

Amy Tesch  
Honors Thesis  
Professor Myers

### The Critique of Women in Shakespeare's Plays

In many of William Shakespeare's plays, women play a central role in moving the plot forward. These women become catalysts for the drama that unfolds, especially in Shakespeare's tragedies, where the reactions of the other characters depend on the actions of the women. Desdemona from *Othello* and Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth* play this role in their respective plays. Both women play similar roles even though their personalities are vastly different. Desdemona becomes an almost stereotypical woman once she marries Othello. This new personality affects her negatively because it ultimately leads to her demise. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, blurs gender lines by acting similar to a man for personal gain. But, like Desdemona, her personality leads to her death. Shakespeare uses Desdemona and Lady Macbeth as important plot devices and to experiment with gender roles. His female characters then become subtle critics on Elizabethan society's traditions and views of women.

The transition from the Middle Ages to the Elizabethan era proved to be a pivotal moment for the women of Shakespeare's time. As Judith Cook writes, "If the position of women in Tudor and early Jacobean England was scarcely enviable by today's standards, their influence was very considerable indeed and in general their lot had improved dramatically during the course of the sixteenth century," (1). While Queen Elizabeth I sat on the throne, women experienced broader acceptance for certain actions. Courtni Crump Wright states,

The rise to power of Mary I and Elizabeth I provided the women with positive, aggressive, self-confident female role models who ruled

Renaissance England with determination and, sometimes, an iron hand (8).

With strong women on the throne, noble women experienced an increase in socially acceptable actions that would have been forbidden in early centuries. This included attending plays. Going to the theater became widely accepted since Elizabeth I was an avid supporter of the theater. Wright continues, “The women attended the theater, although they still could not act in any performances and often found themselves the butt of theatrical jokes about shrewish housewives,” (8). Since women were unable to perform on stage, they became keen observers and judges of the play and actors to ensure that the play depicted real life.

Shakespeare was aware of this change in society and used the changing times for women as inspiration for his plays. But he also knew that he would only be able to push his female characters so far. Wright states, “Shakespeare was an astute writer who knew that a play containing very liberated women would be insulting, shocking, and unpopular with the majority of the theater-goers,” (9). But even with the audience dictating some of Shakespeare’s restrictions, he still made some of his female characters strong willed and, in some cases, almost manly.

Not all of Shakespeare’s women display the new liberal aspects of the Elizabethan era. This is best seen in the character of Desdemona from *Othello*. Desdemona originally embraces the changing culture of the Elizabethan era. However, after her marriage, she reverts back to the standards of women that were common in the Middle Ages. Irene Dash writes, “Shakespeare’s portrait has a remarkable consistency as the story of the decline of a woman from a single, self-confident person to an uncertain, married woman still attempting to understand her role,” (123). Desdemona is the perfect example of a

woman caught in the middle of a world in the midst of change much as England was during the Elizabethan era.

When the play opens, Desdemona is a strong willed individual who marries Othello, a man her father, Brabantio, does not approve of. In the play, Iago states, “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs,” (1.1.114-115). Othello was a noble Moor who was also a servant of the Venetian state. However, because he was a Moor, Brabantio did not approve of the marriage. Quoting M. R. Ridley, Cook writes, “Rodrigo sees Desdemona’s marriage as a ‘gross revolt’, Brabantio sees in it a treason of the blood for which only her subjugation by charm can account, and for which she will incur a general mock...” (95). Their marriage, according to Brabantio, is one that is unacceptable and will incur making a mockery of the family since he is a nobleman. Desdemona, as a woman of a certain social position, was expected to create a union that would benefit the family as a whole and would honor her father. By marrying Othello, Brabantio believes that she is embarrassing him instead of helping raise the family’s power.

Brabantio does not consider the reasons for why Desdemona would choose to marry Othello. Not only was he a successful military man, but he had had many experiences. Desdemona says, “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind/And to his honors and his valiant parts/Did my soul and fortunes consecrate,” (1.3.252-254). Desdemona’s love of Othello’s travels is similar to the mindset that was overcoming England during the Elizabethan time period. Mrs. Anna Jameson writes, “At the period of the story a spirit of wild adventure had seized all Europe,” (200). During the time when Shakespeare was writing *Othello*, the British Empire was excited to explore India and the New World. The

possibility of a strange and new life outside of what the English knew was exciting and enticing. This excitement also included the idea of meeting new and different people. This idea is easily translated into the play because Othello was black, so he was already seen as an exotic person.

But even with her reasons for marrying Othello, Desdemona's idea of marriage outside of a father's consent, while still not the most popular practice in the Elizabethan era was becoming more and more acceptable. In the Middle Ages, women were forced into arranged marriages. Wright states, "As they entered into arranged dowry-bearing marriages, the women were aware that their duty was to marry the man found suitable by their fathers: love, if they were lucky would come later," (7). But as Elizabeth I refused to marry, women started to become more independent in the institution. Between 1575 and 1700, almost 20% of women went completely unmarried (Kemp 36). This percentage is important because it shows that women were not always willing to follow what their fathers expected of them, such as getting married. Desdemona is the perfect example of this because she refuses to allow her father to have the ultimate authority in making a life changing decision. Even though she does marry Othello, she does so on her own terms. She does not seek her father's approval, nor does she make a large ceremony of the marriage. Instead, she elopes with him before the play begins. As a result, she is exerting her independence.

