuffling, one can easily understand Isabella's speechless wonder at what she sees and hears. But in one of the play's most awkward moments, the Duke does not wait for Isabella's response; instead he proceeds to arrange the rest of the play's marriages with great efficiency. In the next 35 lines, the Duke restores Angelo to Mariana, decrees that Lucio will marry the woman he has wronged, and urges Claudio to repair Juliet's honor. While the inadequacy of these marriages is apparent to some, others are quick to defend their validity. F. R. Leavis, for example, argues that because of Angelo's suffering and guilt, we should let him "marry a good woman and be happy" (161) without questioning the plausibility of the marriage. But such a response fails to acknowledge that Angelo never gives any indication that he is willing to marry Mariana and live happily; in fact, after he is exposed, the deputy repeatedly expresses a desire to die (V.i.378-379,481-482) and never speaks of beginning life anew. Yet Angelo is not the only character who seems unhappy with the idea of marriage, for Isabella also appears to resist the thought of matrimony. From the time she first sees Claudio alive and hears the Duke's

proposal, Isabella is curiously silent, presumably overwhelmed with awe and amazement. Although there is no textual evidence to suggest that she agrees to the Duke's offer, some critics are confident that she accepts the proposal without question. W. W. Lawrence, for example, believes that there is little doubt that "Isabella turns to [the Duke] with a heavenly and yielding smile" (107). But such a claim cannot be supported by the text, and given Isabella's failure to speak and her rigid chastity, there is good reason to believe that the Duke's offer will not be accepted. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that in Jonathan Miller's production of the play, Isabella refuses the Duke's offer and walks off stage in the opposite direction.²¹ In the end, the only marriages that may be assessed confidently are those involving Lucio and Claudio, the former trying desperately to escape his fate, the latter willing to embrace the woman he loves.

In his discussion of the marriages that end the play, Arthur Kirsch offers the following commentary:

Though not a sacrament in the Anglican liturgy, marriage always in Shakespeare has sacramental value, and never more than in Measure for Measure, where it is seen as the deepest and most creative

²¹For comments on Jonathan Miller's 1974 production of Measure for Measure performed by the National Theatre, see Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: King Lear and Measure for Measure," Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism, Ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985, 95.

model and expression of human community . . . (98)

With his belief that marriage in Shakespeare is an "expression of human community," Kirsch echoes Northrop Frye's claim that comic marriages are symbolic of a new social order, but like Frye's claim, Kirsch's remarks apply more accurately to Shakespeare's earlier "festive" comedies than they do to Measure for Measure.²² If this dark and brooding play ends with the formation of a "new society," we are forced to ask exactly what kind of community is being established when both Angelo and Isabella appear to resist their marriages and Lucio openly protests the Duke's ordering of events: "Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging" (V.i.527-528). Only Claudio and Juliet's relationship holds any promise for growth and prosperity, but their love for one another cannot mitigate the uncertainty and reservations surrounding the other marriages.

However, while Kirsch's conclusions about the ending of Measure for Measure remain unconvincing, his remark that marriage in Shakespeare has sacramental value is incisive and thought-provoking. Throughout the canon, Shakespeare treats marriage as a sacred institution; even in the

²²For Frye's penetrating discussion of myth and comedy, see Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957, 163-186. For his views on Shakespearean comedy, see A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance, New York: Columbia UP, 1965.

romantic comedies where the concluding nuptials are part of the comic design, marriage is portrayed as an important event demanding special reverence. For example, when Theseus in A Midsummer Night's Dream decides that the lovers shall join him in marriage, he declares: "For in the temple, by and by, with us / These couples shall eternally be knit . . . / Three and Three, / We 'll hold a feast in great solemnity" (IV.i.179-184). In this speech, Theseus' use of the word "solemnity" calls to mind not only the marriage celebration but the religious ceremony itself, and while this second meaning remains tacit, it is in total harmony with his remark that in "the temple" the couples "shall eternally be knit." Significantly, the play ends with Oberon and his train blessing the palace chambers with field-dew, an act that recalls the Catholic ritual of anointing the marriage bed with holy water.²³ To take a strikingly different example, Love's Labor's Lost emphasizes the importance of marriage by preventing its occurrence. When the King and his followers try to win their beloveds in the play's final scene, their attempts are unexpectedly thwarted:

KING

Now, at the latest minute of the hour,
Grant us your loves.

²³For more on this point, see Greenblatt's discussion of "metaphorical acquisition," the means by which a social practice is transferred indirectly to the stage (10-11).

PRINCESS

A time, methinks, too short
To make a world-without-end bargain in.
(V.ii.783-785)

In this exchange, the King's plea points towards the traditional ending of romantic comedy, but the Princess' reply makes clear that marriage, "a world-without-end bargain," deserves more thought than the time allows. Consequently, all the marriages are delayed one year until the men can prove that their offers, "made in the heat of blood" (V.ii.796), are true and everlasting.

As these brief examples suggest, marriage in Shakespeare signifies a mystical bond that unites a man and a woman in mutual love and respect, the kind of relationship expressed so eloquently by Saint Paul (Eph.5:28-32) in words that served as part of the marriage liturgy in The Book of Common Prayer (1559):

So men are bound to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife, loveth himself. For never did any man hate his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord doth the congregation: for we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This mystery is great, but I speak of Christ and of the congregation. (297)

Although at the end of this passage Saint Paul reminds his listeners that he speaks of Christ and the congregation, he makes clear that this mysterious merging of two bodies into one is simulated on the human level between husband and wife. To find that marriage in Shakespeare can possess the

same value and importance that it does in Saint Paul, we need look no further than The Tempest, when Prospero bestows his only daughter upon Ferdinand:

Then, as my gift and thine own acquisition
 Worthily purchas'd, take my daughter. But
 If thou dost break her virgin-knot before
 All sanctimonious ceremonies may
 With full and holy rite be minist'ed,
 No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
 To make this contract grow; but barren hate,
 Sour-ey'd disdain, and discord shall bestrew
 The union of your bed with weeds so loathly
 That you shall hate it both. Therefore take heed,
 As Hymen's lamps shall light you. (IV.i.13-23)

With these words, Prospero strongly emphasizes the idea of marriage as sacrament, referring to it specifically as a "sanctimonious" ceremony that must be administered with "full and holy rite." He begins his speech by recognizing that the child must leave the parent in order to join with another and that this union is consummated by the sexual act, which for Miranda means the breaking of her "virgin-knot" or hymen. But as his dreadful prophecy makes clear, if this consummation takes place before the marriage is properly solemnized, the very desires that caused the lovers to commit such an offense will become loathsome to them; they will soon come to hate the union of their bed. Although this speech appears in a play written near the end of Shakespeare's career, it has serious implications for Claudio and Juliet's predicament in Measure for Measure. Unlike Miranda and Ferdinand, Claudio and Juliet consummate their marriage before it is properly solemnized, and

consequently, they suffer the effects of Prospero's curse. After their clandestine relationship is exposed, Claudio bitterly condemns the sexual urge and allows his affair with Juliet to be called lechery. While Juliet's reaction is less vehement, she also expresses keen remorse and sees their sexual activity as evil since it was committed outside of sanctified marriage.

It is precisely because marriage can have such value and importance in Shakespeare that the concluding nuptials of Measure for Measure are so unsatisfying and disturbing. They are arranged by the Duke (except for his own) as remedies for the offenses committed by Angelo, Claudio, and Lucio, but they are so blatantly false and arbitrary that it is impossible to accept them as a viable solution to the problem of sexual desire. Near the end of his influential study, Love in the Western World, Denis de Rougement concludes that marriage is "the institution in which passion is 'contained,' not by morals, but by love" (315). With this penetrating insight, Rougement expresses the idea that marriage can control sexual desire not through obligation, but through mutual affection. But it is exactly this concept of marriage that is sorely missing from the end of Measure for Measure. Except for Claudio and Juliet, none of the couples exhibits the mutual love and affection necessary to control the destructive passion that permeates the entire play. Thus, contrary to what some

critics believe, the ending of Measure for Measure is not a comment on the legitimacy of the romantic ending but a comment on the legitimacy of marriage as a "container" of passion. Without mutual love and respect, marriage cannot achieve the mysterious merging of two bodies into one that allows it to endure. In the end, the perfunctory marriages of the final scene fail to confront the sexual conflicts of the play's characters, and by providing such a false ending, Shakespeare underlines just how complex and inscrutable the problem of sexual desire can be.

In Act IV. as the Duke sets into motion the plans he believes will procure a happy ending, he tells the Provost: "Put not yourself into amazement how these things should be; all difficulties are but easy when they are known" (IV.ii.203-205). But the forced and artificial ending that actually occurs in Act V. stresses the hollowness and naivete of the Duke's words. The expressions of mercy and the hastily arranged marriages of the final scene are inadequate responses to the play's examination of sexuality, and their failure to confront the problem of sexual desire emphasizes its strength and complexity. In the end, conflicts concerning sexuality and marriage unsettle the play's design, and in its failure to achieve the comic salvation that it promises Measure for Measure approaches tragedy, for it is a play in which there is tension but no release, conflict but no resolution.

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CHAPTER III

"AN INVITING EYE":

THE ANATOMIZING OF DESDEMONA

Shakespeare's syncretic vision is perhaps never so sharply defined as it is in Othello, a play in which love appears at its most glorious and yet, at the same time, its most destructive. Like Romeo, Othello is an inexperienced lover who idealizes both his love and his beloved with the same disastrous consequences. For Othello, Desdemona is the embodiment of innocence and purity, and his love for her proves so great that it becomes the basis for his own existence. But through a slow poisoning of the mind, Othello's ideal of love collapses as he learns to adopt Iago's view that all love is mere lechery and all women are devious whores. Infected with Iago's evil, he becomes convinced of Desdemona's infidelity and commits himself to a murder that he believes will purify his former love. But Othello's transformation from romantic lover to jealous murderer reveals this central point -- that he is incapable of seeing Desdemona as both virtuous and desirable. Unable to reconcile his wife's sexuality with her innocence, he is forced to perceive her only in the limited terms of angel or whore. In this way, Othello becomes guilty of anatomizing

the female sex as he divides the spiritual from the erotic, an activity that reduces women to stereotypes and denies them their humanity.

In order to understand the conflicts that develop within Othello's marriage, attention must first be paid to Iago's cynical views on sexuality and women. Before Othello or Desdemona even appear on stage, we hear Iago's unsavory description of their wedding night as he and Roderigo raise up Brabantio and his household. In his taunting of Brabantio, Iago denigrates the sexual union of Othello and Desdemona with a barrage of animal imagery:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tuppung your white ewe. (I.i.89-90)

You'll have
your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll
have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers
for cousins and gennets for germans. (I.i.111-114)

I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter
and the Moor are now making the beast with two
backs. (I.i.116-118)

As these passages indicate, Iago views sexual activity as bestial, and he is capable of discussing it only in terms of animals mating. The word "tuppung," as David Bevington points out, is a term used only in reference to the copulating of sheep (1121), and the phrases "old black ram" and "Barbary horse" appear to be derogatory statements concerning Othello's Moorish race which some Elizabethans

considered barbaric and lascivious.¹ Iago's final description of intercourse as making the beast with two backs is an unattractive and perverted view of sexual activity, but once again the emphasis is on animality, for Iago suggests that when men and women succumb to desire, they become less than human.²

In addition to his outburst before Brabantio's house, Iago denigrates sexual love in his private councils with Roderigo. Faced with Roderigo's threat of suicide over the loss of Desdemona, he explains that love is merely an unruly desire that may be checked by the will:

But we have reason
to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our un-
bitted lusts, whereof I take this that you call love
to be a sect or scion. (I.iii.332-335)

Thus, for Iago, love has no spiritual or psychological dimension; instead it is only a physical appetite that may be suppressed by reason. He returns to this point a second time when he emphasizes the mutability of love and sexual desire. In an attempt to convince Roderigo that Desdemona has fallen in love with Cassio, he explains:

When the blood is
made dull with the act of sport, there should be,
again to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh

¹For a discussion of Elizabethan attitudes and Othello's race, see G. K. Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," Proceedings of the British Academy 8 (1967): 139-163. Also worth noting is Eldred D. Jones, Othello's Countrymen, London: Oxford UP, 1965.

²For further comment on Iago's use of animal imagery, see Robert Heilman, Magic in the Web, Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1956, 105-108.

appetite, loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties -- all which the Moor is defective in. (II.i.226-230)

Here Iago once again characterizes love as a bodily appetite, but this time he stresses its need to be renewed by variety in order to avoid sexual malaise.

However, as this last passage reveals, Iago's distaste for sexuality is firmly linked to his contempt for the female sex. For him, not only Desdemona but all women are promiscuous and untrustworthy.³ As he explains to Othello, "In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience / Is not to leave 't undone, but keep 't unknown" (III.iii.208-210). Thus, in his mind, all women are members of Bianca's trade by virtue of their gender.⁴ While some may see Iago's misogyny as merely an act, the jealousy he feels concerning Emilia suggests that he believes his own rhetoric. During the course of the play, Iago offers several reasons for his villainy, including Cassio's promotion. But eventually his complaints become more personal as he begins to question Emilia's fidelity. At first, he suspects Othello "with [his] nightcap" (II.i.306), but soon he becomes wary of Cassio as well. These suspicions, based on no real evidence, strike us as irrational and paranoid, yet for

³As Carol Thomas Neely points out, Iago's cynical generalizations about women are "self-aggrandizing" and "divorced from reality" (113).

⁴Significantly, Iago calls his own wife a "Villainous whore" (V.ii.235) before stabbing her in the final scene.

Iago they are real enough. As he explains in one of his soliloquies, the mere thought of being cuckolded "Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards" (II.i.296). But if Iago is so painfully concerned about others sleeping with his wife, perhaps this is an indication that he himself is not. In this way, his persistent fears about his wife's honesty may be read as intimations of sexual difficulty or even impotence. Such a reading would, in turn, help explain his harsh view of sexuality, for if he is experiencing such problems, it would be natural for him to devalue sexual activity and make it less than human. In the end, Iago's tendency to portray sexual desire as bestial may be interpreted as a defense mechanism, a way of pacifying his own anxieties about sexual behavior.

