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Feminine Agency in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Throughout the many works of William Shakespeare, male characters beat, manipulate, control, and silence female characters. Many of Shakespeare's female characters lose a significant part of their personalities -- or worse, their bodies -- by the end of his plays. By Act 5 of any one of his plays, depending on the genre, Shakespeare's women are frequently murdered, raped, mutilated, married to someone they do not like, or otherwise humiliated. Katerina in *The Taming of the Shrew* ends up married to a man she detests. Katerina's sister Bianca fares somewhat better but has little say over her eventual husband. In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia suffers gang rape by two men who finish their assault by cutting off her hands and tongue. Her father, title character Titus, murders her. In the same play, Titus stabs Queen Tamora to death. But not every female Shakespearian character suffers. Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* chooses her husband and escapes abuse at the hands of her father. Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* chooses her time of death by suicide and escapes humiliation at the hands of Octavius Caesar. The two women have different fates but they both choose. I will examine feminine agency in Shakespeare's Jessica in the comedy *The Merchant of Venice* and in Cleopatra in the tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*. I argue that giving Jessica and Cleopatra -- two women with opposing personalities and situations -- the agency to decide their own fates allows Shakespeare to demonstrate the strength and wisdom of women in a patriarchal world.

The Merchant of Venice is a so-called comedy about a Jewish man, Shylock, being ruined by Italian merchant Antonio. The play focuses on Antonio, his good friend Bassanio, and their interactions with Shylock, a moneylender, while Bassanio attempts to court Portia, an orphaned heiress. Antonio is rich, but his considerable wealth is tied up in his ships, all of which are traveling. As a result, Antonio has little liquid cash to lend when Bassanio needs to visit Portia to win her love. Bassanio instead borrows money from Shylock on loan with Antonio's blessing;

Antonio essentially co-signs the loan. The twist is Shylock vows to take a pound of Antonio's flesh if the loan cannot be repaid. The characters have to go to court, where the loan is ultimately forgiven and Antonio survives. Shylock encounters varying hardships, but is also abusive to his daughter Jessica along the way. Jessica's escape to a happier life is liberating, and Shakespeare's staging of Shylock in this play suggests he deserves his ultimate ruin.

Jessica's first lines convey her discontent. Upon learning of Lancelet the servant's plans to leave, she opens the scene by saying "I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so; / Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil, / Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness" (2.3.1-3). Describing her household as hell is strong language; Jessica is miserable living with Shylock. In a mere 20 lines, Jessica outlines her plan to elope with Lorenzo, a Christian man who is staying at Bassanio's house, where Lancelet intends to work. While Jessica does not seem to have had much opportunity to get to know Lorenzo as a person, he is both interested in her and willing to marry quickly. Jessica is desperate to escape.

The fifth scene of the second act is fraught with tension between Shylock, Jessica, and Lancelet. To begin the scene, Shylock calls Jessica three separate times (2.5.3-6), showing his impatience. Shylock is going to a masque, or costume party, at Bassanio's along with Lancelet, but Jessica is forced to stay home. Shylock tells her to lock the doors and windows and to not look out of the house (2.5.27-47). He fears Jessica may enjoy a taste of fun and freedom if she so much as gazes upon a costumed individual. When Lancelet tells her to keep an eye out for a Christian -- a thinly veiled reference to Lorenzo -- Shylock insults Lorenzo's Christianity (2.5.38-49). Shylock repeats his message to Jessica to lock the doors and windows, threatening "perhaps I will return immediately" (2.5.50). Shylock does not let on if he knows about Jessica's attraction to Lorenzo, but wants Jessica to know he could come home anytime so she hopefully

will avoid any sneaky behavior. Jessica responds cryptically, saying “Farewell, and if my fortune be not crossed, / I have a father, you a daughter, lost” (2.5.54-55). Jessica hints at her plan to run away, though Shylock does not catch on. Maybe Jessica tries to give Shylock one last chance to change his actions, but if so, he ignores the opportunity.