And more important, she also stands up to him about her decision. Desdemona says,

I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband;  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.185-190).

Desdemona uses her mother as her defense for her new loyalty to Othello.

Presumably, Desdemona's mother, once she married Brabantio, was more apt to listen to her new husband than her father. Desdemona states that her mother preferred the opinion of her husband over that of her father once she was married. This is significant because after a woman was married in the Elizabethan times, it was the responsibility of the new husband to take care of the woman. However, since most marriages were approved by the fathers of the time, this was an acceptable shift in power. Since Desdemona never sought the approval of Brabantio, Shakespeare is pushing the limits of the new social acceptance. Shakespeare is saying that a woman should be able to marry whomever she chooses because he allows Desdemona to do so without any major consequences from the immediate disapproval of her father.

When standing up to her father, we see that Desdemona's greatest trait is her ability to reason. Desdemona says,

Nor would I there reside,  
To put my father in impatient thoughts  
By being in his eye. Most gracious duke,  
To my unfolding lend you prosperous ear,  
And let me find a charter in your voice,  
T' assist my simpleness," (1.3.241-246).

In this passage, Desdemona is defending her love for Othello to the Duke of Venice and the rest of the assembly. But most importantly, she is reasoning with the Duke. This passage also shows that Desdemona is playing to the strengths of the men in the room. By pleading with the Duke to provide her with wisdom and authority, she is recognizing and flattering the power the Duke has. This reasoning shows that Desdemona is highly aware of the state of power in the assembly and she appeases the Duke to not only help her, but to side with her. Another important aspect of Desdemona standing up

to her father about her marriage is that she did so publicly. In a chamber with the Duke of Venice, officers, and attendants, Desdemona states that she will be loyal to Othello now that he is her husband instead of being loyal to her father. Wright states, “The Renaissance and Elizabethan Age women were somewhat better educated than the women of the Middle Ages and a bit more outspoken,” (8). This outspoken nature was most likely a result of Elizabeth I openly saying to Parliament that she would not marry. In fact, the scene in the chamber is almost identical to that of Elizabeth I standing in Parliament. Shakespeare was drawing a connection between the Queen of England and Desdemona stating that if the Queen could stand up for herself against a room full of men, then perhaps other noblewomen could do the same.

Even though her ability to reason is a strength of Desdemona’s, it is also obvious that when she attempts to reason with someone, she focuses on emotions. Desdemona claims,

That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright, and storm of fortunes,  
May trumpet to the world. My heart’s subdued  
Even to the very quality of my lord (1.3.248-251).

Desdemona speaks from the heart openly about her emotions. Mrs. Anna Jameson writes, “Words are with her the vehicle of sentiment, and never of reflection,” (206). This is important because it is also a fault of hers. The fact that she speaks from emotion and sentiment causes problems between her and Othello later in the play, especially when Othello questions Desdemona’s fidelity.

When Desdemona and Othello move to Cyprus, we see that Desdemona is a leader amongst the rest of the group. During the trip, part of the contingent gets separated, including Othello. However, even with this news, Desdemona chats and jokes

around with Iago and his wife, Emilia, instead of showing her worry. She says, “What wouldst thou write of me, if thou should’st praise me?” (2.1.117). This ability to stay calm and positive continues to show that Desdemona is a strong character. Dash writes, “Shakespeare was expanding his earlier portrait of an independent, bright woman, worthy of audience interest,” (108). While she is worried about her husband, she decides it is best to not only take charge, but to stay calm. She asks if men have been sent to the harbor (2.1.120). This shows that she does have leadership abilities because she is starting to take charge when her husband is gone. She continues by stating, “I am not merry, but I do beguile/The thing I am by seeming otherwise./Come, how wouldst thou praise me?” (2.1.122-124). Desdemona admits that she is worried about her husband. However, she realizes that worrying will do nothing to help the situation or the moods of the people around her. She takes it upon herself to improve the morale of the surrounding men and women until word comes back about Othello’s ship. She is demonstrating her ability as a leader. She diverts the men by focusing on herself because it allows her to stand out in the group. By calling attention to herself, she is showing the group that she is capable of being a leader, much like her husband.