✓ In sharp contrast to Iago's cynical view of love, Othello expresses an idealism that is vibrant and compelling. As was stated earlier, Othello tends to idealize both Desdemona and the love they share. For him, Desdemona is the perfect embodiment of innocence and purity, and the greatness of their love becomes the source of his life and happiness. That Othello bases his existence and well-being on his love for Desdemona is illustrated as early as the Council scene when he declares: "My life upon her faith!" (I.iii.297). Later in the temptation scene, he will once again affirm that it is Desdemona's love that gives order and meaning to his life:

"Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (III.iii.92-94).⁵

But while Othello's idealism is sincere and admirable, it is also quite limited and potentially destructive. Even in the early scenes of the play, Shakespeare reveals subtle but critical weaknesses in Othello's relationship with his wife. For instance, when Othello relates his wooing of Desdemona before the Council, he explains that he won her love by telling her exotic stories about his many battles and misfortunes. He finishes his account of their courtship by saying: "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (I.iii.169-170). While it remains unclear how Desdemona's pity grew to be sexual love, this last statement is more important for what it suggests about Othello. As Robert Heilman notes, Othello's speech demonstrates "less of devotion than of flattered acceptance of adoration . . ." (171). In fact, Othello's love at this point appears to be based on Desdemona's affirmation of his self-ideal; as she later explains: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.iii.255). The idea that Desdemona reinforces her

⁵The paradoxical quality of Othello's phrase "Excellent wretch!" has been noted by Robert Grudin who describes it as "a sudden glimpse of white against black" (1). This verbal yoking of opposites suggests not only Othello's affection for Desdemona but anticipates her unfortunate demise.

husband's self-image is important, for it helps explain how the couple's estrangement brings about the breakdown of Othello's psyche.

After the couple convinces the Senate of the genuine nature of their love, Desdemona petitions the Duke that she may accompany Othello on the expedition to Cyprus. Such a request is indeed bold and unexpected in its own right, but it is also significant for the response it elicits from Othello. After listening to her plea, he tells the Duke:

Let her have your voice.
Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat -- the young affects
In me defunct -- and proper satisfaction,
But to be free and bounteous to her mind.
(I.iii.263-268)

With these remarks, Othello attempts to reassure the Duke that Desdemona's presence in Cyprus will in no way distract him from his military duty and that he will not allow love to interfere with the business of war. Such remarks, of course, perfectly reflect the self-control that Othello exhibits throughout the beginning of the play, but at the same time, they are suggestive of some darker problems. For instance, these comments reveal, if not a coolness, at least an indifference toward sexual activity, and it is interesting to note that like Iago, Othello refers to sexual desire as an appetite that may be suppressed. Furthermore, Othello's words reveal that he underestimates the ability of passion to disrupt human life, and ironically

it will be passion in the form of sexual jealousy that will unhinge his reputed self-assurance.

While remarks such as these may suggest critical weaknesses in Othello's relationship with Desdemona, it is his ominous speech on being reunited with her on Cyprus that most clearly underlines the destructive nature of his love:

OTHELLO

It gives me wonder great as my content
To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!
If after every tempest comes such calms
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!
And let the laboring bark climb hills of seas
Olympus-high, and duck again as low
As hell's from heaven! If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for, I fear,
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

DESDEMONA

The heavens forbid
But that our loves and comforts should increase,
Even as our days do grow!

(II.i.181-193)

That Othello's great joy over his reunion with Desdemona occasions a desire for death has caught the attention of several critics.⁶ But while his speech may express an unconscious wish for annihilation, it also reveals a fear of mutability that demands close attention. Upon being reunited with Desdemona on Cyprus, Othello's joy is so

⁶For John Bayley (159) and Marianne Novy (129), Othello's greeting stresses the idea of Liebestod, while Carol Thomas Neely sees it as the wish for "a perpetually unconsummated courtship . . ." (112). This last point is suggestive, for Othello perceives sexuality as a threat to his ideal precisely because it entails change and a loss of innocence.

great that he desires to preserve the moment through death, to freeze it in time, for the future cannot hold the same kind of happiness. But this desire only exposes Othello's fear that his love and happiness will change with the passing of time. This fear, in turn, emphasizes the fragility of Othello's ideal, for like other Shakespearean lovers, he yearns for a love that is perfect, immutable, and complete, yet is constantly reminded that love in this world is flawed, temporary, and partial. Significantly, Desdemona, who does not have an ideal of love to protect, sees time not as a threat to their love and happiness but as an opportunity for it to grow and prosper.

In his controversial essay on the play, F. R. Leavis remarks that Iago "represents something that is in Othello -- in Othello the husband of Desdemona: the essential traitor is within the gates" (140-141). Continuing in this vein, Leavis argues that the tragedy of the play "is inherent in the Othello-Desdemona relation, and Iago is a mechanism necessary for precipitating tragedy in a dramatic action" (141). These comments are valuable, for they suggest that Iago derives his power from his ability to take advantage of a weakness in Othello's character.⁷ Yet contrary to Leavis' claims, this weakness is not an "obtuse

⁷For Stephen Greenblatt, Iago is the master of "improvisation," the ability "to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (227).

and brutal egotism" (146) but rather a naive and dangerous ideal of love, and when the fragility of this ideal is recognized, it becomes easier to accept how swiftly and completely Iago deceives Othello.

It is, of course, in Act III, scene iii that Iago pours his pestilence into Othello's ear, and through a slow poisoning of the mind, Othello's ideal collapses as he begins to adopt Iago's view of love. In this scene, Iago's temptation takes the form of subtle and carefully chosen remarks, designed to prick Othello's curiosity and arouse his suspicion. But because Iago delivers his remarks under the guise of friendship, he only makes insinuations about Desdemona's fidelity, allowing Othello to draw his own conclusions. In this way, Iago achieves his deception by planting doubts in Othello's mind, an activity interrupted only by calculated pauses which allow Othello to think the worst.

At first, Othello pretends that Iago's troubling words have not touched him, but after their conversation, it becomes clear that his belief in both himself and his marriage is gravely shaken. The collapse of Othello's ideal love is poignantly revealed in his very first utterance after Iago's exit: "Why did I marry?" (III.iii.249). His following soliloquy then demonstrates his complete loss of confidence and self-worth:

Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation

That chamberers have, or for I am declin'd
 Into the vale of years -- yet that's not much --
 She's gone. I am abus'd, and my relief
 Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
 That we call these delicate creatures ours,
 And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,
 And live upon the vapor of a dungeon,
 Than keep a corner in the thing I love
 For others' uses. (III.iii.269-279)

This startling confession contrasts sharply with Othello's earlier speeches which exhibit an undaunted self-assurance, for here his words betray a total lack of faith and self-regard that is foreign to our understanding of his character. It appears that the collapse of his ideal love also precipitates the crumbling of his self-image as he begins to doubt the power of love to overcome the obstacles of race and age.⁸ But while this soliloquy reveals an erosion of confidence, it also highlights Othello's inability to accept his wife's sexuality. Near the end of his speech, he once again echoes Iago as he refers to sexual desire as an uncontrollable appetite which husbands are unable to curb in their wives. In these lines, Othello appears threatened by female sexuality, for he is disturbed to find that Desdemona not only possesses sexual desire but that she is capable of arousing it in others.

However, Othello's distress stems not only from his belief that Desdemona is unfaithful but from his discovery that someone as pure and innocent as Desdemona may actually

⁸As Arthur Kirsch points out, the tragedy of Othello at this point in the play is that he fails to love himself (32).

be false and corrupt. This point is made painfully clear when Othello finds himself praising his wife's courtly virtues despite his conviction that she is deceitful:

OTHELLO Hang her! I do but say what she is. So delicate with her needle! An admirable musician! O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear. Of so high and plenteous wit and invention!

IAGO She's the worst for all this.

OTHELLO O, a thousand, a thousand times! And then, of so gentle a condition!

IAGO Ay, too gentle.

OTHELLO Nay, that's certain. But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!
(IV.i.186-195)

The great pity is that a lovely woman like Desdemona turns out to be evil and corrupt and that her noble qualities are really a false facade covering a wicked nature. This idea is difficult for Othello to accept, and it takes him some time to reach this point, for his earlier response to such a notion was one of simple denial: "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! / I'll not believe 't" (III.iii.284-285). But now Othello sees the world through Iago's eyes, and with this shift in point of view comes the shattering of the neo-Platonic idea that outer beauty may somehow reflect inner goodness.

While Othello's contemplation of his wife's duplicity grieves him deeply, his suffering reaches its climax when he realizes that the loss of Desdemona's love is the one thing in life that he cannot overcome:

But there where I have garner'd up my heart,
 Where either I must live or bear no life,
 The fountain from the which my current runs
 Or else dries up -- to be discarded thence!
 (IV.ii.57-60)

As this passage reveals, Desdemona's love is the source of Othello's life, the very thing on which he bases his existence, and the idea of bearing the loss of such a support is simply inconceivable. As Bernard McElroy points out, Othello is confronted with enduring what for him is simply unendurable (134). Without Desdemona's love, there can be no identity, happiness, or life -- only conflict, despair, and wretchedness.

With his apparent loss of Desdemona and the collapse of his ideal, Othello adopts Iago's view that all love is mere lechery and all women are devious whores. In fact, Othello becomes so infected with Iago's malignity that he even begins to acquire his language.⁹ The most striking example of this acquisition occurs in Othello's angry greeting of Lodovico, who brings the letter recalling him to Venice: "You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus. -- Goats and Monkeys!" (IV.ii.264). This coda on Othello's sentence appears detached and irrational and causes Lodovico to question Othello's mental stability. But as critics have observed, this statement is lifted directly from one of Iago's scurrilous remarks in which he compares Cassio and

⁹As Heilman points out, the "almost pre-emptive use of animal imagery passes in mid-play from Iago to Othello" (8).

Desdemona's alleged passion to the sexual heat of goats and monkeys (III.iii.408). While Othello's acceptance of Iago's view of love may be far-reaching, it is ironic to note that this view is just as incomplete and destructive as Othello's ideal. Although some marriage partners see love as only sexual desire and are unfaithful to their spouses, this scenario is not the whole picture, and neither of these things are true of Othello and Desdemona's relationship. In fact, the failure of the couple's love to agree with Iago's twisted view of human nature appears to add impetus to his villainous behavior, for he seems bent on destroying their marriage in order to validate his belief that all men are cuckolds and all women are whores.

However, the reason that Othello embraces a view of love that is just as inadequate as his former ideal is not because he is a fool as Leavis and others would have us believe, but because he is a grown man still inexperienced in the ways of love. In his eloquent speech before the Council, Othello claims that he has been a soldier since boyhood and that he knows little of life outside the battlefield:

Rude am I in my speech,
 And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace;
 For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,
 Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us'd
 Their dearest action in the tented field;
 And little of this great world can I speak
 More than pertains to feats of broil and battle . . .
 (I.iii.83-89)

In light of this passage, it may be assumed that, despite

his age, Othello's first love is probably Desdemona, which helps explain his tendency to idealize their relationship as if he were a youth like Romeo.¹⁰ Iago, the consummate opportunist, recognizes this weakness in Othello and knows that by taking advantage of his "unbookish jealousy" (IV.i.102), he may bring about his ruin.

Yet the real crux of Othello's inexperience in love centers on his inability to see Desdemona as both sexual and innocent. In his simple and direct approach to life, black and white are sharply defined, and their boundaries are never allowed to blur. In his exchanges with Iago, he is uncomfortable with ambiguity and exhibits a need to resolve all uncertainties.¹¹ When Iago first raises doubts about Desdemona's honesty, Othello reacts with his usual confidence and expresses his belief in getting to the bottom of things:

No, Iago,
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
And on the proof, there is no more but this --
Away at once with love or jealousy!

(III.iii.195-198)

But once Othello's ideal of love is undermined by Iago's

¹⁰Othello may also be compared to Hamlet and Troilus, other idealists who exhibit a naive and conflicted attitude toward sexuality and women.

¹¹While Othello's decisiveness and willingness to act on limited information contribute to his downfall, such qualities are the military virtues for which he was probably hired. In fact, Othello's decisive nature contrasts tellingly with the behavior of the Venetian Council which spends its time counting ships while the Turkish fleet makes its way toward Cyprus.

villainy, his self-assurance is replaced with the anguish of indecision:

By the world,
I think my wife be honest and think she is not;
I think that thou art just and think thou art not.
I'll have some proof. (III.iii.388-391)

As this passage suggests, it is not only jealousy but the strain of uncertainty that puts Othello on the rack. This uncertainty causes him to search for the "ocular proof," yet he seeks only evidence that will confirm his worst suspicions. Overcome with doubt, he declares to Iago: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!" (III.iii.364), and while this line indicates his despair, it also reveals that for him, Desdemona can only be an angel or a strumpet. In Othello's ideal of his wife, Desdemona epitomizes purity and goodness; she is the complete woman possessing all the necessary courtly virtues. This ideal woman is celebrated in the various sonnet-cycles of the period, and as Rosalie Colie points out, Othello speaks of Desdemona "with the magniloquence of the sonnet-lover . . ." (155).¹² But while such a woman may exist in Renaissance love poetry, it is quite dangerous to assume that she exists in real life. By placing Desdemona on a pedestal, Othello denies her both her womanhood and her humanity, for in his ideal, she is not allowed to be

¹²For a detailed analysis of Othello's speech, see G. Wilson Knight's classic essay, "The Othello Music," The Wheel of Fire, 1930, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965, 97-119.

sexual or flawed. When Othello finally acknowledges his wife's sexuality, he becomes greatly disturbed, for like the missing handkerchief, he sees it as evidence of her guilt; in his mind, Desdemona's carnality calls into question her innocence, for he is unable to see her as both a virtuous woman and a sexual creature.¹³ In the end, Iago takes advantage of these conflicts in order to bring about the destruction of Othello's ideal, and with its collapse, he becomes free to reshape Othello's view of love according to his own cynical vision, one which sees women as deceptive and promiscuous. Under Iago's influence, Othello no longer portrays Desdemona as the world's sweetest creature (IV.i.182-183) but instead calls her that "cunning whore of Venice" (IV.ii.89) who has committed with Cassio "the act of shame" a thousand times (V.ii.218). As these accusations reveal, Othello's speech changes from idealization to degradation as he moves from idolatry to

¹³Both Edward Snow (388) and Stephen Greenblatt (251) argue that Othello suffers from an underlying guilt that forces him to view sexuality as a form of pollution. This insight complements my own claim that Othello becomes convinced of his wife's dishonesty because he equates her sexuality with corruption.

misogyny.¹⁴

While Othello's inability to see Desdemona as both sexual and innocent is a complex problem, it may be examined more directly in Cassio, a character who embodies Othello's masculine failings. In general, Cassio is a character who has not received much critical attention. Even the critic most associated with character-analysis, A. C. Bradley, deems him a figure hardly worth studying (196). When critics do direct their interest toward Cassio, they tend to view him in a positive light. Most see him as basically a good man, who, despite a momentary weakness with alcohol, proves himself a valuable soldier and a trusted friend. Eileen Cohen even goes as far as to argue that Cassio's role in the play is to act as a mirror of virtue, reflecting the best of Othello's nature just as Iago reflects the worst (116). But the most disturbing

¹⁴In Political Shakespeare, Jonathan Dollimore quotes Kathleen McLuskie's remark that Shakespeare "gave voice to the social views of his age" and that consequently, his ideas about women "were necessarily bounded by the parameters of hagiography and misogyny" (11). But while Shakespeare's historical conditions should not be ignored, we must also be careful not to confuse his views with those of his characters. The difficulty of assessing Shakespeare's attitude toward women is reflected in the differing viewpoints of feminist critics, for while some claim that he is an advocate for the female sex, others see him as as a spokesman for the patriarchial system. For more on this debate, compare Juliet Dusinberre, Shakespeare and the Nature of Women, London: Macmillan, 1975 and Lisa Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare, Brighton: Harvester, 1983. Also worth noting is Dusinberre's chapter on the idolatry and satire of women during Shakespeare's time ("Gods and Devils" 137-198).

feature of Cassio's character is his divided attitude toward women, for while he idolizes Desdemona, his only sexual relationship is with the prostitute, Bianca, a woman he treats with derision.¹⁵ This observation is crucial for understanding the problems within Othello's marriage, and consequently, it demands closer examination.