The courtroom scene at the beginning of Act IV demonstrates Shylock’s character. When Bassanio, now rich after marrying heiress Portia, offers Shylock three times the amount of money he borrowed, Shylock refuses, instead maintaining his right to Antonio’s flesh (4.1.225-226). The judge (actually Portia in disguise) rules Antonio’s flesh may be taken but no blood may be spilled, as the bond does not allow Antonio to be killed for the debt (4.1.305-310). Shylock had not counted on an independent individual close-reading the contract. Enraged, he demands the money instead. But Portia rules that Shylock already refused the money, so he is owed nothing (5.1.341-343). Shylock intended to kill a fellow human being rather than accept money, despite dramatically mourning his loss of money earlier in the play. Dr. Katherine Maus, English professor at the University of Virginia, writes in the introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, “The play represents Shylock as an isolated figure, shunned by his daughter, abandoned by his servant. His calculating, loveless existence seems to result from the way he manages his property. Or perhaps isolation has made him cautious and selfish” (para. 9). Shylock manages his property with strict control. He controls how much food Lancelet can eat, when Jessica can leave the house, and how exactly Bassanio will receive lended money. Keeping too tight of control on people can cause them to flee, however. Lancelet, Jessica, and money were all Shylock had, but he gripped them too tightly. Like a bar of soap, all three flew out of his hands. Shylock’s own isolation may have created a vicious circle resulting in his abusive personality.

Shylock utters one of the most famous quotes from *The Merchant of Venice*, giving examples of how Jewish people are just like Christians. He asks of Salerio and Solanio:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions—fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die, and if you wrong us shall we not revenge? (3.1.48-55)

This speech is one of Shylock's saving graces, meant to suggest to 16th century English audiences that people of Jewish descent or faith -- and by extension, of any other race or spirituality -- were no different from them. While Shylock's general argument is true, in his case the sentiment falls flat. Maus agrees, writing, "Shylock asserts that a common human experience of embodiment ought to override considerations of religious or racial difference. ... the argument does not follow from the position Shylock has taken earlier" (para. 14). Shylock's speech is meant to justify the revenge he plans for Antonio (taking Antonio's life instead of money for the debt), in part because Antonio has been exceptionally racist to Shylock, even spitting on him (1.3.123-124). But Shylock mentions the debt in the middle of his angry lines about Jessica, which has the effect of equating Jessica, his only family, with Antonio's debt.

Lorenzo helps Jessica escape her father. Jessica writes to Lorenzo, who happens to be staying at Bassanio's house, and asks Lancelet to deliver the letter since he works for Bassanio (2.3.5-7). After Shylock and Lancelet leave, Lorenzo comes by with his friends, Salerio and Graziano, all dressed up in costume for the same masque Shylock is attending (2.5.1, 21).

Jessica, disguised in traditional male clothing, appears at the window asking for confirmation of Lorenzo's identity, to which he responds he is "Lorenzo, and thy love" (2.5.27-29). Already in the second act he has declared his love for her outright, a rare occurrence for Shakespeare's male characters. Jessica trusts Lorenzo completely, even throwing her possessions -- including a hefty amount of Shylock's cash -- out the window to Lorenzo (2.5.34) before coming through the downstairs door herself (2.5.58). Jessica has enough money to make her own marital choice; she is not limited to requiring a rich husband. As a result, she is free to choose Lorenzo.

In the last scene of the play, Jessica's reticence comes out. She and Lorenzo list sad love stories -- those ending in suicide, adultery, and more -- before moving on to describe their own love story with unhappy language (5.1.3-13). Lorenzo calls himself a spendthrift, suggesting he married Jessica for her money, while Jessica says Lorenzo's love is not true (5.1.16, 18-19). Listing their own relationship as unhappy could simply be an instance of newlyweds having cold feet. They may fear their relationship will become unhappy, or perhaps their relationship is already unhappy. In any case, Jessica's mental turmoil takes root: She has never lived away from her father and the discomfort of change unnerves her. Jessica was not given an opportunity to get to know Lorenzo well before she escaped Shylock. She had only one chance to leave and took her chance. Now at the end of the play, she wonders if she made the correct choice, which is common among emotional abuse victims. Independence is new for Jessica, but she will get used to the feeling of freedom.

In leaving her abusive father behind for a loving husband, Jessica demonstrates strength. Leaving an abusive relationship is extraordinarily difficult, not only physically but emotionally as well. Abusive relationships usually start from a place of love, at least in the eyes of the victim, so leaving can be traumatic even if the victim knows leaving is best for them. Escaping an

abusive parent is even more difficult than escaping a domestic partner, because in most cases, the abusive household is the only one the victim has ever known. There are many reasons women may have difficulty leaving abusive relationships. According to *Psychology Today*, fear is one of the top three reasons women may not be able to leave an abusive relationship (Whiting). Shylock clearly tried to make Jessica fear him, as demonstrated when he suggested he could arrive home at any moment. Jessica is also aware of how Shylock treats Lancelet -- she may fear being deprived of food like Lancelet. Furthermore, being forced to live away from others and stay locked in the house is an example of how Jessica experienced isolation, another top reason women might stay in an abusive situation (Whiting). Despite isolation, Jessica was able to enlist the help of Lancelet to acquire a husband, and in turn, an escape.