Her ability to joke around with Iago also shows her carefree nature. Desdemona and Iago discuss the status of women and their intelligence which is significant because it continues to place women in a particular social structure. When Iago admits that beautiful women and ugly women can both use their intelligence to manipulate a man into sleeping with her, Desdemona is shocked and replies, “O heavy ignorance! Thou praisest the worst best. But what praise could thou bestow on a deriving woman indeed – one that in the authority of her merit did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?” (2.1.143-

147). Desdemona refuses to believe that Iago is right. In fact, she claims that Iago's reasoning is just a joke from the bar. She does not believe Iago because she does not believe that a woman would manipulate a man just for sexual pleasures. This idea goes against what Desdemona believed to be important in a marriage, which was fidelity. But Desdemona's curiosity persists as she continues to question Iago about the different types of women. Martha Ronk writes, "Earlier in the play Desdemona appears as dramatically and linguistically accomplished, expressing herself with wit, passion, energy, and daring," (54). Her ability to joke around with men shows that she is capable of surpassing the instituted gender roles of females. Her reaction at Cyprus helps mold her character into more of an Elizabethan model because she is more carefree.

Desdemona's independent and strong-willed nature is short lived. Once she marries Othello and they move, she begins to transform into a meek, shy, and passive character. When Othello wrongly believes that Desdemona is cheating on him, he refuses to eat or spend time with her. She replies, "Tell me, Othello. I wonder in my soul/What you would ask me that I should deny,/ Or stand so mammering on." (3.3.68-69) Desdemona is openly saying that she would never deny her husband anything he would ask of her. The strong and independent woman who stood up against her father has completely disappeared. The arrival of the passive Desdemona shows that Shakespeare was aware that while times were changing, some aspects of the Middle Ages still remained. Wright states, "Their [women in the Middle Ages] spouses were selected for them and were often total strangers to whom the women would owe total allegiance and obedience," (7). By making Desdemona obedient to Othello, Shakespeare is openly commenting on how women still had limitations in marriage.



The limitations in marriage are best seen in Richard Allestree's *The Lady's Calling* (1682). In this book, Allestree gives detailed descriptions of what is expected of a woman in all aspects of her life. But most importantly, he discusses what is expected of women after they are married. He writes, "Another duty to the person of her husband is obedience, a word of a very harsh found in the ears of some wives, but it is certainly the duty of all," (116). Allestree defends this by stating it is the natural hierarchy that God created. It is implied that before the play begins, Desdemona's outgoing nature is natural to her. However, when she becomes a wife that her nature changes into what is expected of her.

The idea of Desdemona cheating on Othello is the main problem in the play. Theresa Kemp writes, "In early modern England, after the dissolution of the monasteries, however, such an alternative was no longer viable, but the notion that all women make bad wives continued to find voice in such ideas as the cuckold, the (often ignorant) husband of an unfaithful wife," (39). The possibility of being cuckolded was disastrous for the men in *Othello*. If a man was cuckolded, it was perceived that he was less of a man. This is evident by the various jabs Iago makes towards Othello. For example, Iago states,

That cuckold lives in bliss  
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;  
But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er  
Who dotes, yet doubts – suspects, yet soundly loves (3.3.167-170).

In this passage, Iago is openly stating that Othello should fear that he is becoming cuckolded. By being a cuckold, Othello is proving that he is unable to control his wife. This, in turn, would hurt his career because if he cannot control a single woman, it would

be impossible for him to control an entire army. Iago is feeding into the suspicion that Desdemona is not loyal or virtuous that he had originally instilled in Othello.

Othello doubts Desdemona for several reasons including her tendency to have a free and generous personality. She is constantly seen talking to Cassio, the man Othello believes she is cheating on him with. This is especially true after Cassio seeks Desdemona's assistance in trying to win back Othello's favor. Desdemona responds, "Therefore be merry, Cassio,/For thy solicitor shall rather die/Than give thy cause away," (3.3.26-28). Because she is constantly seen with Cassio, and because Desdemona loses her beloved handkerchief, Othello believes she has been unfaithful. The handkerchief was a sign of Desdemona's love and loyalty to her husband. Because it was lost, Othello immediately questions his wife's fidelity. Kemp writes, "In the social economy of the play, a woman's sexual virtue is everything," (89). This idea is seen not only in the play, but in Shakespeare's time as well. Even though the monasteries had disappeared during the Elizabethan era, some of their teachings still resonated. Kemp writes, "Although marriage in post reformation England was no longer considered a sacrament as it was among Catholics, it continued to be viewed as a sacred and indissoluble union lasting until the death of one or both of the couple," (38). This puts into context the importance Othello placed on having a faithful wife. Othello still believed that a marriage was a partnership between two people where they would be completely devoted to each other; one of the main purposes of a marriage was to ensure companionship. This belief is seen when Desdemona demands to accompany Othello to Cyprus. She claims, "If I be left behind,/A moth of peace, and he go to the war,/ The rites for why I love him are bereft me," (1.3.255-257). She wanted to accompany Othello and not lose out on the rights of

marriage. She is demanding that since she is married, she should be a constant companion of Othello to ensure they both fulfill the privileges of their union. Companionship in marriage was an idea that bridged the gap between the Middle Ages and the Elizabethan period.