Ironically, most of our information about Cassio comes from Iago's soliloquies from which we learn that he is a handsome Florentine who "hath a person and smooth dispose / To be suspected, fram'd to make women false" (I.iii.398-399). While Iago is hardly a reliable source, Cassio's actions throughout the play appear to support this view. In fact, Cassio's speech and behavior define him as a courtly lover, a gentleman whose every act displays his good manners and fine breeding. For example, when Cassio greets Emilia on Cyprus, he does so with a ceremonious kiss which dismays the already jealous Iago:

Let it not gall your patience, good Iago,
That I extend my manners; 'tis my breeding
That gives me this bold show of courtesy.
(II.i.98-100)

Through this and other scenes, Cassio identifies himself as a product of the various courtesy-books so popular during the Renaissance and of which Castiglione's The

¹⁵Both Kirsch (36) and Neely (112) make similar insights.

Courtier is the most celebrated.¹⁶ Yet like the ideal courtier of these books, Cassio's interest in the great lady of his life is strictly platonic and void of sexual longing. In the tradition of courtly love, he admires another man's wife from afar, content to sing her praises and not possess her physically.¹⁷ But nevertheless, his harmless courtly behavior helps Iago arouse Othello's suspicions. When Iago notices Cassio and Desdemona talking intimately, he immediately sees his opportunity: "He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said, whisper. With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio. Ay, smile upon her, do; I will gyve thee in thine own courtship" (II.i.166-169). But Cassio's courtly behavior alone does not ensure the success of Iago's plans, for part of Iago's scheming turns on Othello's inexperience concerning love and Venetian society. Because Othello harbors doubts about himself, he becomes easily jealous of a man like Cassio who possesses all the social graces that he claims to lack. In this atmosphere of doubt and hostility, the twin prejudices

¹⁶In his discussion of courtesy manuals, Greenblatt notes their relationship to the rhetorical handbooks that were also in vogue during the Renaissance. According to Greenblatt, the former simply built upon the scope of the latter, "offering an integrated rhetoric of self, a model for the formation of an artificial identity" (162). These remarks are suggestive, for I will argue that Cassio's courtly identity is linguistically constituted, inscribed through his particular use of language.

¹⁷For a discussion of platonic love and the courtly ideal, see Bembo's famous speech in Book IV. of The Courtier.

of race and age are allowed to surface once again.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of Cassio's courtesy is his lavish praise of Desdemona, for like Othello, he speaks of her in a manner reminiscent of the various sonnet-cycles of the period. In his role as courtly lover, he constantly idealizes Desdemona's beauty and idolizes her virtues. When Montano asks him if Othello is married, he responds:

Most fortunately. He hath achiev'd a maid
That paragons description and wild fame,
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in th' essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener. (II.i.62-66)

In this passage, Cassio uses the same verbal strategy found in many of the sonnets of Sidney and Petrarch: he greatly praises the woman of his inspiration by strongly insisting that she cannot be praised.¹⁸ When a messenger informs the two men that Desdemona's ship has arrived safely in port, Cassio's language becomes even more hyperbolic as he declares that the sea and the tempest itself "having a sense of beauty, do omit / Their mortal natures, letting go safely by / The divine Desdemona" (II.i.72-74). Now that his magniloquence has elevated Desdemona to the level of a goddess, he instructs the men of the island to react in kind: "O, behold, / The riches of the ship is come on

¹⁸Cassio employs what may be called the "inexpressibility topos," a term coined by Ernst Curtius to describe the emphasis a speaker puts upon his inability "to cope with the subject" (159).

shore! / You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees" (II.i.83-85). As Rosalie Colie points out, Cassio's "welcoming benediction" recalls Aeneas's "O dea certe" as Desdemona emerges like Venus from out of the sea (150). Through this and other speeches, Cassio joins Othello in his idolatry of Desdemona. To their ranks we may even add Roderigo whose obsession with Desdemona allows him to be victimized by Iago's duplicity. In fact, the only character to deflate this ideal image of Desdemona is Iago, her only detractor. When Roderigo declares that Desdemona is "full of the most bless'd condition," Iago punctures this notion by retorting: "Bless'd fig's-end! The wine she drinks is made of grapes" (II.i.49-52).¹⁹

But Cassio's worship of Desdemona contrasts sharply with his scornful treatment of the courtesan, Bianca. Significantly, Cassio's affair with Bianca is entirely Shakespeare's creation, for in Cinthio's novella the lieutenant is a married man.²⁰ While it is not unusual for

¹⁹Because figs are associated with the genitals and sexual activity, Iago's retort is even more hostile than it first appears. While Roderigo argues for the divine ("bless'd condition"), Iago counters with the sexual ("fig's-end!") which he perceives as animalistic. For more on the association between figs and sexuality, see E. A. M. Colman, The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare, London: Longman, 1974, 193 and Janet Adelman, The Common Liar, New Haven: Yale UP, 1973, 204 n.30.

²⁰Although Cassio's counterpart in Cinthio is said to frequent a prostitute, this woman never appears nor is she ever given a name. See Giraldi Cinthio, Gli Hecatommithi, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, Ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, 7:249.

Shakespeare to deviate from a source, such a departure begs an explanation. I contend that through this change, Shakespeare gains the opportunity to juxtapose Cassio's differing treatment of the two women in his life: Desdemona, the object of his praise, and Bianca, the object of his desire. But this contrast should not be viewed as an end in itself, for Cassio's divided attitude toward women is paradigmatic of Othello's own problems with Desdemona.

While Cassio satisfies his psychic need to idealize the female sex by praising Desdemona, he fulfills his sexual desires by visiting the prostitute, Bianca. Although he knows that she is hopelessly in love with him, his treatment of her is careless and patronizing. As Iago informs us, whenever Cassio hears of Bianca, he cannot refrain from excessive laughter. When Iago goads him with the rumor of their marriage, Cassio responds: "I marry her? What? A customer? Prithee, bear some charity to my wit; do not think it so unwholesome. Ha, ha, ha!" (IV.i.120-122). The arrogance and insensitivity that Cassio displays toward Bianca in this and other scenes is disturbing by itself, but when we contrast it with his treatment of Desdemona, the implications become even more alarming. When we examine closely the difference in Cassio's behavior toward the two women, we begin to realize that what he is, in effect, doing is splitting the female

sex into halves, separating virtue from sexuality and dividing the spiritual from the erotic. Thus, he is able to worship Desdemona on the one hand, while centering his sexual desires on a prostitute whom he treats with contempt. This kind of anatomizing of the female sex is a destructive activity, for it denies women their humanity and fails to accept them as whole persons; instead what it does is simply divide them into goddesses and whores which brings us directly back to Othello's problem with Desdemona. Cassio, like Othello, is unable to view the female sex as both virtuous and sexual, both spiritual and erotic, and consequently, Desdemona and all women are forced to move between the polarities of saint and strumpet.

However, this tendency either to idealize or denigrate the female sex is hardly confined to Cassio and Othello, for the same problem may be found among critics who try to reach a conclusion about Desdemona's role in the play. As some commentators have noted, most critics see Desdemona as a woman deserving either great praise or strong censure.²¹ To find unfavorable views of Desdemona's character, we need not look far, for since Thomas Rymer's early condemnation of the play, criticism of Desdemona has

²¹Both Marvin Rosenberg (206) and S. N. Garner (235) make this observation.

been harsh and disapproving.²² One example is A. P. Rossiter who contends that Desdemona is hardly deserving of the idolatry paid her by Othello; he argues instead that she is "pathetic" and "girlish," a "nearly-blank sheet" (206). Continuing in this vein, Bernard Spivack charges that there really is some justice in Iago's scheme to accuse Desdemona of adultery because we may actually believe that she is in love with Cassio (9). But perhaps the most damning criticism of Desdemona's character belongs to W. H. Auden who writes:

Everyone must pity Desdemona, but I cannot bring myself to like her. Her determination to marry Othello -- it was she who virtually did the proposing -- seems the romantic crush of a schoolgirl rather than a mature affection. . . . Though her relation with Cassio is perfectly innocent, one cannot but share Iago's doubts as to the durability of the marriage. . . . Given a few more years of Othello and Emilia's influence and she might well, one feels, have taken a lover.

(268-269)

While this assessment seems extreme, it demands our attention, for it is representative of most of the adverse commentary surrounding Desdemona's character. But while these negative views may appear unusually harsh, they are only one side of the issue, for as Marvin Rosenberg points out, among her supporters, Desdemona is in "grave danger of being canonized" (208). For instance, A. C. Bradley refers to Desdemona as "simple and innocent as a child, ardent

²²In A Short View of Tragedy, Rymer remarks that "there is nothing in the noble Desdemona, that is not below any Countrey Chamber-maid with us" (134).

with the courage and idealism of a saint, radiant with that heavenly purity of heart which men worship the more because nature so rarely permits it to themselves . . ." (168). Adding to this praise, G. Wilson Knight suggests that we may interpret Desdemona as "a symbol of man's ideal, the supreme value of love" (109). Similarly, Robert Heilman sees Desdemona as "the symbolization of spirit" that Iago must ultimately destroy (218). Contrasting these favorable responses with their negative counterparts, we begin to see that most of the criticism involving Desdemona is regrettably polarized and appears to suffer from the same schismatic thinking that dominates both Othello and Cassio. Furthermore, we need to realize that these high praises of Desdemona are just as dangerous and flawed as the criticisms of her character, for as I indicate in my discussions of Othello and Cassio, idealizing the female sex is just as destructive as denigrating it; the form idealizing takes is just more insidious. What the critics, along with Othello and Cassio, fail to understand is that Desdemona is able to integrate both the spiritual and the erotic, that she is both innocent and aggressive at the same time.²³ Thus, an analysis of Desdemona is needed which examines this reconciliation of opposing qualities and which attempts to relate it to the collapse of

²³Both Kirsch (15) and Garner (238) make similar remarks.

Othello's ideal.

When we look at some of Desdemona's speeches, we can understand why many critics portray her as the epitome of purity and devotion. In fact, in the first description we receive of Desdemona, it is her modesty and innocence that is emphasized. When Brabantio, at the play's beginning, attempts to persuade the Council that it is unthinkable that his daughter could love Othello, he describes her as

A maiden never bold;
Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
Blush'd at herself; and she, in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit, everything,
To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!
(I.iii.96-100)

Brabantio, of course, is wrong, but not completely so, for even after Desdemona has followed Othello to Cyprus, her behavior, at times, supports his assessment. Desdemona's girlish nature and lack of experience are perhaps never so clear as in her conversations with the more worldly and cynical Emilia.²⁴ For instance, after Othello falsely accuses her of being a whore, Desdemona confesses to Emilia that she is incapable of speaking the word, let alone performing the act:

I cannot say "whore."
It does abhor me now I speak the word;
To do the act that might the addition earn

²⁴For a discussion of Emilia's role in the play, see Carol Thomas Neely, Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays, New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, 105-135.

Not the world's mass of vanity could make me.
(IV.ii.163-166)

Such a statement, of course, may strike some as hard to believe, but it is spoken with the utmost sincerity and is entirely consistent with her other speeches. For example, in the very next scene, Desdemona goes on to question whether any woman could possibly betray her husband:

Dost thou in conscience think -- tell me, Emilia --
That there be women do abuse their husbands
In such gross kind? (IV.iii.63-65)

When Emilia assures her that such women indeed exist, the reply does not sit too well, and she later tries to dismiss it with a child-like simplicity: "I do not think there is any such woman" (IV.iii.86). While these exchanges emphasize Desdemona's innocence and naivete, they also underline her unfaltering belief in the goodness of humankind, and it is this kind of optimism that enables her to remain devoted to Othello even when she realizes that something has gone dangerously wrong with their marriage. Despite both verbal and physical abuse, she never blames her husband for his actions but instead seeks some rational excuse for his behavior. Perhaps the most striking example of Desdemona's obedience to her husband occurs after he has tried to suffocate her in bed. When Emilia discovers her dying mistress and asks who has done the deed, Desdemona responds: "Nobody; I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!" (V.ii.129-130). This reply not only demonstrates Desdemona's complete fidelity to Othello

but also shows that she is willing to accept some responsibility for what has happened.