Some scholars argue Jessica's marriage is not so much a freeing escape as it is a disappointing mistake. Renowned Shakespeare expert Dr. Dympna Callaghan writes in her book *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, "Jessica provides a strong counterexample to her father and Portia insofar as she chooses totality; her fate demonstrates the dangers of seeking the dissolution of the self into the other" (375). Callaghan dislikes how Jessica flees to a Christian man instead of a Jewish man, but Jessica did not have many options nearby. Shylock's treatment by Christian characters might indicate Jewish individuals were not common in Venice, so Jessica may not have been able to find a Jewish husband if she tried. Callaghan is critical of Lorenzo as well, writing, "When Jessica implicitly deprecates herself in giving a glowing account of their hostess, Lorenzo does not immediately respond with words of loving assurance as a besotted new husband should do" (376). Lorenzo, while clearly self-centered, is learning how to be a good husband. Jessica and Lorenzo are still newlyweds at the end of the play. Besides, Lorenzo did not have to help Jessica escape in the first place. He could easily have abandoned her as

everyone else in her life had done. Though Callaghan argues Jessica ends the play worse than she began, Callaghan fails to take Shylock's abusive nature into account.

The Merchant of Venice is a revenge comedy at its heart. Shylock is a greedy, self-centered man incapable of seeing another's point of view, including that of his own daughter Jessica. The drama between Antonio and Shylock may be the forefront plot, but Jessica gains independence on her own terms, escaping from under Shylock's thumb into the arms of her new husband. After suffering emotional abuse her entire life, Jessica finally wins.

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is a tragedy similar to *Romeo and Juliet*: in both plays, the title characters are lovers and both die by the end of the play. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a more mature version, though. The characters are all adults, war is a common theme, and the play is based on real history. Marc Antony is a triumvir -- one of three leaders -- of the Roman Empire. The other triumvirs are Octavius Caesar (Julius' great nephew) and Lepidus. The play is a sequel to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*; so the characters deal with the aftermath of Julius' murder. Cleopatra is the queen of Egypt and Antony's mistress. At the beginning of the play, Antony is married to Fulvia, who dies shortly into the play. He then marries Octavius Caesar's sister Octavia. He continues to see Cleopatra in Egypt, but the other triumvirs become annoyed with Antony neglecting his duties in Rome. He returns to Rome to deal with senator Pompey, who challenges the triumvirs' authority. After the triumvirs negotiate a treaty with Pompey, Octavius Caesar breaks the treaty and starts a war. During the war, Cleopatra's Egyptian forces join with Antony against Octavius. When Cleopatra's navy retreats, Antony accuses Cleopatra of betraying his trust. The accusation is untrue, and Cleopatra feels so emotionally wounded by his accusation she sends a message to him claiming she died by suicide. Antony decides to die by suicide as well. Guilt-stricken, Cleopatra tries to comfort him in his last moments. Then, facing

seizure by Octavius Caesar, she chooses to die by suicide for real before he can take her. While Cleopatra ends up dead in the end, she -- and only she -- decides when and how to die. Cleopatra refuses to suffer humiliation at Caesar's hand.

It is important to note *Antony and Cleopatra* is a work of fiction. While the play is based in historical events, like many literary works based in history, *Antony and Cleopatra* is not necessarily historically accurate. Instead, the story of Marcus Antonius (Antony's historically correct Roman name) and Cleopatra has been exaggerated and glamorized, both by Shakespeare and by other storytellers. According to Dr. Adrian Goldsworthy, historian of ancient Rome, in his book *Antony and Cleopatra*, "Antony and Cleopatra did not change the world in any profound way," (qtd. in "True Story"). Much of the couple's fame seems to stem from their romantic relations. Cleopatra was a strong ruler in her own right, but her ruling is not always what we think of today. Furthermore, Goldsworthy continues:

Antony and Cleopatra proved themselves just as capable of savagery and ruthlessness, but the losers in a civil war do not get the chance to shape the future directly. Apart from that, there is no real trace of any long-held beliefs or causes on Antony's part, no indication that he struggled for prominence for anything other than his own glory and profit. Some like to see Cleopatra as deeply committed to the prosperity and welfare of her subjects, but this is largely wishful thinking. There is no actual evidence to suggest that her concerns went any further than ensuring a steady flow of taxation into her own hands, to cement her hold on power. (qtd. in "True Story")

As much as we would love Cleopatra to have been a caring leader, historical evidence shows she was likely just as greedy as male leaders of the time. Nevertheless, by play's end the fictional Cleopatra has turned herself into a myth, an impressive feat for one of Shakespeare's women.