Desdemona also believes in this version of marriage. Dash writes, “Desdemona, too, clings to conventions, believing that mutual respect can coexist in a relationship where a woman owes ‘duty’ to a husband and considers him almost godlike,” (119). However, even with the idea of companionship being prominent in a marriage, Shakespeare recognizes that Othello is still the dominant one in the relationship. Desdemona believes in the idea that she is equal to her husband in social standing by the way she defends her marriage to the assembly. But that is where the equality ends. She recognizes that Othello has power over her. Desdemona says, “Whate’er you be, I am obedient,” (3.3.89). The shift between the strong-willed and out-spoken Desdemona to the obedient wife develops the idea that Shakespeare wanted to experiment with gender roles, but only to a certain extent. When Desdemona enters her marriage, she becomes less independent and begins to follow the standards of the union according to popular fiction during the period.

The standards of marriage during the time of Shakespeare were dictated by the *Book of Common Prayer*. The book states, “Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and adversity...”. Othello and Desdemona only partially support this idea of marriage. At the beginning of their marriage, when the adversaries are outside of their marriage, Othello and Desdemona support each other completely, much like when Desdemona stands up to

her father. However, when the complications of the marriage come from within the couple's relationship, such as when Othello believes that Desdemona is cheating, the ordinance of the church is forgotten. This is significant because it goes against the reasoning of the church to get married. Facing adversity together is something that should occur during the entire length of the marriage, not just at the beginning.

Desdemona continues to be a passive catalyst for the plot when she refuses to stand up to Othello when he becomes abusive towards her. Enraged by jealousy, Othello strikes his wife, while simultaneously calling her the devil, when she tries to speak with him. Desdemona only responds with, "I have not deserved this," (4.1.235). The woman who had given a speech in front of a room full of noblemen was now reduced to short sentences for her defense. But what is worse is that this is her only defense against the man that had hit her. After this moment, she says, "I will not stay to offend you." (4.1.241). Desdemona slips back into the almost stereotypical women of the Middle Ages. Instead of standing up for herself like an Elizabethan woman would have, she waves aside any rights she has as a human in order not to offend Othello. Wright states, "The women of the Middle Ages were property, owned by their husbands without any rights of their own," (7). Desdemona is allowing herself to be treated like property. She is almost like a doll, where Othello determines what she does. He exerts control over her in their marriage.

The physical display of power over Desdemona was considered shocking to Shakespeare's audience. Domestic abuse was an ideology that was changing during the Elizabethan era. Kemp writes, "While it was legally permissible for husbands to use corporal punishments to control the behavior of their wives – as well as children and

servants – beatings did not mesh quite well with the emergent ideologies that viewed marriage as a partnership and wives as spiritual equals and domestic helpmates,” (41). To be physically abusive toward a mate made created an obvious hierarchy that the Elizabethan era was attempting to move away from. This is best seen when Othello strikes Desdemona in front of her cousin. Lodovico is shocked and states, “My lord, this would not be believed in Venice,” (4.1.236). While men were still viewed as the societal heads of the family, women experienced some power. However, since Desdemona married Othello, it appears that how he acts towards her determines who she is. In the beginning, when Othello does not suspect her of cheating and is kind to Desdemona, she is strong and outspoken. But, when he becomes angry and abusive, she becomes submissive. It appears that Shakespeare wrote Desdemona to be a character where her personality is dependent on the mood of her husband. As a result, Desdemona is a combination of the independent Elizabethan woman and the submissive wife of the Middle Ages.

Desdemona’s submission is solidified towards the end of the play. Desdemona defends her honor against her husband by stating she is not a whore when Othello accuses her of being one even though Othello does not believe her (4.2.86). Instead of putting up more of a fight, she gives up. Desdemona says, “‘Tis meet I should be used so, very meet./How have I been behaved, that he might stick/The small’st opinion on my least misuse?” (4.2.107-109). This passage begins with Desdemona stating that it is fair for Othello to treat her the way he has been. This treatment goes against the way she has been talking to Othello. When Othello treats her harshly, Desdemona attempts to defend herself. Now she is stating that she deserves to be treated in such a manner. This

submission to the way that Othello is treating her makes Desdemona appear weak. She is not the strong and independent woman she once was. Desdemona also reveals that she is beginning to doubt herself. She questions what she has ever done to make Othello think she has cheated. By doubting, she can never confidently defend her virtue because she will be second guessing herself.

Desdemona meets an untimely end because of her submission to Othello. When going to bed, she is aware that he does not intend to let her live. Othello's jealousy and anger has taken complete control of him, causing him to believe that the only way to redeem himself and his manhood is to kill his wife. Desdemona even pleads for her life by saying, "Kill me to-morrow: let me live to-night!" (5.2.80). Much like when Othello hit her, she is submissive to his desires and does not fight strongly to save her life.