If we were to stop our investigation of Desdemona's character with those passages which emphasize her innocence and devotion, we could easily join those critics who wish to see her canonized. But while these qualities are undeniably a part of her character, they are just that -- only a part. As I asserted earlier, Desdemona's character may be seen as combining conflicting qualities, and thus, she is able to integrate both the spiritual and the sexual, both the innocent and the aggressive. Critics need to remind themselves that Desdemona is a young Venetian girl who has escaped the protection of her father's house in order to elope with an older, black man, whose life has consisted of one military campaign after another. The impetus for her actions is undeniably her ardent and steadfast love for Othello, but this love, for her, clearly has a sexual component. As W. H. Auden points out, it is Desdemona who virtually does the proposing, for as Othello tells the Council, it was she who provided the first hint of love: "[She] bade me, if I had a friend who lov'd her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story, / And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake." (I.iii.166-168). But there is no reason why critics should find this gesture threatening or inappropriate; instead, Desdemona may be seen as gently encouraging a man who is inexperienced in

the ways of love.²⁵ While this small example may highlight Desdemona's assertiveness, it is her courage and determination before her father and the Council that proves most revealing in the end. When Brabantio confronts her in the senate-chamber and asks to whom she owes her allegiance, Desdemona responds:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education . . .
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,
And so much duty as my mother show'd
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord. (I.iii.182-191)

As Kirsch points out, Desdemona's words not only recall Cordelia's speech before Lear, but they also evoke "the very cadence of the scriptural injunction to marry: 'For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh' . . ." (14). In defying her father, Desdemona privileges the sexual love of marriage above the familial love of father and daughter. After Brabantio acquiesces, the Duke prepares to send Othello to Cyprus to fight the Ottomites, but Desdemona intervenes and boldly petitions to accompany

²⁵Desdemona's participation in the couple's courtship may be viewed as even bolder if the Folio reading of Othello's Council speech is used. In this version, Othello tells the Senate that for his stories, Desdemona gave him "a world of kisses." But most editors emend this line by adopting the quarto's "a world of sighs," even when they are using the Folio as their copy-text. As Garner notes, a possible reason for this change is that some editors find the Folio reading incompatible with their sense of Desdemona's character (251 n.8).

her husband to the island:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
 My downright violence and storm of fortunes
 May triumph to the world. . .
 I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
 And to his honors and his valiant parts
 Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
 So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
 A moth of peace, and he go to war,
 The rites for why I love him are bereft me,
 And I a heavy interim shall support
 By his dear absence. Let me go with him.
 (I.iii.251-262)

This eloquent plea is a frank expression of her wish to consummate their marriage and live with the man for whom she has sacrificed her former way of life. These lines, as Hugh Richmond notes, demonstrate that Desdemona is "not squeamish about sex" (169), but they also show that, unlike Othello, Desdemona recognizes the importance of sexuality in human life. While Desdemona's behavior in the senate-chamber reveals her ability to exert her will, her assertiveness is by no means limited to the first act. After the action moves to Cyprus, she demonstrates that she can stand up not only to her father and the Council but also to her husband when necessary. This claim is supported not only by her persistent pleading for Cassio (which is excessive at times) but also by her brave

defiance of Othello when he insists that she is a whore.²⁶

After taking this more comprehensive view of Desdemona's character, we begin to see that while at times she appears innocent, naive, and girlish, she is also aggressive, tough-minded, and sexual, and any attempt to emphasize one set of qualities at the expense of the other is misguided and reductive. Some critics may find such a coupling of opposed traits in the same character disturbing, but they need not since such a technique merely adds to the complexity and richness of Desdemona's characterization. This complexity and richness is never made so clear as on the first night in Cyprus when the lovers retire and Iago and Cassio begin the watch:

CASSIO Welcome, Iago. We must to the watch.

IAGO Not this hour, lieutenant; 'tis not ten o' th' clock. Our general cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame. He hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for Jove.

CASSIO She's a most exquisite lady.

IAGO And, I'll warrant, full of game.

CASSIO Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.

²⁶In a recent article, Richard Levin remarks that some critics who praise Shakespeare's female characters end up idealizing them even though they claim to oppose such activity (135). While I have been stressing what I see as Desdemona's virtues, I do not wish to give the impression that I see her as ideal. As I have already indicated, she pleads too strongly for Cassio's reinstatement; furthermore, her attempt to cover up the loss of the handkerchief is dishonest and inappropriate. But these faults do not mar Desdemona's character; instead they support my argument that she should be viewed as "human" not "ideal."

IAGO What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.

CASSIO An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.

IAGO And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?

CASSIO She is indeed perfection. (II.iii.12-25)²⁷

In many ways, the words that the two soldiers exchange in this conversation are highly reflective of their characters. On the one hand, Iago expresses his view of women as sexual objects to be enjoyed and playfully baits Cassio with his amorous descriptions. On the other hand, Cassio, uneasy with the topic of conversation, politely agrees with Iago yet qualifies his statements at the same time. While this conversation may appear incidental to the play's actions, I would argue that it is quite significant for what it subtly conveys about Desdemona's character. Throughout this passage, it is Desdemona's rich sexuality that is emphasized, yet it emerges as natural not

²⁷In praising Desdemona's "eye" and then her voice, Iago and Cassio employ the technique of blason and begin an abbreviated body catalogue. In fact, in his earlier praise of Desdemona, Cassio refers to "the quirks of blazoning pens" (II.i.64). The most famous examples of this poetic strategy may be found in Blasons anatomiques du corps femenin (1543), a French collection in which each poem praises a different part of the female body. But it is important to note the resemblance between this literary division of the female sex and the psychological anatomizing performed by Cassio and Othello. In both cases, the woman is fragmented, divided up into parts and denied her integrity. For a discussion of the dangers of blason, see Nancy Vickers, "'The blazon of sweet beauty's best': Shakespeare's Lucrece," Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, Ed. Patrica Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, New York: Methuen, 1985, 95-115.

perverted, chaste not promiscuous. As Cassio remarks, Desdemona possesses an inviting eye, and yet it is right modest. This statement contains within itself the whole complexity of Desdemona's character -- her ability to combine both the innocent and the sexual. Despite what Desdemona's detractors might say, her chastity throughout the play is indisputable, yet it is the chastity of a Lucrece and not a Diana. Desdemona is a woman who exhibits a vital sexuality, but it is confined to her marital love for Othello, a love that also contains a strong spiritual dimension.²⁸

In the end, it is this love which is both spiritual and sexual that Othello is unable to comprehend just as he is incapable of seeing Desdemona as both innocent and erotic. Instead, Othello, in his inexperience, embraces a dangerous ideal of love that consists of worshiping the beloved while denying her humanity. Because of the fragility of this ideal, Iago is able to bring about its collapse and supplant it with his own cynical view of love which is

²⁸After completing my analysis of Iago and Cassio's conversation, I discovered that W. D. Adamson had also commented upon this scene. In an essay on Desdemona, Adamson claims that when Cassio says "An inviting eye, and yet methinks right modest," he is acknowledging Desdemona's "sexiness," and in this way, "functions to provide an idea of Desdemona's virtuous sexuality" (180). But I think such a reading is in error in light of my discussion of Cassio's divided attitude toward women. I argue instead that Cassio is merely "responding" to Iago's sexual remarks and in the process, ends up speaking truer than he knows.

equally flawed and incomplete. Once Othello begins to see the world through Iago's eyes, Desdemona moves from being his ideal to becoming his victim, the woman who was once his buffer against chaos becomes the vehicle of his own ruin. With the collapse of the lover's ideal, passion begins to take on its original meaning of suffering, a suffering that leads to the violence and degradation of the play's end. But unlike Romeo and Juliet, the deaths of Othello and Desdemona are not an attempt to achieve ideal love and transcend a troubled world; instead they mark the endpoint of a steady process of estrangement and alienation that began once they set foot on Cyprus. While death for Romeo and Juliet becomes a "joining" not a "parting," for Othello and Desdemona it becomes the ultimate form of separation as Othello sees himself damned to hell for his deed: "When we shall meet at compt, / This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven . . ." (V.ii.282-283). In his death speech before the others, Othello advises:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe . . .
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and turban'd Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcized dog,
 And smote him, thus. (V.ii.350-364)

In this preface to his suicide, Othello casts himself

as both victim and perpetrator, and in Oedipus-like fashion, the violence he commits upon himself is an act of both punishment and redemption. In the end, Othello becomes the sworn enemy, the malignant Turk, the destroyer of his own happiness. But in a sense, Othello's horrible deed and the terrible jealousy that drove him to it may be seen as a measure of his love, for only a love as great as Othello's could lead to such a catastrophe. The real horror and pity of the play is that Othello destroys the only true and precious thing in his life, a woman who in her humanness was really more precious than his ideal.

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CHAPTER IV

"THE SIZE OF DREAMING":

LOVE'S RHETORIC IN ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Antony and Cleopatra is one of Shakespeare's most enigmatic plays, a work that constantly undermines its own grounds for interpretation and simultaneously enchants and disillusions its audience.¹ Two competing views, internal to the play, dominate the drama: the Roman view which sees Antony as an emasculated soldier who succumbs to the charms of a bewitching whore and the Egyptian view which sees Antony as a noble figure who rightly sacrifices the empire in order to enjoy his love for Cleopatra. But rather than advocate one view over the other or attempt to reconcile the two, I intend to examine the relationship between love and rhetoric in the play. I wish to argue that in Antony and Cleopatra, the lovers use the power of language to create their own reality and fashion their identities, but like all artful constructs, their love becomes vulnerable

¹In The Common Liar, New Haven: Yale UP, 1973, Janet Adelman discusses the work's amorphous quality and concludes early on that "uncertainty is an essential feature of the play" (14).

to perception, subjectivity, and even revision.²

In his discussion of desire in Shakespeare's plays, Terry Eagleton remarks that "if sexual desire is a physical matter, it is even more (as Shakespeare well appreciates) a question of discourse: sonnets, love letters, verbal fencing, seductive rhetoric" (18). While this statement may aptly describe a number of works in the Shakespeare canon, it has particular resonance for Antony and Cleopatra, for sexual love in this play is predominantly "a question of discourse," a matter of "seductive rhetoric." In Antony and Cleopatra, love is not only the pretext for hyperbolic language, it is also the end result, forming a closed circuit whose beginning cannot be traced. This paradox is illustrated when the lovers first appear on stage:

CLEOPATRA

If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

ANTONY

There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd.

CLEOPATRA

I'll set a bourn how far to be belov'd.

ANTONY

Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth.

(I.i.14-17)

²Other important studies of the play's language include G. Wilson Knight, "The Transcendental Humanism of Antony and Cleopatra," The Imperial Theme, London: Oxford UP, 1931, 199-262 and Rosalie Colie, "Antony and Cleopatra: The Significance of Style," Shakespeare's Living Art, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974, 168-207. In his essay on the play, Knight praises the work's poetry and offers a detailed analysis of its style and imagery. In her study of the tragedy, Colie discusses the relationship between the lovers' "Asiatic" speech and their extravagant behavior.

In this brief exchange, Cleopatra challenges Antony to prove his love for her by quantifying it, by estimating its value through language. Initially, Antony's response is to deny the challenge, to assert that any love that can be measured will, by definition, be found wanting. When Cleopatra insists on being satisfied, Antony shifts from evasion to hyperbole, declaring that his love strains the limits of the world itself. This final reply contains within it the central concern of language throughout the play: the need to "find out new heaven, new earth," the need to describe a love that transcends human boundaries. Faced with the problem of articulating a love that cannot be expressed in human terms, Antony and Cleopatra are forced to create an exalted fiction about themselves which is destroyed several times only to be created again.

Egypt serves as fertile ground for the development of this amorous fiction as it becomes the locus amoenus where Antony and Cleopatra pass the time in sport, drinking, and love-making. As Antony declares in the first scene: "Let Rome in Tiber melt . . . Here is my space" (I.i.33-34). But even the pleasures of Alexandria are not free from the demands of empire-building, and faced with news from Rome, Antony must once again affirm his commitment to Cleopatra:

The nobleness of life
Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair
And such a twain can do 't, in which I bind,
On pain of punishment, the world to weet
We stand up peerless. (I.i.36-40)

This passage, perhaps more than any other, reveals the couple's belief that the greatness of their love makes them exclusive and separate from the rest of humanity.³ But like all illusions, this one also weakens with the passing of time which brings with it changes in mood and perception. Struck with a "Roman thought," Antony discovers that "The present pleasure, / By revolution low'ring, does become / The opposite of itself" (I.ii.128-130). Confronted with Fulvia's death and his own dereliction of duties, Antony no longer sees his stay with Cleopatra as the "nobleness of life" but now sees it as a shameful "dotage" that must be broken at all costs. When he informs Enobarbus of his plans to leave and blames Cleopatra's "cunning" for his idleness, Enobarbus responds with Antony's own hyperbolic language:

Alack, sir, no; her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love. We cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tears; they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report.
(I.ii.150-153)

With this reply, Enobarbus mimics Antony's romantic speech as he idealizes Cleopatra's person beyond human portions. When Antony continues in his resolve to depart, Enobarbus

³In his "Life of Marcus Antonius," Plutarch explains that Antony and Cleopatra "made an order between them which they called Amimetobion (as much to say, 'no life comparable and matchable with it') . . ." (204). After their defeat at Actium, they "set up another, which they called Synapothanumenon (signifying 'the order and agreement of those that will die together') . . ." (267). While Shakespeare makes no mention of these orders, he dramatizes the ideas behind them.

cannot resist reminding him that Cleopatra is "a wonderful piece of work" (I.ii.157-158), but as his own ironic commentary suggests, she is as much a work of the imagination and language as she is of nature itself.

What Antony's interview with Enobarbus makes clear is that in order for the illusion of love to be sustained, both partners must give themselves over to the fiction. When one begins to view the spectacle with different eyes and a changed heart, the illusion becomes in danger of collapsing under its own weight. Cleopatra draws attention to this problem during her quarrel with Antony in the first scene. Doubting Antony's constancy, Cleopatra responds to his "nobleness of life" speech with taunting skepticism:

Excellent falsehood!
 Why did he marry Fulvia, and not love her?
 I'll seem the fool I am not. Antony
 Will be himself. (I.i.41-44)

With this response, Cleopatra demonstrates her ability to see through love's rhetoric and question the fidelity and motives of her lover, but she also realizes that she must continue to participate in the illusion in order to perpetuate it. Thus, she will pretend to be the fool she is not, and Antony will remain the fool that he is. This emphasis on mutual deception for the sake of amorous harmony recalls Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 in which the speaker overlooks his mistress' infidelity and she his age. After recounting the winding course of their deception, the speaker concludes: "Therefore I lie with her, and she with

me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be" (13-14), punning on the very word that connotes both falsehood and sexual union. Consequently, both Cleopatra's speech and Sonnet 138 illustrate the belief that as in politics, deception in love can be a necessary ingredient for stability and survival. Yet it is important to note how widely this play's view of self-deception differs from most of Shakespeare's other works in which deception of any kind is portrayed as either ridiculous or evil. In the end, the play's acceptance of falsehood becomes one of its most prominent features, separating it from the bulk of the Shakespeare canon.

But sexual politics in Antony and Cleopatra goes beyond the need for self-deception and includes direct attempts at manipulation and control. Fearing Antony's departure, Cleopatra sends Alexas to seek him out:

See where he is, who's with him, what he does.
 I did not send you. If you find him sad,
 Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report
 That I am sudden sick. Quick, and return.
 (I.iii.2-5)

In a work entitled A brief and pleasant discourse of duties in Mariage, called the Flower of Friendshippe (1568), Edmund Tilney advises a wife to use her husband's face as a "daylie looking glasse, wherein she ought to be alwayes prying, to see when he is merie, when sad, when content, and when discontent, whereto she must always frame her owne

countenance."⁴ In the passage cited above, Cleopatra's method in love is clearly the inverse of Tilney's patriarchal advice. Unlike a dutiful wife, Cleopatra is not interested in framing her countenance to mirror Antony's disposition but instead desires to influence his mood by confronting him with its opposite. When Charmian suggests that she give way to Antony in all things and cross him in nothing, Cleopatra's response is immediate and unequivocal: "Thou teachest like a fool; the way to lose him" (I.iii.10). Like Shakespeare's Cressida, Cleopatra understands that passion wanes with complacency but increases with conflict. In Troilus and Cressida, the heroine reveals that "Things won are done, joy's soul lies in the doing" (I.ii.289).⁵ Thus, sophisticated in the ways of love, Cleopatra will play the rhetorical games necessary to vex Antony and keep him by her side.