Readers' first impression of Shakespeare's Cleopatra is powerful. Her first line is "If it be love indeed, tell me how much" (1.1.14). From the very beginning of the play, Cleopatra asserts dominance over Antony. By demanding Antony state his love for Cleopatra, she forces him to define his relationship with her. Antony's position is tricky; he is a triumvir already married to another woman named Fulvia, and there are plenty of witnesses present in the scene. Nevertheless, Fulvia is home in Rome -- a long journey away from Egypt, where Antony and Cleopatra find themselves in the first scene. Antony never quite returns Cleopatra's request, instead asking her to stop talking: "Now for the love of love and her soft hours, / Let's not confound the time with conference harsh" (1.145-46). Antony dances around the question by suggesting he feels in love with the idea of love.

Cleopatra feels the need to control the people and circumstances around her. When Antony is absent from Egypt for an extended period of time, she cannot help but accuse him of cheating on her. She argues that since he cheats on his wife with her, surely he must cheat on her with still another woman (1.3.27-29). Instead, Antony's wife Fulvia has passed away in Rome, which Cleopatra learns upon Antony's return (1.3.55-58). Oddly, when Antony sheds no tears over his wife's death, Cleopatra assumes he would not shed tears for her death, either (1.3.65). Cleopatra should show empathy for Antony, who has just buried his wife, but she does not. Her immediate shift from feeling jealous to feeling insignificant demonstrates her self-centeredness.

Antony remarries in the second act. When the messenger comes to share the news of Antony's marriage to Octavia, Octavius Caesar's sister, with Cleopatra, she interrupts him repeatedly, almost daring him to give her bad news (2.5.25-60). When she finally pauses long enough to hear the news, she curses the messenger, screaming "The most infectious pestilence upon thee!" (2.5.62). Cleopatra is understandably upset; she had thought she had a chance of

marrying Antony herself mere moments previously only to learn he already remarried on a whim. Affairs of the heart are both the most powerful and the most wounding we experience as humans. According to Dr. Walter Cohen, literature professor at the University of Michigan, in his introduction to the play, “Cleopatra experiences something more than she can express. Its articulation thus takes the form of a failure to articulate” (para. 14). Underneath her manipulative, cold exterior, Shakespeare’s Cleopatra is a human being. Unfortunately, Cleopatra’s inability to articulate her feelings takes the form of anger. Cleopatra cannot gain control of her anger, physically injuring the messenger three times before threatening him with a knife (2.5.63-73). This exchange again demonstrates lack of empathy. She has difficulty considering the position of the messenger: he only delivered a message, he was not the one to remarry. But Cleopatra flies out of control when she is not in charge of those around her. Her character is larger than life by way of her power, personality, and emotions.

In Act IV, Octavius and Antony are at war with each other and Cleopatra joins forces with Antony. Before heading into battle, Antony finally declares his love for Cleopatra, saying she has broken through otherwise impenetrable armor to his heart and rides on his heartbeats (4.8.14-16). Interestingly, Antony only chooses to share his true feelings with Cleopatra when faced with death. In Antony’s actions, Shakespeare seems to suggest emotions of love are only masculine if a hero figure is on his potential deathbed. By the twelfth scene of the act, however, Antony is angry at Cleopatra. She chooses to retreat from battle, and when she does, Antony yells “This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me!” (4.12.10). Privately, he accuses her of leading him into a battle she has already forfeited, indicating his belief that she has sold him out to the enemy. When Cleopatra appears in the scene, he continues his rant directly at her, saying among other insults that he wishes Octavia would claw at her face (4.12.37-38). At the suggestion of

Charmian, one of Cleopatra's female servants, Cleopatra's answer to Antony's anger is to send a messenger to him announcing she has died by suicide (4.13.7). In the next scene, Antony mourns that his mistress would ever sell him out; he thought she loved him back, but apparently not (4.14.15-20). He quickly switches from being sad back to being angry, showing he experiences grief; regardless, he vows to murder Cleopatra in revenge (4.14.25). By showing Antony's rapid changes in emotion, Shakespeare shows Antony to be just as self-centered as Cleopatra. Antony cannot imagine a reason for Cleopatra's retreat other than betrayal. When Antony learns of Cleopatra's apparent death, he is thrown into immediate depression and guilt, choosing to die by suicide to be with her in a suggested heaven (4.14.38-53). Antony bids his man, Eros, kill him when he realizes he lacks "the courage of a woman" (4.14.60) to do it himself. By having Antony say Cleopatra has courage for dying by suicide, Shakespeare suggests women can be as heroic as men, if in different ways.