Similar to when she is defending her husband to the Duke, Desdemona relies on her ability to reason to save her soul. She even kneels in front of her husband, another form of submission. Shawn Smith writes, "This union of language and spectacle is dramatized most powerfully in the final scene when Desdemona adopts a pose of supplication and pleads with Othello for mercy, a gesture commonly associated with pity in theatrical and legal contexts," (7). But unlike earlier, her entreaty to the emotions of Othello, and not the logic, does not help. Desdemona pleads, "I never did/Offend you in my life; never loved Cassio/But with such general warrant of heaven/As I might love," (5.2.58-61). Desdemona claims she does not love Cassio as she loved Othello. She does say she did love Cassio in a way that a religious woman is expected to love all men. This is once again an argument dictated by her emotions. Her emotions are causing her to speak in a way that does not comfort Othello. Othello wanted to hear that Desdemona had no

feelings towards Cassio, which would have been the more logical response for Desdemona. This logic would have been better in the attempt to persuade her husband to spare her life.

But most important, while she is dying she does not blame Othello for her death. When asked who killed her, she responds, “Nobody: I myself. Farewell./Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!” (5.2.125-126). She not only takes responsibility for her husband’s actions, but in her last moment, calls him kind. She takes obedience and Middle Age allegiance to her husband to the extremes. Because she is obedient, she no longer stands out in a crowd like she did when they first arrived in Cyprus. Wright claims, “Desdemona suffers the most since she lives in the shadow of her famous husband and is the unwitting tool of his destruction,” (113). But the destruction of Desdemona’s character also sheds light on the issues that faced women during the time period. Kemp writes, “The play also engages in a uniquely female tragic drama concerning the difficulties faced by early modern women in negotiating their culture’s misogyny on the one hand, and enacting the ideals of companionate marriage and the cultural definitions of a good wife on the other,” (89). The ability to balance these two beliefs is what created a successful union. Othello compares Desdemona to a lustful woman when he says, “The bawdy wind, that kisses all it meets,” (4.2.78). Because Othello makes this comparison, he is stating that Desdemona was not a good wife because she was not loyal to him. Desdemona was not able to walk the line carefully enough between the two beliefs in Othello’s eyes because she said she loved Cassio, even though it was a different kind of love than that which she felt towards Othello.

Shakespeare's *Othello* tells a tale of what happens when a woman is caught in the transition of social change. Society dictated how Desdemona was to act when she was married, drawing influences on both the Medieval Ages and Elizabethan era. Dash writes, "Until they marry, the tragedy does not occur because until that time they do not have to conform to any set roles; they function as two individuals. With marriage, they receive a new set of rules, new patterns for behavior," (110). These behaviors cause internal conflicts within the marriage that ultimately causes it to fail. When Desdemona became a wife, she lost part of her personality. As a result, she became a weaker version of her former, independent, single self. But *Othello* is not the only play Shakespeare writes that emphasizes the distinction between single life and married life as well as the changing roles of women in his time.

Unlike Desdemona who is a woman stuck between the changing roles of women, Lady Macbeth is a woman who pushing every boundary of her gender. Because of this, she is one of Shakespeare's most memorable characters. From her first soliloquy to her last sentence, Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most liberal female characters. She is seen as an example of what would happen if women gained too much power and took over control of their husbands. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a tale rooted with the lust for power and deception circulating around the Thane, Macbeth. After receiving a prophecy from three witches that he will become king (1.3.50), Macbeth sends word to his wife, Lady Macbeth about the news. It is when reading this letter that the audience is first introduced to Lady Macbeth.

During her first soliloquy, the audience realizes that Lady Macbeth is not the average wife. She says,



Glamis though art, and Cowder, and shalt be  
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature.  
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way, Though wouldst be great,  
Art not without ambition, but without/The illness should attend it.  
What though wouldst highly,  
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,  
And yet would wrongly win, Thou' dst have, great Glamis,  
That which cries, 'Thus thou must do' if thou have it;  
And that which rather thou dost fear to do  
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear  
And chastise with the valor of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crowned withal. (1.5.14-29).

In this soliloquy, Lady Macbeth not only covers many how she views her husband, but also reveals several aspects of her true nature, the first of which is that she is intelligent and clever. Lady Macbeth realizes that the prophecy of the three witches is coming true and that soon Macbeth will be presented with an opportunity to gain power. But she is keenly aware of the fact that her husband does not have the proper personality traits to set the prophecy in motion, should he need too. She believes he is ambitious and power, but is hindered by his kindness and love towards humans. As a result, he will not be aggressive enough to fulfill the prophecy at the first, and possibly only, opportunity. Lady Macbeth admits that her husband would rather succeed in a moral way than to take what is believed to be his. Macbeth wants to be a good man and Lady Macbeth is aware of this. By being aware of this, Lady Macbeth will assume the role of a manipulator, to mold her husband into what she wants and expects from him. The only flaw in Macbeth's personality according to his wife is that he does not want to cheat, but he still wants to position cheating would give him. As a result, Lady Macbeth promises to "pour my spirits in thine ear." In other words, she plans to convince her husband to do the actions

that are required for him to gain power. Lady Macbeth goes beyond the role of a supportive wife. Because of the prophecy, she becomes a manipulative wife, pushing the boundaries of her role as a wife so that she can serve her own desires.