But despite Cleopatra's ploys, Antony leaves her to return to Rome, where Octavius first appears reciting Antony's faults before Lepidus. While Octavius' complaints are many, the blurring of Antony and Cleopatra's sexual identities appears to trouble him the most. As he tells Lepidus, it is reported from Alexandria that Antony "is not

⁴As quoted in Carol Thomas Neeley, Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays, New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, 241 n.5.

⁵For a perceptive analysis of the dynamics of Troilus' relationship with Cressida, see Rene Girard, "The Politics of Desire in Troilus and Cressida," Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, Ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, New York: Methuen, 1985, 188-209.

more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he . . ." (I.iv.5-7). This breakdown in sexual distinctions poses a serious threat to Octavius and the political order that he represents. Without difference there can be no meaning, only confusion, and as the play reveals, Octavius is a figure whose life turns on a series of carefully defined opposites: male and female, reason and emotion, duty and pleasure, Rome and Egypt. But while Octavius' complaint against Antony tells us something about his own character, it may also offer some insight into Antony's decision to leave Egypt without delay. Antony's relationship with Cleopatra, as Octavius' report testifies, is one of great intimacy, but with such closeness comes the danger of losing one's identity, the fear that one may be absorbed by one's lover.⁶ Fearing this loss of self, Antony returns to Rome, a male-dominated world, but the pull of his rhetorical fantasy in Egypt will reassert itself once again. While one can never get too close to one's illusions, one can never stray too far, and Antony's separation from Cleopatra only serves to increase his

⁶In her discussion of the play, Constance Brown Kuriyama remarks that the association of Cleopatra with snakes and biting "strongly suggests the fantasy of the vagina dentata, a fearful misconception of female genitalia sometimes arising during childhood" (333). This psychological insight complements my own claim that Antony fears being devoured by Cleopatra's love.

former passion.⁷

But if Antony is willing to submit himself to a love that forces him to redefine his identity according its fiction, Octavius in his pursuit of political dominance will have none of it. Although he tells Lepidus, "Let's grant it is not / Amiss to tumble on the bed of Ptolemy . . ." (I.iv.16-17), he is disturbed by the sexual power that Cleopatra represents, and part of his fear must stem from the knowledge that Cleopatra once subdued the man he calls his father. Although he is actually Julius Caesar's adopted nephew, Octavius sees himself as the rightful heir to Caesar's legacy. Thus, when Antony and Cleopatra are enthroned in the marketplace, he is particularly galled to hear that at their feet sat "Caesarion, whom they call my father's son . . ." (III.vi.6). But Octavius' aversion is not limited to sexual matters, for it appears to encompass pleasure itself. When Antony offers him a toast aboard Pompey's galley, Octavius responds: "I could well forbear 't / It's monstrous labor when I wash my brain / And it grows fouler" (II.vii.97-99). After the allies perform their drunken dance to Dionysus, Octavius ends the festivities by reminding his partners that "Our graver

⁷In Antony's absence, Cleopatra experiences her own crisis of self. As Barbara Estrin points out, while Cleopatra may contemplate her future and recall her past, she "can find no present -- no being -- without Antony" (181).

business / Frowns at this levity" (II.vii.119-120). What these isolated incidents show is Octavius' inability to surrender himself to situations that make him vulnerable. Both drinking and sexual activity require a relinquishing of control and a willingness to steep one's sense "In soft and delicate Lethe" (II.vii.107). By cultivating a rigid and austere nature, Octavius remains incomplete and compromises his humanity.⁸ But the purpose of this analysis is not to register an ethical judgment of Octavius' character; rather its aim is to show how Octavius' reserve makes it impossible for him to understand the rhetorical illusion that Antony has created in Egypt. Like Rome itself, Octavius remains sterile and unimaginative, eschewing the opulence and sensuality that characterize the lovers' fantasy in Alexandria. The only time that Octavius participates in the couple's amorous fiction is after their deaths when it is no longer a threat to his power. Commenting on Cleopatra's suicide, he remarks that "She shall be buried by her Antony / No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous" (V.ii.357-359). But Octavius' attempt to exalt the lovers

⁸According to the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, there were three kinds of life: the contemplative, the active, and the pleasurable, and three paths to happiness: wisdom, power, and pleasure. Ficino believed that to choose one of these ways at the exclusion of the others was not only foolish but even dangerous. See Edgar Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, London: Faber and Faber, 1968, 82.

in death is merely empty rhetoric, for he quickly tempers his praise with references to his own glory and triumph. In the end, Octavius' eulogy is not an acknowledgement of the lovers' fiction but a form of lip-service that indicates his distance from it.

In refusing the fantasy of Egypt, Octavius clings to an ideal of discipline and self-denial, qualities whose loss in Antony he bitterly laments:

Antony,

Leave thy lascivious wassails. When thou once
Was beaten from Modena . . .

Thou didst drink

The stale of horses, and the gilded puddle
Which beasts would cough at. . .

On the Alps

It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,
Which some did die to look on. And all this --
It wounds thine honor that I speak it now --
Was borne so like a soldier . . . (I.iv.56-71)

But the heroic fortitude and military prowess that Antony exhibited at Modena are really no longer valued in Rome; instead they have been replaced by the deceit and political scheming best exemplified by Octavius himself. While Octavius' acts of "policy" include assassinating Pompey and stripping Lepidus of his power, only his attempt to marry his sister to Antony is dramatized. The marriage is, of course, one of political convenience; as Agrippa tells Octavius and Antony, its purpose is "To hold you in perpetual amity, / To make you brothers, and to knit your hearts / With an unslipping knot . . ." (II.ii.132-134). But a marriage based on political expediency rather than

love remains a sterile contract as Antony demonstrates when he speaks of it as "The business we have talk'd of" (II.ii.176). Because the marriage is treated like a commercial transaction, Octavia is reduced to a commodity passed between two males and is referred to variously as the "hoop" that will hold Antony and Octavius staunch (II.ii.122), the "cement" that will solidify their alliance (III.ii.29), or the "ram" that will break it apart (III.ii.30). Enobarbus is the first to express his fear that Antony's marriage to Octavia will threaten rather than strengthen the newly established peace. As he tells Menas, "But you shall find the band that seems to tie their friendship together will be the very strangler of their amity" (II.vi.119-121). Yet Shakespeare never makes it clear whether this is Octavius' plan all along; although Octavius' duplicity suggests such a reading, we are never allowed to make an absolute judgment.⁹ But regardless of his intentions, the marriage that Octavius arranges underlines once again the antithesis between Roman and Egypt; while Antony and Cleopatra express an exuberance for life that is reflected in their lavish speech, Octavia is

⁹Despite the lack of textual evidence and Octavius' apparent sympathy for his sister, most critics remain convinced that Octavius uses Octavia as a political pawn in his conflict with Antony. Harold Goddard claims that "By convincing us of the sincerity of his love for his sister [Octavius] multiplies many times the ignominy of his sacrifice of her to his career . . . He does not ask whether it is worse to give up one's empire to a whore or give up one's sister to an empire" (186).

described as being of a "holy, cold, and still conversation" (II.vi.122-123), a nature that is directly opposed to the verbal self-fashioning that takes place in Alexandria.¹⁰

While Antony's return to Rome allows him to forge an uneasy alliance with Octavius, it also gives Enobarbus the opportunity to describe their sumptuous life in Alexandria. When Agrippa speaks of Cleopatra's appearance on the river of Cydnus, Enobarbus responds with his famous panegyric to the Egyptian queen:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
 Burnt on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were love-sick with them, the oars were
 silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster,
 As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
 It beggar'd all description; she did lie
 In her pavilion -- cloth-of-gold of tissue --
 O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature. On each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
 With divers-color'd fans, whose wind did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did. (II.ii.200-215)

Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra's arrival is indeed a piece of wonder, so dazzling and hypnotic in its effects that it begins to take the shape of a mirage arising off the Grecian waters. Commenting on the passage, Janet Adelman remarks that through the use of paradox,

¹⁰For further comment on Octavia and her marriage to Antony, see Carol Thomas Neely, Shakespeare's Broken Nuptials, New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, 142-145.

Shakespeare "transforms Plutarch's beautiful but entirely probable description into something rich and strange" (115). Similarly, Maynard Mack asserts that Enobarbus' various descriptions of Cleopatra in this scene ("she did make defect perfection") compose not "a portrait of a mere intriguing woman, but a kind of absolute oxymoron" (17). But "paradox" and "oxymoron" are tropes, and their presence in Enobarbus' speech helps us to recognize a central point -- that his composite description of Cleopatra is really an artful construct, an elaborate product of eloquence. To paradox and oxymoron, we may add another rhetorical device, hyperbole, which reaches its apex when we hear Enobarbus declare that the air itself "but for vacancy" would have gone to see Cleopatra in her barge and "made a gap in nature" (II.ii.226-228). This claim is Enobarbus' most extravagant attempt at conveying Cleopatra's powerful attraction, and it actually culminates a number of smaller assertions that he makes about nature succumbing to desire. At the beginning of his speech, he informs his listeners that the winds were "love-sick" with the barge's perfumed sails and that the water was so "amorous" of the silver oars that it followed them all the faster. The effect of such remarks is to suggest that Cleopatra imbues the entire barge with her own irresistible magnetism, but despite the magnificence of Enobarbus' description, it actually tells us very little about Cleopatra's erotic power. As auditors

of Enobarbus' speech, we are so overwhelmed by images of burnished thrones, golden poops, and smiling Cupids that we almost fail to realize that the woman at the center of all this splendor remains oddly nondescript. While Enobarbus takes pleasure in providing careful details about the barge and its passengers, he balks when it comes to describing Cleopatra herself: "For her own person, / It beggar'd all description . . ." Like Antony in scene one, Enobarbus shifts from hyperbole to evasion when it comes to articulating Cleopatra's mystique. Using the word "beggar," both men stress the inadequacy of language and argue that words only devalue, not enrich, those things that defy human expression. In a sense, such evasion is a form of hyperbole, for like Antony, Enobarbus lavishes Cleopatra with greater praise by insisting that words cannot do her justice. But at the same time, this technique has an even subtler effect: it allows the speaker to avoid humanizing that which he wishes to remain mysterious; in this way the ideal of the beloved as someone who exceeds human comprehension is protected and preserved. Enobarbus' only other comment about Cleopatra is that she over-pictured "that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork

nature,"¹¹ but the artifice of his speech reveals that the fancy which outworks nature is really his own imagination and the rhetorical fiction that it creates. In the end, Cleopatra remains as indefinite as Antony's description of the alligator, and like the bewildered Octavius, we cannot help but wonder: "Will this description satisfy . . ." (II.vii.51).

Enobarbus ends his discussion of Cleopatra by asserting:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where she most satisfies . . . (II.ii.245-248)

In stressing Cleopatra's eternal appeal, Enobarbus devises a male fantasy involving a woman who not only satisfies sexual desire but renews it to fulfill it again and again. Using the power of metaphor, he characterizes Cleopatra as a piece of food, something to be relished and consumed. Even Cleopatra sees herself in this way; when she speaks of her sexual conquests of Caesar and Pompey the Great, she calls herself "A morsel for a monarch" (I.v.32). But unlike normal food (or women), Cleopatra does not exhaust the appetite, for she stimulates desire while providing

¹¹In the "Life of Marcus Antonius," Plutarch's description of Cleopatra reads as follows: "And now for the person of herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess of Venus commonly drawn in picture . . ." (201). While this passage states only that Cleopatra was dressed like Venus, Shakespeare's version suggests that Cleopatra's beauty surpasses that of the goddess of love.

constant pleasure. Pompey develops this equation between sexuality and eating even further when he calls Antony an "amorous surfeiter" (II.i.33) who sits at dinner in Egypt and will not do battle outside of the bedroom door (II.i.11-13). Pompey continues the association aboard his galley when his remarks about Egyptian cooking segue into a digression concerning Cleopatra's affair with Caesar (II.vi.62-70). In light of these repeated parallels between feasting and sexual pleasure, it is fitting that Enobarbus ends the scene aboard Pompey's ship by proclaiming that Antony "will to his Egyptian dish again" (II.vi.126).¹²

But while Enobarbus is confident of Antony's return to Alexandria, Cleopatra is not, and after attacking the messenger who tells her of Antony's marriage, she appears to die with the celerity joked about in Act I. Feeling faint, Cleopatra is led away, and for one brief instant she is willing to forsake Antony, but this thought is reclaimed as quickly as it is uttered:

Let him for ever go! -- Let him not, Charmian!
 Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon,
 The other way's a Mars. (II.v.115-117)

In characterizing Antony as a perspective painting whose interpretation shifts with point of view, Cleopatra draws attention to the play's own protean ability to produce

¹²For further discussion of the play's food imagery, see Maurice Charney, Shakespeare's Roman Plays: The Function of Imagery in the Drama, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961, 102-107.

multiple readings based on one's particular angle of vision. But more importantly, Cleopatra reveals the conflict between her desire to see Antony as a god and her fear that he is really a monster, for throughout the play, her admiration for his virtue is tempered by her doubts about his constancy. Thus, when she hears of his marriage to Octavia, she immediately perceives it as a monstrous betrayal, an act reflecting the worst side of his nature. But her use of the word "Gorgon" may have more significance than this reading indicates. In her discussion of rhetoric in Lucrece, Nancy Vickers, quoting the Italian humanist Coluccio Salutati, identifies the Gorgon Medusa with "'artful eloquence'" (110). She points out that Socrates makes the same identification in the Symposium when he compares Agathon to the rhetorician Gorgias: "'I was afraid that when Agathon got near the end he would arm his speech against mine with the Gorgon's head of Gorgias's eloquence, and strike me as dumb as a stone'" (110). This pairing of eloquence with the Gorgon is quite suggestive, for it exposes the danger of rhetoric and its power to dazzle, deceive, and dumbfound. Thus, Antony is not only a renowned soldier ("a Mars") but a skillful rhetorician ("a Gorgon") who through the power of language creates a "stunning" fiction that he seems to abandon with his

marriage to Octavia.¹³

But if Antony's identification with the Gorgon (and hence, artful eloquence) resonates with a richness of meaning, so too does his association with Mars which is repeated several times throughout the play. When Cleopatra asks Mardian, her eunuch, if he is capable of experiencing passion, he confesses that he has "fierce affections" and thinks of "What Venus did with Mars" (I.v.18-19). Without commenting on this response, Cleopatra immediately thinks of Antony: "O Charmian, / Where think'st thou he is now? Stands he, or sits he? / Or does he walk? Or is he on his horse? / O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!" (I.v.19-22). Significantly, Mardian's reference to the union of Venus and Mars prompts Cleopatra to allude to her own sexual activity with Antony, revealing that in her mind, she and Antony belong to the same tradition of noble lovers. According to their amorous fiction, Antony is the mighty god of war, and she is the beautiful goddess of love.¹⁴ But while this association contributes to the

¹³Although Antony's reputation is primarily that of the lover/soldier, his rhetorical skills are evident throughout the play and are even more obvious in Julius Caesar. As Rosalie Colie notes, Antony was not an "official" orator, but he had, according to Plutarch, studied the art of rhetoric in Athens (173).