In the final scene of the act, Antony, clinging to life after being stabbed by his own sword, finds his way back to Cleopatra. Devastated at the sight of him, Cleopatra sobs, "So it should be that none but Antony / Should conquer Antony, but woe 'tis so!" (4.15.17-18). Antony's power is so great that death by his own order is the only fitting death. She continues to mourn over him, not allowing him to speak, but when he finally does he bids her "Of Caesar seek your honor with your safety" (4.15.47). Antony believes Octavius will honor Antony's will by protecting Cleopatra now, but Octavius was just in battle against Cleopatra and Antony a few scenes ago. Cleopatra rightly suspects Octavius has other ideas, responding that she trusts only herself (4.15.51). Shakespeare's choice to have Cleopatra know better than Antony indicates women can be wiser than men. Just before Antony passes away, Cleopatra suggests he would not dare die if he truly cared for her (4.15.62-63). Yet again, Cleopatra shows, however playfully, her

belief that she should be at the center of everyone's universe, which gives her the power of a strong leader in the context of the play.

Cleopatra also has many interactions with her servants, who she repeatedly calls "my women," Charmian, Iras, and Mardian throughout the play. Charmian and Iras are female while Mardian is a male who has been castrated. Charmian especially tries to temper Cleopatra, imploring her not to act rashly. In the third scene of the play, Charmian suggests Cleopatra should be more gentle with Antony if she really loves him (1.3.6-8). Charmian is the only person who understands Antony may not wish to be ordered around. Later, while Antony is away after Fulvia's death, Cleopatra requests mandragora (1.5.3), a hallucinogenic and narcotic liquid made from mandrake plants. Charmian asks why, then proceeds to distract Cleopatra so she forgets about the mandragora (1.5.4-6). Mardian steps in with suggestive language, turning Cleopatra's thoughts again to Antony (1.5.8-18). The servants dull Cleopatra's sharpest edges, keeping her from hurting herself (by overmedicating) and occasionally others. Of course, as previously mentioned, Charmian ends up indirectly responsible for Antony's death when she suggests Cleopatra send word of her suicide (4.13.3-6), but Charmian, Mardian, and Iras always protect Cleopatra first and others second.

Cleopatra's ultimate victory is in her death by suicide during the final act of the play. While Cleopatra and her servants do not yet know for sure, Caesar plans to force Cleopatra to live in Rome with him (5.1.65-66) as Cleopatra feared. Caesar sends one of his men, Proculeius, to prevent Cleopatra's death by suicide (5.1.64-65). When Proculeius comes to Cleopatra, she tries to kill herself with a dagger, which is taken from her by Roman soldiers (5.2.36-37). Eventually, another of Caesar's servants, Dolabella, tells Cleopatra of Caesar's true plans to parade her and her previously unmentioned children through the streets of Rome (5.2.70-109,

197-203). The idea of such common humiliation confirms Cleopatra's resolve to die. A man brings venomous snakes seemingly at her request (5.2.240-243), though the request is only implied, not written. Cleopatra asks Charmian and Iras to "Give me my robe; put on my crown. I have / Immortal longings in me" (5.2.275-276). She wants her body to be found by Caesar in all the glory she has as a queen. Charmian and Iras, likely fearful of being paraded alongside Cleopatra or worse, choose death alongside their queen (5.2.288). In choosing death, Cleopatra outsmarts Caesar, shows care to her servants, reunites with her lover, and demonstrates her power as queen.

While Jessica and Cleopatra chose vastly different fates for themselves, both demonstrate strength and independence in their choices. Neither woman allows anyone else to make choices for them; they alone have that power. Jessica chooses marriage as an escape from a past of abuse; Cleopatra chooses death as an escape from a future of abuse. Both women end their plays victorious. In writing Jessica and Cleopatra to be strong female characters, Shakespeare shows his late 16th and early 17th century English audiences that even women living in a patriarchal world can have agency. Shakespeare's plays and characters remain relevant over 400 years after they were written, though. Abusive relationships, dangerous rulers, and dignified deaths are all major issues in today's society. Furthermore, the exact stories themselves remain relevant. *Antony and Cleopatra* is being remade again, this time into a Hollywood film with Gal Gadot starring as Cleopatra. *The Merchant of Venice*, though less popular than *Antony and Cleopatra*, has been made into a film as recently as 2004.

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