After this soliloquy, Lady Macbeth continues to speak to herself and the audience sees that she is a woman who has no boundaries when it comes to getting what she wants.

She says,

The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits  
That tend my mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to toe topful  
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood;  
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature. Shake my fell peace  
between  
Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breast  
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark  
To cry 'Hold, hold,' (1.5.38-53).

The soliloquy begins with the recognition of Duncan, the king staying at Macbeth's castle. "The raven himself is hoarse/That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan/Under my battlements," (1.5.38-40). An important change occurs in this line. To begin with, Lady Macbeth says the castle she lives in is hers. While she does live there, it is technically owned by her husband. Kemp writes, "Under coverture, early modern marriage continued the ancient and medieval tradition of transferring a woman's legal rights and identity from father or guardian to husband. As *femme covert* ('covered woman'), wives were prohibited from owning property..." (42). While Lady Macbeth does live there, by stating "my battlements" she uses a possessive form for her house. She

is implying that she has the ability to become manly and to own property. Lady Macbeth continues by specifically calling on the spirits to make her more like a man filled with cruelty. In order for her to succeed in her plans, Lady Macbeth needs to lose her womanly manner. By removing the milk from her breasts, she is removing a physical representation of her womanhood. Breastfeeding is a maternal duty to women who have children. While at the time of Shakespeare there was a debate on the health and nature of breastfeeding, the act itself was still seen as motherly. Kemp writes, "Attempting to counter the class stigma attached to nursing, however, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century proponents of maternal breast-feeding drew upon biblical images of queens and other important mothers to lend respectability, even prestige, to maternal nurture," (38). By removing the milk from her breasts, Lady Macbeth is removing a symbol of the caring, tender, and loving maternal instincts women are supposed to have. The last segment states that the smoke from hell would be too dark for even heaven to see what she was doing and cry out for her to stop. She is literally asking that not even the power of God could stop her. Lady Macbeth realizes she is going against what God and the church expects from her as a woman. And she wishes all of this because she realizes that her husband would not be strong enough to fulfill the prophecy because his personality makes him more caring towards Duncan. As a result, Lady Macbeth takes matters into her own hands. When she talks in her soliloquies, the audience sees not only her cruel nature, but her intelligence as well.

Lady Macbeth's intelligence is seen as almost a warning to the Elizabethan audience of what could happen if women became too educated on court life. Lady Macbeth is portrayed as a woman of high social standing. This is significant because

women of the nobility and royalty received a particular type of education. Since women of the elite were expected to attend court and possibly even be attendants for the royal family. Kemp writes, “Such girls and women would have been tutored in languages, literature, dancing, music, and other entertainments suited to court life,” (36). Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, seems as if she has been educated beyond the expectancies of court life. As a result, Shakespeare is subtly hinting that the desire for power is linked to education. Lady Macbeth is an uncommonly intelligent woman who uses her intelligence to manipulate her husband. Therefore, she is a warning for the Elizabethan males in the audience that while societal standards for women are changing, they should not sway too far from the teachings of the Middle Ages.

Lady Macbeth’s intelligence allows her to become manipulative towards her husband. Lady Macbeth and her husband make the plan to kill Duncan in his sleep. On the night of the murder, however, Macbeth is too afraid to go through with their plan. As a result, Lady Macbeth questions his manhood, “When you durst do it. Then you were a man;/And to be more than what you were, you would/Be so much more the man,” (1.7.49-51). By commenting on his manhood, Lady Macbeth is openly challenging her husband. This challenge is a moment of importance because it shows the dynamic between Macbeth and his wife. Unlike in *Othello* where the idea of marriage as a companionship is obvious in both Desdemona and Othello, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s marriage is considered more of a union where the interests of the self are superior to the interests of the couple. This is evident because Lady Macbeth forces her husband to help her commit a crime in order to gain the power she desires. Since she is the one who desires the power more than her husband, she is serving her interests by using her

husband. Lady Macbeth understands that she needs her husband to gain power, but she also realizes that her role in the gaining of that power is very significant.

This desire for power is a direct violation of what the Elizabethan audience believes because it involves performing actions that are strictly against the teachings of the church. Wright states, “The desire for power initially blots the traditional religious upbringing which teaches against murderous and covetous from her mind,” (97). Once again, Shakespeare is warning his audience about the desires of women. Only this time, he is focusing on the idea that women who desire power can be led to activities that go against the doctrine of the church. Because Lady Macbeth leads Macbeth away from his duties as a good Christian man, she can be considered evil.

This extra power Lady Macbeth has causes her to become evil, which the audience can be seen when she discusses infanticide. Lady Macbeth says,

How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me:  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dashed his braids out, had I so sworn to you  
Have done to this (1.7.55-59).