¹⁴Although Antony and Cleopatra are associated primarily with Mars and Venus, Antony is also compared to Hercules, and Cleopatra is linked with Isis. For discussions of these associations, see Eugene M. Waith, The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare, and Dryden, London: Chatto and Windus, 1962 and Michael Lloyd, "Cleopatra as Isis," Shakespeare Survey 12 (1959): 88-94.

lovers' apotheosis, it also emphasizes the ambiguity of their relationship, for like Venus and Mars, their affair may be read as either an example of great love or shameful seduction.¹⁵

For those who condemn the couple's love, Antony's passion for Cleopatra represents a loss of masculinity. This view is expressed at the play's beginning when Philo complains to Demetrius:

Nay, but this dotage of our general's
 O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,
 That o'er the files and musters of the war
 Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
 The office and devotion of their view
 Upon a tawny front. . .
 Take but good note, and you shall see in him
 The triple pillar of the world transform'd
 Into a strumpet's fool. (I.i.1-13)

In Philo's eyes, Antony's love for Cleopatra, like Mars' for Venus, signifies a loss of military prowess and a descent into lust and idleness.¹⁶ Like Mars, Antony is the victim of an attractive but unscrupulous woman, who strips men of their virtue. As L. T. Fitz points out, Cleopatra is seen by her detractors as "the archetypal woman: practicer of feminine wiles, mysterious, childlike, long on passion and short on intelligence -- except for a sort of

¹⁵For other discussions of the Venus and Mars myth in Antony and Cleopatra, see Raymond B. Waddington, "Antony and Cleopatra: 'What Venus Did with Mars'," Shakespeare Studies 2 (1966): 210-227 and Janet Adelman, The Common Liar, New Haven: Yale UP, 1973, 78-101.

¹⁶The relationship between sloth and sexual indulgence suggested by Philo's speech is carefully examined by J. Leeds Barroll in "Antony and Pleasure," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 57 (1958): 708-720.

animal cunning" (298). This view of Cleopatra as seductive whore and Antony as impotent soldier appears to derive its strongest support from Cleopatra herself. While recounting her past adventures with Antony, Cleopatra expresses her fondness for one night in particular:

That time -- O times! --
 I laugh'd him out of patience; and that night
 I laugh'd him into patience. And next morn,
 Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed,
 Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
 I wore his sword Philippan. (II.v.18-23)

Like Venus' triumph over Mars, this incident may be read as an example of symbolic emasculation as we hear how Cleopatra took Antony's sword, an obvious phallic symbol, and dressed him in her own feminine clothing.¹⁷ Not only does Cleopatra take the sword that Antony used to defeat Brutus at Philippi, but she drinks her lover to bed, an act typically viewed as masculine. Yet the question remains whether Cleopatra's subduing of Antony may, like Venus' taming of Mars, be viewed as something positive and good, whether in a radically different context, it may be seen as the union of love and virtue.

¹⁷Cleopatra's disarming of Antony has its origin not only in the myth of Venus and Mars but in the story of Hercules and Omphale. In "The Comparison of Demetrius with Antonius," Plutarch explains that "we see in painted tables, where Omphale secretlie stealeth away Hercules clubbe, and tooke his Lyons skinne from him. Even so Cleopatra oftentimes unarmed Antonius, and intised him to her, making him lose matters of great importaunce" (319). Shakespeare also had a contemporary analogue for this incident in the Artegall/Radigund episode appearing in Book V. of Spenser's The Faerie Queene.

In his discussion of Raphael's the Dream of Scipio and its companion piece, The Three Graces, Edgar Wind offers the following commentary:

While the hero is advised [in the Dream of Scipio] to adopt a rule of action by which he subordinates his pleasure to his duties, he is here invited [in The Three Graces] to soften those severities and allow virtue to come to fruition in joy. The discipline of Scipio is only one side of the picture; the other is his affectionate liberality. Virtus and Amor belong together. (85)

While an iconographic study of Raphael's paintings may appear to take us far from Shakespeare's play, Wind's analysis may actually help deepen our understanding of Antony and Cleopatra's love, especially his remarks that virtue comes to completion in pleasure and therefore should be reconciled with love. As Wind explains, the combining of love and nobility is represented by the union of Venus and Mars which produces the daughter Harmony:

"Born from the god of strife and the goddess of love, she inherits the contrary characters of her parents: Harmonia est discordia concors" (86).¹⁸ Thus, the victory of Venus over Mars, the triumph of love over strife, precipitates the birth of peace and unity in the world. As Wind points out, the many Renaissance idylls depicting Venus' conquest

¹⁸Significantly, the idea that harmony is achieved through the yoking of opposites (love and strife) has its basis in Plutarch's own theory of the Venus and Mars myth which appears in his essay "Isis and Osiris": "The beliefs of the Greeks are well known to all . . . and they rehearse a legend that Concord is sprung from Aphrodite and Ares, the one of whom is harsh and and contentious, and the other mild and tutelary" (117).

of Mars express this version of the myth, for they "all celebrate this peaceable hope: that Love is more powerful than Strife; that the god of war is inferior in strength to the goddess of grace and amiability" (89). Placed in the context of Wind's perceptive commentary, Cleopatra's triumph over Antony no longer represents symbolic emasculation alone but also signifies the necessary joining of aggression with love. Like the coupling of Venus and Mars, the union of Cleopatra and Antony epitomizes the triumph of love over strife and the reconciliation of virtue with pleasure. Shakespeare emphasizes these ideas when he provides another version of Cleopatra's erotic power. After hearing Enobarbus' exalted praise of Cleopatra, Agrippa exclaims:

Royal wench!

She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed;
He plough'd her, and she cropp'd. (II.ii.236-238)

Unlike Cleopatra's story about drinking Antony to bed, Agrippa's speech is unambiguous and is delivered in a manner that reveals both fascination and approval. In Agrippa's account, Cleopatra does not unman Caesar but instead testifies to his virility by bearing him a son; in this version, Cleopatra does not take her lover's sword but instead transforms it from a weapon of destruction into an instrument of fecundity. In the space of three lines, Agrippa changes Cleopatra from a cunning seductress (the Venus Vulgarius) to a fertile woman (the Venus Genetrix).

Agrippa's remarks demonstrate the human impulse to interpret and hence rewrite events according to one's point of view, an impulse that also manifests itself in the various Renaissance idylls depicting Venus' triumph over Mars. For example, in Francesco Cossa's fresco, the Triumph of Venus, the emphasis is on Mars' bondage as he is shown kneeling before Venus' throne to which he is chained as her captive. But in Veronese's painting of Venus and Mars, this chain is replaced by a flimsy handkerchief tied by a winged cupid and joining the lovers at the calf. In the idylls of Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo, the fetter of love disappears completely as Mars is portrayed fast asleep, apparently exhausted after a night of love-making with Venus.¹⁹ By stressing either bondage or mutuality, these painters offer their own version of the Venus and Mars myth, and it is this artistic process that lies at the heart of Shakespeare's play, for Antony and Cleopatra create their own myth of love which they, other characters, and even the play's audience must continually interpret and revise.

The ability to create an image of something from one perspective, only to change it from another, is even illustrated on a minor scale with Octavia. In Rome, Octavius' characterization of his sister as a "piece of

¹⁹For a more detailed discussion of each of these paintings, see Edgar Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, London: Faber and Faber, 1968, 89-91.

virtue" is, not surprisingly, confirmed again and again. In an attempt to offset the praises attributed Cleopatra by Enobarbus, Maecenas calls Octavia a blessed gift of "beauty, wisdom, [and] modesty" (II.ii.251-253) that Antony is fortunate to receive. Even Enobarbus' depreciation of Octavia as being of a "holy, cold, and still conversation" (II.vi.122-123) is turned by Menas into a list of desirable qualities to seek in a wife. But when the action shifts to Egypt, Octavia's image is transformed through the power of language into something less than attractive. After the Messenger explains that Octavia is short and low-voiced, Cleopatra expresses relief, confident that Antony cannot love someone who is "Dull of tongue, and dwarfish" (III.iii.17). Still fearing punishment, the Messenger quickly catches on to this little game of words and adjusts his speech accordingly. In a parody of Enobarbus' famous description of Cleopatra, the Messenger tells us that Octavia does not walk, "She creeps," her face is "Round even to faultiness," and her forehead is "As low as she would wish it" (III.iii.19-36). Like Enobarbus, he crafts a description that not only satisfies its audience but calls attention to its own rhetorical power. Through verbal manipulation, both Cleopatra and the Messenger reduce Octavia from a sexual threat to a harmless caricature.

But Cleopatra's concern is unwarranted, for Antony is

quick to leave his new wife at the first provocation from Octavius. While Shakespeare does not dramatize the lovers' reunion, he does show them preparing for their battle at Actium, a battle that ends in defeat and humiliation. But while Antony's flight at sea marks the beginning of his decline, it also underlines his commitment to Cleopatra. As he tells her after their retreat:

Egypt, thou knew'st too well
My heart was to thy rudder tied by th' strings,
And thou shouldst tow me after. (III.ix.55-57)

In writing this passage, Shakespeare may have been influenced by Plutarch's comment that Antony's conduct at Actium proved "true that which an old man spake in mirth: that the soul of a lover lived in another body, and not in his own" (258). But unlike Plutarch's mocking criticism whose purpose is to stress Antony's loss of honor, Shakespeare's passage allows us to see that Antony's flight from battle is not only an index of his shame but a measure of his love for Cleopatra. Because of this love, Antony is capable of forgiving the woman he believes has undone him. After Cleopatra asks several times for pardon, Antony finally relents:

Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates
All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss,
Even this repays me. (III.x.68-70)

Once again, we see the ability of words to modify a situation, as Antony rates one of Cleopatra's tears equal with the battle's outcome and makes her kiss adequate

payment for all that is lost. Through the strength of hyperbole, Antony transforms his shame into a lover's badge and makes his attachment to Cleopatra worth the loss of the empire.

But the compassion and forgiveness of the lovers' reconciliation is soon shattered in the Thidias episode when Antony fiercely criticizes Cleopatra and has Octavius' messenger whipped. While this scene is usually interpreted as further evidence of Antony's loss of honor, it is more important for its insights into Antony's change of rhetoric. When Antony enters the scene and sees Thidias kissing Cleopatra's hand, he flies into a violent rage which leads not only to Thidias' whipping but a series of lacerating remarks directed at Cleopatra:

Ah, you kite! (III.xiii.90)

You were half blasted ere I knew you. (III.xiii.106)

You have been a boggler ever. (III.xiii.111)

I found you as a morsel cold upon
Dead Caesar's trencher; nay, you were a fragment
Of Cneius Pompey's . . . (III.xiii.117-119)

With this savage attack, Antony's rhetoric dips from the supernatural to the subhuman as he portrays Cleopatra as old, corrupt, deceptive, and predatory. In a perversion of Enobarbus' metaphor of sex as nourishment, Antony no longer portrays Cleopatra as exotic food that never cloy the appetite but now describes her as a discarded scrap, a cold leftover found on the plates of previous lovers. While

many critics find Antony's outburst excessive and unjustified, his hostile treatment of Thidias and Cleopatra may be better understood in light of his mounting fears regarding age and sexual betrayal.

Perhaps more than any other scene, the Thidias episode stresses Antony's decline in both years and fortune and contrasts it sharply with Octavius's youth and inevitable triumph. Before Thidias even appears, Antony tells Cleopatra that she may save herself by sending his "grizzled head" to "the boy Caesar" (III.xiii.17). With this comment, Antony emphasizes his greater years and appears to influence Cleopatra's later remarks concerning her own loss of youth. When Thidias arrives without proper introduction, Cleopatra cries: "What, no more ceremony? See, my women! / Against the blown rose may they stop their nose / That kneel'd unto the buds" (III.xiii.38-40). Significantly, Cleopatra links her loss of youth with a loss of respect; like the decaying rose whose beauty has faded, she no longer commands the attention she received in her younger days.²⁰ Aware of this double loss of youth and respect, Antony attempts to reassert his power by

²⁰In his "Life of Marcus Antonius," Plutarch states that Cleopatra "went to Antonius at the age when a woman's beauty is at the prime, and she also of best judgement" (200). But in Shakespeare's play, Cleopatra is no longer so youthful; this point is emphasized in Act I when she refers to herself as "wrinkled deep in time" and recalls her "salad days" when she was "green in judgement" (I.v.30,76-77).

having Thidias whipped. When his servants are slow to respond, he declares: "Now, gods and devils! / Authority melts from me. . . Have you no ears? -- I am Antony yet" (III.xiii.90-93). But despite his claim that he is still his former self, Antony realizes that his power is at its twilight and that his best days are behind him. As he tells Thidias: "Get thee back to Caesar . . . Look thou say / He makes me angry with him; for he seems / Proud and disdainful, harping on what I am, / Not what he knew I was" (III.xiii.140-144).

But Antony's anger is not engendered by Caesar's arrogance alone, for Antony also fears that Octavius' military triumph will be a sexual one. It is no accident that Antony evokes the names of Julius Caesar and Cneius Pompey during his attack on Cleopatra, for Antony fears that like these dead lovers, he too will be supplanted by a younger man. Because of his sexual anxiety, Antony perceives Thidias as an extension of Octavius, the youthful rival that will take his place in Cleopatra's bed. Consequently, like all jealous lovers, he becomes possessive and domineering, willing to dilate the smallest gesture into the greatest offense. Thus, he chastises Cleopatra for letting Thidias kiss her hand, his "playfellow" (III.xiii.126), and equates the act with

infidelity itself.²¹ His jealous rage reaches its peak when he exclaims: O, that I were / Upon the hill of Basan, to outroar / The horned herd! For I have savage cause" (III.xiii.127-129). With this angry declaration, Antony reveals that although he is not married to Cleopatra, he sees himself as a betrayed husband, an older man cuckolded by a younger suitor. In order to regain his honor and reaffirm his potency, Antony has Thidias whipped, and he uses this punishment as a way to strip Thidias of his manhood. When the servants come to take Thidias away, Antony instructs them to whip him "Till, like a boy, you see him cringe his face, / And whine aloud for mercy" (III.xiii.101-102). When they return and report that Thidias did indeed cry for pardon, Antony humiliates him further by stating: "If that thy father live, let him repent / Thou wast not made his daughter" (III.xiii.35-36). In this way, Antony eliminates Thidias as a sexual threat by first reducing him to a boy and then a woman.²² But Antony's jealous anger is not completely purged until Cleopatra reaffirms her love and constancy.