*The Book of Common Prayer* states that the main reason for matrimony is for procreation. “First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name,” (*Book of Common Prayer*). The church wanted to continue having people fear and praise the Lord and the best way to do this was to promote procreation within a marriage. By promoting procreation in marriages, the church also expected that the child would be raised within the church as a God fearing man or woman. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, distinctly goes against the ordinance of the church by stating that she would kill a child if she needed to. This is significant because infanticide was not only a crime against a person,

but a crime against lineage. Stephanie Chamberlain writes, “Treated as a sin in medieval England, one punishable by ecclesiastical penance, infanticide, by the early modern period had been deemed a criminal offense, one punishable by hanging,” (75). Infanticide was considered a more serious crime by the Elizabethan period because there was more of an emphasis placed on lineage. With King Henry VIII and his six wives, England had seen the more horrific side of a man if his wife does not produce an heir.

Since being evil was against the common conceptions of an ideal woman, Lady Macbeth is further pushing gender roles. It is this evil that causes Lady Macbeth to take over the killing of the king when Macbeth determines he is unable to do so. Lady Macbeth says, “A little water clears us of this deed./How easy it is then!” (2.3.70-71). Lady Macbeth is frightening when she plays the death of Duncan off so easily. She does not hesitate or contemplate her actions. She is remorseless. Shakespeare created her to be so because it depicts the dangers of too much power. Kemp writes, “Having taken on an inward masculinity, Lady Macbeth further perverts her wifely duties, not only assuming the upper hand in the marriage, but also providing a deadly form of hospitality to those who enter Glamis Castle,” (95). Shakespeare is perverting the Elizabethan idea of what it means to be a loving wife, a good hostess, and a decent woman. This perversion allows Shakespeare to write the character of Lady Macbeth with more freedom. Lady Macbeth is the farthest away from the perfect wife that Shakespeare can create because of her remorselessness and lack of decency.

Decency for Elizabethan woman was mapped out in Richard Brathwaite’s book *The English Gentleman and the English Gentlewoman*. Divided into different parts, Brathwaite, much like Allestree, discusses the qualities that are expected of all men and

women during the Elizabethan time period. An entire section of the book is dedicated to the idea of decency that is expected of women. He writes, “Vulgar opinion, whose applause never received life from desert, may admire what is new but discretion that onely which is neat. It is one thing to walke honestly as on the day, another thing to walke uncivilly as on the night,” (316). Brathwaite’s comparison to honesty and incivility to the day and night is a fitting example for Lady Macbeth. Decency, and consequently honesty, are associated with the day because it is easy to see not only people, but their intentions during the daytime. However, it is at night when decency is forgotten. In the shadows, men and women lose themselves. The loss of decency and nighttime simile is perfect for Lady Macbeth. First, she murders Duncan in the middle of the night. This is a literal translation of Brathwaite’s comment. Her indecency occurs at night. But for the rest of the play, Lady Macbeth continues to be uncivil. She exerts power over her husband and has cruel intentions. Lady Macbeth goes against Brathwaite’s belief that all women should be decent. And because of this, she not only perverts the idea of decency in the Elizabethan period, but further separates herself from her womanhood.

The power Lady Macbeth was exerting over her husband, and consequently, the gender roles she was pushing, ends when she begins to feel guilty. After she commits the heinous act of killing the king, Shakespeare reminds his audience that Lady Macbeth is still female because she can experience guilt. This is best seen when she sleep walks and says, “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (5.1.35). While she is sleeping, Lady Macbeth wakes and attempts to wash away the “spot.” It is then revealed that the spot is the illusion that Duncan’s blood still stained her hand. This belief is her subconscious feeling guilty for the actions that had lead her to her position of power. Even though Shakespeare

has been warning his audience about the liberties that women have been gaining in the Elizabethan era, he offers some condolence to the men. Through this passage, he is stating that even if women become more masculine, there will still be some feminine traits that are impossible to get rid of, such as guilt. Guilt is seen as a feminine trait because it was considered a sign of weakness. There will always be a feeling like guilt that will make women weaker than men because men are rarely depicted as feeling guilty when they commit a crime.

This idea of guilt is solidified when Lady Macbeth commits suicide. A soldier says, “The queen, my lord, is dead,” (5.5.16). Lady Macbeth’s death is not seen on stage. The audience only hears a woman screaming before a soldier is sent to see what the cause for the scream. Shakespeare implies that the guilt of killing Duncan was too much for Lady Macbeth to endure and the only way to rid herself of the guilt was to commit suicide. Even though she had acted crass and manly earlier, Shakespeare uses her death to signify that a woman will always be delicate and cannot handle the moral consequences of acting like a man.

Lady Macbeth is comparable to the Haec Vir character in the pamphlet *Haec Vir or the Womanish Man*. Published in 1620, this pamphlet is a dialogue between a manish woman (Haec Mulier) and a womanish man (Haec Vir). The Haec Vir insults the Haec Mulier by stating that a manish woman is unnatural. “Thus Baseness, Unnaturalness, Shamefulness, Foolishness are the main Hatchments or Coat-Armors which you have taken as rich spoils to adorn you in the deformity of your apparel,” (Haec Vir 4). It was the belief in the Elizabethan era that a woman who took on the appearance and customs of a man were deforming their original duties. The qualities of men that were seen in



women like the Haec Mulier and Lady Macbeth were not only hypocritical, but seen as abominations.

The Haec Vir continues to discredit the Haec Mulier. “Now you will not only put it [men’s attire] on, but wear it continually; and not wear it, but take pride in it, not for persecution, but wanton pleasure; not to escape danger, but to run into damnation; not to help others, but to confound the whole sex by the evilness of so lewd an example,” (Haec Vir 11). The Haec Vir continues to discuss how a woman who appears or acts like a man does so for pleasure. He states that women like the Haec Mulier and Lady Macbeth take pride in their ability to cast away their womanly nature. This is seen as damnable because pride is one of the worst sins anyone can have, let alone a woman. The Haec Vir continues to state the women who act like men do not do so to escape danger, but to commit evil acts. Women who act like men do not set an appropriate example for other women because the damnable acts they are committing influence other women to become more manish.

What the Haec Vir implies with the Haec Mulier is best seen in Lady Macbeth. Because she wishes to strip herself of any maternal nature, she has become evil and unnatural. Lady Macbeth takes pride in her ability to lose her womanly tendencies. She then uses her new, male personality traits to commit acts of conspiracy and murder. The fear that the Haec Vir has that manish women confuse the rest of the sex is understandable in the life of Lady Macbeth. She is an example that power can be attained by both sexes. However, this power is a destructive force in the end.

Lady Macbeth is the culmination of what Shakespeare believes will happen if women gain too much power in society. Anna Murphy Jameson writes, “She is a terrible

impersonation of evil passions and mighty powers, never so far removed from our own nature as to be cast beyond the pale of our sympathies; for the woman herself remains a woman to the last-still linked with her sex and her humanity,” (363). It is important to point out that while Lady Macbeth was manipulating and murdering the men in her life, she was still a woman. Dash writes, “She [Lady Macbeth] is often considered the prime perpetrator of evil, the perfect illustration of a woman of power,” (253). She encompasses the fears of Shakespeare and Elizabethan men over what would happen if women stepped beyond the new boundaries created by Queen Elizabeth I and desired something more.

Desdemona and Lady Macbeth challenge the gender roles of the Elizabethan time period. The transition between the Middle Ages and the Elizabethan era created an interesting moment in time for women. The roles of the female gender were evolving and expanding, allowing for more freedom. With the rise of Elizabeth I, women were given an inspiring role model. Because the Queen asserted her independence, so did the rest of the women in the country.

The changing social standards within the Elizabethan era also allowed writers to explore several different types of female characters. Contemporary works of the time allow the reader to understand the vastly different personalities of Desdemona and Lady Macbeth compared to the *Book of Common Prayer* and *Haec Vir*. Especially since the works depicted what was expected of women and Shakespeare wrote his female characters to challenge that expectation. Whether it is a woman who is caught between the transitions from the Middle Ages to the Elizabethan era like Desdemona, or a woman who far exceeds the newly established boundaries like Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare uses both characters to critique society he was living in.

## Bibliography

- Allestree, Richard. *The Ladies Calling*. Amsterdam: 1682. 116. eBook.
- Anonymous. *Haec-vir*. London: 1620. 4-11. eBook.
- Brathwaite, Richard. *The English Gentleman and the English Gentlewoman*. London: 1641. 316. eBook.
- Chamberlain, Stephanie. "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England." *College Literature* 32.3 (2005): 1-20. Web. 30 April 2011.  
<<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=1d504490-e79d-4b7b-a142-9a89488540d8%40sessionmgr12&vid=2&hid=11>>.
- Cook, Judith. *Women in Shakespeare*. London: Billing & Sons Limited, 1980. 88-130. Print.
- Dash, Irene. *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1981. 249-255. Print.
- Jameson, Anna. *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*. London: George Bell and Sons, 1891. 198-209. Print.
- Kemp, Theresa D. *Women in the Age of Shakespeare*. Denver, CO: Greenwood Press, 2010. 1-109. Print.
- Murphy Jameson, Anna. *Shakespeare's Heroines*. Toronto, ON: Broadview Editions, 2005. 216-379. Print.
- Ronk, Martha. "Desdemona's Self-Presentation." *English Literary Renaissance* 35.1 (2005): 52-72. Web. 30 April 2011.  
<<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=56c1a0a1-fec9-421b-bb6c-692888a73714%40sessionmgr14&vid=2&hid=11>>.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. New York, NY: The Pelican Shakespeare, 2000. 1-98. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. New York, NY: The Pelican Shakespeare, 2001. 1-145. Print.
- Smith, Shawn. "Love, Pity, and Deception in 'Othello.'" *Papers on Language & Literature* 44.1 (3-51): 2008. Web. 30 April 2011.  
<<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=67ab1d21-7766-413f-9f46-4e5b2b52dd57%40sessionmgr15&vid=2&hid=11>>.

*The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the use of the Church of England.*  
London: John Basket, 1715. Print.

Wright, Courtni Cump. *The Women of Shakespeare's Plays*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993. 1-134. Print.