²¹This tendency to attribute crucial significance to an "apparently" minor event also occurs in Othello when the Moor perceives the loss of his wife's handkerchief as the "ocular proof," the undeniable sign of her guilt and betrayal.

²²While I attempt to explain Antony's rage in terms of sexual jealousy, it should be noted that his anger also has a social cause, for he is disturbed that Cleopatra would allow a mere servant ("one that ties [Caesar's] points") the privilege of kissing her hand.

When Antony accuses Cleopatra of being cold-hearted, she responds: "Ah, dear, if it be so . . . let heaven engender hail . . . and the first stone / drop in my neck"

(III.xiii.159-162). Only by calling upon herself a curse of destruction is Cleopatra able to satisfy Antony's anger and allay his fears. Confident once again of Cleopatra's loyalty, Antony is willing to recreate their former myth of love, casting himself as the lover/soldier ready to do battle for his beloved: "If from the field I shall return once more / To kiss these lips, I will appear in blood; / I and my sword will earn our chronicle. / There's hope in 't yet" (III.xiii.174-177). Prompted by Antony's new-found spirit, Cleopatra reacts in kind, declaring that "since my lord / Is Antony again, I will be Cleopatra"

(III.xiii.187-188). Thus, both protagonists assume their former roles and reinvest themselves in an amorous fiction that moments before appeared incapable of resurrection.²³

In the ensuing battle against Octavius, Antony maintains and intensifies his image as the lover/soldier. In a highly symbolic scene before the day's battle, both Cleopatra and Eros help Antony arm for the coming conflict.

²³Once again, reference to Othello may prove illuminating, for unlike Antony, the Moor is never capable of accepting his lover's innocence once he has called it into question; in fact, any mention of her goodness only increases his jealous anger. Ironically, Othello's tragedy stems from his inability to reaffirm his former love for Desdemona while Antony's downfall is caused by his repeated willingness to resume an affair that is dangerous and illusory.

Appearing to embody both love and virtue, Antony fights heroically and proves for one brief moment that he can "tumble on the bed of Ptolemy" (I.iv.17) and still beat Octavius' forces "to their beds" (IV.viii.19). But there is one significant figure who fails to share in Antony's temporary triumph over Octavius and that is the character of Enobarbus who has revolted to the other side. Before joining the Roman camp, Enobarbus questions his loyalty to Antony but decides to stay with him to the end. As he reasons in one of his asides:

Mine honesty and I begin to square.
 The loyalty well held to fools does make
 Our faith mere folly; yet he that can endure
 To follow with allegiance a fall'n lord
 Does conquer him that did his master conquer,
 And earns a place i' th' story. (III.xiii.41-46)

Significantly, Enobarbus sees life as a "story," a narrative, in which one tries to make an impression or earn "a place" by playing one's part well. Such a conception of life is important, for it presupposes that the world and one's role in it may be shaped and fashioned by one's actions. This concept is particularly relevant for understanding Antony and Cleopatra's love, for as I have argued throughout, the protagonists attempt, through the power of rhetoric, to create their own story or personal narrative. But what is especially intriguing about Enobarbus' speech is his noticeable concern for how others will, in sense, "read" his "story" or life.

When Enobarbus first appears in the Roman camp, he is

already regretting his decision to leave Antony. During a brief soliloquy, he laments Octavius' treachery as he recounts how his new master has either killed or mistreated those that have revolted from the Egyptian side. But a soldier interrupts his soliloquy to tell him that Antony has sent his treasure after him despite his betrayal. By juxtaposing the soldier's message with Enobarbus' soliloquy, Shakespeare contrasts Antony's great-heartedness with Octavius' cruelty, a distinction made throughout the play.²⁴ Upon hearing of Antony's generosity, Enobarbus' regret turns to bitter self-loathing as he curses his villainy and longs for death. But before he dies, Enobarbus expresses once again his concern for how others will view his "story," for he realizes that the "place" he has "earned" is an ignoble one and that he has played his part without honor. In his apostrophe to the moon, he cries:

Be witness to me, O thou blessed moon,
 When men revolted shall upon record
 Bear hateful memory, poor Enobarbus did
 Before thy face repent! (IV.ix.9-12)

Overcome with shame, Enobarbus tries desperately to avoid the legacy of those that choose to play the role of

²⁴Shakespeare continually emphasizes Antony's generosity, especially in the scene after Actium when Antony urges some of his followers to take his treasure and escape (III.xi.4-6). As Plutarch explains in his "Life of Marcus Antonius," "that which most procured [Antony's] rising and advancement was his liberality, who gave all to the soldiers and kept nothing for himself" (178).

traitor. But after addressing the moon, Enobarbus directs his pleas to the man he has wronged:

O Antony,
 Nobler than my revolt is infamous,
 Forgive me in thy own particular,
 But let the world rank me in register
 A master-leaver and a fugitive. (IV.ix.21-25)

Realizing that he cannot rewrite his story or influence its reading after his death, Enobarbus no longer wishes to change world opinion; instead he accepts his infamy as punishment and seeks to be remembered well only by Antony. After delivering this speech, Enobarbus dies, apparently overcome by remorse, but his preoccupation with how others will interpret his life's "story" looks forward to the play's end, for Antony and Cleopatra will exhibit the same concern, though on a much larger scale, before their deaths.²⁵

Ironically, Enobarbus' death is followed by Cleopatra's alleged betrayal. When the Egyptian fleet joins forces with the enemy, Antony immediately accuses Cleopatra of treachery although there is no evidence to

²⁵While I discuss Enobarbus' betrayal and death in terms of his belief that one's life is a story interpreted by others, there are other discussions worth noting. For example, Janet Adelman points out that Enobarbus' death "not only deprives us of our most skeptical spokesman; it also teaches us precisely the cost of skepticism" (131). In addition, Peter Erickson explains that "The overall effect of Enobarbus's departure is to highlight Antony's relationship to Cleopatra and to reduce the importance of male bonds . . ." (128). Erickson's remark is particularly suggestive, for after Enobarbus' desertion, Eros becomes Antony's companion, a character whose symbolic value needs no commentary.

support this conclusion. Stung by Cleopatra's apparent duplicity, Antony equates her military betrayal with a sexual one as his former jealousy returns: "Triple-turn'd whore! Tis thou / Hast sold me to this novice, and my heart / Makes only wars on thee" (IV.xii.13-15).

Significantly, Antony calls Cleopatra a "Triple-turn'd whore," a woman who has been unfaithful to three men, Cneius Pompey, Julius Caesar, and now himself; he also continues to refer to Octavius as a younger rival, calling him the "novice" to whom he has been "sold." When Cleopatra comes upon the scene, his former love turns to violence: "Ah, thou spell! Avaunt! . . . Vanish, or I shall give thee thy deserving, / And blemish Caesar's triumph" (IV.xii.30-33). Even after she departs, he continues to threaten her life: "The witch shall die. / To the young Roman boy she hath sold me . . . She dies for 't" (IV.xii.47-49). Unlike the Thidias episode, reconciliation seems no longer possible as Antony's rage moves beyond criticism to threats of bodily harm.

But despite Antony's repeated declarations to end Cleopatra's life, the only violence he commits is against himself. Bereft of Cleopatra's love, Antony finds that he can no longer fashion an identity for himself; the collapse of the couple's amorous fiction precipitates a loss of self. Comparing himself to ever-changing clouds and vapors, Antony explains to Eros that he is "Even such a

body. Here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave" (IV.xiv.13-14). In a state of dissolution, Antony perceives himself as something insubstantial, an "airy nothing," "such stuff / As dreams are made on."²⁶ When Mardian informs him of Cleopatra's suicide, his decision to die is immediate:

Off, pluck off!
 The sevenfold shield of Ajax cannot keep
 The battery from my heart. O, cleave, my sides!
 Heart, once be stronger than thy continent,
 Crack thy frail case! . . .
 I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and
 Weep for my pardon. (IV.xiv.37-45)

For Antony, Cleopatra's suicide vindicates their former love, and therefore, he commits himself to a course of action that will reunite them once again. But just as he tried to forge a personal world of love in Alexandria, he attempts to create a vision of their love in the afterlife. Calling upon Cleopatra again, he cries:

I come, my queen. . . Stay for me.
 Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,
 And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
 Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,
 And all the haunt be ours. (IV.xiv.50-54)

In Antony's version of life after death, he and Cleopatra

²⁶I have appropriated these quotes, from A Midsummer Night's Dream (V.i.16) and The Tempest (IV.i.156-157) respectively, to stress the point that Antony sees his identity and love for Cleopatra as something that can be created and given a shape. Like the poets whom Theseus claims can give "a habitation and name" to "airy nothing," Antony and Cleopatra become the authors of their own amorous fiction. The latter quote from The Tempest is also suggestive, for Cleopatra will attempt to recreate Antony after his death in her famous "dream" speech.

will be the noblest lovers in the Elysian fields, attracting more followers than even Aeneas and Dido. But Antony's reference to the founder of Rome is tinged with irony, for unlike Antony, Aeneas sacrifices love for heroic virtue, causing Dido to scorn him in the underworld.²⁷ In order to suppress these details, Antony rewrites the ancient myth making Aeneas and Dido simply another pair of lovers in the Elysian fields. But this vision of Antony and Cleopatra as immortal lovers is more than a simple extension of their amorous fiction; it is a deliberate attempt to avoid a radically different ending, one that promises not glory but "Disgrace and horror" (IV.xiv.66). As Antony explains to Eros, while death offers a fitting conclusion to the life he has led with Cleopatra, to continue living means to be led in triumph by Caesar, to be seen "with pleach'd arms" and a face "subdu'd / To penetrative shame" (IV.xiv.73-75). To allow his life to end in such a fashion would be to undermine the illusion of love he has created with Cleopatra, but in the final analysis, Antony's suicide is more than just an escape from Octavius. Because Cleopatra's "suicide" reaffirms their former love, Antony's death changes from an escape to a reunion, from an act of desperation to an act of joy. On the brink of suicide, Antony embraces death as he once

²⁷See Virgil's account of this episode in Book VI. of the Aeneid.

embraced life: "But I will be / A bridegroom in my death,
and run into 't / As to a lover's bed" (IV.xiv.99-101).

Significantly, Antony speaks of his death as a consummation, as a way of reuniting with Cleopatra and completing a love too great for earthly life.

But Antony's attempt at suicide miscarries, an act that may read as a parallel to unfulfilled sex, for his death may only be truly consummated with Cleopatra and in the dignity of high rhetoric. Informed that the queen is still alive, Antony is brought to her monument where she refuses to descend for fear of capture: "Dear my lord, pardon -- I dare not, / Lest I be taken" (IV.xv.23-24). But Cleopatra's selfish behavior does not appear to disturb Antony; in fact, he never expresses anger at her for deceiving him about her death, an act that has cost him his life. Instead his only thoughts are for her welfare, and after he is drawn up into the monument, he advises her to seek from Caesar both her honor and her safety. After providing this counsel, Antony delivers his final speech which in some ways sounds like his own eulogy:

The miserable change now at my end
Lament nor sorrow at. But please your thoughts
In feeding them with those my former fortunes
Wherein I lived, the greatest prince o' th' world,
The noblest, and do now not basely die,
Not cowardly put my off helmet to
My countryman -- a Roman by a Roman
Valiantly vanquish'd. Now my spirit is going;
I can no more. (IV.xv.51-60)

With this rhetorical climax, Antony may finally end his

life, but while his death speech may be one of the finest in Shakespeare, it is, unfortunately, only partially true. Although at the point of death, Antony sees himself as a once great leader, he has, according to his own admissions, been guilty of idleness and dishonor. While it is true that he dies without surrendering to Caesar, his death is far from valiant since he has bungled his own suicide. But in the end, these inconsistencies are no longer important, for in his final moments, Antony achieves a certain peace which allows him to express a love for Cleopatra that is tender, selfless, and unconditional.

Unlike most of Shakespeare's plays in which the tragic hero dies at the end of the fifth act, Antony dies at the end of the fourth, yielding center stage to Cleopatra for the rest of the play.²⁸ This change in dramatic form, far from being anticlimactic, stresses the importance of Cleopatra's final actions, for if she conspires with Caesar, Antony's death will have been in vain, yet if she kills herself, she will assure their reputation as noble lovers who forsook the world for each other's love. Thus, Cleopatra has the power either to explode or validate the amorous fiction she has created with Antony. When she first appears in Act V., she seems determined to seek her

²⁸Paula S. Berggren also notes Cleopatra's unusual position: "In an important anticipation of the matriarchal final romances, Antony's fourth-act death leaves to Cleopatra the heretofore masculine prerogatives of the fifth" (25). —

death:

My desolation does begin to make
 A better life. 'Tis paltry to be Caesar;
 Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
 A minister of her will. And it is great
 To do that thing that ends all other deeds . . .
 (V.iii.1-5)

In this speech, Cleopatra portrays suicide as a means of controlling one's destiny; it is the way not only to thwart Caesar but fortune itself. Instead of being merely a victim or instrument of fortune, one can make one's own way in the world. But Cleopatra's capture by Caesar prevents her from realizing her plans. Instead of joining Antony in death, she is forced to reminisce about his former nobility. Placed in Dolabella's custody, she delivers her famous dream of Antony speech:

I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony.
 O, such another sleep, that I might see
 But such another man! . . .
 His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm
 Crested the world, his voice was propertied
 As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;
 But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
 He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,
 There was no winter in 't; an autumn it was
 That grew the more by reaping. His delights
 Were dolphin-like; they showed his back above
 The element they liv'd in. . . . (V.ii.75-89)

Like Enobarbus' description of her, Cleopatra's dream of Antony makes use of hyperbole and paradox to create a dazzling illusion that overwhelms the senses. In this passage, Cleopatra metamorphosizes Antony into a figure that is literally larger than life, one whose very features are composed of the elements themselves.

But when Cleopatra asks Dolabella to confirm her apotheosis of Antony, he gently declines, causing her to speak even more vehemently about her departed lover:

You lie, up to the hearing of the gods.
 But, if there be nor ever were one such,
 It's past the size of dreaming. Nature wants stuff
 To vie strange forms with fancy; yet t' imagine
 An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy,
 Condemning shadows quite. (V.ii.94-99)

With this response, Cleopatra emphasizes the magnitude of her vision by declaring that Antony's greatness surpasses her capacity for imagining or articulating it. As she explains to Dolabella, although nature lacks the material to compete with fancy, the very act of imagining her Antony is itself a creation of nature that exceeds any work of art. This last assertion, despite its paradoxical nature, underlines the complex interaction of nature and art in the process of creating something -- in this case a "dream" or vision of one's dead lover. In discussing this interaction as it is debated in The Winter's Tale (IV.iv.86-97), Terry Eagleton explains that

Nature itself produces the means of its own transformation, contains that which goes beyond it. What goes beyond it -- art, civilization, culture, language, love -- is thus no mere external "supplement" to it, but is internal to its very design. (91)

Although Eagleton's remarks pertain to a scene in The Winter's Tale, they are actually quite illuminating for Cleopatra's speech. As Eagleton points out, nature itself is responsible for producing that which goes beyond it, and

in Cleopatra's case, it is "love" and "language" that allows her to create her dream of Antony, a vision that has its basis in nature but which aspires to the heights of art. In the end, Cleopatra's portrait of Antony, like Enobarbus' description of her, emerges as a product of artful eloquence, the result of elaborate myth-making. But despite its artifice, Cleopatra's speech, like all successful rhetoric, exerts a powerful influence over its audience, and while Dolabella remains a skeptical auditor, he nevertheless feels moved to reveal that Caesar will lead her in triumph. This information confirms Cleopatra's worst fears, for like Antony, she associates the horror of Caesar's triumph with the horror of revision. Like Antony, she realizes that given the chance, Rome will rewrite their amorous fiction, transforming it from tragic myth to ridiculous comedy: "The quick comedians . . . will stage us . . . Antony / Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I' th' posture of a whore" (V.ii.216-221). In this Roman version, Antony and Cleopatra are reduced from the world's greatest lovers to a profligate soldier and his whore, a redaction that Cleopatra will avoid with her death.

Like Antony, Cleopatra sees her suicide not as an ending but a rejoining: "Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch / My best attires. I am again for Cydnus, / To meet Mark Antony" (V.ii.227-29). Thus, for Cleopatra, death

offers a glorious reunion with Antony, a second Cydnus where she will once again win his heart. But while Cleopatra approaches her suicide with anticipation and delight, her death differs from Antony's in its theatricality. While Antony's suicide is a solitary act performed without an audience, Cleopatra deliberately stages her death with the help of her attendants:

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me. . . .
Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear
Antony call . . .

Husband, I come!
Now to that name my courage prove my title!
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life. . . .
The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,
Which hurts, and is desir'd. (V.ii.280-296)

Assuming a tragic pose, Cleopatra carefully orchestrates a majestic ending to her life, but even more importantly, she speaks of death in terms of marriage and sexual pleasure. Like Antony, she portrays her suicide as a consummation, as the satisfaction of longing and desire.²⁹ This portrayal is complicated and intensified when she combines imagery that is both sexual and maternal. After applying the asp to her bosom, she cries to Charmian: "Peace, peace! / Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep? . . . As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle

²⁹As Carol Thomas Neely points out, Cleopatra's entire death-scene appears to simulate the love-act: "The scene, with its fluid images, its panting rhythms, and its identification of Antony with the asp, embodies the pun on die which has pervaded the language of the play" (161).

-- O Antony!" (V.ii.308-312).³⁰ By equating Antony with the asp, Cleopatra characterizes the agent of her death as both the infant that sucks her to sleep and the lover who gives her pleasure, and if this mixing of the sexual and the maternal appears odd, it begins to lose its strangeness when placed in the context of marriage, a condition in which the female is often both lover and mother. In her relationship with Antony, Cleopatra occupies both of these positions, for as noted earlier, she personifies both the Venus Vulgarius and the Venus Genetrix. But even more importantly, her affair with Antony takes the form of a true marriage because of the mutuality they have achieved, a mutuality based on love, intimacy, and companionship.³¹ Thus, it is not surprising that both lovers express their suicides in terms of marriage and reunion. Even Caesar reinforces this image of their deaths when he comes upon the scene to find Cleopatra dead. Noting her tranquility, he remarks that "she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace" (II.ii.345-347). But Caesar speaks truer than he knows, for Cleopatra's death is a sleep, that rest longed for in her dream of Antony speech: "O, such another sleep, that I

³⁰As Janet Adelman notes, Shakespeare departs from Plutarch by transferring the snake's bite from Cleopatra's arm to her breast (64).

³¹In Chaucer's The Legend of Cleopatra, the narrator states that Antony and Cleopatra are husband and wife and even makes reference to their wedding day (614-620).

might see / But such another man!" (II.ii.76-77). In the end, death becomes the means for Antony and Cleopatra to recapture their dream permanently and affirm their amorous fiction once and for all.

In his introduction to the play, Maynard Mack writes that "Critics have been known to speak of Macbeth, King Lear, and Antony and Cleopatra as Shakespeare's Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso" (14). Although Mack cautions that such an analogy can be misleading, he states that it can be useful if taken as "a guide to tone," for while Macbeth and King Lear are "dark plays," Antony and Cleopatra is a "bright" one (14). While such remarks are highly impressionistic, they possess a certain merit in that Antony and Cleopatra, unlike Shakespeare's other tragedies, exhibits a transcendent and otherworldly quality that looks forward to the later romances. But on a deeper level, the play's shift in tone may be attributed to Shakespeare's willingness to sympathize with a form of love and a mode of discourse that are excessive and illusory. In this respect, Antony and Cleopatra differs significantly from most of the other works in the canon. For example, in Venus and Adonis, the goddess' overwhelming desire and her seductive rhetoric are often held up to ridicule and disdain; in Romeo and Juliet and Othello, the tendency of the lovers to idealize their passion through hyperbole is shown to be self-deluding and destructive. Even in works

not concerned with the emotion of love, Shakespeare portrays elaborate speech as corrupting and pernicious. Thus, in The Rape of Lucrece, Collatine's immodest praise of his wife leads indirectly to her rape and suicide, and in King Lear, Goneril and Regan's false adulation effectively conceals their true ambitions. If in works such as these, Shakespeare condemns artful rhetoric and idealistic love as dangerous, in Antony and Cleopatra, he appears to accept, even embrace, the verbal illusion that the lovers have created. But as I have argued throughout this study, the experience of love and the impulse to engage in hyperbolic language are inextricably linked, creating a condition in which love becomes both the cause and the result of amorous discourse. While the coupling of Venus and Mars may be said to produce harmony, the union of Antony and Cleopatra may be seen as producing language, the pregnant word, that gives rise to a powerful fiction so radically ambiguous that we are continually forced to reinterpret its meaning.

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CHAPTER V

"SINGLE NATURE'S DOUBLE NAME"

Bertolt Brecht once remarked that "one has to grapple [sich auseinandersetzen] with Shakespeare as one does with life" (204).¹ The key word in Brecht's statement is "grapple," for it suggests struggle and conflict. I propose that Shakespeare's syncretic vision of love is itself the result of a struggle to understand an experience that is double and antithetical. In trying to come to grips with this experience, Shakespeare portrays love as both glorious and destructive, views that are held in constant tension but never reconciled. In examining these views as they appear in several of Shakespeare's works, I have focused my attention on problems involving sexuality, marriage, romantic discourse, and fear of betrayal. However, as my discussions reveal, these problems are carefully intertwined and may only be separated for the purpose of analysis. Furthermore, while most of these conflicts appear in each of the plays, certain ones figure more prominently -- marriage in Measure for Measure,

¹As quoted in Margot Heinemann, "How Brecht Read Shakespeare," Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism, Ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985, 202-230.

jealousy in Othello, rhetoric in Antony and Cleopatra. But of those conflicts that are central to Shakespeare's vision of eros, the most inscrutable and enduring is the problem of sexuality. The works that comprise this study form a coherent group because they all explore the dialectic between love and sexual desire and ask whether these two things are compatible or mutually exclusive. On the one hand, sexual activity is dangerous because it corrupts and destroys; on the other, it is the highest expression of romantic attachment.

Throughout Shakespeare's poetry and plays, sexuality is a major concern, and in some cases, it becomes responsible for contaminating the experience of love.² Thus, in the Sonnets, the ideal love celebrated in Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds") is vitiated by the sexual nausea of Sonnet 129 ("Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame") with its emphasis on post coitum triste. In fact, in several of the later sonnets, it is not love's ideal but its problems (sexual anxiety, criticism of the beloved, the loss of self, etc.) that are examined until the speaker is forced to conclude in Sonnet 147 ("My love is a fever, longing still") that Desire is death . . ." (8). But this concern with sexuality is not

²In The Essential Shakespeare, John Dover Wilson refers to the "strain of sex-nausea" that runs through the plays after 1600 (118).

simply confined to Shakespeare's love poetry or those plays typically viewed as having love as their primary subject. For instance, in Hamlet, sexual conflict appears to be at the very root of the tragic hero's disturbance. Troubled by his mother's hasty marriage to his father's brother, Hamlet condemns what he sees as Gertrude's unnatural sexual appetite, a weakness he seems to associate with women in general. In his confrontations with Ophelia, Hamlet's hostile attitude toward female sexuality becomes entangled with the issue of reproduction itself, for if mankind is hopelessly corrupt, then childbearing only perpetuates the evil -- thus the injunction, "Get thee to a nunn'ery" (III.i.122). But it is Gertrude's carnality that pushes Hamlet toward psychic dissolution, forcing to vent his fury in the closet-scene and deliver his most virulent attack upon his mother's constancy:

Nay, but to live
 In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
 Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
 Over the nasty sty -- (III.iv.93-96)

In these four lines, Hamlet expresses his utter disgust with sexual activity. For him, such behavior is degrading and self-indulgent, and therefore, he characterizes it with imagery that is gross and degenerate. But ~~his~~^{the} mistrust of sexual desire, especially in women, may also be found in King Lear. When Edgar and Gloucester come upon the king near Dover in Act IV., Lear's distracted speech turns, oddly enough, into a commentary on lechery and fornication. In

this commentary, Lear speaks of the hypocrisy of women and their ravenous appetite for sexual pleasure. But most striking of all is his description of the female sex, for as he explains to the two men:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
 Though women all above.
 But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
 Beneath is all the fiends'.
 There's hell, there's darkness, there is the
 sulphurous pit,
 Burning, scalding, stench, consumption. Fie, fie,
 fie! (IV.vi.124-129)

In this passage, Lear expresses the same sexual revulsion exhibited by Hamlet in the closet-scene. In his tormented image of the female body, the woman's vagina becomes the entrance to hell itself, a dark, threatening abyss that all men should fear and loathe. Thus, Lear, like Hamlet, perceives female sexuality as something strange and monstrous.

This coupling of misogyny and sexual malaise is even more pervasive in Troilus and Cressida, a play that anticipates the jealousy and disillusionment found in Othello and Antony and Cleopatra. When faced with Cressida's transfer to the Greek camp, Troilus finds his faith in his beloved sorely tested as he is beset by doubts about her constancy. During their final meeting, Troilus repeatedly asks Cressida to be "true" (IV.iv.58,74), causing her to vehemently defend her honor, but it is Troilus' defense of his own behavior that proves most intriguing. In an attempt to placate Cressida's anger, he

confesses that "Alas, a kind of godly jealousy -- / Which, I beseech you, call a virtuous sin -- / Makes me afeard" (IV.iv.80-82). Through such rhetoric, Troilus turns his jealousy into a virtue, a sign of his love and affection, but these words only thinly veil his mistrust of Cressida's sexuality.

At the end of the play, Troilus' worst suspicions are confirmed as he overhears Cressida's interview with Diomed. During this scene, he watches in disbelief as Cressida and Diomed talk intimately with one another. Although he tries to contain his bitterness, his disillusionment, like Othello's and Antony's, precipitates a change in rhetoric, a shift from idealization to degradation. When Troilus had first anticipated making love to Cressida, he asked: "What will it be, / When that the wat'ry palates taste indeed / Love's thrice repured nectar?" (III.ii.19-21). But after witnessing Cressida's betrayal, he declares: "The fractions of her faith, orts of her love, / The fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics / Of her o'er-eaten faith, are bound to Diomed" (V.ii.162-164). The contrast between these two speeches marks a radical change in Troilus' view of Cressida as sexual desire is transformed from exquisite craving to nauseating disgust.

As these works reveal, sexuality in Shakespeare is often an uncontrollable force, and the pleasure it

affords is considered forbidden or illusory. But because of his syncretic vision, Shakespeare incorporates this viewpoint into its exact opposite: the idea that sexual union is the ultimate fulfillment of the idealized longings found in romantic love. In Measure for Measure, Claudio and Juliet regret the affair that has led to an unwanted pregnancy, but their relations are characterized as the natural expression of two people in love. In contrast, Angelo's passion for Isabella and the activities of the brothel world are treated less favorably because they do not involve either intimacy or affection. Although the Duke tries to resolve the play's conflicts with a series of marriages, his plan fails to ally sexual desire with romantic love. In Othello, the Moor perceives Desdemona's carnality as evidence of her guilt because he is incapable of seeing her as both innocent and sexual. Significantly, Cassio's own attitude toward women reflects Othello's problems with his wife, for while the lieutenant idealizes Desdemona, he centers his desires on a prostitute whom he treats with disdain. In the end, the two men suffer from same crucial fault: the inability to see love as both spiritual and erotic. In Antony and Cleopatra, sexual pleasure and romantic attachment appear totally integrated. But while the couple's passion gives rise to a rhetorical fiction that celebrates their mutuality, this artful construct is continually destroyed and revised.

Consequently, opposing views of the couple's love emerge: one which sees it as exclusive and ethereal and another which sees it as tawdry and decadent. But most important of all, Shakespeare's vision of love undergoes a significant change, for while he stresses the dangers of artful rhetoric and excessive desire in other works, he appears to accept and even promote the amorous fiction that develops in this late tragedy.

I began this study with a passage from Venus and Adonis, and I would now like to end it by looking at another Shakespeare poem, "The Phoenix and Turtle." Although these two works are strikingly different, both use death as an occasion to speak of love in paradoxical terms. When the speaker of "The Phoenix and Turtle" praises the lovers' total commitment to one another, he refers to them as "Two distincts, division none" (27) and "Single nature's double name" (39). While these remarks are used to express the couple's intimacy, they also help to describe the syncretic nature of Shakespeare's vision, for by portraying love as both glorious and destructive, Shakespeare offers a set of viewpoints that are distinct but inseparable, opposing yet complementary. In confronting the problem of eros, Shakespeare explores these conflicting viewpoints but never reconciles them, for in the end, his achievement lies in his ability to perceive love as an experience that is double-sided, contradictory, and ever-changing.

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

April 3, 89
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